

# The Alchemist's Agenda

*by baylor713*

Witches and wizards have always carried the burden of their allegiances to the dark or to the light. The choice to follow one or the other dictates a person's character. Attica Flamel pays fealty to neither. When grief morphs into an irrepressible need for vengeance, Attica will stop at nothing until the debts are paid.

## Prologue

*Chapter 1 of 21*

Witches and wizards have always carried the burden of their allegiances to the dark or to the light. The choice to follow one or the other dictates a person's character. Attica Flamel pays fealty to neither. When grief morphs into an irrepressible need for vengeance, Attica will stop at nothing until the debts are paid.

She watched as her master left the Shrieking Shack, his dark robes billowing behind him in the still air. The snake slithered behind him only slightly, slowing down as it neared the Dark Lord's side. His bright eyes were focused on the tall cedars and redwoods and tangled brambles of the Forbidden Forest. He was going to meet the Boy Who Lived.

Attica waited for the emergence of the Dark Lord's right hand. Why wasn't he coming? She cursed as Potter and Weasley fled from the ramshackle building with the know-it-all in tow. Attica pulled the hood of her black cloak over her head more fully as she backed into the shadows. The Golden Trio headed toward the protection of the castle, the Potter boy leading the way. Little cowards. But where was Severus? She was torn as she approached the Shrieking Shack — to follow the boy or to find Severus... It would be almost too easy to off the black-haired boy; a flick of her wand would be enough.

It was true that you must mean an Unforgivable Curse to cast one, but she would mean it. With every fiber of her being, she would mean it. There would be time for the boy later, she decided quickly. After all, the coward was running in the opposite direction of the Dark Lord. For the foreseeable future, her carefully laid plan would not be interrupted. Attica walked briskly into the Shrieking Shack, but what she saw before her in that small room froze her staccato steps. There, on the grimy floorboards, lay the Potions Master. Dark blood was pooling around him and trickling down the wall behind his broken body.

"Severus," she whispered, her voice dripping with more admonishment than concern. Why had he let this happen? What thread had he left to be discovered? Attica knelt beside him, her hand searching for an uninjured part of his neck to feel for a pulse. Quickly, she settled for observing the absence of the telltale rise and fall of his chest beneath her fingers. Blood was still seeping from his wounds, and it was that which gave her hope. She automatically began searching Snape's pockets until she had found what she was looking for: two small vials containing an opalescent liquid she immediately recognized as Mortemque and a tiny jar of murtlap essence.

Attica set to her task with detached efficiency and slathered the murtlap onto the lacerations winding around Snape's neck. She then tipped both vials of Mortemque, an advanced healing potion, into his mouth, absently murmuring a charm to help him swallow. The lacerations began to close into jagged rips rather than the gaping tears that they had been, but several minutes passed and the wizard before Attica failed to stir. He had lost too much blood; the Potions Master had not anticipated such an attack as this.

The treatments she had already administered would not be enough. With growing apprehension, Attica pulled a small silver-encased vial from beneath her robes and removed the emerald stopper. She took a deep breath to calm herself before letting the few precious drops of translucent, blood-red liquid fall into her former professor's mouth. She settled down with her back against the wall and her wand drawn.

All that was left was to wait.

## Comfort

### *Chapter 2 of 21*

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"You've been very brave through this whole ordeal, my dear," McGonagall whispered to the frightened young girl beside her. Her navy blue eyes were hidden by golden curls, and she fervently hoped that the hair hid her tears from the formidable older woman.

The imposing farmhouse was just up the road from the Apparition point. They reached the front door and McGonagall lifted the heavy brass doorknocker, letting it fall into place with a bang that startled the girl beside her. Augusta Longbottom answered the door. She was wearing one of the silliest outfits the girl had ever seen, complete with a stuffed vulture perched atop her dusty purple hat. The sight of the vulture caused the girl to grab McGonagall's hand in desperation. The professor squeezed the small hand in reassurance.

The sight of the Longbottom matriarch made even the head of Gryffindor house seem less imposing. McGonagall greeted the woman standing in the doorway with a curt nod. "Hello, Augusta. It's nice to see you again."

"Likewise, Minerva," the woman responded with an almost imperceptible twinkle in her eyes. The girl looked back to her teacher, navy eyes wide, and then took a deep breath as she pushed her unruly curls from her face. She extended her hand to the older woman and spoke in a small but confident voice. "Hello, Mrs. Longbottom. I am Attica. Attica Flamel."

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June 17 rolled around with the same languid humidity that had plagued the beginning of the month. A twelve-year-old Attica sat on her bed, running her fingers across the faded quilt her grandmother had made for her. She remembered receiving the quilt for her birthday five years ago to the day. This year, she had awoken not to the smell of her grandfather brewing potions downstairs but to a pang of loneliness that gripped her on this day more than ever. Slowly, she counted out twelve bare threads on the quilt, pretending she was counting out the twelve sparkling candles her grandmother would have carefully arranged on her birthday cake.

She stood and crossed the room to her dresser. She reached out and straightened one of the picture frames sitting there. The picture depicted five smiling faces looking out at her. In the background, her grandfather held a protective arm around his wife, her head nuzzled against his chest in contentment. Attica as a baby was sitting on her father's lap while her mother whispered something in his ear. The couple burst out in a fit of laughter that Attica couldn't hear and began to wave at the camera before the whole scene began to replay itself.

A single tear rolled down her cheek before Mrs. Longbottom called up the stairs for her to join them in the kitchen. Before heading downstairs, she opened the top drawer of her dresser and pulled out a small object that she hadn't touched since the night she had arrived at the Longbottom house. She wanted to carry something with her that reminded her of the people she had loved and lost, but the picture evoked tears whenever she looked at it. So instead, she settled on the sparkling green gemstone she had hidden in her dresser. She placed the stone in her pocket, wiped the tear away, and steeled herself for another day of pretending she lived a normal life. She pretended that her family was only away for a short time and that they would soon return for her. She pretended that she wasn't completely alone in a house filled with people. And she pretended that she wasn't scared.

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She skipped down the stairs, pretending to be happy. She was as far from happy as she thought a person could be, but she didn't want to appear to be ungrateful to Mrs. Longbottom and Neville. They had been so kind to her since she had come to live with them. There was a birthday cake waiting for her on the kitchen table. Augusta and Neville clapped for her when she entered the room and Neville enthusiastically began singing the birthday song in a decidedly off-key pitch. One look from his grandmother silenced him and an embarrassed blush reddened his cheeks. Attica plastered a smile on her face that she didn't feel in her heart and joined in the festivities.

Neville's Uncle Algie came over from his house across the valley to help them celebrate. He handed Attica a brightly wrapped box and he seemed very eager for her to open it. When she did, several dozen chocolate frogs sprang from the box and began hopping all over the furniture, climbing up the drapes, and clinging to the windows. If Augusta was irked by the frogs invading her pristine living room, she didn't let on. Instead, she handed Attica a long thin box wrapped in pretty paper. Attica opened the box, revealing her own wand, made of ash wood, 11¼ inches long, and unicorn hair core. She looked up at the older woman with confusion. Augusta smiled and explained that since it was her birthday, she would be allowed to perform some magic for fun. She had a few spells up her sleeve that she would like to teach her.

Attica protested that they had been expressly told in school that they were not allowed to perform magic outside of Hogwarts. Augusta laughed. "Well," she said, "I spoke with Dumbledore, and he has agreed to lift the rules against you performing magic, just for today. I would consider this a pretty special occasion, wouldn't you?"

She giggled and nodded. She had a feeling that she was only allowed to do magic on her birthday because Dumbledore had felt sorry for her. Augusta felt sorry for her too, she could tell, and the grandmotherly woman had been trying very hard to cheer her up. The prospect of performing magic did cheer her up, like nothing else had since she had gone to stay there. Attica was good at magic. It was something she could control. Lately, her circumstances had been plummeting in a downward spiral, and there had been nothing she could do to stop it. Some control was nice, for a change.

After some pleading on Neville's part, he was allowed to join in the fun as well. Brandishing his own wand in triumph, he sent sparks flying across the living room while attempting to levitate Trevor, his pet toad. Attica giggled again and offered to help Neville get the spell right.

"It's all in how you say it," Attica offered. "Watch this."

She took the gemstone out of her pocket and placed it on the coffee table. With a perfectly enunciated "Wingardium Leviosa," the emerald elegantly rose two feet above their heads. With a flick of her wand, the emerald began to spin slowly in midair.

"I know that, but I just can't ever say it right. I can't do spells the way you do. And I'll never be able to find Trevor now," he moaned. Attica patted him on the back and offered to help him look for the toad. And then maybe help him review some spells for their second year at Hogwarts.

Shaking her head, Attica smiled the first real smile that she had mustered since the night she had fled from her home and watched in terror as it burned to the ground. When she closed her eyes, she could still smell the pungent fumes rising from the burning manor. Even more memorable was the spicy scent of the man who held her as

they escaped from the flames and into the starless night.

## Awake

*Chapter 3 of 21*

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"Don't move," Attica hissed from her seat on the floor opposite the Potions Master, who was beginning to stir. He looked so weak and vulnerable lying there with his voluminous black robes curled around him, she thought. Pathetic.

He had always been so stoic, so implacable in the classroom. She had found his manner almost enviable back then. She remembered sitting in his dungeon classroom, on the verge of tears, as she listened to the other students making plans to go back to their families for the holiday. She realized that Professor Snape would never have let that kind of emotion appear on his countenance, and she wanted to be able to emulate that strength. His impassiveness was even more impressive to her when she had first seen him in the Death Eater circle.

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She remembered that moment more vividly than most. Her heart had been pounding so hard that she irrationally thought it might pound its way out of her chest. She had been nervous. Her entire body felt cold, and she clenched her hands in front of her to prevent the shivering from becoming noticeable. Attica felt virtually imprisoned by the circle of Death Eaters that surrounded her. She had been trapped in the presence of Voldemort.

There was no escape. The best choice she could make was to stare ahead and exhibit the same bravery she knew her parents had shown when they too had come face to face with the Dark Lord. In the midst of this inner turmoil, her eyes met a familiar set of black ones. Even though the rest of his face was hidden by a mask that was identical to the others, she knew it was him. Snape's rigid figure imbued an ambiance of confidence and pride that was elevated by his stark black robes. His elegance was only surpassed by that of the Dark Lord himself; she couldn't help but feel her own inadequacy with a sharp pang in her stomach. She wondered how he could be so calm when she was struggling to quell an overwhelming sense of nausea. Out of pure reflex, Attica had lifted her hand to touch the vial she wore around her neck, stroking its reassuring hardness even through the rough wool fabric of her robes. It was in that moment that she felt an inexplicable pull toward the serpentine man. Without another thought, she turned her head and boldly locked eyes with the inhuman red gaze of Voldemort.

She had expected to feel horrified. She had expected to feel the urge to flee or to beg for the opportunity to take it all back. But in that first concentrated moment when he was fully focused on her, she felt no regret. The temperature seemed to drop, but she had been so cold already that she wondered if that was possible. This wasn't the frigid numbness of the dread that had plagued her before. It was icy and rippling and alive. The red pools of the Dark Lord's eyes seemed to be siphoning the fear from her very bones, because it wasn't panic that she felt anymore. It was exhilaration. She sensed that she was a satellite that had found its orbit, although she couldn't understand where the fear had gone. All she knew was that once the fear had dissipated, she was awake.

The tension drained from her body even as the Dark Lord conspicuously sized her up. Instead of wanting to fold herself away from him, to cower in his presence as she anticipated, she experienced an inconsolable desire to step closer to him and open herself up fully to his scrutiny. Attica felt pure joy and the exhilaration that had consumed her before multiplied tenfold as she closed the distance between herself and the Dark Lord's proffered hand. Somehow, this was where she was supposed to be.

"Attica Flamel," Voldemort drawled in his deceptively velvet voice. "Welcome to our ranks."

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Snape braced himself against the wall, struggling to sit up. Attica was glad that she had had the foresight to Scourgify the wall behind the professor as well as his robes. He panted silently with the effort and Attica rolled her eyes. "I said not to move," she sighed. "You're weak."

Snape lifted his eyes to Attica's face, pinning her with a contemptuous glare. "Obviously," he rasped. He grimaced and pain flittered across his features before he steeled himself and addressed the girl in front of him again, fingering the raised scars that now covered the flesh of his neck as he did so. "How long was I unconscious?"

"About twenty minutes, no more."

"And the boy?"

Attica sneered. "He and his friends have returned to the castle. I think they are running," she said. She pushed her golden tresses away from her face as she spoke and let them fall down her back. "You must leave here, Snape. If the Dark Lord wants you dead, it is best that you make it seem as though he has succeeded where that is concerned." Attica eyed the man on the floor across from her. "What did you do to displease your master? Has he discovered your treachery?" Her tone remained disinterested.

Snape surveyed the girl in front of him critically. She was of average height, much shorter than he was. She had unexceptionally blonde hair and unremarkable eyes. On her left arm, she wore a mark so distinct that its image in the sky sent crowds of wizards running in panic. And that in itself was nothing special, for Severus wore an identical stain.

All in all, she was nothing extraordinary at a glance. And yet, she had been able to figure out what the Dark Lord himself had not - where his, Severus Snape's, true loyalties lay.

"Potter will not run," said Snape in a low tone.

Attica waved her hand as if to brush away the thought. "He ran," she said impatiently. Now that her goal was so close, Attica was growing irascible of Snape's apparently undiminished faith in Dumbledore's infallibility concerning the Potter boy.

"Potter will not run. Once he sees the memories I gave him, he will not back down. He will confront our master. The treachery you speak of is not mine alone."

# Elixir

## Chapter 4 of 21

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His words had not stung her like he had surely meant them to. She had given up on regretting how her actions affected others long ago. She picked up the now empty vial she had tossed aside after healing her professor. She looked at it thoughtfully, remembering the urgency with which it had been bestowed upon her.

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Attica was bored. She was supposed to be learning the next potion on her grandfather's list. Instead, she was sitting on a table in his private laboratory, swinging her legs and waiting for him to return. She was reproaching the visitor's appearance, which had interrupted her brewing. She felt privileged to be studying under her grandfather's tutelage. His expertise would help her to hone her Potions skills and maybe even earn her a desperately coveted compliment from Professor Snape. Now, it seemed that her grandfather was distracted by the man who had made himself at home in the study. While he was absent from the laboratory, Attica decided to take on the role of the taskmaster with more aplomb than anyone would have expected of a child who had only just finished her first year of school.

The door adjoining the study and the lab to the study was cracked, and she heard a voice float out that she did not recognize and without giving it much thought, she began to listen. She had been warned by her grandmother several times that adult business was not for the ears of children and that it was rude for her to listen in. Attica didn't put much stock in her grandmother's warning after all, without eavesdropping, she never would have learned that her grandfather had created a stone that granted him and her grandmother immortality. From there, she was able to piece together why her grandparents were so old but looked so young. Through eavesdropping, she had been made privy to the highly restorative powers of the Elixir that was made from the Stone. She understood the importance of secrecy in these matters and had never told another soul after her grandparents sat her down and explained that this was terribly privileged information, but she enjoyed having the knowledge nonetheless. She found eavesdropping to yield too many positive results to refrain from listening in. And she certainly wasn't going to respect the privacy of this man who had ruined her afternoon.

"Nicolas, you must think about how badly he wants it," the stranger was saying. "He nearly killed Harry Potter, again, to get it. He's desperate for a way, any way, to rise back to his former power. Right now, your creation is his only hope. He will stop at nothing to get ahold of that Stone." The newcomer ended his speech with a heavy sigh. Attica was able to discern that they were talking about You Know Who. The rumors had been running rampant around the school during the last few days of term, and she knew that Harry had narrowly escaped his clutches.

"I cannot. We cannot. I know what we told you before, but we have our own priorities to consider. We cannot let this happen. At least not right now. Our Attica is only going to be a second year, Albus." Attica recognized her grandfather's voice, seemingly tinged with irritation. There was an underlying emotion that she couldn't identify in her grandfather's usually strong, unwavering voice. It was an emotion that she hadn't witnessed in him in the nine years that she had been living with her grandparents. It was also an emotion that she didn't care to consider.

"Dear," her grandmother said. "We cannot deny that we see his point. We did give him our word." There was a tense lull in the conversation, and through the crack in the door she could see her grandmother walk over to stand behind her husband's chair and place a comforting hand on his shoulder. "But Albus, we can't leave her on her own. That's out of the question." With her grandmother entering the conversation, there was no danger of her being caught listening in, and she moved closer to the door, hoping to catch a glimpse of the man who had elicited a slight panic in her usually composed grandparents.

"I'm not saying that, precisely, Peri—" continued the stranger, who was clearly the Hogwarts Headmaster. She silently chastised herself for not being able to recognize the voice of the Headmaster at her own school. But, she realized, she had only heard the man's voice on three occasions briefly, during the welcome ceremony, during the Halloween ceremony when he had taken action when the troll had entered the castle, and again when he had awarded an obscene number of house points to the Boy Who Lived at the end of the year.

"I can't protect all three of you, Nick. If we allow the Stone to remain intact, he will come after you. He will come after all three of you," Dumbledore whispered.

"Enough. We'll end up talking in circles and we can endure that later. What about this item you wanted to discuss?" Perenelle said with a finality that made Attica suspect that the older woman knew she was listening.

"Ah yes, the scepter." Dumbledore seemed eager to move on from that particular wrinkle in the conversation. "As I've told you before, I think I have uncovered the secret behind the Dark Lord's inability to die. I can't be absolutely certain, but I believe it has something to do with Salazar Slytherin's scepter. You get my meaning, I hope."

Attica's grandmother gasped. "You can't mean that he created a... That can't be possible!"

"Yes. I'm afraid it's very possible." Dumbledore's voice seemed to grow weary.

"The magic behind creating one of these is surely far above his skill level," her grandfather countered.

"There was someone working at the school when Tom was a student that was able to help him acquire the knowledge necessary. I haven't been able to discover who it was or what resources they were able to offer to him, but I have reason to believe that Tom would have been able to create one eventually."

"You have the scepter with you, let's take care of this now, once and for all." Her grandfather's voice was filled with hope. He had been examining the scepter in question and slammed its tip on the ground to emphasize his newfound optimism. As he did so, something dropped from the scepter and rolled under her grandfather's desk. She made a mental note to hunt for the shiny object later.

"That would get us one step closer, but Tom Riddle was one of the most determined students that has ever passed under my guidance. My deepest fear is that had he gained the ability to create one, he would not have stopped there."

"You mean... there could be more?" There was a pregnant pause after her grandmother's exclamation, and Attica envisioned their visitor nodding his head solemnly in response.

"That would make him virtually indestructible," Nicolas said slowly. Through the crack in the door, she saw the man reach up and pat the hand that still rested on his shoulder before he said in a voice that was barely a whisper, "Then it must be done."

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Now, as she held the vial in her hands six years later, she realized how much had changed since she had received it. It pained her to picture the sorrow in her grandfather's eyes when he had pressed it firmly into her palm. There were tears in his eyes as he told her to guard the little vial fervently, because one day she would have great need

of it.

"There will come a day when you will need to use this. I had hoped to protect you from what's coming, but a good friend of mine has shown me that the only way to protect you is to destroy the Stone. There will be no more Elixir for us, Attica. This is the last of it," he told her.

"But can't you drink it now and last for a few more years?" She had abandoned all hope of preventing the tears, but she couldn't hold on any longer, and a barrage of tears streamed down her face.

He swallowed back his own tears as he explained that the amount of Elixir he had siphoned into her vial was only enough to heal. They knew what was coming in the future and wanted to leave the rest of the Elixir with her. If given to a person who had died only moments before, the Elixir could restore that person to life. They knew that she would have need of it in the midst of the dangers that were coming. In the last moments of their lives, all they had been able to think of was protecting her.

A few days later, she was sitting at her grandfather's desk in the study when Dumbledore arrived to settle her grandparents' affairs. She felt closest to her grandfather in that room, but it felt wrong that the Headmaster was invading the place she had staked as her sanctuary after she had lost them. She could hear Professors McGonagall and Snape speaking in hushed tones in the hallway. She wished it were the Transfiguration professor who was sitting with her now. The severe Deputy Headmistress had been there with her when she had been orphaned for the second time in her young life.

She looked down in order to hide the tears that were threatening to once again brim over in a deluge down her cheeks. The Headmaster must have sensed her discomfort and dismissed himself to give her a few moments alone. Through her tears, she noticed something twinkling beneath the large cherry desk. She slipped from her chair and retrieved the item, which she recognized as the object that had fallen from the scepter the night her life had started crumbling down around her.

She sat back up in the chair and studied her newfound treasure—a round-cut emerald that beautifully reflected the light from the candlesticks mounted on the wall behind her.

Years later, when rumors of Voldemort's return had surfaced, she used a simple attachment charm to adhere the emerald to the stopper of the vial that contained the last Elixir on earth. She then placed the vial around her neck and hadn't removed it since.

In this rare moment of nostalgia, Attica was reminded of a time when her life had appeared to promise her so much happiness. She was taken back to the moment when that happiness was no longer promised to her, the moment that her hatred for Harry Potter had been born.

## Incendio

### *Chapter 5 of 21*

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Attica presumed that for most, nostalgia summoned a pleasurable sensation. Maybe it was like a mindless, balmy escape into more welcoming times. But Attica did not feel that consuming warmth when she remembered her family. Rather, her nostalgia transported her back to the moments surrounding her loss. It was with bitterness that she used the singular, because she could not remember the first loss that had shaken her once-happy life. Her parents, Armand and Isolde Flamel, had died in the wake of the first Wizarding War when Attica had been only a baby. They, too, had fallen victims of Voldemort, who had plans for the Stone. They had shown bravery that none should have expected of them. When the Death Eaters threatened to take them to the lair of the Dark Lord if they did not hand over the Stone, they didn't balk. And when they were in the presence of Voldemort himself, her parents still had not wavered. They had gone bravely to their deaths and had not betrayed the rest of the Wizarding World in their selfish desires to live. Merlin forbid they disappoint Dumbledore, who would later repay their sacrifice by abandoning their only daughter for a scrap of parchment.

They died young and without the privilege of getting to raise their own daughter, but because of their valor, Voldemort had not been able to take a firm hold on life through the Stone that he had no right to anyway. This was a blessing in more ways than one, because there was more to the Stone's power than just keeping a person alive or healing mortal injuries. Obviously, Nicolas and Perenelle had lived centuries beyond even a magical life span, but so few people had met the Flamels that it was not common knowledge that the consistent use of the Elixir derived from the Stone also prevented its users from aging. Nicolas's hair remained a dark chestnut in color and her grandmother's dark eyes had never lost their spark, nor had her hair grayed from its originally lustrous black.

Attica possessed a rare bit of knowledge about the Stone: it gave strength to the person who consumed it. Not physically, of course. Nothing visible would change about the person. But the Elixir of Life shaped already impressive magic into something even more resilient. As a child, her grandfather had impressed upon her the terrifying nature of the Elixir.

And so, Attica assumed that people thought she should have been happy. They probably expected her to be thrilled, even, that the Potter boy had recovered the Stone in their first year. But he had meddled in affairs that he needn't have. What, other than a youthful show of arrogance, had made Potter interfere in her life? Because of him and Dumbledore's impressively blind protection of one child, she was orphaned a second time. "He nearly killed Harry Potter, again, to get it," Dumbledore had said. Why did Potter get a protector so loyal that he was willing to sacrifice the happiness of so many for him while she lost the people she loved most? Where was the justice in that?

Where an all-consuming grief used to occupy a large hole in her chest, she now only felt a defiant urge to watch Harry Potter crumble in front of her. The dam of her grief had burst in her fourth year and morphed into something she considered to be more constructive. She had donned the emerald-stoppered vial containing the Elixir around her neck and less than a week later, the fiery and all-consuming desire to witness Potter's destruction had overwhelmed her. She now had the protection of her grandfather's Elixir always near at hand, and it was this assurance that allowed something sinister to surface. She wanted him to feel as hopeless as she had the night when Dumbledore had hesitated aiding in her protection before his exasperated spell had set fire to the only home she had ever known. And she would be the one who made Harry feel the way she had that night if she had to kill Voldemort himself to see the debt paid.

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Attica squeezed the emerald tighter in her fist in a fruitless attempt to drown out the grown-up voices coming from the hall. She stared resolutely at the shadows on the wall cast by the candles and wondered despairingly why the Headmaster wouldn't just go away and let McGonagall handle the Flamels' affairs.

"How sure are you, Severus?" Attica heard Headmaster Dumbledore say in a serious tone.

Professor Snape responded in a tight voice. "When I left, they had already decided that the best course would be to attack tonight. They don't want to waste any time."

"Ah," the Headmaster sighed. "Then we must find the instructions to the Stone quickly."

"We do not have that luxury, Albus. They could arrive at any moment. Get the girl and go," said the Potions Master. He didn't raise his voice, but Attica recognized the impatience. He had often taken a similar tone with her first year Potions class.

"The instructions are too valuable to leave behind. They cannot fall into the wrong hands."

"They are invaluable, yes. But that will be of little consequence to you if the Death Eaters arrive before all of you can escape."

"What is this?" A new voice joined in. "Death Eaters, here? Albus, the girl..." McGonagall's panicked voice trailed off, followed by the unmistakable sound of china shattering on the floor. She had been in the kitchen preparing tea and must have returned in time to hear the tail end of the hushed conversation.

"Yes, Death Eaters," Snape hissed. "Minerva, please fetch a few of the girl's belongings." Brisk steps on the oak stairway told Attica that the Transfiguration professor had wordlessly heeded his request. "You are leaving with the girl, Albus."

"I just need a little more time. It can only be in so many places in this house..." Dumbledore was beginning to sound frantic.

"Dumbledore!" Snape cut in and Attica jumped. It was the first time she had heard the head of Slytherin House raise his voice. Then, his speech resumed its deadly soft quality: "If you will not get that child out of this house, then I will." Attica had been holding her breath during the whole conversation, not daring to imagine how everything would turn out. Suddenly, Professor Snape called to her. "Miss Flamel? Please come into the hall."

The Headmaster and the professor were both exuding a palpable tension that pervaded the grand foyer. Snape's shoulders were set in a straight line, while Dumbledore stood by the stairs, clutching the wooden orb at the end of the bannister. His knuckles were white, and Attica paused in the doorway. She eyed the pale face of the Potions Master where he stood, imperious, before the older man.

"Albus, I'm taking her to the rendezvous point we discussed. Tell Minerva to meet us there with the girl's things."

"Severus..."

"No. You and Minerva could stand an attack. The Death Eaters wouldn't touch me without the Dark Lord's explicit orders to do so. But this child would not come out of the struggle unscathed. I will not stand for it. You would not hesitate if this were Harry." Irritation colored Snape's features, and his lip curled with disgust as he placed emphasis on the name. Dumbledore looked stricken by the Potions Master's words.

Snape grabbed her wrist and pulled her out of the house, tugging Attica to the field on the other side of the road. When Attica finally looked back, Dumbledore and McGonagall both stood in the front yard.

"Incendio," she heard Dumbledore roar into the quiet night.

Attica looked up at Snape uncomprehendingly and no tears fell then. She was too shocked to cry. And a part of her was still afraid of the emotionless professor, but as he regarded the child in front of him, Attica swore that something in his face softened briefly. Then, he wordlessly picked her up and began to fly. As they rose above the small village, Attica could not rip her gaze from the flames and continued to stare at the destruction over the black shoulder of her protector.

"Do not look back," she heard him murmur softly. It was the softness in his voice that consoled her only slightly, and she was able to tear her eyes from her burning home in the distance. Attica buried her face in the black wool of her unshakable Potions Master's cloak. She vaguely noted that he smelled of cardamom.

## Defeat

### Chapter 6 of 21

Witches and wizards have always carried the burden of their allegiances to the dark or to the light. The choice to follow one or the other dictates a person's character. Attica Flamel pays fealty to neither. When grief morphs into an irrepressible need for vengeance, Attica will stop at nothing until the debts are paid.

Attica fastened the chain around her neck and snapped back to the present. Something that Snape had said before was nagging at her. "What do you mean, Potter isn't running?"

Snape had finally gained enough strength to stand, but he needed the support of the wall to remain upright and was leaning heavily against it. "Just what I said. He is not running. His time is almost up. He may be confronting the Dark Lord in mere minutes," he said through gritted teeth. He was still struggling against the pain that lingered from the attack.

Attica usually prided herself on her unwavering fortitude, but she was suddenly fevered at the thought of the boy slipping out of her grasp. She shook her head. "I don't believe you." If Potter confronted the Dark Lord, he would surely be killed. She couldn't accept that.

"You do not need to believe me. You can see for yourself." He drew aside the tattered curtains, revealing the view from the window behind him. From there, she could see a fire burning somewhere in the Forbidden Forest. From their vantage point in the Shrieking Shack, they were able to see down into a valley of the Forbidden Forest. She stepped closer to the window and realized that the fire was burning in a clearing much closer than she had initially thought. A group of masked Death Eaters surrounded the fire, waiting.

"And?" she asked impatiently.

"And," he snapped, "you can watch Potter's attempt for yourself. The Dark Lord is awaiting him in that clearing. The roof will undoubtedly provide a better view."

Attica wanted to deny that it was possible for Potter to do anything but run. Why would he walk willingly into the Dark Lord's midst when any fool would know that to do so would be nothing short of a death wish? Instead, she accompanied the professor to the roof in silence. He moved at a clipped pace, far faster than she had expected considering the blood he had lost. Undoubtedly, he was in immense pain, but his intractable pride prevented him from showing it.

*Please, she thought, let him be mistaken. The boy must be running...*

The clearing was easily visible, and she could make out a cluster of people in front of the fire, their figures brought into relief by the light of the flames. Malfoy would be there, as he and his wife would be too afraid to deny the Dark Lord their presence on this momentous occasion. Attica absently ran through the short list of names that Voldemort would have requested be present for his triumph.

If Snape was correct, she was quickly running out of time. She wished for a way to salvage her plan, and her breathing hitched. She was desperate for some tactic that would allow her to deliver the blow that ended Potter.

But it was too late for plans and schemes now. She ceased breathing and watched as a scrawny figure walked meaningfully into the clearing from the surrounding foliage.

When the figure that had to have been Potter's came into view and she saw the green arc of Voldemort's spell hit the boy, she gasped as if the curse had met its mark in her own chest. She crumpled to her knees even as Potter crumpled to the ground in the Forest below. The years that had gone into planning the boy's demise, the tremendous risks she had taken, finding it within herself to muster the immense amount of bravery it had taken for her to lie directly to the most powerful Dark Wizard in the world and acquire his almost impossible to gain trust... It had all been for naught. The deaths of her grandparents would never be avenged, even after years of meticulous preparation. She had always felt that out of anyone, she had reason to seek vengeance for her loss through the death of Harry Potter. And yet, she had failed. She had been branded with a mark of loyalty to the man who had taken her parents away from her before she even had the chance to know them. Now, he had stolen this from her too.

Before she could perceive the deep sorrow in Snape's eyes as he watched the scene unfolding before them, Attica was already slipping past the professor, running down the narrow steps and into the small room.

A million thoughts flooded her already crowded mind, and she could nearly feel the thrum of the Dark Lord's victory through the mark on her arm. Through a red haze of conflicted anguish she tried to think clearly. What should she do, where could she go, how could she bear to stand upright when the only thing that had allowed her go on for so long was now no longer tangible? Any chance for vengeance was slowly becoming a misty El Dorado that she could never, ever hope to reach.

Potter was dead, and she was not the one who had yielded the wand.

She had lost.

It was all... for nothing. She had nothing left. Even her sanity seemed to slip further from her grasp as she frantically tried to search her mind for the next step, for any way to erase what had just happened in the last few moments.

Anger and the quest for vengeance had brought Attica's thoughts into a bitter lucidity that had now, somehow, erupted into a surge of broken, riotous thoughts that she herself could barely follow.

She expected grief to flood through her. She expected to feel bereft with the loss of the tenuous thread she had been holding onto, the thread that connected her to the one way she could compensate for what she had lost. She had convinced herself that only by following this thread to its end could she ever be happy again. With this connection destroyed, she expected only defeat. Instead, the thrum of victory intensified. Glory beckoned. With what little of her mind she could still undoubtedly call her own, she listened and welcomed this new feeling of hope.

And then it occurred to her.

Now, Potter would never fall at her feet and beg for mercy. He had already fallen to the Dark Lord. But Voldemort survived. Voldemort had murdered her mother and father. Voldemort had taken them from her just as surely as Potter had been the catalyst that had ended in the deaths of her grandparents. And even then, the Stone had been destroyed because Voldemort had been after it. It was Voldemort who was deserving of her wrath now, not Potter.

Snape's voice brought her out of her reverie. "Miss Flamel?"

She looked up at him from where she had fallen on the floor of the Shrieking Shack. "I have to go," she said, motioning with one hand to the doorway.

"Wait. You must tell me..."

"I don't have to tell you anything, Snape," she spat.

She expected his icy retort, maybe even his signature vitriol if he was feeling especially irritated. But she did not expect the barely-there whisper that now accosted her. "Maybe I can help you."

She looked down, discomfited and unable to know how to respond to anything but harshness since her foray into the Death Eater circles. "No one can help me," Attica whispered. "I'm going to take care of this myself."

"You cannot mean..." Snape seemed to be at a loss for words. "You will not survive if you challenge the Dark Lord! Have these last two years taught you nothing?" he countered. "Have I taught you nothing?"

Attica knew that it was foolhardy to attempt to kill Voldemort. She knew that she would probably not survive the encounter, and it was pure madness to try. But she had given up on attempting to hold onto the few threadbare pieces of sanity she imagined she had left. Revenge she had sought, and it was revenge she would get. Or she would die trying. Either way, she needed to release the anger and frustration that had been boiling inside her, under the surface, for more than half her life. She didn't grace him with a response and, instead, turned on her heels and walked to the door of the Shrieking Shack.

"Attica," Snape called. She stopped, but did not turn around.

"Why?" he asked, and his speech held a note of some emotion that felt completely out of place coming from the impassive man. It was imploring. Severus Snape, of all people, was pleading with her.

Feeling vaguely shocked, Attica took a deep breath. And, for the first time in a very long time, she spoke the truth, unencumbered by hate or agenda. "Because if I don't, it will have all been for nothing. Everything I have sacrificed..." She trailed off.

"It will not bring Potter back," he said softly.

*Bring Potter back?* Attica turned a bewildered gaze on the Potions Master. She snapped out of her anguished haze for a moment to truly look at him. His normally proud posture was replaced by shoulders slumping under agony and exhaustion. The expressionless face was no longer steeled toward the world, but was filled with emotion and paler than Attica had ever seen it. He looked drained, pained, and desolate as he stood before her with his arms held limply at his sides.

*This is what a broken man looks like,* she thought fleetingly.

When Attica didn't answer, Snape moved almost imperceptibly closer to her. "You are not the only one who has failed in protecting him."

Snape thought she was a protector of Harry Potter, she realized with a click of belated understanding that persisted even through the foggy haze that had become her mind. It was amusing, really, and hysterical laughter threatened to bubble up from her chest. She was exactly the opposite of that brat's bodyguard; she was no Snape. She was an agent for her own agenda, biding her time until she could claim his life for herself. In the midst of her musings, Snape had closed the distance between them so that he was standing immediately before her. When he touched her gently on the arm, Attica flinched and shrugged away from the contact and the pity in his black eyes.

"Don't," she said flatly before slipping out of the doorway of the derelict building. Leaving behind her the only person who had continually protected her since the loss of her family, Attica felt a brief twinge of guilt before the overwhelming tug of revenge flooded through her once again. Never before, not during her childhood when she had sat in the dungeons as he taught her Potions, nor in the years she had served the Dark Lord by his side, had she ever seen Severus Snape defeated. And she had seen no small number of Cruciatus curses thrust upon him.

*The fruit of this quest has long been sought,*

*But faint of heart should tarry naught.*

## Apology

*Chapter 7 of 21*

Witches and wizards have always carried the burden of their allegiances to the dark or to the light. The choice to follow one or the other dictates a person's character. Attica Flamel pays fealty to neither. When grief morphs into an irrepressible need for vengeance, Attica will stop at nothing until the debts are paid.

The words to a poem from her childhood floated unbidden into her mind, and Attica began snaking toward the castle, the poem still in her thoughts:

*Asphodel and phoenix feather,*

*Ground as one not mixed together.*

How did the rest go? She couldn't remember...

She sighed and continued treading carefully to avoid the eyes of Death Eaters and Potterites alike. Only Voldemort's inner circle knew of her involvement or would recognize her, and friendly fire would be imminent from the other Death Eaters. And as for everyone else — well, she had left that life a long time ago, choosing instead to utilize her nights for far more fruitful endeavors than personal relationships. Yes, she had remained a student in name, but that was only to keep an ever-watching eye on Potter. It was part of her arrangement with the Dark Lord, and she hadn't wanted to displease him before the opportunity to kill the boy presented itself in a way that allowed for little to no cleanup on her part.

Once the stone courtyard was visible, Attica began scanning for the most advantageous position in which to hide. She needed to be close enough to see but far enough away to avoid any fighting which might ensue, which would only distract her from the real objective. Glancing around herself, she saw few Death Eaters. This was something she had expected, as well. She knew that Voldemort would enter, encircled by his most devoted followers. Except me, she thought wryly, imagining the cloaks that would surround the Dark Lord upon his triumphant return to the castle that was once considered to be the place that was most safe from him.

Yes, she thought. The courtyard looked promising. There was no doubt in her mind that the Dark Lord would choose that ancient place to finish what he had started. He might even parade the black-haired corpse through the stone archway of the school, she supposed, to show McGonagall and the others who had been blindly following Potter that their hero was dead, that there was nothing left to fight for now. Some twisted part of him would want to see their faces as they gazed upon their lifeless hero. He would stand victorious and offer pardon to the very people whose homes he had shattered and whose families he had destroyed. And they would lose every ounce of pride that remained in their weak bodies when they dropped to their knees before him to beg him for their lives. Some of them would be too proud to beg for their own survival, or too heartbroken from the loss of loved ones at the hand of Voldemort that they would not resist submitting themselves to the same fate.

Reducing a person to this state of surrender fueled the Dark Lord. Voldemort hungered for life, as everyone knew. But he also had an insatiable desire to be worshipped, feared, to be hailed as a conqueror, and to be the father of a new age. Attica couldn't explain exactly how she knew those details, but she did. Those faint glimmers of insight into his thoughts had allowed her to earn the Dark Lord's trust so much more quickly than the others had. As she tucked herself neatly away in the crevice of a forgotten watchtower, she allowed herself a small smile as she recollected the hateful sneer that painted the face of Bellatrix Lestrange when Voldemort had unexpectedly drawn Attica into his inner circle without presenting her with half the hoops that Bellatrix had had to jump through just for him to go to the trouble of learning her name.

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After the Tri-Wizard Tournament, Attica was certain that Potter was telling the truth about Voldemort's return. She had begun to carry the vial of Elixir on her person at all times, convinced that this was the danger that her grandfather had warned her about. But while it had been mostly fear causing her to wear the charm, she found that after a month of carrying it with her, the fear had grown less substantial. Her nightmares were still vividly real, and she often woke in the middle of the night with her whole body shaking and covered in a cold sheen of sweat. But in her dreams she was no longer running from Voldemort as a weak soul searching for escape. She was wildly powerful and undaunted by the bodies piling up around her, and she was not cowed by the thought of the Dark Lord. In a way, it was almost like she was Voldemort, so convinced was her dream-self of her invincibility...

And then the dreams of Potter had started. She found herself loathing him, unable to see him in person without being confronted with a resurgence of the hatred that consumed her dreams. She felt drawn to him, but not like a moth is drawn to a flame. It was more like a shark drawn to blood in the sea. It was bloodlust - irrevocable and instinctual.

It had taken months to obtain an interview with the Dark Lord himself. She thought of it as research. Surely he, of all people, would know about Potter's weaknesses. As a fellow classmate, she truly should not have found it difficult to end Potter. But the boy had survived attack upon attack by one of the most powerful wizards of all time. Attica was true to her Sorting. No Ravenclaw worth her sapphires would step into a situation without first learning as much as possible about her enemy.

Shortly after Voldemort had formally welcomed Attica into his ranks, she sat at the long black table in the luxurious dining room at Malfoy Manor. The meeting had come to an end, and she was flooded with anxiety as Voldemort beckoned for her to stand before him at the head of the table. Snape sat at his right hand. The seat on his left had been newly vacated by Bellatrix Lestrange. It had been a particularly tense conference. Lucius Malfoy was beginning to have doubts, and the Dark Lord could sense it in the penetrating silence of the echoing room.

It wasn't helpful that, the night before, Goyle had caught Greyback abandoning his post as an outlook at the Department of Mysteries to take up a more... immediate form of fulfillment. The woman he attacked was an official of the Department. It was only a stroke of luck that she was discovered to be a Muddblood, and so, the Dark Lord was willing to overlook the indiscretion he so unapologetically described as "a reckless, but fruitful, incursion into extermination."

When Attica reached the end of the table and stood before the Dark Lord, she detected his irritability. It rolled off him in waves of disdain that she could tell he was trying to contain under the mask of the regal and forgiving Master. The majority of the Wizarding World thought that Voldemort ruled by fear, and in a way that was true. But that was only the easiest way to coerce his followers to do as they were bid. It was not the most effective. The Dark Lord knew that it would be more beneficial to him, in the long term, to gain the unflagging loyalty of his subordinates. Its absence created a perverseness in his temper seldom rivaled by any other circumstance with which he was presented.

Instinctively understanding this, Attica felt it was wise to proceed with caution. If he were to discover that her true motives fell well outside the realm of a simple and defining

fealty to him, even a quick death would be an ambitious hope.

"There is something amiss, here, I can feel it..." he whispered so that even though the large room was crawling with Death Eaters, only she and the Potions Master could hear.

"My Lord?"

"You have offered your services, and I admit I was shocked to hear of your clandestine allegiance to me... I am most skeptical of this. You are not a Slytherin. Neither do you belong to a family that followed me before the minor setback. In fact, you may blame me for the death of your family. You cannot blame me, surely, for wondering why someone like you would want to join my ranks. Unless you had some sort of... agenda." His eyes were focused on her and the internal conflict between a profound sense of belonging and debilitating anxiety waged on.

Attica steeled herself with a quick breath and, clenching her hands into fists at her sides, she attempted to dredge up what confidence she could. She had a role to play.

"I am sorry," she said in a tired voice, trying to convey genuine regret. "I confess that there is more to the story, my Lord. But I beg that you give me the opportunity to explain myself, even though I deserve no such leniency."

"Ah," Voldemort sighed, seeming to have reached a conclusion even as he reached for his wand. He leaned back against the ornately carved wood of his chair with the satisfaction of a man proven correct. "You will learn to regret withholding secrets from me, child," he said simply. He locked eyes with Attica and the pause that followed was the tensest moment she had ever withstood. Finally, he looked away to place his wand on the varnished surface of the table before him. The threat behind the gesture made Attica's nails dig into the flesh of her palms.

"Speak," Voldemort said expectantly.

"My goal in coming to you was not simply to join your Death Eaters," she said carefully. "I am a selfish person, and the guilt... My Lord, I have waited years to apologize to you."

That seemed to surprise him. The Dark Lord searched her gaze, and Attica sensed the delicate weight of Legilimency press against her mind. She opened herself up to him, and offered the memories of flames enveloping her home, the conflagration lapping up the stone and mortar of the Flamel estate. She felt him swiftly extricate himself from her mind, and Attica fought the urge to beam with triumph; he had not perceived the walls she had so assiduously built in preparation for this encounter. He only saw what she had intended him to see, and undoubtedly he had not met with any snippet of her thoughts that would make him certain of anything but Attica's loyalty. He looked distinctly disappointed; traitors he had dealt with, but the young woman before him was not what he had expected.

"Years? Explain yourself."

"When I was taken from my home... Dumbledore and McGonagall came to resolve the matters of the estate. Dumbledore was looking for instructions to the Stone, and I knew where they were, but I said nothing." She could feel the alarmed gaze of the Potions Master on her countenance. He knew that if she mentioned his name, his days would be numbered and few. The Dark Lord would not punish him lightly for the betrayal.

Voldemort seemed to consider her words. "That is all?"

"No, there's more. Dumbledore set fire to the manor, and so the instructions were destroyed. This you know of course, my Lord." Attica dropped her head in shame, trying her best not to overplay her role. "If I could have removed the documents before, my Lord, I could have hastened your return. You would not have needed any other assistance, and your objectives would have not been neglected as long as they have been," she whispered in what she hoped was a convincing act of penitence.

"So you came to me to tell me of your... remorse?" That word, meant to convey such emotion, seemed foreign coming from the inhuman figure seated before her.

"Yes, my Lord. The welcome I received was most unanticipated. I was expecting to be punished for my inaction." Attica paused for a moment, but Voldemort seemed to be processing this new information. In the seconds of silence, Attica allowed herself a glance at the Potions Master, who was studying her with a calculating gaze.

"I know you must punish me, my Lord. For my omission," she said quietly as she tore her eyes from the professor.

"You were but a child," Voldemort said finally, looking up. "And you have seen the error of your actions. I am, nonetheless," he paused momentarily, as if to find the word he was searching for, "... touched by your sentiment. By your loyalty." Attica searched his demeanor for doubt, but all she could garner from his person was a rush of some satisfying emotion radiating from him... Shocked, she finally found the name of the sensation he was feeling. It was pleasure. She wondered briefly if he was this decipherable to everyone. Apparently he was not, as Snape was still alert and rigid in his seat with distrustful expectation that would have been lost on someone less observant than she. He darted a glance at Attica, but she quickly retrained her eyes on the Dark Lord.

"Bella," Voldemort called in a soft voice that, to Attica, bespoke his power within the circle. He did not have to raise his voice much above a whisper for his followers to hear him, so attuned were they to the nuances of their master's voice. Bellatrix wasted no time in rushing to his side, all but pushing Attica out of the way to get closer to him. She was dressed in black, of course, and her sleek, sophisticated robes hid a bustier if her exaggerated figure was any indication. She was curvy and seductive and any fool could see whom that was intended for. Bellatrix all but fawned over the Dark Lord.

"My Lord?" she asked silkily as she stood before him. She stared into his face confidently with her dark and heavily hooded eyes.

"Would you please find Miss Flamel a set of new robes? She no longer needs to wear the ensemble of the neophyte, I believe." Out of the corner of her vision, Attica saw Snape relax his unyielding posture microscopically. But she knew that if she met his gaze, there would be a question in his eyes. Obviously she was keeping his involvement a secret...why was she doing so and what else was she hiding?

Bellatrix hesitated. "But she is new, my Lord. She belongs in the rough wool robes," she whined in a stilted voice that scarcely concealed her annoyance. "The silk is reserved for the long-faithful—"

"I am well aware of that, Bellatrix," Voldemort interrupted in a deceptively calm tone. It was clear that he did not appreciate having his wishes questioned. "The robes, Bella. It would not please me to ask again."

Bellatrix acquiesced with a murmur of respectful assent that belied the tight-lipped, narrow-eyed countenance that now turned on Attica. Walking away from the table, she pinned Attica with a glare of pure abhorrence. Attica knew she should have been afraid of the woman. She was a Lestranger, after all, and a known madwoman. But instead of cowering from Bellatrix's antagonism, she let reflex take over.

Attica met her eyes and smiled knowingly.

# Bravery

## Chapter 8 of 21

Witches and wizards have always carried the burden of their allegiances to the dark or to the light. The choice to follow one or the other dictates a person's character. Attica Flamel pays fealty to neither. When grief morphs into an irrepressible need for vengeance, Attica will stop at nothing until the debts are paid.

Leaning gingerly against the jagged rock of the watchtower, Attica absently ran a hand down her fine silk robes. She kept her eyes trained on the courtyard and waited for the Dark Lord.

She watched with rapt interest as Voldemort approached the castle. As she had expected, the Boy Who Lived was not far behind. Hagrid the groundskeeper was carrying the boy's lifeless body in his arms. Attica had been able to hear the half-giant's sobs long before he came into view.

There was a long, tense moment of silence before the magically amplified voice of Lord Voldemort pervaded the air surrounding the castle.

"Harry Potter is dead. He was killed as he ran away, trying to save himself while you, his loyal followers, were sacrificing your own lives for him and his cause. I bring you his body as proof that your hero has perished," Voldemort proclaimed.

He continued his homily with what she knew he intended to be a gentle voice. Attica turned toward the Dark Lord, searching for the best angle of attack.

Too many people were in her way. She didn't have a clear shot. If she sent a curse to push them out of the way, she would surely be spotted and executed before she could bat an eyelash. She was not dense enough to lose this opportunity to end the Dark Lord. Besides, if and when she defeated Voldemort, she wanted there to be no shadow of a doubt in his mind as to who had delivered the blow that ended his life. She wanted to be staring into those blood-red eyes as the life left them, leaving them vacant. She needed that satisfaction, but the waiting was painful.

"...Your parents and your children, your brothers and your sisters, your friends and your loved ones will live and be forgiven. You will join me in the new world that we will build together. I know that you have been misguided, and that is why I have decided to be so gracious. I also know that many of you think me evil. But I am here to tell you today that the right side has won this fight. I am giving you this opportunity to join me in my quest to rebuild the world. I wish for a return to the splendor of days past. My purposes are not ones of malevolence, but ones of purity. And I wish for you to join me in this endeavor."

By the time he finished speaking and the echoes of his sinister speech dissolved into the crisp morning air, the large group of Death Eaters had reached the castle doors. Attica could hear the clamor inside the large stone edifice. Bellatrix cackled menacingly as she waved her wand and the heavy wooden doors that had always seemed to offer Attica so much protection swung open without protest. The open doors revealed the pathetic remnants of Dumbledore's Army gathering in the entrance hall. They warily began to straggle out of the castle and into the burgeoning sunlight. The swarm of Death Eaters was only yards away.

Someone, McGonagall, Attica thought, screamed. A flood of despairing cries followed her exclamation as one by one, each remaining soldier for the Light took in the sight of the still form in Hagrid's arms. Comprehension dawning, the wails of anguish grew louder.

With a shout and a flash of sparks from his wand, Voldemort silenced the crowd, which was now almost completely filling one side of the large stone courtyard. Hagrid was instructed to place Potter on the ground at Voldemort's feet. The weeping man refused and only after multiple death threats from Lucius Malfoy and Bellatrix did he relinquish his grasp on the boy. His wails grew louder as Malfoy dropped the body at the Dark Lord's feet. Attica felt an unexpected wave of gratification roll through her. She wanted to laugh at the sight. So many faces were contorted in despondency as they took in the spectacle before them.

In her effort to suppress the laughter that was once again threatening to bubble to the surface, she almost missed seeing the tall figure breaking away from the mass of Hogwarts students and making its way into no-man's-land.

Neville.

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Forgetting that she did not want to be discovered, Attica audibly gasped. *This is no time for bravery, Neville*, Attica thought. The thought of seeing her best friend crumpling in front of her was almost more than Attica could endure. She had grown up with him. He had taught her so much about love and loss. He had been an island of lucidity in the sea of her instability. She suddenly found herself stuck between her desire for vengeance against the man who had destroyed her happiness and her need to rescue the man who had brought it back. She had taught herself to adopt the detachment needed to witness almost any other person's death, and she had on many occasions looked on as Voldemort tortured and killed innocent people, seemingly for the entertainment of the Death Eater circle. But she couldn't watch Neville be discarded so easily. She grasped at the stone wall before her and felt tears, real tears, well up in her eyes. She waited with bated breath, looking for her opportunity to intervene.

Neville, of course, was quickly disarmed. She knew he had been practicing defensive spells for months in preparation for this moment, but she also knew him well enough to know that he would never be able to accurately cast any of those spells when his emotions were running so high. He had always floundered at the slightest hint of frustration.

The Dark Lord began sizing the boy up. *"You show spirit and bravery," he decided. "And you come from noble stock. Pureblood, even. You will make a very valuable Death Eater. We need your kind, Neville Longbottom."*

She knew how he would react to the mere thought of joining the assemblage of people who had sent his parents to a permanent stay at St. Mungo's.

He was infuriated.

"I'll join you when hell freezes over," Neville spat. It was just like Neville, Attica noted in the back of her mind, to give such a clichéd retort. Raising his wand, he bellowed, *"Dumbledore's Army!"* The battle cry caused roars to issue from the crowd behind him.

With a flick of Voldemort's wand, Neville grew still and something flew from one of the high windows of the castle. Attica watched with unease as he caught the dark object in his pale hand. The Sorting Hat.

Attica could only look on as Neville attempted to struggle against the binding curse that held him unnaturally still as the Sorting Hat was dropped unceremoniously onto his head. She briefly glimpsed the determination in his eyes before they disappeared under the hat. She also detected something else she had hoped she wouldn't see. She

was remotely thankful that she couldn't see his face clearly because it grieved her to see such intense fear mar his usually calm features. She knew that seeing the terror and sorrow in his eyes would break her like nothing had since the night she had fled from her childhood home. Years of planning her revenge and her interactions with Voldemort had left her calloused and steadfast. But nothing in this war had prepared her to witness the pain she had, for an instant, seen reflected in the eyes of the person she loved most in the world.

A/N: \*These lines were taken directly from JK Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, Chapter 36, "The Flaw in the Plan." I make no money from the writing of this story. These characters (with the exception of Attica) belong to JK Rowling. She built this beautiful world, and I find myself supremely lucky to have the honor of visiting it from time to time.

## Escape

### Chapter 9 of 21

Witches and wizards have always carried the burden of their allegiances to the dark or to the light. The choice to follow one or the other dictates a person's character. Attica Flamel pays fealty to neither. When grief morphs into an irrepressible need for vengeance, Attica will stop at nothing until the debts are paid.

The crowd of Potterites rushed forward, their movements halted by the surrounding Death Eaters, who pushed them back at wand point.

"Neville Longbottom is going to demonstrate the punishment that will befall anyone foolish enough to continue to oppose me," Voldemort hissed. The hat burst into flames.

Screams issued forth from Dumbledore's Army, and Attica's choice was made for her. Neville had to be saved, if nothing else. She whispered a glamor charm so she wouldn't be seen. She had been formulating a plan to make her way into the inner circle without being stopped by the Death Eaters, but the battle had already begun. Giants and centaurs flooded the courtyard, and it took Attica a moment to find Neville amidst the chaos.

With Voldemort's attention diverted, Neville was able to shake off the binding curse. Her heart started racing as she saw Voldemort's snake slithering through the crowd toward him. She was trying so hard to reach him, but there were so many people in her way, and her limbs felt as if they were made of lead. Neville threw aside the burning hat and seemed to pull a silver sword out its depths. Time seemed to stand still, and Attica saw him brandish the sword, looking more determined than she had ever seen him. In a graceful arc, he lowered the weapon to meet its target. The sword sliced through Nagini's neck and the head seemed to remain suspended in mid-air before hitting the ground with a sickening thud.

Voldemort's scream could be heard above the din of battle. Attica knew that he was feeling something he had not felt for a very long time. Fear. With the death of the snake, she realized, Voldemort's only affectionate relationship with another living creature had been severed.

But this was of little consequence. After killing the snake, Neville turned and ran headlong into the entrance hall and directly into the battle that was erupting there. Attica began to run to catch up to him. When she reached the entrance hall, she slowed down to navigate through the multitude of spells being thrown haphazardly all around her. The hot smell of hexes zapping through the air made her nausea swell.

She passed Voldemort warring with McGonagall, Slughorn, and Kingsley Shacklebolt, but she was set on finding Neville before he got himself killed. She would have to come back for him later. Frantically searching the large entrance hall, she finally spotted Neville fighting alongside Ronald Weasley, both of whom had been attacked by Fenrir Greyback. Attica cast a silent *Incendio* and watched as the werewolf erupted into flames. Another flick of her wand and he was thrust back several yards, landing with a crunch against the opposite wall.

"Nice one," Weasley called as he turned and narrowly missed being hit by a hex thrown by another Death Eater.

She reached out and grabbed Neville's wand while he was still trying to make sense of what had just happened. In his confusion, he did not resist when she pushed him around the corner and into an empty room. The tumult of the battle was still pouring through the castle, and Attica knew that time was short.

"What..." he began.

Realizing that he could not see her, she lowered the invisibility glamor.

"Attica! What are you doing? What are you doing here?"

She swiftly placed a hand over his mouth to quiet him.

"Shhh," she hissed. "We only have a few seconds before someone finds us here." She stared up into his soft brown eyes for a moment before realizing that her hand was still clamped over his mouth. She lowered her hand and returned his wand to him. "I'm getting you out of here."

The surprise in his eyes lasted only a fraction of a second. He shook his head. "No, Attica. I have to fight," he whispered passionately.

Attica wanted to scream in frustration, but struggled to keep her voice down. "I'm not going to stand by and watch you die, Neville," she snapped.

"I can't just leave all this behind. I'm a part of this, and I'm going to see it through to the end. Attica, we have to fight for what we love," he said simply.

"I am, Neville!"

A pregnant pause followed her exclamation and a glimmer of hope flittered across his face.

"We are leaving. You have your wand back. We are going to have to fight our way out of here." Grabbing his hand, she turned toward the broken window on the other side of the room. She would body-bind him and levitate him through the window if she had to, she thought wildly.

He pulled away from her grasp and she looked back at him. He shook his head adamantly. "Go if you want, Attica. I'm staying." He leaned down and planted a gentle kiss on her forehead before exiting the room and rejoining the battle.

After recovering from her shock, she replaced the invisibility glamor and rushed after him. She dodged hexes from both sides as she followed Neville, who was fighting his way through the crowd to the entrance of the castle.

Attica froze. In the middle of the hall, the battle had died down and a circle of people surrounded Voldemort. She tried to push her way toward the circle for a better view of

what was happening. It had to be something big if it had halted the entire battle. As she drew closer, she noticed that there was someone else inside the circle. With a gasp of disbelief, she recognized Potter. His wand was drawn as he and Voldemort circled each other. He was alive.

*"But you're too late. You've missed your chance. I got there first. I overpowered Draco weeks ago. I took this wand from him."*

*"So this is what it comes down to,"* whispered the Boy Who Would Not Die. *"Does the wand in your hand know that its last master was Disarmed? Because if it does... I am the true master of the Elder Wand."*

The room was silent with trepidation. She dared a glance at the Dark Lord. She could see it there again, the fear. Only this time, it was much more pronounced.

It all unfolded very quickly.

*"Avada Kadavra!"*

*"Expelliarmus!"*

The two spells met, green and red, uttered at exactly the same moment. Voldemort's wand arched high into the air, landing at Potter's feet. The Dark Lord crumpled to the floor and his body remained where it had fallen, lifeless. His own curse had rebounded on him once more. Voldemort was dead.

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Attica couldn't make sense of any of it at first. The Elder Wand was only a myth. Potter was supposed to be dead. Once again, the rug had been pulled out from under her, and her thoughts were a web of tangled dread and disappointment.

She reassured herself with the fact that Neville had not been harmed. Hesitant sounds of merriment began to rise and then flooded through the entrance hall. The joy was almost palpable, but Attica was numb to it, and her hatred of Potter began to bubble to the surface once again. It had receded in the moments following his ostensible death, but now it was resurfacing, more potent than ever. Neville had chosen to fight for him rather than escape with her. As if she needed another reason to hate Harry Potter.

Still enveloped in the glamor, she pointed her wand at Potter from across the room. *"Avada Kadavra!"* she hissed through clenched teeth. She was reminded of the fact that a spell caster had to really mean an Unforgivable to cast an Unforgivable. She knew that when Snape had killed Dumbledore, he had had to work very hard to contrive his hatred for the man. There would be no pretending here. She meant the curse with every fiber of her being, and she believed in her abilities with absolute certainty. There was greater chance that the sun wouldn't rise than she would find the killing curse to be above her capability.

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As the sun rose high above the recovering occupants of Hogwarts Castle, Attica was nowhere to be found. Her curse had failed, and no one had even heard her utter it, so absorbed were they in the comparative bliss that had immediately followed the fall of the Dark Lord. She could not fathom why her curse had foundered, and she glared at her ash wand as one would a traitor.

She was all at once overwhelmed with the knowledge that she had failed, twice over. Despair coursed through her, and all she knew was an inordinate urge to be alone in her misery. She knew that she no longer belonged there, among the walls of the castle that had been her sanctuary of learning and magic. She no longer belonged in the only place that had remained constant in her unstable life. This place had offered her asylum like no other place had been able to, not even her haunted dreams. And now, she was a stranger to it. Her magic had betrayed her. Attica slowly stole away from the castle, needing to be anywhere but there.

Somewhere in the back of her mind, she could hear the murmuring of the Dark Lord's voice, taunting. There was not even a place in her mind where she could seek refuge anymore.

Still, she ran.

A/N: \*These lines were taken directly from JK Rowling's Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, Chapter 36, "The Flaw in the Plan." I make no money from the writing of this story. These characters (with the exception of Attica) belong to JK Rowling. She built this beautiful world, and I find myself supremely lucky to have the honor of visiting it from time to time.

## Madness

### Chapter 10 of 21

Witches and wizards have always carried the burden of their allegiances to the dark or to the light. The choice to follow one or the other dictates a person's character. Attica Flamel pays fealty to neither. When grief morphs into an irrepressible need for vengeance, Attica will stop at nothing until the debts are paid.

Days passed. It had been more than a week since she had Apparated into the hall of her parents' house. She had been confused and angry and, to the consternation of the house-elf that had found her, completely beside herself with grief. He had snapped his fingers and wrapped her in a thick blanket. "Not to worry, Miss. Moby is here," he whispered as he fussed over her. His voice had faded into indistinct murmurs as she flitted from consciousness. When she woke up from a particularly vivid nightmare, she was tucked neatly into a bed in a second-floor guest room. The house itself had been shut up after her parents had died. Her grandmother wouldn't hear of selling it. Instead, it had stood vacant for years.

The house-elf who waited on her now had chosen to live in the uninhabited house when her grandparents' house had been destroyed. He had elected to remain in the lonely, cobwebbed manor, polishing the silver every Thursday and mopping the once-beautiful parquet floors as if someone actually lived there.

Now, he was adamant that Attica have something to eat.

"Moby has brought Miss some fresh clothes. Is Miss wanting some food?"

Some part of her brain registered the sound of the house-elf's voice, but she couldn't seem to find the voice to answer his questions. She wanted to have the strength to talk to him. He had been so polite to her since she had arrived at the house, but she had not said a word to him in reply. She had successfully withdrawn into herself

completely.

*It's over*, she constantly reminded herself. But why didn't she feel like it was over? Although she had envisioned it ending very differently from what had actually transpired, she had nonetheless expected to feel relieved upon its conclusion. Now that the war was over, her journey should be over as well. Instead, she felt as though she were still teetering on the edge of her sanity. The nightmares had seemed to quadruple in intensity. The red gaze of Voldemort pinned her into submission, and he whispered the plans of his return to her every time she closed her eyes.

She was thankful for small mercies, however. She hadn't slept or eaten much since she had returned to her parents' home, meaning the nightmares had been blessedly few.

She was not making a conscious effort to sulk, but she was lost. It had been much easier to put one foot in front of the other when she had had a purpose for her life. She couldn't eat, and she didn't want to sleep. Instead, she sat on the bed in the guest room with her arms locked around her knees, staring blindly at the wall. She was exhausted, but there was something nagging at her subconscious, tenuously pushing into her waking mind. The Dark Lord's voice was now starting to haunt her waking hours. Weren't her dreams enough?

Moby had been thrilled when she had given into his prodding earlier that day and agreed to have a lie-down. He had even brought up freshly laundered blankets for her, as well as a plate of toast and the tea tray. She laid down and closed her eyes to appease him, but she did not attempt to sleep. The toast remained untouched. She was concentrating on remaining as still as possible. She thought maybe if she was still enough, the voices would not be able to detect her presence, and they would stop.

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Moby returned a few hours later and found her in exactly the same position he had left her in.

"Miss?" He ventured to address her uncertainly, jolting her from her attempts at silent meditation.

Attica sat up and rubbed her eyes, feigning the motions she would have taken had she just woken up. She looked at him, and what was left of her heart melted at the hope in his eyes as he held the tray of food out for her. "Thank you," she said quietly, "But I'm not very hungry right now."

Moby just smiled at her, evidently pleased that she had spoken a complete sentence after a week of almost complete silence. "Moby will make some soup for Miss and bring it up, just in case."

Attica eyed the being in front of her. He was a fixture of her childhood, someone she remembered always being able to depend on. She recalled asking him to sneak her cookies from the kitchen when her grandparents were occupied in the garden. He had always obliged, and it had felt like a great secret between the two of them, but looking back, Attica strongly suspected that the fiercely loyal Moby had had her grandmother's permission to comply with her wishes. Nonetheless, she felt an overwhelming tug of affection for the big-eared, wide-eyed figure standing at the foot of her bed.

"Very well, Moby," she sighed. "And thank you again." Attica winced at her own voice, which was raspy from disuse.

Moby smiled broadly and nodded. He snapped his fingers and disappeared with a crack.

Attica gently pushed herself to her feet and took a few tentative steps across the wooden floor. Her legs were stiff, and she winced again. She couldn't allow herself to wallow like that anymore.

She needed to figure out what was amiss with her magic.

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As Attica sat on the last step of the elegant staircase in the foyer, she tried the last of the rudimentary spells she knew offhand. With an almost silent *Wingardium Leviosa*, she was able to lift the targeted vase effortlessly into the air. With a pang, she thought of Neville. She briefly wondered where he was, and if he was wondering where she was too. She sighed and let the vase float back down to the table across the room and turned her gaze to the wand in her hand.

It was made of light-colored ash and unicorn hair core. The intricate etchings on the grip of the wand were beautiful. Attica had always thought so, from the very first day she had seen it in Ollivander's. Why it failed her in administering the Killing Curse to Potter was beyond her. Everything seemed to be in working order. Maybe it was weak. She knew of only one way to strengthen it, but that was impossible. The Stone was destroyed, and it was beyond even her ability to recreate.

Wasn't it?

*I am coming back*, a voice hissed softly. Attica jumped as the voice pulled her out of her reverie. The voice chuckled darkly, and she shivered.

It spoke again, louder this time. *I know of your deceit, Attica, and I am coming back. Remember this* Cold fear rippled through her as Voldemort's disembodied voice tapered off in a hiss. Fragmented visions of the Dark Lord walking toward her, surrounded by darkness, flooded unbidden into her mind. She pulled her legs to her chest and locked her arms around them.

"No," she whispered, squeezing her eyes shut as she tried to drown out the apparitions and the voice. The cold laughter that followed and faded into nothingness broke every ounce of strength she had left.

There were only two explanations for what was happening to her. The first was that Voldemort was coming back. Merlin knew how he did it the first time. He could probably do it again if he was so inclined. But then again, he had been so arrogant in his abilities this time that he may not have considered his failure a possibility.

But if he wasn't really coming back, if she was only hallucinating...

Attica's eyes flew open as she tried to stop the thought. No. It couldn't be true. If it was, that meant that she was mad and she just could not face that. She had seen madness. Bellatrix was mad. Voldemort was mad. She had been on several heartbreaking trips to St. Mungo's to visit Alice and Frank Longbottom. She had gone only to comfort Neville, but had been deeply pained herself to see them that way.

Attica could be called cold. Clinical, even, but she was not mad.

Attica tried to stifle a sob, but it came anyway. She wept for the first time in years and she choked on the onslaught of her tears. She clutched at her head and entangled her fingers in her riotous curls, as if she could remove whatever insanity had overcome her with the sheer force of her hands.

She did not even notice when the wards protecting her home were broken.

# Negotiations

## Chapter 11 of 21

Witches and wizards have always carried the burden of their allegiances to the dark or to the light. The choice to follow one or the other dictates a person's character. Attica Flamel pays fealty to neither. When grief morphs into an irrepressible need for vengeance, Attica will stop at nothing until the debts are paid.

"Miss Flamel?"

It took a minute for Attica to register the presence of another person in the room. But when she did, her head snapped up from her hands. She stared at the man in front of her, taking in the sullen expression partly hidden behind a curtain of black hair.

Snape.

"What are you doing here?" Her voice sounded tired and was still raspy from disuse.

Her demeanor seemed to surprise him. He was undoubtedly expecting her usual snark in response, but she was too weary to deliver it.

"I came to see how you are faring," he said slowly, gauging her reaction. He searched her gaze and stepped closer to her as one would approach a wounded animal. His look was part concern and part wariness. She did not concern herself with trying to determine which part was greater.

Attica scoffed. "Obviously I am doing wonderfully, Snape. Can't you tell?" She could almost see her red-rimmed eyes, her blotchy, tear-stained face, and her mutinous hair reflected in his black eyes. "You seem to have fared far better, though." She nodded toward him, indicating that his crisp new robes and boots had not gone unnoticed.

"I do not want to be in possession of anything remotely reminiscent of Voldemort," he shrugged. "I got rid of everything he gave me. At least everything that can be removed." Attica's right hand immediately sought her left forearm, and she stroked the soft cotton of her sleeve where it covered her Dark Mark.

"I see. And of course you wanted to groom yourself for your big heroic debut, yes?" She nodded to the newspaper lying on the step beside her. The Daily Prophet had been hailing Snape as a tragic hero.

Attica had never questioned the motivation behind Severus Snape's actions. She knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that he was truly loyal to Dumbledore. She had heard him warn the old wizard that the Death Eaters were coming the night they had come searching for the instructions to the Stone. He could just as easily have led the Death Eaters in Dumbledore's capture that night. And then, when he had remained silent upon her entrance into Voldemort's ranks, her suspicions concerning his loyalty had been solidified. He was the only Death Eater who had failed to congratulate her.

And now she knew why he had been protecting Harry Potter. It was for the sake of a woman who had been dead for more than sixteen years, and he had been doing it from inside the Dark Lord's inner circle.

He had played his role flawlessly for so many years, and she had been the only one to truly figure out where his allegiance belonged. Now, the entire Wizarding World knew the whole story. Potter, believing Snape to be dead, insisted on the "real story" being told. Now, Snape was being portrayed in the Daily Prophet as a lovelorn man whose anguish over losing Lily Evans had driven the actions that led to the salvation of the entire Wizarding world. For had it not been for Severus Snape, they all would have been doomed.

But even in her grief-stricken madness, Attica had been able to find mirth in the embarrassment evident on Snape's face when he was spotted emerging from the Forbidden Forest the day after the final battle and was faced with an onslaught of questions pertaining to lost love and his "heart-breaking quest for redemption." The photos depicting this embarrassment had brought Attica the only semblance of a positive emotion since she had arrived at the empty manor.

Snape shifted where he stood and pursed his lips. "Rita Skeeter is an abominably conniving woman who will stop at nothing to convince the masses of anything that will force them to purchase a copy of the revolting piece of garbage she calls a newspaper. And if people are thick enough to believe the lies she feeds them, then their opinions really are of no worth," he said, crossing his arms. It seemed to Attica that his indignant response should be accompanied by a stomp of his foot. For one brief moment, she tried to picture the surly man before her as a surly child crossing his arms when he didn't get his way. She couldn't do it.

"I have always known you to be a private man, Snape," Attica said. "Who knew that you were itching to have your story told so badly that you gave Potter, of all people, those memories? I have to admit, I'm a little affronted. I thought we were closer than that. I always fancied that when you grew weary of keeping so many secrets and felt that you had to break down and tell them to someone, that you would come to me. But it seems that Harry Potter is more worthy of your trust."

His eyes hardened and all traces of wariness vanished. She quickly averted her gaze. She had not meant to sound so petulant, but once she had started, the words had all come tumbling out in a rush. She was loathe to admit it, but the words she had painted with sarcasm rang true. She had been shocked to discover these snippets of his past among the pages of the *Daily Prophet*. He had told her little about himself during their time together, but what he had revealed to her had been telling. She also knew that he was privy to much more about her own life than she had learned about his. He had been there when her world had collapsed, and he had helped her to slowly rebuild it. Knowing that he had shared these private memories with Potter and not with her had only fueled her hatred for the boy. But then she quickly reminded herself of the secret she had been keeping from him and tried to bury the feelings of betrayal.

Attica could tell she had hit a nerve. "Miss Flamel, had I known that I was not breathing my last breath, I can assure you, I would have given Potter nothing but the information he absolutely needed to defeat the Dark Lord."

"Do you regret it?"

There was a slight pause. "Regret what, exactly?"

"Spilling all your dirty secrets to Potter," she clarified.

He did not answer her inquiry, but instead straightened his posture, seeming to weigh his words before he spoke them.

"I am, as you say, a private man. I was not prepared for the delicacies of my past to be blatantly plastered on the front pages of the newspapers by people who think they know me without ever having had a conversation with me." His black eyes met Attica's and under his scrutiny, she slowly got to her feet and prayed that her legs wouldn't fail her. He had already seen her weeping like a child. She didn't want to forfeit any more of her pride in his presence.

"Potter appears regretful as well. He's looking for you, you know. He wants to make amends, I daresay," she offered.

Snape nodded curtly. "I do not want his apologies. He defeated the Dark Lord. That is enough. I would rather be left in peace. It is becoming increasingly difficult to dodge his sorrowful accolades and the nuisance that is Rita Skeeter."

"Oh, the burden of the celebrity," she gushed sarcastically, pushing her unruly curls from her face.

His jaw tightened. "I did not come here to listen to your snide comments, Miss Flamel," he said coldly.

Attica crossed her arms over her chest. "Then what do you want?"

"I came to thank you," he said simply.

She was taken aback by his sudden show of thoughtfulness and remained silent.

"I have never been one to overlook a kindness. I am well aware that I owe my survival to your actions in the Shrieking Shack," he said in a quiet voice. He studied the cuff on his right wrist before seeking out her eyes with his own. "I am also aware that my injuries were so severe that a mere murtlap and Mortemque treatment would not have sufficed. Those were the only healing potions I had in my possession that night."

She sniffed, breaking her gaze from his and looking away. "Then I guess you are far luckier than you believe."

"No, I am not. Luck had nothing to do with it." Snape studied her face. "You gave me Elixir. I was not aware any still existed in the world, but I am certain that Elixir is the only substance capable of reviving me after the injuries I sustained. Nothing else would have responded to Nagini's venom. And your grandparents being who they were, it wasn't hard to come to a viable conclusion."

Attica shrugged. "There is no more, if that's what you're after. My grandfather gave me one vial, and I used it on you. It's not as if I know how to create more," she said solemnly.

*But if I could, my wand would become so much stronger. I would become so much stronger,* she added silently.

"Of course you can't. I don't expect you to," Snape said, shaking his head. "Your grandfather was a brilliant alchemist. It would be impossible for even the most talented Potions Master to recreate the Stone from scratch without any residue," he said curtly. "I simply came to offer you my thanks. I greatly appreciate that you used the last of the substance to save me. It was completely undeserved, and I cannot fathom how I can ever repay you. But I do realize the weight of what you have done for me. I need you to know that."

The emotion in his voice was enough to render Attica speechless, but something Snape had said was echoing in the back of her mind.

*Residue.* Snape had said that the Stone could be remade using residue. Was there enough left in the vial? Could it be possible?

Assuming that Attica was going to make no attempt to reply, he had turned toward the door.

"Wait!" Attica took a few steps toward Snape and reached for his arm. He turned his face to her, his eyebrows raised in surprise.

"Help me recreate the Stone."

He issued a bark of laughter, but the desperation in her eyes quickly dissolved the sound.

"It is impossible. Your grandfather was the only person who knew how to produce it." He eyed the pale fingers grasping his arm.

"If anyone can figure it out, it would be you."

"Flattery will not do you any good..."

She waved her free hand to dismiss whatever he was about to say.

"You said it could be recreated if there was residue. What if I had residue? Then could you do it?" She tugged on the chain around her neck, pulling the vial from where it hung under her shirt. He was silent, so she continued. "The Elixir was in this vial from the time I received it from my grandfather until I used it to revive you. There should be enough residue left to recreate the stone. Right? We have a chance, don't we?"

It seemed to pain him to see her this way. She was usually so controlled and impassive, but in that moment, her eyes were wild and beseeching.

"Even if it is possible, it could take months or even years to get results. People have wasted entire lifetimes brewing and rebrewing in fruitless efforts to find just the right combination of ingredients to yield the Sorcerer's Stone."

"I don't know about you, but I don't have any urgent plans in the next few years. You are trying to escape from the public eye, and I can offer you refuge," she proclaimed, looking up into his face.

Although he had stood beside her on countless occasions, he had never noticed how small she truly was. "My father's potions lab has been well maintained over the years and is fully stocked. It is here for your unlimited use, if you agree to help me. You could even continue your research here when we have finished, if you wish. I can procure whatever supplies you will need."

She could see him considering the few options she knew he had. He could stay with her or he could... what? Go back to Spinner's End and await the next wave of reporters who were undoubtedly staking out the place? Or worse, Potter himself might show up to offer his meaningless apologies.

"I do not think it is wise," he said finally, gently tugging his arm from her grasp. "Good day, Miss Flamel. And thank you again."

She could not let him leave. With his help, her possession of the Stone would no longer be outside the realm of possibility.

She dropped her hand and decided that the best course of action was to target his honor. "You wanted to know how to repay me for saving your life. This is it. Help me. No questions asked. If it doesn't work, you can leave. No debts left to repay."

Snape looked surprised. He studied the young woman before him, silently appraising her. She locked eyes with him for a long moment before he spoke.

"Very well, Miss Flamel," he exhaled. "Show me to the lab."

## Darkening

### Chapter 12 of 21

Witches and wizards have always carried the burden of their allegiances to the dark or to the light. The choice to follow one or the other dictates a person's character. Attica Flamel pays fealty to neither. When grief morphs into an

irrepressible need for vengeance, Attica will stop at nothing until the debts are paid.

Moby had been thrilled when Attica informed him that they would be having a guest. After being alone in that house for so long, she couldn't blame him. There were only four bedrooms in the large house. The other rooms on the second floor were filled with books, and therefore could not really be called bedrooms. The room that had once been Attica's nursery and the room that had belonged to her parents had remained untouched. Moby had situated Snape in the guest bedroom at the end of the hall. The novelty of the situation was not lost on Attica as she dressed for the day.

She had incorrectly assumed that she and the Potions Master would immediately set to work. Instead, he had compiled a list of supplies and sent Attica out to retrieve them. He had also asked Moby to visit Spinner's End to retrieve several heavy tomes from his personal library. Apparently several hours of arduous research were necessary before they could move on to actually trying to figure out how to recreate the stone. Attica was frustrated by the obscene amount of texts she had been given to sift through.

The research was tedious and the days dragged on. Snape insisted that they must investigate all theory surrounding the Sorcerer's Stone before they attempted any brewing at all. He had only been in the laboratory long enough to clean the cauldrons properly and scour the countertops. The rest of his time was spent in the study pouring over his research. Attica believed this to be a colossal waste of time, but she bit her tongue and tried to summon every ounce of patience she possessed. Admittedly, that wasn't much.

When the cleaning had been completed by Snape Standards, he divested Attica of her vial. He removed the delicate chain and the emerald stopper and suspended the vial in a small golden cauldron. He poured a strange opalescent liquid into the cauldron and lowered the vial so that it dropped just below the surface of the swirling fluid. Attica placed a hand over the emerald stopper and gently stoked its smooth surface. When she raised her eyes, she realized that Snape had been looking down at her with a strange expression on his face. He motioned for the stopper to be placed in the cauldron alongside the vial. She held the stopper over the cauldron, hesitating. With an encouraging nod from Snape, she reluctantly loosened her grasp and watched as the emerald dropped into the softly churning liquid below her hand. The emerald hovered just below the surface, coming to rest directly beside the vial. She resisted a surprisingly strong impulse to reach into the cauldron and retrieve the emerald.

Attica was startled by the visceral reaction she had experienced upon being parted from the emerald. She didn't understand it and the coldness that had entered her heart when the emerald had broken contact with her skin told her that she didn't want to. She shivered and decided to blame it on nostalgia. There was no doubt that the items evoked strong memories of her grandparents and the last moments she had spent with them. But memories meant so much more to her than items. The emerald was only an object, she reminded herself. So why did she feel so bereft without it?

The sound of Snape tapping his wand on the lip of the cauldron drew her out of her reverie. He began to murmur an incantation. When he finished, he set his wand aside. Without looking up, he answered her silent question. "This potion will strip any residue from the vial, but will leave the samples intact for analysis. It is a very delicate process. I must ask you to keep your temper in check in the meantime. I realize your patience has been running thin as of late, but I cannot possibly conduct the removal as rapidly as you would like. We cannot risk losing anything due to unnecessary haste."

"How long?" she asked.

The answer was brisk, no-nonsense. "Three weeks."

That was that.

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So Attica waited. She spent her waking hours in the freshly polished study. She poured over parchments and books with spines that had frayed long ago. Her materials were spread out on the low coffee table while Snape occupied the desk on the other side of the room. He was perusing some ancient, yellowed tome, searching for the technique that may have been used to create the Stone while Attica was tasked with attempting to compile the most plausible list of ingredients from historical accounts and Potions. So far she had determined the plausibility of aconite, ginger root, powdered amethyst, ginseng, and unicorn blood, among others. The list was long and the reasons behind each ingredient's place on the list were equally extensive. Snape told her that many of the ingredients could be determined from an analysis of the residue, but that there were countless other possible components that would be virtually undetectable. Even if they could figure out every constituent of the Elixir, they would still have to backtrack to determine the makeup of the Stone itself. The Elixir was merely a derivative of the Stone; its composition could be as disparate from that of the Stone as a Slytherin is different from a Hufflepuff.

If Snape was considered to be a difficult professor, he was proving an almost impossibly demanding research partner. He fully immersed himself in the quest, and expected nothing less from Attica.

Even now, having just awoken, she felt stiff from the long days spent bending over scrolls of parchment as they became covered in her small, looping notes and references. The situation was not aided by lack of sleep and the nightmares she suffered from when she did manage to doze off. The dreams had changed again, becoming more vivid, more unrelenting. These visions produced by her subconscious became so consuming that most nights she slept with her candle lit, hoping that the light would prevent her from slipping into too deep a sleep. Her dream self did not feel protected; something was not right. However, she no longer heard Voldemort's voice in her head, so she wasn't going to complain. The Elixir was no longer nestled close to her heart as she slept, and she assumed it was this absence that was causing the feelings of unease and vulnerability. She wanted so badly to go down to the lab and retrieve the chain at the very least, and the emerald from the stopper. These were not essential to the research, and this was the last connection she had to her grandparents, after all.

She looked at herself in the mirror, taking in the bruise-colored circles under her eyes and the greenish pallor that was pervading her features. She sighed and, after pulling on a pair of soft jeans and the white, long-sleeved shirt Moby had set out for her, she walked down the stairs to the kitchen. The house-elf was nowhere to be seen, but there was a large plate of toast on the counter and two large mugs of steaming coffee.

From the kitchen, Attica ventured into the study. When she entered, she set the tray on the end table by the fireplace. Snape barely glanced up as she did so. If he noticed her careworn appearance, he made no mention of it. He was seated in the desk chair as usual, but he had swiveled it so that his right arm lay across the top of the desk. His long, black-clad legs were crossed, one at a right angle to the other, and parchments were strewn across his lap. He scratched a few words on a piece of paper on the desk as she watched. This posture was not new to Attica, but she imagined that many of his former students would have fainted had they witnessed his casual attitude. She had witnessed him reposition himself several times into differing contortions over the past few weeks. He must have been uncomfortable with his legs crammed under the desk. He was not a short man.

Attica then noticed that his normally tightly buttoned wrist cuffs were undone and his sleeves were rolled back to reveal his pale forearms. She saw this in a glance, and then returned her gaze to him and she could not look away. She knew it was only a matter of moments before he would catch her ogling him. But her eyes were glued to the faded gray image on his left forearm. His Dark Mark had paled remarkably. Its edges were almost indiscernible.

"It's faded," she blurted out, lifting her eyes from his ivory arm to gaze into his ebony eyes. His head snapped up and he met her eyes with a sharp look. He nodded slowly, glancing at the Mark.

"Yes, it has. It was much like this the first time he was ... defeated," he said, carefully considering the word before he said it. He looked thoughtful. "With his death, it is only a matter of time before it fades completely, as this last bit of magic disintegrates as well."

Attica nodded curtly. "Will it vanish completely?"

"That is my assumption. It did not disappear wholly the first time because the Dark Lord was not dead. He was severely weakened then, and it began to fade as his magic faded. It came back when he regained power. This time, I believe it will disappear altogether," he continued to gaze at her and she averted her eyes in discomfort.

She gulped and took her seat in the low chair by the fire, aware of his eyes still on her. She searched through the pile of books beside the table until she found the one she

was looking for. It was a particularly old volume that contained information about the use of emerald as a life-enhancer. Sadly, it seemed that the gem was currently considered almost useless for that purpose. It was nothing more than an old wives' tale, according to the book. She sighed, thinking of all the time wasted with that particular theory and feeling irritation at reaching yet another dead-end. She opened the book and removed the notes she had tucked inside, smoothing out the creases against the mahogany surface. The stack of notes was almost as thick as the book itself; she wanted to make sure she didn't miss a single tidbit of information throughout her research and so had utilized a meticulousness of Hermione Granger caliber in her note taking. Although she hated to compare herself to that insufferable know-it-all, she could not deny her methods.

When she finally looked up, Snape was once again absorbed in his work. It was a long moment before she could wholly focus on the task before her, but not because she was discouraged. No, that wasn't it. She enjoyed Potions immensely, was talented in it even, and the research was interesting, if not fruitful. In fact, the research was providing for her the academic challenge she was never presented with at Hogwarts. It was refreshing, it was work, and it was distraction. But she could only be distracted for so long. Currently, she was perturbed by that vision of the professor's faded Dark Mark.

It made sense that it was becoming less and less visible to the eye. That was not difficult for her to accept. What was fast becoming a cause of distress to her was the knowledge that her own Mark had not faded at all.

She eyed the pure white of the cotton hiding her forearm from view. A sense of dire foreboding threatened to erupt, for the mark beneath the sleeve had only darkened.

## Fire

### Chapter 13 of 21

Witches and wizards have always carried the burden of their allegiances to the dark or to the light. The choice to follow one or the other dictates a person's character. Attica Flamel pays fealty to neither. When grief morphs into an irrepressible need for vengeance, Attica will stop at nothing until the debts are paid.

After discovering that rubies were used in the thirteenth century as a blood-strengthener when paired with powdered emerald, Attica felt that maybe she had hit a breakthrough. She scratched a side note on a spare piece of parchment to remind herself to search the study for another book on the subject after she finished perusing the one before her.

She jumped at the sound of a book slamming shut, and she looked up from her notes in surprise. She looked questioningly at Snape, who was stretching his legs out in front of him. A large closed book lay on the desk.

"The extraction should be complete," he announced.

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The lab was a large, open room with two long tables in the middle. A chalkboard hung on the wall in the front of the room by the stairs and shelving occupied the back wall from top to bottom. Notes had once been written on the chalkboard and the words were still barely visible, as if they had only just been erased the day before rather than close to seventeen years prior. The shelves were full of cauldrons, organized by size and material as well as glass cases full of tools, sorted first by category and then by size. A narrow glass cabinet on the side of the room was full of crystal vials as well as stoppers, beakers, bottles, and flasks.

The room was vaguely reminiscent of the Hogwarts Potions classroom. This fact, combined with the memories she had of her grandfather in this place almost overwhelmed Attica with nostalgia. That nostalgia quickly deepened as she watched Snape gathering and organizing the supplies they were going to need. After months of seeing him only in secret meetings with the Dark Lord and hidden in shrouds of darkness, it was refreshing to see him among the cauldrons once again. She suddenly remembered the first time she had seen him like this.

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The dungeon doors slammed shut, and the students in the classroom jumped collectively. A few of the students stifled nervous giggles. It was double Potions for Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw first years. No one there was what could be considered self-assured on their first day of class with the notoriously wicked Professor Snape. The girl sitting beside Attica had light brown hair and glasses. She looked like she was about to burst into tears from the minute she took her seat beside Attica. When the professor entered with his black robes billowing behind him, Attica held her breath. She wondered if he was really as cruel as people said, and she decided that she would heed one of her grandmother's favorite rhymes:

*Sit tight,*

*Be polite,*

*Never balk!*

*Just be bright.*

Her grandmother had been fond of teaching Attica life lessons through rhymes. They were utterly silly to her now, of course, but she remembered every one. Her grandmother would have been happy to know that Attica had carried these lessons with her all these years. Rhyming was almost a game to them. Her grandfather would join in as well and offered his jingles to them with a twinkle in his eyes. Her grandmother would roll her eyes at his absurdity and her laughter could warm Attica's darkest days.

Attica swallowed thickly and watched the professor as he glanced at a piece of parchment on the podium. He called out the names on the class list and marked down the presence of the students. With each name called, the student responded with a respectful, "Present." Besides the deep register of the professor's voice and the pathetic squeaks of the student responses, the room was totally silent.

"Attica Flamel," boomed the Potions Master. Attica couldn't find her voice. He looked up, clearly annoyed that someone would dare to miss his class, and Attica forced a croaky, "Present!" Snape narrowed his eyes before lowering them back to the list.

When the last name had been called and the last student marked present, he left the podium and began slowly walking down the center aisle. Attica bit her lip as he passed her seat.

"*You are here to learn the subtle science and exact art of potion-making*" he said softly. "Many of you will not understand the beauty of the effervescing potion, nor the

fierce, yet delicate, force of the brews that can entangle itself in the very lifeblood of every person in this room. These potions can bewitch the mind and ensnare the senses." He paused beside Attica's table and continued in a whisper, "I can teach you how to bottle fame, brew glory, even stopper death if you aren't all too daft to learn what I have to teach."

Silence followed, and Attica did not dare to look up. *Sit tight, Be polite, Don't balk, Just be bright* she recited internally.

"Where would you look if I told you to find a bezoar? Hawkins!"

The unfortunate Hufflepuff in question sat in wide-eyed shock, as if answering a simple question about a stone in a goat's stomach was more than could be lawfully expected of him.

"I don't know, sir," Justin Hawkins muttered.

"No? Let's try this again. Sorwitt!" The black-haired Ravenclaw directly in front of Attica sat up straighter in her chair, ready to flout her brilliance. *What is the difference between monkshood and wolf's bane?\**

Ellen Sorwitt's shoulders slumped, and Attica immediately felt a pang of pity for the girl. Snape was asking a particularly tricky question. There was no difference between monkshood and wolf's bane; they were both common names for the same purple-flowered plant. The girl muttered that she did not know. Attica finally looked up at the professor and made the mistake of meeting his gaze.

"Miss Flamel!" He called suddenly. "I wonder if you could inform your classmate, although I presume you are equally ignorant on the matter of..."

"There is no difference, sir. They are both also referred to as 'aconite'," she said meekly, interrupting Snape's tirade.

"As I thought. Just another..." he scoffed before catching himself. His cold black eyes studied the small blonde child seated before him. "That is correct." He cleared his throat. "And as to the location of a bezoar?"

"One can be found in the stomach of a goat, sir," she replied, gaining a minuscule amount of confidence.

He quickly fired another question: "And why would you want to obtain one?"

"You can use them against poisons, sir," she said politely. Her confidence continued to grow and she gave him a small smile.

"You seem to have at least read the text. Tell me, though, what would I get if I added asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?"

"Nothing, sir. It wouldn't make a potion. It would just congeal." At this point, her confidence had given her enough courage to meet his gaze, purposefully this time. When she saw that he was glaring at her, she added a quiet "sir" for good measure.

Snape smiled with satisfaction and crossed his arms over his chest. "Aha, and so it seems even a Flamel cannot answer my questions correctly." He paused as he stood imperiously in the quiet classroom. "For your information, Miss Flamel, it makes a sleeping potion so powerful that it is known as the ... why are you shaking your head?" His tone quickly shifted from approval to annoyance, but Attica was still slowly shaking her head.

"Because, with all due respect, sir, it would not make the Draught of the Living Death," she said in a whisper, afraid of his next acerbic comment. But as scared as she was of the imposing man before her, she was equally determined to prove to him that she was not daft.

He looked irritated, and Attica wondered what detention was going to be like. She had not heard good things about detention with Snape. Actually, she had heard nothing good about Snape at all.

"I can assure you that it would, Miss Flamel," his tone was quiet and threatening.

She swallowed as she continued to dig her own proverbial grave. She knew she should just accept what he was telling her and save herself from the violent hiding he was envisioning herself receiving later, but she couldn't stop herself. The triumph in his eyes was taunting her.

"Only if the asphodel was powdered. If the asphodel was grated, the form it most commonly comes in, the potion would not put anyone to sleep, sir," she announced quietly, wondering if her corpse would ride home on the Hogwarts Express.

Professor Snape could only stare at her for a moment before speaking softly. "Five points to Ravenclaw for a ... lucky guess. And do not interrupt me again, Miss Flamel."

As he returned to the podium to begin the day's lecture, Attica saw the corner of his lips turn upward. Maybe it wasn't a real smile, but she would find out later that it was as close to one as a student could ever hope to receive from the formidable Severus Snape.

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The room was pleasantly cool, if a little damp. Snape loomed over the small golden cauldron, and Attica stood at his side awaiting instructions. The liquid inside the cauldron was now a pale red rather than the pearly ivory it had been in the beginning.

"Find me a clean silver cauldron and several flasks, Miss Flamel," the professor said. Attica rushed to the shelves behind them and selected a medium-sized cauldron and five immaculate crystal flasks. She muttered a cleaning charm and waved her wand over the flasks just in case.

She watched as the professor pointed his black wand at the liquid and it rose out of the cauldron, floating the few inches to the silver cauldron she had just placed on the bench. She watched in fascination as the red fluid practically danced in the air before Snape lowered it into the cauldron and it landed with a small splash.

"Can I have the vial back now?" She asked the question in an impatient whisper, afraid that the answer would be "no." When he nodded briefly, she exhaled the breath she was holding and wasted no time grabbing the stoppered vial from the now-empty cauldron and shoving it into her pocket. With the vial back in her possession, she began to relax. Her mind experienced a moment of clarity that she hadn't been quite able to reach since she let it drop into the cauldron what seemed like an eternity ago.

Snape tipped the silver cauldron slightly to the side and, understanding his request without his having to speak it, Attica brought a flask to the lip of the cauldron for the swirling red liquid to be poured into. Four more small flasks were filled and stoppered and lined up perfectly on the bench.

"What's next, Snape?"

"Now we will simply attempt to perform a few simple assessments on the liquid to determine the components of the Elixir."

As it turned out, there were several tests to be performed, and none of them were what Attica would call simple.

By the end of the week, she had aided the professor in implementing sixteen tests. From the flasks, the residue was separated into what seemed like hundreds of small test tubes. Some of the tests involved placing a sample of the component in question into a test tube and mixing it with a small drop of the residue and monitoring the reaction. If the red fluid remained stagnant, that component was not used to create the Stone. Conversely, if the mixture began to bubble when the designated charms were cast, they had successfully found another component of the Stone. Other tests required more advanced spell work and the results were varied and difficult for her to read. The professor had no such difficulty, of course.

They had discovered that aconite was not used in the creation, but there were traces of amber and asphodel, both of which had been on Attica's list of possibilities. There was a touch of some other precious stone as well, but it was proving slightly more difficult to determine which one specifically was used. When treated with the sap of the juniper bush, the sample mixture should have turned the color of the gemstone it contained. Much to Attica's dismay, the mixture had failed to turn red like the ruby she suspected had been used or blue like sapphire. Instead, it had turned a convoluted, murky brown.

For the first time, Snape also seemed irritated with their results as he stood over the muddy liquid in the flask. Pragmatic as ever, he set the flask aside with a whispered stasis charm and continued. After shaking off his initial annoyance, he was able to continue completely unperturbed.

The test for ginger root also proved to be negative, while the results for phoenix feather were overwhelmingly positive. Flames shot out of the test tube with ferocity, and Attica had jumped as the heat licked the thin skin on the back of her right hand. She hadn't expected such bounding flames, and Snape had snatched the tube from her fingers just as she was about to spill it.

"Watch it," he hissed.

He set the test tube carefully in the rack on the bench, and he turned to Attica with a wrinkle in his normally smooth brow. He gently took hold of her right hand, which was bright red from the flames and beginning to swell. She winced at the contact. Leading her to the tap on the other side of the room, he turned the handle and cool water began to flow. He placed Attica's hand under the faucet and summoned a jar of murtlap essence from the supply cabinet. Attica sighed as he applied the substance and the pain transformed into a cool tingling sensation.

"Next time, roll up your sleeves. They could have caught on fire and you would have had a lot more pain to deal with. Elementary Potions safety tips. This is difficult enough without the added danger," he admonished brusquely. "Is that better?" he asked, still allowing her small, injured hand to rest in his larger one.

"Yes, thank you," she replied as she removed her hand from his grasp. She dropped her uninjured hand to her pocket and allowed it to skim over the fabric of her jeans, feeling the hard cylindrical shape of the vial underneath. Its presence calmed her from the indignation she had felt at his reproach. She knew the rules of safety concerning potion-making inside and out. He reiterated them in class year after year and her grandfather had drilled them into her before that. She was insulted that he would think she needed to be chided like a child just because she chose not to roll up her sleeves. She thought about voicing her frustration, but she remembered that she still needed him to help her and that arguing would only prolong their results, so she held her tongue and decided to concentrate on the relief she was receiving from the essence on her hand instead.

He looked at her for a long moment and then appeared to decide something. "That is all for today. It is late." He turned and began to clean the instruments that had been used during the session. When she did not move from the floor, he said, "You may go." Her irritation grew. She took another deep breath and removed the vial from her pocket, squeezing it tightly with her uninjured hand.

Then, as if it were only a sudden touch of curiosity, he said, "You seem quite attached to that vial. It was given to you by your grandfather, yes?"

"Yes," she answered offhandedly as she stuffed her wand into her pocket, scanning the room for anything else that needed cleaning. "He gave it to me shortly after we discovered that the Stone needed to be destroyed."

"You never seem to be without it."

"I need it," she said simply as she walked toward the stairs, leaving Snape with a calculating expression on his face.

A/N: \*The italicized lines were taken directly from JK Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, Chapter 5, "The Potions Master." I make no money from the writing of this story. These characters (with the exception of Attica) belong to JK Rowling. She built this beautiful world, and I find myself supremely lucky to have the honor of visiting it from time to time.

## Realization

### Chapter 14 of 21

Witches and wizards have always carried the burden of their allegiances to the dark or to the light. The choice to follow one or the other dictates a person's character. Attica Flamel pays fealty to neither. When grief morphs into an irrepressible need for vengeance, Attica will stop at nothing until the debts are paid.

The professor studied the small script scrawled across Attica's notes, the curtain of his black hair covering most of his face. "And you are certain about this information?" he asked.

"Yes." Attica swung her feet slowly back and forth as she sat on the bench in the lab. "I was only able to compile it all from the oldest of the texts you gave me," she continued as the professor continued to study the scroll in his hands.

"Well, that would explain the results of the *Revelo* test," he muttered, slightly under his breath.

"How so?" she inquired, curious. They had already established that the Elixir contained traces of approximately seven ingredients. The number was magically potent, so that should have come as no surprise. Phoenix feathers, amber, and asphodel were definite ingredients. The other four or so had thus far been elusive and Attica was insistent that the rubies were used in the creation. She also wouldn't be surprised if sapphire appeared on the list as well. The research backing her claim rested in Snape's hand. Of course, he would not attempt a test for an ingredient without appropriate research to justify it. His overly scholarly approach was really testing her patience.

"The reason behind the liquid turning brown rather than reflecting the color of the stone, Miss Flamel." He did not look up from the parchment.

"Because it was a mixture of them," she said as comprehension dawned.

He glanced up, nodding slightly. "Indeed. Ruby, sapphire, and emerald. If we are correct, then I estimate that we are only one ingredient away from having the full list."

Excitement bubbled in her chest. "I bought rubies on my last supply run!" She slipped off the table, her sneakers clacking against the stone floor. "And there is a sapphire encrusted hair comb in a jewelry box upstairs. I'll fetch it!" It had been over a month, and it was beyond exhilarating to know that they were so close to determining, without a doubt, what exactly was used to compose the Sorcerer's Stone.

"Not necessary, Miss Flamel. I happened across a small box that contained several split sapphires in the supply cabinet when I did my initial inventory. We can use those,"

he said matter-of-factly as he summoned the box.

Using a charmed knife, Snape scraped off a small flake from one of the rubies and cracked a sapphire in two. "There is an emerald on the stopper of your vial, yes?" he asked, pushing the two chips of precious stone together on the countertop.

Dread slowly but definitively crept over Attica. Her body felt cold and she stood very still as she contemplated his request. "I don't know if..."

Snape sensed her discomfort. "I only need a very small sample. I assure you, the missing piece will not even be noticeable."

She slowly pulled the vial from the stopper and murmured a charm to dislodge the round-cut emerald from its resting place. She handed it to Snape without a word. It didn't feel right. The emerald belonged to her. It was the last connection she had to her grandparents, and she immediately began to question what would possess her to just hand it over to this man without question, without a fight. But she reminded herself that it was necessary. They were so close to determining the components of the Stone. If she refused to give it to him, it would take weeks for them to get another sample. The closest apothecary did not carry precious gems on hand. An order would have to be made. She couldn't wait and he promised that she wouldn't notice the difference. It was worth it.

Wasn't it?

Despite her rationalization, she still felt overwhelmed by a dark sense of foreboding. Attica held her breath as Snape lowered the sharp little knife toward the glinting emerald. When the charmed metal came into contact with the stone, Attica screamed. At first, she didn't understand what was happening. She hadn't been trying to stop him from cutting the stone, but she had screamed anyway. And then came the pain. She could feel the sharp edge of the knife as if it were pressing into her skin rather than the small glinting rock.

Piercing, intense, and excruciating pain.

The knife crumbled to dust in Snape's hand and the emerald glinted an eerie gold light. With the light came a force powerful enough to knock the man off his feet and fling him across the room. His body crashed against the opposite wall and he sank to the floor. He remained there for a moment, dazed and confused. Attica was still screaming, and he found the strength to lift himself to his feet with his wand drawn. He trained his eyes on the girl, who had slumped against the table and was clutching a shaking hand to her chest.

She was panting heavily in between the shrieks of pain. Her golden hair was strewn across her face and was adhered to her forehead by a thin sheen of sweat. Her face was contorted into an expression of pain that struck Snape's heart as painfully as if he had been stabbed with the knife himself. Even more painful was the panic that came with the realization that he had no idea what was afflicting her and if he would be able to save her.

He ran to her side, ignoring the physical pains caused by his fall. The stone sat where it had before, appearing completely innocuous. He reached a hand to touch it and felt something grab his arm with a vice-like grip.

He heard a feral voice hiss, "Do not touch it!"

The voice had issued from the girl, her eyes wide and bloodshot, her hair wildly twisted around her. She had not let go of his arm and was clutching it with more strength than he thought her capable of possessing. He looked at her with horror. She looked nothing like the once charming child who had single-handedly renewed his desire to teach or the resolute young woman she had grown to be. Now, she was glaring at him with a hatred he had seen rivaled not even by Voldemort himself. Her normally prepossessing blue eyes were now almost black. He could see something burning inside them, something that was not coming from her. For one disconcerting moment, he thought he might have been staring into the eyes of the Dark Lord himself. He had to remind himself that the horcruxes had been destroyed. He was gone for good this time. But as he continued to stare into those demonic eyes that he knew did not belong to the girl in front of him, doubt flooded his mind.

"Attica!" he cried, trying to shake off the death grip she still held on him before she broke his arm. She seemed to wake up then, looking at the hand clutched around Snape's forearm before attempting to jerk it away. But before she could break the contact, Snape caught her hand in his.

As he did so, he noticed something peeking out of the edge of her white cotton sleeve. It looked something like a bruise.

He briskly shoved the sleeve further up her arm, revealing her Dark Mark. He almost choked on his breath. Purple and black bruises covered the skin of her arm and the tattoo was much blacker and bolder than he remembered his being during the times he was most connected to Voldemort. The skin that wasn't bruised or covered in the ink was a sickly pallor. It almost looked green with infection.

She used her free arm to reach between them, to find the stone that lay on the black tabletop, but Snape restrained her free arm as well with a move so fast that she hadn't been able to deflect it.

She glared at Snape and her eyes flashed with the darkness he had seen there before. "Give me the emerald," she snarled and writhed against his hold. The doubt in Snape's mind gave way to comprehension. How had this child acquired something like this? Who would give her such a thing?

When he didn't respond or give in to her wishes to return the stone to her, she screamed. "Let me go!" she bellowed in a voice that she didn't recognize, although it came from her own lips.

She mentally shook herself and gasped. What was that?

She shuddered, and Snape eased his grip on her but did not let go. Instead, he lifted his hands to take hold of her shoulders and bent over in order to look her directly into her eyes, which, he noted with relief, were blue once again.

"Attica," Snape said softly. "What is happening to you?"

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Attica sat in a straight-backed chair in the study. Bright sunlight filtered onto the hardwood floor, warming it. She stared unblinkingly at the sun-drenched square, feeling like she was in a daze.

"What is happening to you?" Snape repeated. He stood before her with a glass of water in his hand. He tried to hand it to her but she would not even look at it, so he set it on a table and fixed her with his dark, calculating stare. The reserved but not unpleasant research partner was replaced by the stern and cold professor from Attica's youth.

She remained silent because she didn't know. And she wasn't sure she had the strength to meet the gaze she could feel burning on her skin. She knew he was looking at her with a mixture of horror and despair. It was the same look she had been giving herself in the mirror for years. She had always known there was something wrong, she had always felt it, but she had attributed it to grief and then to her thirst for vengeance. Snape resumed his pacing.

Abruptly, he stopped in front of her. He held the emerald out to her, pulling it back against his chest when she almost jumped out of her chair to claim it, the hunger on her pale face so intense that he, the ever surly and undaunted Potions Master, was taken aback.

"I want to know how and when you obtained this stone," he said, trying to keep the fear out of his voice.

Attica rolled her eyes as she slumped back in the chair. She smirked. "My grandfather gave me the vial. I've mentioned this to you before."

"Yes, yes, I am aware of that. But he did not give you the emerald." No grandparent would bestow that burden on a child they loved. And Nicolas Flamel would never have bestowed it on any other person. He had only met the man a handful of times, but that was enough for him to know that the man was one of the most selfless men he had

ever known. He would have undertaken the curse of this item and would have let it kill him before he would wish it on his worst enemy. No, the girl had acquired it from some other source.

She pursed her lips and glared at him.

"How did you obtain this? I will not ask you again."

Attica met his eyes but did not answer.

"Speak!" he barked. She jumped.

"I found it!" she shouted. She tucked her hands under her legs as she spoke. "When Dumbledore came to tell my grandparents that they had to die. I eavesdropped, and I saw the stone fall onto the ground as they were talking. I waited until they left, and then, I snuck into the study and took it."

Snape rolled his wand in his fingers, and Attica eyed him warily. He wasn't going to hurt the girl, but she most likely didn't realize that. And if that stone was what he suspected it was, the sooner he knew for certain, the better.

"You are going to tell me what you heard that night. You are going to tell me everything you know about this gemstone, Miss Flamel."

She swallowed hard, but acquiesced.

## Legilimens

### Chapter 15 of 21

Witches and wizards have always carried the burden of their allegiances to the dark or to the light. The choice to follow one or the other dictates a person's character. Attica Flamel pays fealty to neither. When grief morphs into an irrepressible need for vengeance, Attica will stop at nothing until the debts are paid.

Attica's life had always been filled with secrets. She couldn't remember a time when she didn't have a secret to keep. At times, she felt that it was all she was truly good at. She had kept secrets for her grandparents, for Dumbledore, for Voldemort, and by extension, for Snape. In so doing, she had also kept secrets from each of these people, and she had kept them from Neville. There was not a single living person that she had ever been able to completely and utterly confide in. And for as long as she had been harboring the secrets, she had been harboring a desire to reveal them. She had trained herself not to share certain aspects of her life with others for danger that one of the secrets would slip out. The result was that she no longer trusted herself enough to share intimate details of her life with the people close to her, and if she ever did, the details were not true.

This battle between hiding and revealing had gone on for so long that she simultaneously thought that it was time to tell all and that it was vitally important for her to lie to Snape about everything. She wanted the immense relief that she knew would come with bearing herself to someone. But as soon as she imagined how it would feel, a voice, *that* voice, whispered that Snape would only use the information to hurt her, that exposure was vulnerability.

Snape had been watching her intently, awaiting her response. He could sense the change in her demeanor as the fear set in. A roaring noise assaulted her ears and she desperately covered them with her hands, although the noise was in her head. She began to rock back and forth as she tried to expel the noise and the voice from her mind. He knelt in front of her and looked earnestly into her eyes, gently placing his hands on her shoulders to steady her. She opened her eyes and returned his gaze, realizing that his expressions didn't seem as cold as it had a minute before. He was cognizant of her internal struggle, although he knew nothing about the nature of it. He did know that he needed to keep her grounded, to bring her back to a place of assured safety. His eyes were silently pleading with her, leading her out of her head and away from the voice that had always haunted her.

As she moved farther and farther from the voice and closer to Snape, she remembered the explicit trust he had placed in her, and she knew him well enough to know that he would not depend on someone so thoroughly and not offer the same security in return. Understanding his silent question, she relented with a single nod.

He settled her back into the chair and made sure that she was comfortable. He wanted to give her some time, let her recover from the assault, but he knew that he needed to learn the truth, and he needed it as soon as possible. Any delay would allow more time for this dark force to take more control of her mind. He had been able to bring her back from it this time, but he had no idea what this force was capable of or what it would try to do to her next. He paused only briefly. Then he took a deep breath and pointed his wand at her with a whispered, "Legilimens."

Images flashed through her mind before swirling into nothingness. Some images she wanted to grab onto, others she wanted to push away. Some of the images were bright remnants of a happier past.

Perenelle holding her hand in the garden and singing her one of the rhymes her grandparents had created.

*Asphodel and phoenix feather*

*Ground as one, not mixed together*

*Ruby dust and emerald powder*

*Whisper this, don't say it louder*

Attica as a toddler sitting on the desk in the study playing with a toy Nicolas had given her.

Buying her wand from Ollivander's.

The letter she received from her grandmother congratulating her for being sorted into Ravenclaw House.

These flickers were painful only when tainted with the knowledge that the happiness she had felt then would not last.

Dumbledore in the study holding the scepter. Something green and glittering falling onto the rich carpet at the elderly man's feet.

Nicolas's voice trembling as he uttered Tom Riddle's name.

Some of the images were familiar to Attica, but others she saw as though they were happening to someone else. There was a woman with long blonde hair holding an infant. A tall man with dark hair and Attica's eyes stood beside them smiling at the baby.

The blonde woman in a rocking chair holding the baby, who was older now. The woman calling out to the dark-haired man to come quickly as a doll began levitating toward the small girl.

The next set of images was bathed in a melancholy golden light.

Her grandparents lying next to each other, their bodies cold, and McGonagall pulling a screaming Attica from the room.

The first night she spent in the Longbottom house, waking up in the middle of the night with a tear-stained pillow and puffy eyes.

Sneaking into Neville's room because being close to him kept the nightmares away.

Brewing in the Potions classroom.

Cheering for Cedric Diggory and Potter's other opponents at the Tri-Wizard tournament with Neville's hand in hers.

The light then darkened into cloying shadows when she remembered the fear of Voldemort's return and placing the vial around her neck.

The exhilaration she felt when she did.

The dark remained as the images of her in the middle of Voldemort's circle of Death Eaters flashed by.

Penning the letter to Neville, telling him that if he loved her, he would understand why she couldn't stay and that he would let her go to do what she needed to do.

The terror she experienced at the feeling of returning home when she was inducted into Voldemort's inner circle.

Hatred.

Feeling like she was someone other than the person she had been all her life, someone dark.

Overwhelming anxiety, terror, belonging, and a thousand other emotions that she couldn't explain or name.

Her Dark Mark darkening.

The bleak knowledge that she had some sort of insight into the Dark Lord's mind.

The desolation she felt when she realized that she couldn't go to anyone for help.

She was alone.

Blood-red hatred began to taint the images. Snape was getting closer and closer to the images of Potter. She tensed and used every last bit of strength she had to expel him from her mind.

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She slumped forward in the chair, gasping. The exercise had drained every last ounce of her strength. She placed her elbows on her knees, cradling her aching head in her hands.

"There. That's all I remember," she said in barely a whisper. Snape had not moved from his place in front of her. He was out of breath himself. She desperately tried to steady her erratic breathing, but she had been exposed to memories that she had made every effort to repress, because recalling them only made her ache with grief.

As Snape had sifted through her memories, he had not only seen some of the most personal and emotional moments of her life, but he had also practically shoved them in her face, parading them before her as he looked on. She had been forced to relive every painful memory she had ever tried to forget.

Attica finally straightened in the chair. The Potions Master stared at her from the seat he had taken across the room. He was fatigued, and he looked it, but some other reaction had painted his features as well. Attica could only guess at this unknown emotion, but it looked a lot like disappointment to her. She had no idea how much time had passed, but the light trickling through the stained glass windows was the weak sunlight of twilight. She tried not to analyze his expression too much, but he appeared to her to be a man who had just had his worst fears confirmed.

"Did you get what you wanted?" she asked, her breathing finally returning to a semblance of normal.

He looked at her for a time and then stood wearily, trying to pool all the strength he could muster. How could he explain to this child that the last three years of her life had been spent in an angered haze that she did not knowingly create, and that she had been bestowed with a burden that should not have been hers to bear? How to explain to her that an item she had held close to her for years as a token of a connection to the grandparents she had prematurely lost was in all actuality something that possessed more evil than it did memories? Maybe she would be relieved that her madness had a source, maybe she would welcome the answers she had sought for so long, despite their dire implications. But she would be far from comforted, he knew, to learn that she, for more than two years, had been wearing a Horcrux around her neck.

Snape sighed deeply before he spoke.

"I found what I was looking for, Miss Flamel. Though it is hardly what I wanted."

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The exchange of information had been fundamentally important to Voldemort's cause. For the duration of her servitude, she had witnessed these exchanges in every form. Secrets and information from the light poured in on a daily basis. Lies from Snape were less frequent but significantly more valuable to her master. However, the exchanges she remembered most involved the victim's of Voldemort's wrath. She watched as countless witches and wizards were dragged in and placed before the serpentine monster. She had always been particularly intuitive and was usually able to tell how they would react to the information the Dark Lord was going to share with them. The information was never pleasant. It mostly always involved a threat to the victim's family, if the threat had not already been carried out, as well as Voldemort's intent to end their life as a circle of his masked minions looked on.

Sometimes, they were faced with knowledge that so unfathomable to them that it became laughable. Crazed, rasping laughter would escape their lips before the green light flashed and their helpless bodies crumpled to the ground. Others who did not have the strength to process the information would try to escape, which was always much worse. The most sickening reaction for Attica to witness was of the victims who blatantly accepted the circumstance for what it was. They did not try to dispute or argue the fact that they were going to fall at the hands of this abhorrent being because they knew that this was their fate. During his time in her mind, Snape had dredged up the memory of a man she had desperately tried to forget. Snape had also been present at the execution of this man who had been brought to Voldemort for trying to save the life of an innocent woman who had crossed the path of a group of Death Eaters. He hadn't even known the woman's name and yet he had tried to save her from the same fate that befell him as a result of his valor. Attica had been able to see the slight panic in the man's eyes as his mind tried desperately to find an answer for why this was happening, for exactly the right thing to say to save his own life. Before standing and walking directly into his death, his eyes had glossed over and the panic was replaced

with resignation. His heart had registered the fact even as it shattered.

This is how Attica Flamel felt as she sat in the study of a home she never remembered living in while the man who had become her protector and her only confidant explained the nightmares and the darker than ever mark on her arm. He told her, as gently as the customarily callous man could, about the existence of Voldemort's Horcruxes and Dumbledore's suspicion about the scepter he had brought to her grandparents. Dumbledore had been wrong about the scepter, but he had been correct in assuming that Tom Riddle had created an eighth Horcrux. It wasn't in the scepter, however, but in the flawless stone that had been affixed atop it, the one that Attica had found on the study floor that night. Snape had to choke back tears for the first time in his adult life as he told Attica that she had been carrying a piece of Voldemort's soul with her and that for years, she had possessed the very means of his possible return.

## Treachery

*Chapter 16 of 21*

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As the knowledge of the Horcrux set in, she felt her stomach drop and her mind started to fog. She felt the urge to vomit but tried to hold it back. She had shown enough weakness for one day. But at least now she had answers. Her connection to the Dark Lord could finally be explained. There was a definite reason behind her ability to discern his emotions and motives and the fact that her Dark Mark was mottled and bruised rather than fading away. It explained why she couldn't bear to be parted from the emerald and why she was struck with a profound sense of loss when she did. She was connected to it and through it, to Voldemort.

Snape elucidated the entire sordid mess to her with uncharacteristic patience. As she became aware of the true catalyst behind her hatred for Harry Potter, it felt as if the clouds were finally parting, and the truth was shining through. She had been living in nothing short of a rage-induced haze that was borne of emotions that did not even belong to her. As crippling as the haze had been for her, the clarity she experienced now was even more so. What would have possessed her to blindly accept that her hatred for Harry Potter had so suddenly burst forth? How had it ever made sense to her that killing the boy that was destined to save the entire wizarding world would bring her family back to her or in any way recompense for their loss? In fact, had she succeeded in her venture to kill the boy, Voldemort would still be alive and well and ruling the world in whatever manner he wished. He would have no doubt eventually discovered the connection between them, and then he would have gained complete control over her, over all of them. How could she have been so foolish? How could she have never, not for one second, noticed that something was amiss? Embarrassment at her stupidity, terror of what might have happened had things turned out differently, and frustration that she had never once recognized that she had lost herself coalesced to create an overwhelming pressure behind her eyes. She waited until Snape had announced that he was going to lock the emerald away and that she should not go looking for it. She waited until he told her that he would send word for McGonagall immediately to see about its destruction. She waited until she thought his back was turned before she allowed the barrage of tears to spill over. He was horrified at the outpour of emotion from this usually stoic girl and reached out to touch her, but decided against it. Instead, he turned and stepped silently from the room, leaving her to grieve in peace.

She was glad when the man was gone because it gave her a moment to talk herself out of asking him to explain how Voldemort's wish to kill Harry Potter had transferred to her. He had never known what her motives truly were and if he had, he would never have trusted her in the first place. He had been living his life for the past sixteen years with the sole goal of protecting Lily Potter's son. She couldn't risk telling him now. She knew that the revelation would hurt him as much as if it had been she who had betrayed Lily Potter in the first place. She had been extremely fortunate that he had been too fatigued to resist when she began to repel him from her mind. She was ashamed to admit, even to herself, that his fatigue was only the secondary cause of his retreat. The trust he had placed in her caused him to believe that she was pushing him away because she herself was fatigued and too emotionally drained to face any more of her own memories. Thinking that he had seen everything of import, he had shown her mercy and relented. The shame had increased tenfold when he locked eyes with her and tried to explain that she was the victim here. He had said it so earnestly; he had pleaded with her, imploring her to believe the best of herself. But she knew better. And had he known better, he would not have shown her such kindness. Of that, Attica was certain.

She had joined forces with the man who had killed her parents in cold blood. She had abandoned Neville, the truest friend she had ever known. She had deserted the Longbottoms, who were guilty of nothing more than trying to protect her and offering her security in her time of need. She had neglected the memory of the grandparents who had worked so hard to raise her to be a person that was the polar opposite of the person she knew she had become. She felt the disgrace that came naturally with those recollections, but without the Horcrux and its terrible voice whispering to her, justifying those terrible actions as necessary to her ultimate goal, she felt completely disgusted with herself. The emotions rushed forth in an intense fury, presumably because they had been buried for so long. But there was another regret, clawing through her disgrace to reach the surface. Once there, it erupted into another bout of tears. Snape, who had just reentered the room, rushed to her side, taking her small hand in his large one. His whispered reassurances only made her cry harder, because while she had tried everything in her power to negate all of the risks he had taken and everything he had sacrificed for his cause, he sat beside her, consoling her in her darkest hour.

He was exposing himself to her in the rawest way possible. He too knew what it was to make a mistake. He too knew regret. Attica was surpassed by his gentle sympathy, although this was not the first time he had shown it to her.

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Her second year of Hogwarts had been a whirlwind of whispers from other students and pitying looks from her professors. She had never procured the attention of her classmates before, at least not until a tragedy had befallen her. Everyone tiptoed around her as if she were made of glass. The friends she had made during her first year were wary of talking to her for fear that she would burst into tears. She was almost insulted by this. She had more self-control than they gave her credit for.

The only person in the entire castle who didn't feel the need to protect her or spare her feelings was Professor Snape. He still sneered at her and tried to trip her up when he asked her questions in class, just as he always had, and his expectations were as rigid as ever. After one particularly difficult class, she waited for the classroom to empty before following the other students into the hall. By the time she reached the stairway leading to the main floor, she was completely alone. Glancing around to make sure there were no stragglers, she sat down on the bottom step and began to cry. Sometimes she would miss her grandparents so fervently that she couldn't help but indulge in the emotional release. She always made sure that she never cried in front of another person, so she had to be sneaky about it. She couldn't cry in her room because the other girls would know. The bathroom wasn't always a good option because someone was bound to interrupt. So she settled for the shadows of deserted corridors.

Attica was no stranger to grief. She had always yearned for her mother's touch and her father's guidance, but she had never known her parents as most other children did. Her grandparents had stepped in and flawlessly filled those roles in her life, but regardless, she knew it would never be the same as being raised by her own parents. The presence of her grandparents had softened the hollow pang she always felt when she thought of her mother and father. But now they were gone too, and she had no one. Of course, Neville and Augusta had been so kind to her, but their family was just another placeholder for the two she had already lost.

"Miss Flamel." Attica jumped at the sound of the Potions Master's gruff voice. It echoed in the empty corridor. "I should not need to remind you of the location of the Great

Hall. You should not be lingering in the dungeons." He stepped out of the shadows and looked down at her with his obsidian eyes. He crossed his arms over his imposing chest and raised a single eyebrow, waiting.

"I'm sorry, sir," she said tiredly. "I'll go now." She scrambled to her feet and turned away from him as quickly as possible, but the light of the torches on the grimy walls betrayed her puffy eyes and tear-stained cheeks.

"Not so fast, Miss Flamel. Why are you crying?" he demanded.

She wiped her eyes furiously with her sleeve. "I'm not," she declared bravely as she took a step on the staircase.

The professor sighed as if he were bored. "You shouldn't be crying over my class. Your potion was more acceptable than the other students, as per usual. I wouldn't think that you need verbal verification of that. So, what is wrong?"

The girl didn't answer. Instead, she turned to face her professor and trained her eyes on his boots.

"Miss Flamel. I asked you a question," he urged, his voice as cold as the air in the underground corridor.

"I miss them," she barely whispered, still not willing to meet his eyes. She felt a subtle blush painting her cheeks as she revealed her vulnerability to one of the only people whose opinion of her she actually valued.

"Nicolas and Perenelle." It wasn't a question.

"Yes, sir," she whispered before deciding to finally look up at him.

"Brewing reminds me of them."

The girl locked eyes with the formidable Potions Master, and he was taken aback by the grief he saw there. "I see."

"I usually try not to let it bother me, especially not in class, but my grandfather and I once brewed the healing potion we brewed today. I helped my grandmother gather the ingredients from her garden." Fresh tears fell down her pale cheeks.

"Growing potions ingredients is the wish of every respectable Potions Master. It is too difficult to acquire quality ingredients elsewhere," he said in his usual clipped tone, changing the subject.

Obviously he was used to children's incessant whimpering, but in those cases, it was generally the product of his own whip-like admonishments and insults. This time, the girl's tears were not his doing, and he was disconcerted by that. Even more disconcerting was the fact that he had no idea how to alleviate the pain of losing her entire family. She was crying not because of his invective, but because her entire world had crumbled around her. He was bound to protect Potter, that arrogant and untalented but nevertheless beloved child. But if he was honest with himself, he felt more kinship with the skillful, gentle, Potions-loving child before him. But who would protect her?

"You rather enjoy brewing potions, don't you?" he said softly, and the girl's curls began to bob enthusiastically.

"Very much, sir."

"In someone your age, that is rare indeed. If you wish, you can use the Potions lab outside of class time. There are no classes from five to nine on Thursdays. You will need to bring your own cauldron and various supplies, of course." Attica looked at him with wide, navy blue eyes so filled with hope that the implacable professor seemed unsettled, as if the pure joy he had created for her was a novelty to him.

Now that Attica thought about it so many years later, she realized that it probably was. And treachery is the manner in which she had decided to repay this act of kindness.

## Truth

### *Chapter 17 of 21*

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*Great men find what tainted trail / The fallen man shall ever fail.*

These lines from that old nursery rhyme came unbidden to her mind. If she could have stopped the tears long enough, she would have snorted in derision. Her unconscious mind had dug up these words to torture her already anguished heart. They served only to remind her that she was now one of the fallen; she was tainted and she was a failure. For the first time in her life, she had failed at something she had been determined to achieve. And thank Merlin for that. If she had succeeded in killing Potter, if her killing curse had ended his life, she would have been forever marred with guilt surpassing that already caused merely by her feeble attempt at his murder. She was so ashamed that her mind had entered that dark place, and that she had allowed it. The force that had convinced her that it was necessary to kill an innocent person was dark and savage and absolutely evil, but it had been bred in her own heart. The strength of the Horcrux was overpowering, and she shuddered at the thousands of could-have-beens, the direst one, of course, being that she could have committed murder in cold blood outside the Shrieking Shack that night before she went back for Snape. Only Harry had the power to truly end Voldemort's life and with him gone, Voldemort would currently be stronger than ever and well on his way toward total tyranny. With the Elder wand in his possession, Voldemort's reign would have continued unceasingly until he had stamped out all the good in the world, leaving nothing but destruction and misery in his wake. Without the Boy Who Lived, no one would have been able to stop him.

Attica cried until her tears gave way to wracking sobs that finally settled into a gentle rocking back and forth. Then even the rocking ceased, and her body fell silent and still. She vaguely wondered if she had cried enough tears to wash away every emotion that she had ever felt, but a voice that sounded only like a shadow of the voice of the Horcrux told her that she deserved no pity, not even from herself. This started a fresh wave of tears because she knew that it was absolutely true. This time, she cried until her eyes were dry and her soul was numb.

She knew she deserved every bit of this pain. There was no way to end the agony of knowing that she had been impossibly close to performing any number of ghastly deeds and that she had wasted several years of her life preparing to perform them.

She thought of the exhilaration that welled up inside of her each and every time she met the Dark Lord's eyes and shame washed over her anew. She suddenly realized

that she was lying on the floor of the study and that night had fallen. She knew not what time it was, nor where the professor had gone. She remembered that he had announced that he was going to speak with Professor McGonagall, and she knew that he must have left a number of hours ago because no candles were lit in the study. She was alone and shrouded in darkness and uncertainty, just like she had been for the past seventeen years of her life.

She had now gained the presence of mind to at least attempt to sort out everything that had transpired since the discovery of the Horcrux. When the professor had left her alone in the study, she had fallen into a haze of despair. She had been so consumed with grief that she had not even been aware of her surroundings for several hours. For all she knew, several days could have passed without her cognizance of the event. She fleetingly thought of Moby and thought it strange that he had not come in to light the candles or leave a tray of food beside her comatose body.

Then her thoughts turned to the professor. He had tried so hard to rationalize her actions for her, to help relieve the guilt she was feeling. At first, he was fierce in his insistence of her innocence. He realized the depth of her panic and had tried to show her what he so wrongly believed to be the truth.

"It was not your fault," he had said. "You did not know. Knowledge of the Horcruxes remained hidden to all of us. Dumbledore did not even know about all of them." He placed his hands on her shoulders and practically shook her, his dark eyes wide and imploring in an attempt to reach her in that haunted place in her mind, the place she had retreated to in languish.

This much was true. She had not known of the existence of the Horcruxes. But did it matter? Would it have mattered if she had killed Harry Potter?

He had tried to reason with her, his voice rippling through the still room. "You were a child, a lonely child, Attica. You have done nothing worse than I. You joined the circle in an attempt to understand the force that caused the greatest tragedies in your young life. That is all."

*And that is enough*, she thought bitterly. But that wasn't even the beginning. If he only knew.

She had sat in stunned silence at his words.

Finally, he spoke again, but more quietly. "Augusta will forgive you. Neville will forgive you. That much is certain. You will even forgive yourself in time. All is not lost."

He had sighed heavily at her nonresponse and left the room to contact the Headmistress. He had made it sound so simple, and with every fiber of her being, she wished that she could believe the lies he unknowingly spoke. How badly she wanted to let his words surround her and carry her away from the torment that was slowly and painfully constricting her heart. But the truth was nagging at her, deriding her, and keeping her grounded in the reality that she so desperately wished she could alter.

## Guilt

### Chapter 18 of 21

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"She will be here in two hours. No less."

He was standing in the doorway when she looked up. How long he had been there watching her staring at the ceiling, she had no idea.

"Why can't she come right away? That thing still exists!" She was nearly shouting in her despair. She knew that the emerald was locked in a box that was locked in a cabinet and that Snape had placed several charms over the cabinet to prevent its removal, but that still did not seem like enough. "Every minute that goes by is another chance for that monster to find his way back here! It should have been destroyed years ago!"

His eyes seared into hers. "Miss Flamel," he said with a calm that did not mirror the danger that had flashed in his eyes. "In order for the Dark Lord to return, the emerald would have to fall into the possession of a powerful Death Eater. I have taken every precaution to make sure that does not happen. She will be here soon enough. She has gone to retrieve the Sword of Gryffindor from the goblins. I imagine that the protection of that particular artifact has increased tenfold since the battle, wouldn't you?"

"Don't you see?" she screamed. This time, she couldn't contain her panic. "The emerald has fallen into the hands of two powerful Death Eaters already! We don't have time to wait for the goblins and their nonsense. It needs to be done now!"

"Attica!" he screamed in return. Just as his voice had matched hers in intensity, so did his eyes reflect the panic she knew was evident in hers. He had never seen her lose control like this. Her normally calculating eyes were wild.

"I thought you had placed more trust in me than this. You discerned my true loyalties when Voldemort himself could not. You've known from the beginning whose side I'm on. You know better than anyone the lengths I have gone to to ensure Voldemort's definite demise."

She finally broke eye contact with him and took a deep breath. She wanted to scream in frustration. Instead, she asked a simple question. "But what about me?"

"What about you?" There was a moment of confusion before comprehension dawned. "Attica. You can't possibly think..." He trailed off, leaving the thought hanging poignantly between them.

He suddenly looked weary. "I wish you could see the goodness that I see in you. People make mistakes, Attica. Your only mistake was placing your faith in the wrong person. And one instance of misplaced faith should not constitute lack of faith in yourself. It's what you decide to do with the results of those mistakes that speak volumes to your character. I know you, Attica Flamel. I think I know you as well as any person could. Save Neville Longbottom, perhaps. And I know that your heart is pure. It has been tainted by the power of the Horcrux, but this stain is nothing that cannot be washed clean. Have faith in yourself. You are kind and generous and intelligent. You're also fiercely competitive and driven for perfection. That's who you are. None of those characteristics have receded just because of a mistake that hundreds of others made throughout the course of Voldemort's tyranny."

Attica groaned, mostly out of frustration but also to cease his soliloquy. She could not bear any more of his kind words, nor any more of his ignorance.

"It will be soon taken care of."

She wanted to argue. She wanted to tell him to destroy it now, to get rid of it in whatever improper way he knew how. She wanted to insult his intelligence and insinuate a lack of courage because he had to insist on waiting for a physically unimposing woman to appear and resolve an issue that he should have just dealt with himself. He could

burn it, with fire or with potion, he could hex it, he could obliterate the stone with a crude mallet. She didn't care, as long as it was destroyed.

It needed to be destroyed. Even though it was tucked supposedly safely away in a lead-lined box under lock and key in a securely charmed cabinet, its power was still palpable to her. It was pulling on the imaginary string that connected itself to her. With every passing minute, it was pulling harder and harder, tugging, beckoning her to come closer. Voldemort was calling out to her, whispering her name. His voice was at once revolting and tantalizing.

She pressed the heel of her hands into her eyes until she felt pain. She was hoping that physical pain would assuage the emotional pain that was threatening to wholly consume her. "I can feel it, Professor," she whispered. "I can feel it, him, calling me, waiting for me."

"Stop. Do not think about it."

"It is the only thing I can think about," she choked. "Only his voice and the guilt. I try to forget, I try to think of other things, but he continues to whisper to me, reminding me of what I've done." She looked down at the hands that were now wringing themselves in her lap and caught a glimpse of her Dark Mark. She pulled back her shirtsleeve gingerly, exposing the mark in its entirety.

Snape did not respond right away. Instead, he flicked his wand and an ottoman scooted closer to the chair Attica was sitting in. He sat down slowly, his knees almost touching her as he spoke. His voice was surprisingly despondent. "Everyone carries guilt, Attica. Most of the time, it can never fully be absolved. But we can learn to move past it."

She tore her eyes from her mottled forearm and turned her gaze to the wizard before her. "And what if I do not deserve to? Should evil ever get the chance for a peaceful resolution, Professor?"

He arched an elegant eyebrow. "You are not evil, Attica Flamel. Do you think that evil feels such regret? Do you think evil feels remorse? I have only known one wholly evil being in my entire life. That being, obviously, was Voldemort. And I can honestly tell you that the creature never felt remorse once in his pathetic existence. You are completely and utterly different from him, Attica."

"He murdered my parents in cold blood. He was responsible for the deaths of my grandparents. He was the sole source of sorrow in my life, yet I joined him. I left Neville alone and defenseless in order to join his ranks." She paused, searching for the words. When she continued, her voice was tinged with a calm that she did not feel. "I saw so many people die. I watched as Voldemort killed them. I watched the life extinguished from their eyes, and I did nothing. Absolutely nothing." She knew that she did not need to explain this because he had experienced it for himself, but she was admitting it more to herself than to him.

"That was not you," he said simply.

"But it was!" She exclaimed as she slammed her fist onto the end table beside her. She was sick of him making excuses for her. "It was me! I watched and I..." She began to choke again, struggling for the word she was loathe to utter. "I enjoyed it," she snarled.

"The Horcrux..." he began, but she cut him off with a glare.

"It was absolutely me. I cannot hide behind excuses," she said. "The things I wanted, the things I longed for, Professor... My heart is dark."

He pressed his lips into a hard line in an apparent attempt to repress the urge to shake her, to rid her of whatever twisted notion she possessed of herself. He was simultaneously filled with compassion and frustration, arising from a fierce sense of kinship. He believed that he knew exactly what she was feeling, and he felt pity for her because of that, but he knew that it was imperative to restrain those emotions in order to move on with his life. She was an intelligent girl, and he knew that she would be saving them both a lot of heartache if she would only realize that the nonsense she was speaking would not help either of them. "If you had said anything, done anything, to save those people, you would not be sitting in front of me right now. You were his pet, his golden child, but he not would have tolerated your insubordination. You could not have acted any differently than I."

"But you had a noble purpose," she countered, weaker this time. "You were working for Dumbledore, doing what no one else dared to do. I was there for selfish reasons. I was there to..." She couldn't say it. At the beginning of this conversation, she had harbored a hope that she would finally be able to disclose her most severe transgression. She had shared much with this man already, they had shared countless trying experiences with one another, and she had fleetingly fostered the delusion that she would be able to share this with him as well.

"I don't know what else I can say to you to prove that your heart is not shrouded in the darkness that you mistakenly believe to be there," Snape said.

She nodded once. Her face remained passive, as her heart grew cold. Her only hope of redemption was relinquishing the will to redeem her. But she knew that it had been unfair of her to hope that he could save her from this despair. There was no proof of something that was not true. He could not prove something that could not be proven.

He stared at his hands and cleared his throat. "I can say only this," his silky voice was almost inaudible. "You saved me. You saved my life. You did not have to. No one knew I was dying in that decrepit building, and no one would have known if you had turned your back on me and walked away, saving the Elixir for yourself. You gained nothing and lost almost everything in that act of graciousness. You had no need of recognition, yet you saved my life." He looked up at her to observe her reaction to these words. She wanted to turn away from his dark gaze, but it held her, and she found that she could not have looked away even if she had wanted to.

"Why?" he asked.

She shrugged slightly and offered him a rare, lopsided smile. "Because you saved me first. I was only returning the favor." The smile faded as quickly as it had come, and her face returned to her now customarily melancholic expression.

"Elaborate," he said.

"You saved me from the fire," she said simply. He winced, and she knew that he was aware of the dual meaning behind her statement. She was referring simultaneously to the night he carried her away from her burning home and the fact that through his kindness he had saved her from her own personal hell. "I sensed your kindness, even when you tried to hide it. And, you offered to me a reasonable facsimile of what I had lost." Confusion crossed his features only for a second.

"The brewing sessions?"

"I may have been young, but I was more grateful for the time spent in the dungeons than you can ever know. And I'm not sure that I ever thanked you properly."

He shook his head. "There was never any need. I..."

"Put up with a shrewd and meddlesome child simply to restore a semblance of the happiness that had been unceremoniously torn from her life," she finished.

"You cleaned up your messes."

"Would it be so bad to have someone think well of you, Professor?" She shrugged. "Anyway, I have never been one to overlook a kindness," she said, paraphrasing his own words. She looked at Snape in wonder. While she had not been able to find relief in confessing her sins to the man, he had drowned out the whisperings of Voldemort and allowed her to focus on pleasant memories from her past, even if it had only been for a moment. That in itself was an incredible feat.

# Demise

## Chapter 19 of 21

Witches and wizards have always carried the burden of their allegiances to the dark or to the light. The choice to follow one or the other dictates a person's character. Attica Flamel pays fealty to neither. When grief morphs into an irrepressible need for vengeance, Attica will stop at nothing until the debts are paid.

"Severus, I do not know how you and Miss Flamel came across this artifact." Minerva McGonagall looked from Snape to Attica and back with appraising eyes before setting the sword gingerly upon the desk. "Nor," she continued, "do I believe I want to.

"I have obtained the entire account from the Ministry about the destruction of these... objects. The Sword of Gryffindor is powerful enough to complete the job," she said. She turned from the sword and sat heavily into an armchair. "I am going to sit here a moment before we proceed. We all are going to need every bit of strength we can muster," she added darkly.

"I trust you did not mention anything about the emerald to the Ministry, Minerva," Snape said coldly.

McGonagall blinked. "Of course I didn't! Everyone is under the apparently incorrect impression that Potter has ended that monster once and for all. They do not need this sudden doubt. Not after so many years of living in fear, Severus."

The man's lips curled into the patronizing smirk of the Potions master. "Of course not," he replied evenly, although Attica suspected that he was suppressing a snarl.

McGonagall nodded curtly and leaned back into the armchair slightly, closing her eyes. Attica felt pity for the older woman. She had always been so sturdy, so steadfast. Now, she looked exhausted and wary. The final battle had taken more of a toll on the woman than she had anticipated. And it still was not over yet. She still wore her hair in her trademark bun and her robes were impeccably crisp, of course, but her face was wan. Attica reminded herself that she was not a young woman, but that did not dispel the pang of guilt that nudged her heart at seeing the witch this way. If it weren't for Attica, the woman would be sitting down for her afternoon tea in the Headmistress's office and perhaps settling in to read during this lazy afternoon. Instead, she was here, readying herself to walk into yet another battle. But this time, no one knew neither quite how to prepare for it, nor how much strength it would ultimately take. Attica couldn't help noticing her sunken eyes and hollow cheeks. She fervently hoped that the only thing afflicting this steely woman was exhaustion.

"Might I have a word with you, Miss Flamel?" Snape asked her as he shifted on his feet, looking discomfited.

She nodded, curious and slightly annoyed. He had had plenty of time to speak to her before McGonagall arrived. But she allowed him to lead her into the foyer, nonetheless. He turned his back on her and stood silently for a long moment.

With his back still to her, he spoke in a level voice. "The emerald needs to be destroyed."

"Obviously." She fought the urge to roll her eyes as she tried to remind herself that he was only trying to help her break free of this prison she had unknowingly created for herself.

He ignored her irritation and continued. "However, I do not know what the consequences will be." He turned to her as he said this. His shoulders were set, and his posture was as rigid as she had ever seen it, but weariness seemed to radiate from him.

"It does not matter. A part of Voldemort's soul is in that emerald. It has to be destroyed." Attica toyed with the hem of her sleeve. She knew where this conversation was headed and wanted to look anywhere but at him.

"When I tried to separate a small sample from the gem with a lab knife, you fell to the ground in pain."

Attica winced at the memory. That kind of agony was not something she would be able to easily forget. It had felt as if her heart was being torn from her chest. She closed her eyes. "I remember," she said calmly.

"This will not be pleasant," he said. "I am unaware of how closely your souls are connected, nor how intricately they are intertwined. I do not know if...," he trailed off.

"If I will die?" Attica opened her eyes and met the professor's directly. The remembrance of the pain was pushed from her mind. She had felt a sense of calm wash over her when McGonagall had arrived with the weapon that ended this pain once and for all. Whether that end included her death or not, there would at least definitely be an end. To her, in this moment, her death was inconsequential. But she watched as the terror slowly crept into the professor's eyes. She vaguely wondered why it was this emotion-ridden man standing in front of her and not her apathetic Potions Master. "It does not make a difference, so long as he is really gone."

"You are willing to die? Just like that? You're not even going to fight?"

She cocked her head slightly before nodding. "It's fitting, don't you think?"

He closed the distance between them and lifted her chin with a pale hand so that his eyes locked with hers, black against blue. "If you think that you deserve this in any way, you are absolutely insane."

"Professor," she whispered, drawing on the calm that continued to fill her. "I sided with him and his evil purposes. Think of the things I tried to do, the evils I could have committed. I could spend my entire life fruitlessly trying to rectify this betrayal, or I could nobly accept my punishment and die knowing that my debt has been paid."

"You cannot throw away your entire life in some asinine attempt at redemption!" he roared, dropping his hand in exasperation. "I won't allow it," he whispered.

His concern for her was touching, and if she had allowed herself to tap into her emotions at the moment, it might have brought tears to her eyes. "Professor, it has been more than sixteen years since Voldemort's initial fall, and you spent the majority of that time protecting Lily Evans's son and living a double life, never being able to truly just be yourself because you were always a tool for someone else, be it Dumbledore or Voldemort. You were not living for yourself. And you lived this way because of your guilt. You knew that you could die during the final battle, and you almost did. Are we really so different? Can you not allow me to do for myself what you did for yourself in preparing for your own demise?"

He looked at her, too shocked to say anything in response. She offered him her most dazzling smile, imbued with what she intended to be reassurance. "Do not try to save me from this. This is not your fault, and it is not something you need to attempt to correct. You have saved me more times than I could ever repay you for. Whatever will be, will be."

His bark of laughter was bitter. "So you choose to repay me by throwing away the life I've supposedly liberated."

"No, Professor. You are saving me from myself."

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Attica reentered the study with Snape close behind. "I believe thanks are in order, Headmistress," Attica said with a half smile. "I appreciate you being here today more than you know."

"Now, now, my dear. No thanks are necessary. You and Severus have brought this to my attention. It is I who should be thanking you. We all know what the cost of destroying the stone may be," McGonagall said gruffly. "What you are willing to sacrifice for the security of the wizarding world is of no small consequence." She smiled sadly and patted Attica's shoulder before she turned her attention to the sword. She tried to lift the large object, but grimaced under its weight as she attempted to heft it from the desk. "Severus, I may need your assistance."

He quickly crossed the room and lifted the hilt just below the cross-guard, allowing the majority of the grip and the jewel-encrusted pommel to remain in her grasp. The arrangement was awkward, but in order to draw upon the entirety of the vast amount of its power, it was necessary for the sword to be wielded by a Gryffindor.

Attica silently slipped into the lab, and Snape released the charms guarding the cabinet. With the small, heavy box in her hands, Attica walked slowly back into the study, placing the box gingerly on the desk. The voice that was whispering only a moment before had now raised its voice to barely below a shout. She was startled by the sudden increase in the voice's intensity, but was able to retain her composure. Snape flicked his wand with his free hand and the lock disappeared, leaving the box unlocked. With bated breath, Attica approached the box. She delicately lifted the lid to expose the emerald, her emerald. No. It wasn't hers. It belonged to the monster. She lifted it from its velvet resting place, feeling it awaken to her touch. The voice that was only barely shouting before now was screaming at her, telling her to take the emerald and run, run far away from the people who were trying to kill her. The voice promised her happiness, a resolution to all her problems. In a rising crescendo, Voldemort screamed that if she saved the emerald from destruction, he would bring her loved ones back to her. With his power, although now weakened, they could rule the world together. She hesitated only a moment before slamming the emerald onto the smooth mahogany surface of her grandfather's desk and turning her back to it. She knew that even if what the voice was saying were true, the creatures he brought back to her would not truly be her parents or her grandparents. But if the impending events transpired the way she hoped them to, she would see them again soon enough.

She could feel Snape's eyes on her as she crossed the room and knelt on the floor, covering her ears in a futile attempt to drown out the voice that was still screaming false promises to her. The only thing offering her any gratification in this moment was that now the voice was screaming not in anger or hatred, but in panic.

Attica finally met his gaze and saw the offer in his eyes. They did not have to do this. They could find another way.

But there truly was no other way. She knew that. He knew that. Attica was making a decision that, when she really thought about it, was not much of a choice at all. It was imperative that they destroy the emerald as a means to finally put an end to the reign of the darkest wizard the world had ever harbored. She was saving Snape from having to make a decision that could bring harm to her. When she nodded to him, it was with finality. She was adamant about this, and maybe his knowing that could save him from some of the guilt.

The sword hovered above the stone. Tears were already streaming down McGonagall's face. She could not bear to see the sorrow there, so she glanced back at Snape. She was both surprised and saddened to see the single tear that was tracing its way down his cheek as well. His eyes pleaded with her, and he hesitated only so that he might be sure that a change of heart was not coming from the determined, young girl. She smiled placidly and nodded once more.

McGonagall lowered the sword and the world was black.

Attica screamed.

The black faded to red behind her eyelids. There was a moment when she thought the agony would never end. It felt as if her entire body were being torn apart, her skin from the muscle and the muscle from the bone. The pain was searing and burning, and she could not be sure if the howling she heard was coming from the emerald or from her own mouth. But she maintained the calmness that had come upon her in the foyer as she collapsed upon the cold, unyielding floor.

Even as she burned, all she could think about was the peace that was coming. She imagined the imminent embrace with her family and powered through the pain, knowing that it would soon end. For the first time in a very long time, she was not afraid.

## Demise

### *Chapter 20 of 21*

Witches and wizards have always carried the burden of their allegiances to the dark or to the light. The choice to follow one or the other dictates a person's character. Attica Flamel pays fealty to neither. When grief morphs into an irrepressible need for vengeance, Attica will stop at nothing until the debts are paid.

A warm hand covered hers, enveloping her in its warmth. The hand was large and soft. She thought immediately of her grandfather. She opened her heavy eyes. The room was bright, and the light trickling in through the window temporarily blinded her, but she could tell she was in her own bed. She blinked several times until her eyes adjusted to the light. The figure beside her stirred, squeezing her hand.

"Attica?" the voice sounded concerned, and very familiar. Her weary blue eyes met a pair of alert chocolate ones.

"Neville?" she responded hoarsely. In a moment of confusion, she wondered if Neville had died too and that her parents must be close by. Then comprehension dawned, for even in her confused state, she knew that everything felt too real, too corporeal for her to be anywhere other than her childhood home.

But Neville was there, smiling at her, the crinkles at the corners of his eyes telling her that the smile was genuine. Several emotions flowed through her at once. She was almost disappointed that she had lived when she had been so prepared to die. She believed this disappointment was mostly bred from the fact that she would not be reunited with her family as she had anticipated rather than a longing for death itself. And along with the relief of simply being alive, she felt a relief and an elation that Neville was here, sitting directly in front of her. She did not know what would happen next, but she knew that, no matter what danger befell her, she would not feel fear as long as he was here beside her. He had come to her when she needed him most. He still cared for her, despite the fact that all she deserved from him was total apathy.

If she had had any doubts about her bodily state, she knew without a doubt that she was alive when the ache began to seep into her bones. She ached all over, and the ache was not entirely unpleasant because it meant that it was real, that she was real, that she was alive.

"I'm here, Attica. I'm here. You need to sleep."

But she did not want to sleep. She had so many things to tell him. She needed to tell him everything so that he would no longer harbor any delusions about her. She was

tainted and he needed to know that. As happy as she was that he had come to her, she knew that he deserved someone with a heart that matched his, a heart that was pure and kind. Even if the disclosure of her sins meant that he would remove his hand from hers and walk out of her life forever, he had the right to know. She was so tired, she could feel the pillows and the warm blankets calling to her, beckoning her back into sleep, but he had to know. It was not fair of her to keep him here at her bedside when he should have been running from the house, putting as much distance between them as possible.

"Shhh, Attica," he whispered into her ear as he leaned down to brush a soft kiss across her forehead. "I know." He did not let go of her hand.

The next time she awoke, it was with a start. Neville was still sitting beside her, asleep in the small floral armchair. He looked almost comical, his long limbs slouched haphazardly over the sides of the uncomfortable chair. Even in his awkward position, his hand was placed protectively over hers.

"Neville?"

He stirred immediately, grasping her hand in both of his. The relief in his eyes when he smiled at her filled her with pure, unblemished joy. "Attica! How are you feeling?"

She was surprised to announce to him that she was feeling very much like normal. She was still very tired, but it wasn't the unpleasant sort of exhaustion that had plagued her when she wore the emerald. She stretched her arms and legs, which had become very stiff. The next order of business was to inquire after Snape.

"In the laboratory. He has been brewing nonstop down there." Neville stood, stretching his arms over his head. He smiled at her again before adding, "Or at least that's what Moby told me. I'm not about to go down there myself. He's been very irritable as of late. Or at least, more so than usual," he added with a wink that sent a blush creeping up Attica's neck.

"Of course not," she replied with a smirk, remembering Snape's obvious dislike of Neville. Some things never change, she thought. Attica experienced a moment of elation when she thought of the ongoing struggle between the two. Neville was still wary of the professor, and the professor still did not care much for Neville. It was all so blessedly ordinary. "What is he brewing? Is he...?" Was he well? She did not know what had happened when the emerald was destroyed. In those moments, she had known only herself and her own pain. She had not been cognizant of anything going on around her, and she had not seen the man since she had awakened. She had no need to voice any concern about the gem's destruction because she had felt neither this freedom, nor this lightness, in so long. The emerald, the Horcrux, had been undoubtedly destroyed. She could feel it deep within herself.

"He has been brewing healing potions." Neville noted the alarm in her eyes and quickly elaborated. "For you."

She hadn't needed to ask. Neville knew her well enough to answer queries she had not verbalized. But this meant that Snape was well. She released a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding.

"You collapsed when the Horcrux was struck," he explained. He sat down at the foot of her bed, his eyes never leaving her face. "We didn't know what was wrong. I've never seen Snape so upset. I was so worried." Neville swallowed thickly. "Snape sent for me as soon as they had stabilized you. I was as shocked as you are." Here, he drew his lips into a thin line. "He had to try several potions until one finally worked. He told me about the emerald." This was followed by a pregnant pause. "He told me about everything." Suddenly, the polished oak floorboards were quite interesting, and he studied those instead of meeting Attica's eyes.

But she didn't have to see his eyes to know that he was upset. "Neville, I never meant to abandon you like that. I know that I hurt you, I know my letter hurt you, but I had to protect you. And..."

"I know. Snape told me about the Legilimency. I know why you did it, why you left."

"I know you can't forgive me right now, but I want to make it up to you, Neville. I will do whatever it takes."

"You thought you were protecting me, Attica." He looked at her now, and despite what she knew he meant to be a carefree tone, it was obvious that he was still hurt. "I know that now. I didn't understand before, and that's what made it so hard for me. The Horcrux was manipulating you, and it made you want to be with Voldemort, but there was still a part of you that cared enough for me to try to spare me from the pain you were experiencing. I'm surprised you managed a goodbye at all with that weight on your shoulders."

He uttered Voldemort's name with not so much as a stutter or hesitation. That in itself told her how much the boy she loved had grown. He wasn't a boy anymore, she realized. With a twinge of guilt, she understood how much time she had wasted with the Horcrux and how much she had missed. She regretted not being there for the boy who she had known, but she swore that she would do whatever she could for the man before her. She would be anything he needed her to be, if he would have her. He was brave and good, and she wasn't sure if she could ever truly deserve him, but she had to try.

Closing the distance between them, he gathered her into his arms. "Oh, Neville," she choked. As he rubbed soothing circles on her back, she buried her face into his neck, breathing in the earthy scent of him. Attica tried to ignore the voice in the back of her mind, a voice that was now wholly her own, that was reminding her that he still did not know the entire story and neither did Snape. But as badly as she wanted to, she could not bring herself to say anything in that moment because, as much as she wanted him to know the truth, her desperation to keep him with her was just as strong.

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She watched in silence as the professor moved from cauldron to cauldron, filling flasks with the healing potions he had just finished brewing and sending them to their proper places on the shelves with a flick of his wand. His frame was haggard, and although she only got a brief glimpse of his profile when he had turned to reach for more flasks, she had seen the dark circles under his eyes. It appeared as if he had had little rest recently.

She stood there watching him without saying a word. She knew that he had been aware of her entrance into the lab. The last flask had reached its destination before he looked up at her. "The house-elf told me you were awake."

She smiled at the mention of Moby. "I just wanted to thank you, professor."

He nodded once. "The potions were nothing. Third years could have successfully brewed them for you. I was simply here at the right time. Longbottom would have ransacked St. Mungo's had I not been here." She could have sworn a smile was tugging at his lips.

"That's not what I meant, Professor. You discovered what was happening to me. I can't bear to think about what I might have done if you hadn't put the pieces together. Without your intervention, I could have created the Stone and I would have kill..." She caught herself before she confessed the entirety of her faithlessness and watched with cold fear as the hint of a smile shifted into a deep scowl.

"You wanted the Stone to strengthen yourself." It wasn't a question, and there was absolutely no hint of uncertainty in his voice. How long had he known?

She nodded slowly.

He let out a deep, apprehensive sigh. "You aimed to kill someone but lacked the strength to do it."

She wanted to deny it, to give him contrived stories and excuses that explained the desperation in her efforts to recreate the Stone. But all she could do was offer another nod.

"Who?" It was only one word, but it still made regret curl red and hot inside her chest.

"Don't make me say it."

"Who?" he insisted, more forcefully this time. The word sounded like a growl and his black eyes flashed. He knew exactly whom she had wanted to kill. Somehow, he had figured it out, and she wanted to Avada herself for giving too much away.

Under his hot gaze, her words came out in a rush as she tried to explain. "I don't know how or when it happened, but some of Voldemort's hatred transferred to me. I wanted what he wanted. And I justified this hatred to myself because, without his heroics, the original Stone would never have needed to be destroyed and my grandparents would still be alive. The bloodlust, Professor, I...I couldn't stop myself, no matter how badly I tried to push the feelings away. It was the one thing Voldemort wanted to most, so it became the thing that I needed the most. It was the only chance for me to avenge everything I have lost and all the pain I've ever felt."

His lip curled. "You wanted to kill Harry Potter and you used me to do it," he snarled.

She stepped toward him, wanting to reach for him as she offered two words as the only explanation she had, "The Horcrux."

He stepped back from her, and his withering glare told her that he found her completely deplorable in that moment. "No. You!" he hissed. "As if planning to murder someone in cold blood wasn't enough, you exploited the trust I placed in you to commit the evil act! You selfish, selfish girl."

"I know, and I would do anything to take it back, but that's not who I am..."

"Enough! There is no excuse for this, you foolish child." These words made her flinch because she had always counted on her intelligence to get her through every situation she faced. But he was absolutely right. She had been a fool, and she had almost brought him down with her. She should have been smart enough to realize that the darkness she was feeling was not hers. It was totally unfamiliar, and she should have recognized that it was wrong. She dropped her hands to her sides, and he dropped his voice. "You knew about her. You knew about Lily. You knew whom my loyalties belonged to and what side I was truly fighting for. You knew I was risking everything to protect Potter and had been doing so for years. I risked much for you, as well, and this is the way you repay me. We worked together. I... I told you things. I confided in you. And all the while you were plotting and deceiving and doing everything in your power to reverse each small victory I had gained in keeping him alive. You deceived me into helping you destroy the very thing I have vowed to protect with my life." An injured expression washed over his already harsh features, and he closed his eyes. That expression hurt Attica as much as if he had stabbed her through the heart with the most ragged dagger he could find. She would have done anything in that moment to relieve the pain she had caused. When he spoke again, his voice was icy. "I may have to recant what I said earlier. I'm not so sure that you are the fool here. I very well may be a fool for trusting you."

Her stomach churned, and she felt as if she were going to be sick. Everything was going completely wrong. Deep inside herself, she had harbored the apparently delusional hope that when she explained everything to him he would be able to look past his own pain at her betrayal and that he would be as understanding and forgiving as he had been before when the secret of the Horcrux had been discovered. She had thought that, from there, maybe her life could finally return to some semblance of normalcy and that maybe for once she could put the past behind her and be truly and unadulteratedly happy.

He opened his eyes and looked at her for a long moment, disgust written all over his face and cold fury in his eyes. She desperately wanted him to yell at her, to scream, to punish her with his caustic invectives. She wanted him to hit her. She couldn't bear to have him look at her like that. His silence was more abrasive than a slap across the face would have been. He had been her savior, her teacher, and he had miraculously brought Neville back to her when she thought he would never return because of the pain she had inflicted upon him as well. He had healed her, and now he was looking at her with a hatred so cold that it made her body numb.

He spoke again, his voice low and dangerous. "This is betrayal, Attica Flamel." He Apparated in a billow of black robes, and the words hung in the air long after he had disappeared.

*This is betrayal, Attica Flamel.*

*Betrayal.*

## Homecoming

### Chapter 21 of 21

Witches and wizards have always carried the burden of their allegiances to the dark or to the light. The choice to follow one or the other dictates a person's character. Attica Flamel pays fealty to neither. When grief morphs into an irrepressible need for vengeance, Attica will stop at nothing until the debts are paid.

When Attica had penned that horrible letter to Neville the year before, she had written things that she didn't mean. Before she had written it, however, she had clutched her quill in a shaking hand and poured her heart out onto a piece of parchment.

When she had finished, when her eyes were stinging and her heart was sore, she looked at the tear-stained paper covered with her spiky script. She knew without a doubt that Neville would never accept her leaving if he knew how she truly felt. She could never send this letter to him because it was far too honest. Once he knew that she loved him, she was certain that he would fight for her. So Attica folded the parchment and tucked it away. She didn't want to hurt him, but his safety was worth more than his pride. She decided in that moment that he would never read it.

Instead, she wrote:

*Neville,*

*I'm leaving Hogwarts, and by the time you read this letter, I'll be gone. Do not try to find me. Do not write to me. Do not come after me. There is something I need to do, and I need to do it without you. I know how you feel about me, and I am sorry to tell you this way, but the love you have for me is unrequited. We were friends, and we have shared a lot of difficult experiences, but we are also very different. I do not love you, at least not in the way that you love me. If you truly care for me, you will let me do what I need to do. Goodbye Neville.*

*Regretfully yours,*

*Attica*

Her heart broke as she tied the letter to the owl's leg. The bird flew out of the tower of Malfoy Manor and into the night. She was faced with an onslaught of grief and remorse, but she prayed to Merlin that she was doing the right thing. "Forgive me, Neville," she whispered out of the window after the departing figure.

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Attica sat on the bed in her childhood bedroom and relayed the entire sordid story to Neville now, including everything about Harry and the stone. As she told him the part about Snape and her deceit, she could not meet his eyes and studied her hands instead. She was determined to give Neville the full and unadulterated story. She needed to tell it and he needed to hear it. Even if Neville changed his mind about her and left the minute the truth was out, it was cathartic. No matter the outcome, at least someone would know the truth. She wouldn't have to deceive anyone anymore. She braced herself physically and emotionally and prepared for him to storm out of the room. As the final words left her mouth, she realized that he wouldn't actually storm out. He would quietly and diplomatically leave the room, and she would never see him again. She finally lifted her gaze to his face and froze when she saw the hurt in his eyes. He stood, turned away from her, and stuffed his hands in his pockets. She squeezed her eyes shut and waited to hear the sound of him opening the door and leaving the room.

Silence.

Her eyes opened just in time to see Neville turn around to look at her.

"I'm not going to pretend that this doesn't bother me, Attica," he said. Of course it bothered him, and it should. Contrary to what Snape had told her previously, she was not foolish enough to think that he would brush this knowledge aside and pretend that it hadn't happened. She did hope that somehow he could look past it.

Attica dropped her head with the weight of her shame. She still did not know if this meant he was staying or leaving, so she held her breath for what was coming next.

He took a deep breath before he continued. "There is also nothing you can do to change what you have done or what you tried to do. You tried to kill my friend, Attica. That is something you will have to live with forever. I will not lie to you. I will not tell you that everything is okay. I will not tell you that none of this matters. I will not tell you that you haven't hurt me or anyone else. That's not fair to me. And frankly, it's not fair to you." Attica had never felt such pain, not when the Horcrux had been destroyed, and not when Snape had stood before her and called her a fool. She wondered, in that moment, if it was really possible for the heart to break...not metaphorically or symbolically, but literally. It was the only explanation for the pain that had suddenly and potently bloomed in her chest.

"So yes, I am hurt by what you have done. But it would hurt infinitely worse if I didn't have you. No, it's not okay right now. But as long as we're together, it will be."

Attica stood and took a tentative step toward him. Neville was still for a moment, then closed the space between them so that they were mere inches apart. She reached out to place her hand on his chest, moving slowly, afraid that he would change his mind. "You aren't leaving," she said, her voice betraying her desperation. Neville just as slowly raised his hand to cover hers and shook his head.

"No, I'm not," he said with a tired sigh. "I can't leave," he continued. "I love you." He spoke the final words in a way that was so plain and clear and simple. He had said it like those words could solve everything. And for Attica, they did.

Neville smiled one of his shy half smiles in an attempt to reassure her that everything would actually be okay this time. She simultaneously felt elation and a deep sorrow because she knew that she had hurt him deeply. She could see the pain in his warm, chocolate eyes. Attica burst into tears yet again. It occurred to her briefly that she had cried more tears within the last few months than she had in her entire life. Then she began to smile because Neville was looking at her now with a mix of panic and confusion because he didn't understand.

She realized she hadn't said anything in response to his declaration of love. She placed her hand on his cheek. "I love you too, Neville."

"You don't have to say that," he whispered as he leaned into her touch. His eyes never left hers.

"But I do love you, Neville. I always have. And I know there is nothing I can say that will absolve any doubt you have about that. But I do have this."

She pulled the original letter that she had written for him from her pocket. It was dirty and looked like it was about to fall apart. Her cheeks began to burn as she handed it over to him, because of the sorry state of the parchment as well as the contents, but he had to read it. If he didn't, he would never know that what she felt for him was truly love and not merely affection born of his presence during the hardest times of her life. He was her entire world and he always had been. These were the words she should have been saying to him their entire lives, but her selfishness had gotten in the way.

"The letter I sent you when I left Hogwarts was almost impossible for me to write because nothing in it was true. I knew that if you knew what I was doing, and if you knew how I truly felt about you, you would have stopped at absolutely nothing to save me. So I lied to you. I wrote horrible things, and there is nothing I can do to take them back now. Sending that letter to you is one of the biggest regrets in my life. I wrote this letter first, but I didn't want you to come after me because that would have put you in danger. I've carried the letter with me ever since, and I need you to read it now."

She returned to the bed and he sat down next to her. He took the parchment from her fingers, and she watched as his eyes flickered across the words as he read.

*Neville,*

*I'm leaving Hogwarts, and by the time you read this letter, I'll be gone. I am so sorry that I left without telling you goodbye. I am sorry that I left without saying what I needed to say. You mean the world to me, and I would never have left you if it wasn't absolutely necessary. There are things that I need to do, and I cannot tell you anything beyond that because the knowledge would put you in danger. I will not be responsible for endangering you or Augusta or Algie. I owe all of you my life. I can never repay your family's kindness to me, but maybe keeping you safe in this instance will be one small step toward trying to. I already miss you more than anything. I miss your botched charm attempts, I miss searching for Trevor, and I miss the comfort you offered me during my nightmares. You are the bravest and kindest person I know. You have protected me since I was twelve years old. Let me protect you now.*

*I love you, Neville.*

*Attica*

"You were right," he whispered when he finished reading. "I would have come after you. I would have done whatever it took to bring you back to safety. And if I could have, I would have fought this battle for you." He stood and took Attica's hands, pulling her to her feet. He wrapped his arms around her and gently kissed the top of her head. "I'm never letting go."

When Neville finally pressed his lips to hers, Attica felt an intense feeling of homecoming. She had been searching her entire life to find a place where she could truly belong. Whenever she lost one home, another one would open to her, and the people there accepted and protected her. She had been grateful for that, but there had still been something minute. And in that moment, she found it. Her home was right here, enveloped in Neville's embrace. In his arms, she was where she belonged.