

Unknown Prophecy

Chapter 57

The castle was always eerie at night. Above ground, the stone passages cooled in the absence of sunlight, but in the bowels of the castle, the air always had a cold bite to it. Shadows danced with the flickering wall torches, and the noises that echoed during the day had faded. Below, in the hidden plumbing, the darkness was deeper and all-consuming. The air was heavy with mold, and it tasted faintly metallic from the copper pipes that ran throughout the castle like veins.

The basilisk moved through the darkness without the need for sight. Its vision came from other senses, those that didn't require eyes or torchlight or even sound. It felt the castle's movement as vibrations against its scales. It tasted the flavor of every draft, every exhalation, and every drop of moisture. It remembered the castle's secrets and its many tastes.

Tonight, the basilisk's orders were precise ... stay silent ... remain unseen. Do not touch the forbidden meat. Hunt only the one called Miles Bletchley. Its master had visited that afternoon with a task for it. The basilisk could still hear its master's orders. They cut straight into the basilisk's mind, sharper than any fang. Its master had even provided a piece of cloth with the meat's scent, so it could be sure to find the right target. The basilisk's tongue flicked at the memory. It wanted to begin at once.

Its master had said to wait until full darkness. The basilisk stretched behind a cluster of hot pipes beneath the floor of the dungeons, keeping still for hours as the castle settled. When the last door slammed and the movements guttered out, the basilisk uncoiled itself and flowed up through a grate. The large, metal vent cover was on hinges and flipped up as the basilisk's body slipped through.

It first passed by an old set of armor, and the air was thick with the taste of metal polish. The basilisk couldn't taste its target, so it moved on, keeping close to the wall and inching its belly along the cold stones. At a junction near the corridor with old, abandoned classrooms, a sudden draft made the basilisk pause. The air here vibrated with a familiar flavor. It tasted like the residue of careless meat. The basilisk had been told to ignore them, but old habits lingered. It paused and savored the scent before moving on.

At the four-way intersection near the stairs, the basilisk hesitated. Its memory faltered at the intersection. The castle changed on occasion, shifting the patterns of its corridors. The basilisk had once been trapped for a day behind a wall that had not existed the night before. The memory irritated it. The basilisk flicked its tongue, sampling the air. The left corridor tasted the most like meat, and the basilisk could taste the subtle scent of its master in the air. It slid left, making no sound.

It passed by closed doors and slid around corners, moving faster now. At the end of the corridor was an old room with an open door. The basilisk's master had said that the meat would be here, alone. At first, the basilisk could not see the meat, but it could smell him. The scent was unmistakable. It smelled of flesh and fear, and the basilisk's body tensed with hunger.

The meat was tied to a chair and pushed against the wall. His arms were bound behind him, and his legs were lashed to the chair's legs with rope. A strip of cloth was tied around his eyes, and another, darker piece was jammed between his teeth. He was shivering and scared. The basilisk moved closer, keeping its head low to the ground.

The meat's breathing changed as the basilisk approached. The basilisk could hear the shallow, rapid breaths of its prey. It hissed softly, testing the meat's response, and the meat flinched and tried to shift away. The chair scraped against the stone, making the basilisk hiss angrily. It did not like the sound, but it liked the smell of fear.

The orders were clear ... only strike ... don't eat. The basilisk considered this. It had killed many things in the castle. It had eaten rats, cats, and even the occasional owl, but it had only ever marked a human once before. That memory was still clear in its mind. There was a moment of surprise and then cold stillness. Tonight's job was simpler.

It opened its mouth, exposing its fangs. The venom glands swelled, and venom dripped from the points of its fangs. It drew back and snapped at the meat's leg. The tip of its fangs tore through the fabric of his trousers and buried deep into his thigh. The taste was everything the basilisk had imagined. It was the taste of salt, iron, and the sweetness of panic. The meat made a noise through the gag, and it vibrated through the basilisk's jaw and filled it with warmth. The venom pulsed through its fangs, just as its master had instructed.

The meat writhed, and the basilisk released him. Its tongue flicked along the wound, collecting a last drop of blood. The job was done.

The basilisk backed away, watching the meat slump forward, breathing hard. The venom would do its work. First would come the paralysis, then the temporary blindness. A deep, never-ending sleep would then follow it. The basilisk was not allowed to linger, so it turned and slid back the way it had come.

The castle was silent as the basilisk disappeared into the darkness, leaving his prey gasping and convulsing.

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Harry sat in the dark, empty room, listening under the cover of a Disillusionment Charm. His chair was an overturned crate, and his back was pressed to the icy cold stone wall of a forgotten storeroom. The torch outside the door flickered with the ever-present draft, then settled into a

dull orange glow behind the gap under the door. He rubbed his arms to ward off the chill, waiting for the sound he had been expecting to hear.

It eventually came, and it was faint but unmistakable. A slick, dragging noise grew louder with every passing second. The basilisk was on the hunt. Harry rested his hands on his knees and listened closely. The air in the little room was so stale he could practically taste it, and he constantly had to keep himself from sneezing because of all the dust.

Harry waited as the basilisk passed by his closed door. He saw the orange light coming through the crack beneath the door blink out as it slithered by. It carried on further down the corridor, and when it stopped, he knew it had found its target. He heard nothing, but imagined the violence anyway. He could almost see the fangs and venom, and hear the muffled scream. Harry waited, and he wasn't sure how long he sat in the dark room, but it seemed much longer than it actually was. Eventually, he heard the basilisk slither the opposite way. Harry waited until he couldn't hear it anymore, then he waited a few minutes longer.

When he finally cracked the door, the corridor was empty. The faint smell of reptile lingered in the air, and it made his nose wrinkle in disgust. He moved out of the storeroom and padded invisibly down the corridor to the correct room. The door was open, just as he had left it.

Miles Bletchley was exactly where Harry had left him. He was tied to a chair, head slumped forward with his hands bound tight behind the slats. Miles had been perfectly alive last time Harry had seen him, but now his head lolled at an unnatural angle. The venom would have worked quickly, shutting down his nervous system until all his vital organs failed. The damp, spreading stain where his bladder had let go was the only indication that he had just been alive.

Harry watched the body, waiting for any hint of movement. The Slytherin's mouth was gagged, but the color in his lips was rapidly fading. Blood and spit mingled at the corners, dribbling down onto the ugly green tie that bunched up at his throat. Harry stood over the corpse for a moment, just looking.

His body didn't move at all, and his open eyes were glazed and lifeless. Harry watched his chest and quickly noticed the lack of breath. It was confirmed. The guy was dead.

"You always were a bastard, Bletchley," Harry said. His voice was just above a whisper, and it lacked any hint of remorse.

Harry's words were true. In his past life, Miles Bletchley was a piece of shit while at Hogwarts, and he only got worse as he aged. He had somehow made it unscathed from the aftermath of Voldemort's downfall. Harry obviously hadn't been there to witness it firsthand, but from his research, he understood that Bletchley was always doing his best to keep blood purity as an integral part of wizarding society.

Earlier that day, the Slytherin was crowing over some half-arsed prank on the Gryffindor Quidditch team. They'd gotten sick for days after, and Bletchley was very proud of his work. Harry, with his self-appointed duty to "take out the trash", saw this as the perfect opportunity to rid their society of a current and future nuisance. It wasn't difficult to follow him and hit him with a stunner when he was alone. The fact that nobody was looking for him told Harry that the other Slytherins probably didn't even like him. Harry studied him again before looking away. Bletchley looked pathetic, like a broken marionette. Harry couldn't help but think that this was a fitting end for him.

He exhaled to help calm himself. He was slightly shaking from the adrenaline. He didn't enjoy doing this kind of stuff, but it was a necessary evil. He looked around the room, checking for missed clues. There were two empty bottles of Firewhiskey in the corner, an old, torn-up book, and a discarded Slytherin scarf that appeared to have been stained with ink. All of that crap was already there when he placed Bletchley inside the room.

He waved his hand, and the ropes and chair vanished, causing Bletchley to collapse to the floor with a dull thud. The head lolled again, and his chin scraped against the stone. Harry waved his hand again and lifted the corpse with a Levitation Charm, careful to keep his movements smooth and silent. The dead weight hovered, and the robes trailed along the ground like a shadow.

Harry led the floating corpse into the corridor, through several twists and turns, and around a corner to the Slytherin common room entrance. The corridor was deserted. Harry paused, considered the best place to leave the body, then settled on a shallow alcove behind a suit of armor. He nudged the body in place, let the spell fade, and watched Miles settle against the stone wall. Anyone who found him would think that he had chosen this place to hide.

He looked at him one last time. The two deep puncture wounds on his thigh would be a dead giveaway to Dumbledore. Now that his job was done, he doubled back, retracing his steps while his ears listened for any sign of discovery or witnesses. The only sound was the soft, satisfied thump in his chest.

Harry had chosen the dungeons because there was a distinct lack of portraits on the walls. Unfortunately, that also meant that he was far from the Gryffindor Tower. Harry instead chose to go to his private room, which was a little closer. After ten minutes of careful traveling, Harry made his way through a hidden passage and exited close to his private room. The castle was still and quiet, and Harry smiled to himself, knowing he had gotten away with it. He entered the room and smiled even wider. Hermione was waiting for him in bed. She smiled prettily when he entered and flipped the blanket off her, revealing her soft, smooth body. Harry stripped down, eager to collect his reward.

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The Great Hall was quieter than usual. Harry and Hermione walked in with their group and found that most of the students had already arrived, but they weren't making their typical noisy racket. Instead, the conversations were quiet and tinged with panic. The Slytherin table was the worst. They were bunched together in small groups, whispering to one another. Even the Hufflepuffs looked up from their porridge to gawk at them.

Harry saw Ron at the Hufflepuff table. He gave him a nod and a smile before going back to his breakfast. He was the only one eating with any real appetite, greedily shoveling scrambled eggs onto toast. He passed by Ginny and sat next to Hermione, who immediately began adding fruit to her plate.

Hermione's hand found Harry's thigh under the table. Her palm was greedy, the same way it had been all night. It slowly started to climb, and Harry couldn't help but smile. Hermione was a selfish creature, and it seemed like nothing would change that.

"Everyone looks worried," she muttered, stabbing a slice of strawberry with her fork and popping it into her mouth.

Harry nodded, keeping his attention on the staff table. Dumbledore wasn't smiling this morning. His face was as blank as a gravestone, and he stirred his tea with such absent-minded rhythm that he barely noticed McGonagall nudging him. On his left, Snape was still living in la-la-land. The man's eyes were ringed in shadow, and every time his fork touched his plate, he jerked as if waking from a nap. Sometimes he stared into the ceiling, blinking slowly, as if trying to remember what he was doing there.

"They're all acting like this because of some Slytherin bully," Hermione said with a snort, her voice so low he almost missed it.

Harry shrugged and loaded up his plate. "I think they're worried that they might be next. Dumbledore's likely worried about damaging his reputation."

She nodded while continuing to eat. She looked like she didn't have a care in the world. "Hopefully, he'll get knocked down a peg or two."

Harry reached for the pitcher of pumpkin juice and poured a glass for both of them. He watched the Slytherin Prefects at their table. None of them looked up. They were hunched over and speaking quietly. Daphne, Tracey, Astoria, and even Pansy were together and talking to one another. Malfoy was quiet and picking at his food, but Harry could tell that he was nervous.

He glanced back at the head table. Dumbledore was conferring with McGonagall in short, sharp whispers. Sprout and Flitwick kept glancing at Snape, as if expecting him to get up and do a little jig. The man looked like a wax dummy, propped up for display. Harry had really done a number on his brain with that cauldron explosion.

“So, what do you think the story will be?” Hermione asked.

Harry smirked. “Nothing official yet. I’m guessing Dumbledore’s waiting until he has no other choice.” The last time this happened, Dumbledore was eventually removed as Headmaster. Of course, that was in large part due to Lucius Malfoy, and there was no chance of him getting involved again.

Hermione’s brow furrowed. “How long do you think he can hide it?”

“If I’m successful ... not long,” Harry truthfully told her.

Harry caught a flicker of movement at the Ravenclaw table. Padma Patil was staring at him, and when their eyes met, she looked away fast, blushing madly. Parvati caught the exchange and started whispering furiously in her sister’s ear.

A silver-grey owl swooped through the high windows, dropping letters onto the tables. Most of them landed near the Slytherins. The first-year who caught one opened it, read a line, and turned a shade paler than the tablecloth. Two more followed, and soon the whole table was buzzing with excitement and dread.

Hermione squeezed his thigh. “We’re being watched.”

“I know,” Harry replied. He already knew that Daphne and her group had their eyes on him. He looked around and noticed that the usual ghosts had cleared out. He bit down on a piece of sausage.

In fact, quite a few girls were staring at him. As the resident hero, they were probably hoping that he’d do something heroic to save them all. Harry had plans for that, but they’d just have to wait. By the time he’d finished his food, two figures detached themselves from the Slytherin table and came straight for him. Daphne and Tracey moved in perfect lockstep, their arms linked, and their faces set in identical stoic expressions.

They stopped in front of Harry as he was getting up to join his group to go to class. Daphne’s eyes were a bit shifty and nervous, but she did her best to hide it from others. Tracey’s lips trembled slightly, but she didn’t flinch.

“Harry,” Daphne said. She looked at Hermione, then back to Harry. “We need to talk. Privately, please.”

Hermione made a face, but she didn’t try to stop it. She told Harry that she’d wait for him with their group. Daphne and Tracey stepped closer once she was gone. Their perfume was lovely, and even in their fear, they both looked beautiful.

“What’s up?” Harry asked, pretending he didn’t already know.

Daphne's eyes darted around, measuring every pair of ears within ten feet. "They found Bletchley near the entrance to our common room. He was propped up like he was sleeping, but he was ... you know."

"He's dead," Tracey whispered.

He waited for Daphne to say the next part. "They're saying it was the monster," Daphne said. Her voice was hollow. "He had two holes in his leg ... like fang marks, only way bigger."

Tracey nodded. "The seventh-years are scared shitless. Even Goyle was crying."

Daphne shot him a look. "They're saying Slytherin's monster is back, and nobody's safe. Now it's even attacking the Slytherins."

Harry played it cool. "Do you think it's safe?"

Daphne's lips pressed together. "No. That's why we're here."

Tracey twisted a ring on her finger. "The attack was right next to our common room. It could have been us! We can't sleep in the dorms anymore. At least not until this is over."

Harry turned his gaze on Daphne and smiled kindly at her. "So, you want sanctuary?"

She gave a single, sharp nod. "Can we stay with you in your private room until the danger has passed?"

"Alright," he said. "But how are you going to get away from your Prefects?"

Tracey waved his question away. "Don't worry about them. With Snape being so loopy, they barely even do their jobs," she told him.

"Well, if you think you can get away with it, then sure. I don't mind," he told them.

Daphne exhaled, like she'd been holding her breath for an hour. "Thank you."

"Don't worry about it. Just don't get caught," he told them.

"We won't," Tracey assured him, also looking pleased and relieved.

Daphne smiled prettily at him and brushed his arm with her fingers. She and Tracey then made their way back to the Slytherin table, where Astoria and Pansy began chattering away. Hermione rejoined him and asked what they wanted. Harry told her, and she snorted.

“They’re just using it as an excuse to get more alone time with you,” she told him, and Harry smiled.

“Maybe, but either way, I don’t mind,” and Hermione snorted even louder.

“I’m sure you don’t,” she said with a knowing look. “But if they think they can dominate your free time, they’d better think again. I’m not losing out on our alone time so they can bend over for you,” she bluntly told him, and Harry chuckled.

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” he told her, and Hermione smiled happily. In fact, Harry already had plans to include Hermione in their group. It was about time they all got a little bit closer.