

An Ancient Evil

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The dry air of the crypt stirred lightly, drawing tiny eddies in the thick dust. Such a miniscule event would have passed unnoticed almost everywhere in the world, but here, in the unchanging, endless dark, it called out like a shriek in the night. As if summoned, a figure slowly rose, an aura of menace surrounding him, repulsing all like the stench of a corpse. A soft sound indicated the drawing of breath.

Bloodless eyelids slid up, exposing a pair of eyes that looked as though they'd been stolen from a wolf.

Or would have, if even a fraction of a glimmer of light was available.

Despite the perfect darkness, the figure raised his hands, then clenched them experimentally. He twisted his forearms, turning his palms to face him, and flexed his fingers again.

Something had happened. Something nearby had damaged the almost-crystalline magic wards that surrounded this place. That kept him prisoner.

Swivelling off the slab of stone that had been the figure's centuries-long resting place, he silently placed its feet on the ground and stretched upwards, feeling raw power flood back into his ancient limbs.

He gasped at the sensation, before almost screaming with need. With thirst.

Three strides took the figure to the opposite side of the pitch black crypt, up to a slab of stone with runes carved deep into its surface. Even without light, the eyes flickered over the door, reading the designs that had been once etched with care. The meaning became clear quickly, they were designed to keep the darkest evil well hidden. Trapped, for all eternity.

Thin lips peeled back into a caricature of a smile, revealing a perfect row of human teeth, with two exceptions.

"Salazar, thou hast a vastly under whelming notion of eternity," the figure whispered, its voice dry, yet resonant. "And Godric, thou hast no idea what power is required to bind me."

The figure clenched a fist, and drove it hard into the centre of the stone portal. Granite chips skipped off and landed in the far corners of the crypt as the figure drew back its fist and examined the knuckles.

The white, bloodless skin over the knuckles had been burned deeply by contact with the magic seal, and split open by the force of the blow. But the necrotic flesh crawled and flowed, stitching itself back over the damaged fist. In less than three seconds, the damage done to the figure's hand was healed without scar. As though it had never been injured.

The damage to the inside of the door was the only evidence pointing to the power of the strike. The humourless grin widened, and another fist flashed out, faster than the first.

This time, the flesh on the fist was not burned. The deep runes had been damaged, and had lost much of their power.

A quarter moon bathed the landscape with its gentle, silvery light.

Deep within the Forbidden Forest, a vine covered rock set into the side of a cliff rocked and shook, sending birds flying and small creatures scuttling away. Judging by the moss and lichen covering the stone, it looked to have been undisturbed for centuries, perhaps millennia.

One more muffled boom shook the rock, sending dirt and gravel tumbling down the side of the cliff, sending up tiny puffs of dust as they hit the ground. With the next concussion, a massive crack appeared in the rock, arcing down through the solid stone like trapped lightning.

Three more muted booms followed, each louder than the one before, sending the crack deeper and wider across the stone surface. Eventually, the flaw extended from the top of the stone to the base. With the last blow from behind, one half of the huge stone shifted, jumping outwards by a finger-width.

The powerful thumping paused, replaced with the soft grinding sound of rock on rock, as though being pushed, rather than struck. Slowly, deliberately, one side of the huge stone ground itself away from the cliff, dust and sand falling from the edges as they were worn away.

The stone proved to be over a metre thick, as half finally broke free.

Nosferatu was free once more.

Dumbledore stared through the window in his office, looking over the faintly distorted, yet massive expanse of the Forbidden Forest. The endless sea of green gently suggested an untamed area, filled with life, all existing in harmony. But he knew that was just an illusion, a thin veneer that covered the awful, soul-chilling truth. For centuries, the Forbidden Forest had always been dangerous, even deadly. Now, Dumbledore yearned for those days.

The Headmaster stood rigid with some effort, his right hand clasping the shaped amber handle of his ivory cane and supporting the majority of his weight, his left clasped into a fist and resting against the small of his back. He was relying more and more on his upper body strength to simply stand these days. Despite the effort it took to remain perfectly still, the old wizard forced himself to remain steady.

His vigil had become a ritual over the past few months. Ever since Voldemort had been defeated.

Dumbledore gave a sigh, releasing his iron-willed control enough to allow a tear from each eye to run down his bearded cheeks. The partial release of intense emotion allowed him to keep from quivering like a building in an earthquake and bursting into tears like a toddler.

Ten minutes after beginning his vigil, he Headmaster sighed deeply, turned from the window and gently lowered his body into the armchair behind his massive desk. There was no change. Despite his almost incurable optimism, he seriously doubted that there would ever be a change. Or, if there ever was change, it would be for the worse.

Three days after Voldemort's defeat, Grawp had been found by his brother Hagrid, deep in the Forbidden Forest. The giant had been killed in a most mind bogglingly obscene manner; limbs had been broken and lay useless, his massive heart had been carved from his chest. It had been the final blow to the gentle caretaker. Hagrid, already deep in mourning for friends killed or missing after the final battle, had gone into seclusion after his discovery. He refused to leave his hut for any reason, even to eat. Not even Madam Maxine had been able to coax him from his self-pitying solitude.

While news of Grawp's death had been gut wrenching, the sporadic news that came from the centaurs revealed a far more horrifying picture.

Something of terrifying power had made the Forbidden Forest its home.

Bane, the nominal leader of the centaurs had been found nearly torn to shreds. While frightening in itself, the fact that the powerful equine warrior still grasped all the spears he had taken hunting indicated that he had not had the chance to defend himself.

The centaurs had begun hunting in groups of three from that point on.

Acromantulas, one of the most terrifying creatures on the planet, had also been found killed. No, not *killed*. *Eviscerated*. Hundreds of the giant arachnids had been literally torn apart, sending the rest of the colony into hiding. The sticky fluids that made up Aragog's own internals had been liberally spread around his former lair, in an almost childlike way. Dumbledore could only make one comparison.

Finger painting. With titanic fingers.

Over the last three months, something had cut down the more powerful occupants of the Forbidden Forest as though they were toys. Giants. Centaurs. Acromantulas. Even the only known pair of griffins left in the UK had been casually slain, much to Dumbledore's dismay. Their beautiful, feline bodies, each half again the size of a dragon, had been discovered days after their deaths, rotting, spread over a large clearing.

In a rare, sane response to a crisis, the Ministry had sent out a request for help. Charlie Weasley had led a squadron of Dragon-riders over the forest in an effort to flush out the creature that had taken up residence. Two of the six dragons had fallen. Suddenly. Terrifyingly. Watching the dragons, already twice the size of a house, jerked down to ground height as though an invisible hand wrapped around their necks and ripped down in an instant was spine chilling.

Finding their carcasses an hour later was even more so.

Even someone as iron-stomached as Severus had paled at the sight. Lungs the size of cars had been carved out and put on display. The enormous hearts, used to pumping blood around a creature the size of a whale, were hung up between a pair of trees, attracting flies and other gleeful parasites.

The Dragon-riders of the pair of stricken dragons were not found, though scraps of their distinctive clothing was discovered here and there, sometimes many miles from the final resting place of their owner's mounts. Charlie had dutifully collected all he could to return to the riders' families.

Dumbledore leaned forward, put his elbows on his desk, and cupped his face in his hands. The backlog of paperwork on his desk, which had been ignored for days, gently cushioned his elbows.

"Albus?"

Dumbledore's head jerked up from his hands, and he blearily focused on the newcomer. "Ah, Nymphadora. What can I do for you?"

Tonks' eyes flickered with irritation at her name, but it was quickly overtaken with worry. "Are you all right?"

Dumbledore cleared his throat and smoothed down the front of his silvery beard. "I am quite fine, my dear. Just a little weary, that's all." The Headmaster silently gestured towards one of the armchairs facing him. "Lemon drop?" he asked, indicating a small glass bowl filled with the muggle sweets.

Tonks slowly lowered herself into the proffered chair, her eyes never leaving the Headmaster's. "No thank you. Albus, during the war you went without sleep for five nights without looking like this."

Dumbledore sighed, leaning back in his chair. "There is a difference between tiredness and weariness, Nymphadora."

"I've asked you not to call me that," said the metamorphmagus, a hint of steel in her voice.

Dumbledore wearily nodded his assent. "Very well, *Tonks*," he said, grimacing as he said her surname, obviously uncomfortable with the apparent inelegance. "I have had sufficient sleep over the past few days. Do not worry yourself on that score."

It was Tonks' turn to lean back in her chair, though she crossed her arms in an openly defiant gesture. "Then what is it?"

Dumbledore pushed his half-moon spectacles up onto his brow, and rubbed his eyes with the thumb and forefinger of one hand. "It has been suggested that Hogwarts be closed down."

"What?" Tonks blurted, jerking upright. "Who said that?"

"Our dear Minister, for one. Five of the twelve governors, two dozen or so parents..."

Tonks looked ready to leap to her feet. "I haven't heard anything about this!"

Dumbledore waved her comment away. "There is no reason you should have. Each of them have written to me personally with the suggestion. Oddly enough, this is not a concerted effort in any way. While their stated reasons vary to some degree, it all boils down to the same thing. The Forbidden Forest is too dangerous to have children nearby."

"They've *all* contacted you about this?"

Dumbledore nodded slowly. "Yes, and it is only a matter of time before one of them talks to another, and the movement will build."

"But why? The Forbidden Forest has always been dangerous! Even deadly! Why now?"

Dumbledore graced her with a small frown. "Surely you are aware of the news emanating from the forest? A new creature has taken up residence, and has decimated the local inhabitants."

"So? I only found out this year that there were Acromantulas living in there while I was a student. An entire damn colony of them! Don't tell me the Forbidden Forest was ever *safe*!"

Dumbledore slowly shook his head, waiting for Tonks to calm down. "It is not, and has never been, safe. Even Hagrid, someone naturally resistant to magic and strong enough to give even a dragon small pause for thought, armed himself well before entering. But it has always been a refuge for all manner of magical creatures who have nowhere else to go. Now, the centaurs are considering leaving. The remains of the Acromantula colony have banded together in a tiny cave on the far side, and seem to prefer to starve than leave the relative safety to hunt." Dumbledore lowered his gaze. "It is just not safe for them anymore."

A pair of centaurs carefully checked the ground, looking for any tracks that spoke of either dinner, or an attacker. A faint cloud of mist silently coalesced behind the pair, taking the form of a tall, pale-skinned, elegantly dressed human male. Delicate hands, looking far more suited to playing the piano than anything, reached out and casually picked up one of the creatures, even though it out-massed the new arrival by a factor of five.

The captured centaur could only bellow with rage at its man-handling, before long teeth sank into the side of its neck, finding the jugular vein with obstinate ease. As the vampire drank from the stricken horse-man, it gave a casual backhanded swipe, knocking the other centaur sprawling, stunned and dazed by the force of the blow.

As hungry as the vampire was, he was not ready to let any blood go to waste. In the past he had often deliberately spread blood around the site of his meals; the terror it had inspired gave the blood of his subsequent victims a wonderfully heady bouquet. Occasionally, sheer terror had pumped enough adrenaline into a bloodstream that the sweet red liquid became almost alcoholic. But this time, a thousand years of hunger drove him to waste not a drop.

The pitiful centaur kicked out weakly, but connected solidly with Nosferatu's left knee. The limb buckled under the blow, causing the vampire to stumble slightly. But within a handful of seconds, the damage had been repaired, and the vampire kept drinking.

In just over a minute, the enormous centaur had been drained of life, and the previously slim vampire had an almost pregnant look. He released the bloodless corpse with no thought whatsoever, and licked his lips as he advanced on the second.

Perhaps he should spread the blood of this one around, the vampire wondered, before sinking his fangs into the half-conscious creature's neck.

As the sweet, powerful blood crossed his lips, he discarded the idea. He was far too thirsty to bother scaring anyone.

Time enough for that later.

Besides, his very presence should do the trick.

"Not safe?" Tonks blurted. "When did all this happen?"

Dumbledore sighed. "The battle between Harry and Voldemort shook the foundations of magic itself. Not many people know, but the wards around

Hogwarts had to be rebuilt after they met." The Headmaster looked up at Tonks. "You are well aware that, over the past months, ancient terrors which had been bound by millennia-old spells were released, all over the world. Fortunately for us, the sheer number of muggle-born wizards who have entered the wizarding world over the past few centuries have added to both our power and knowledge. Terrors of ancient times have been simply unable to cope with recent advances."

Tonks nodded throughout Dumbledore's speech. "I know. But what has that got to do with-, oh my. You mean... Something awoke in the Forbidden Forest?"

Dumbledore blinked, frowned slightly, then shrugged inelegantly. "Well, yes and no. Yes, a creature of pure malice was released when the wards fell. Nosferatu, imprisoned by Godric Gryffindor and Salazar Slytherin themselves, was released from his prison when the magic fell."

Tonks gasped, but frowned. "Then what do you mean, no?"

The vampire stood still in the twilight, admiring the skin on his forearms. From appearing to belong to an albino when he first emerged from his prison, a healthy tint had flooded the limbs. While still looking as pale as a human could be, his full power had returned.

While human blood was his favoured meal, the blood of magical creatures was powerful in its own right. The blood of a wizard, however... Now that was a meal to fight for.

Quicker than any living eye could follow, the vampire lashed out with a fist, shattering the trunk of a nine hundred year old oak. The tree shuddered, then fell with a creaking groan, unable to continue to support itself. He nodded with satisfaction, his speed and strength had returned.

Nosferatu looked down at his clothes, noting that his body had fully absorbed his recent meal. He once again looked the ultimate aristocrat, a prince amongst men.

A faint voice interrupted his introspection. With ears as powerful and sensitive as any on a bat, the vampire quickly discerned its source.

"We can, we can, the world can be ours," said the voice, hissing the final consonant.

"Don't want it," came the strained reply, as though it was being forced through an uncooperative mouth.

"Now, now, don't deny it."

"Let me go!" the voice demanded, even more strained.

The approaching creature laughed, displaying such evil that the eavesdropping vampire felt a strange sense of kinship. "Never."

A pause. The vampire tilted his head to one side. The voices, though obviously in conversation, were identical. Despite the manner and tone differences, it was the same voice box producing the words.

"Shall I sing instead?"

"Don't you dare!"

"Rock-a-bye baby, on the tree top."

"Curse you!"

Flashes of different coloured light reached the vampire's eyes, still several kilometres distant.

"Nuner nuner nuner nuner Batman!"

"Filthy maggot!"

Hark, the herald angels sing, glory to- *urk*" The voice was cut off, and a series of spell incantations replaced the argument.

The vampire smiled evilly. The flashes reached him before the incantations, indicating the distance from his target. Obviously a wizard.

A vampire needs to always to be cautious around a wizard, but an insane one would be an easy target.

Nosferatu faded into mist and floated towards the flashes of light.

"I mean, Nosferatu is not the creature who is rampaging through the Forbidden Forest."

Tonks blinked in shock. "Then what?"

The vampire reformed in a clearing, facing the figure who argued with itself.

The grotesque form, twisted and bent, seemed to jerk and jump at random. The featureless blob of a face puffed and deflated, the spine straightened sharply, then bent like a hunchback. It looked as though a battle raged within the creature, for control not only of its actions, but also of

its form.

The disfigured being shrieked with laughter. "I spy with my little eye," it cackled, before one eye bulged hideously.

"Paddy cake, paddy cake, we all fall down, ring-a-ring-a-rosie," it sang.

Nosferatu had never felt sympathy, had never felt empathy, but the figure in front of him triggered something deep within. Something as alien as fear. Curious, the vampire paused and examined the sensation. Perhaps in this instance, devouring the life force of this wizard would be a... kindness?

Was he feeling... pity?

"Ooooo, lookie here!" the figure shouted, pointing towards the silent vampire, his voice high and squeaking. "A guest, we have, my pretty!"

The figure hunched down. "No! You can't have it, it's mine!"

Nosferatu narrowed his wolfish eyes at the disfigured meal in front of him. Outer beauty, cleanliness and sanity meant little to the vampire, who could smell the blood pumping through a being's veins from several metres away. This pitiful being's heart pumped blood so full of magic he was close to being overwhelmed with desire. The hunchback shifted, and the being became almost plant-like, developing a skin seemingly composed of bark.

"Allllllwwwwwwayyyssss wannnteeeed tooooo beeeee thhhhhiiick sssssskiiiiinnned," it pronounced slowly.

A pair of lips formed in the rough bark. "And, I'm a lumberjack, and I'm OK, I sleep all night and I work all day!"

The tree-like figure keeled over with a crash, before twisting again and forming an almost humanoid shape. "Mummy? Is that you?"

Nosferatu snarled, and leapt. In the time it took for an eye to close during a blink, the vampire had his victim clenched and was about to sink his teeth into the soft, fleshy neck.

A hand blurred out, gripping the vampire's wrist. A slow grin spread over the insane creature's face. With a burst of magic, it squeezed, and Nosferatu paled further than usual as the bones in his wrist were crushed into powder.

"Play nice, my pretty," it whispered.

Nosferatu screamed as his arms were casually torn from their sockets.

Dumbledore leaned back and sighed. "Do you remember what happened at the end of the battle?"

Tonks blinked. "Yes, of course. I'm still having nightmares about it!" she almost snarled.

Dumbledore held up a hand in an attempt to calm her down. "The aftermath, is what I'm referring to."

Tonks tilted her head to one side and narrowed her eyes. "There was an explosion as both Harry and Voldemort cast spells simultaneously. Harry disappeared, and Voldemort's body was reduced to a lifeless husk. Harry beat him, but died himself."

Dumbledore shook his head sadly. "Not exactly."

He tried turning into a bat, only to be stunned as a clap of thunder next to his head stole his navigational abilities. He tried turning into mist, only to be sucked into a conjured glass globe filled with boiling holy water. The blessed steam had burned the vampire to his soul.

Attacking the maniac creature was out of the question. When he tried to sink his fangs into it, the skin became solid silver. When he tried punching, the figure would blur out of existence and appear behind him.

Nosferatu had never faced such a being. The magic that flowed within seemed to act of its own volition, giving the insane wizard strength enough to shatter bones, speed enough to outrun lightning, and protection that would have withstood a meteor strike.

Nosferatu shrieked as a hand tipped with knives drove into his thin chest and wrapped around his black, unbeating heart. "Master! I yield!" he shrieked, desperate to survive, even if it meant submitting to this madman of incredible power.

"Sweet words, like honey on my tongue," the figure rasped.

"Nah, golden syrup is better," it continued.

The vampire stared in horror at the argument going on in front of him. His unlife faded and disappeared as the black organ was casually ripped from his chest.

"Happy days are here again!"

"Oh, sod off you git."

"We just killed a vampire, we did."

The figure looked down at the long-dead heart in its hand. It, along with the remains of the powerful vampire, was turning to dust.

"Are we hungry?"

"Not if you're cooking."

The amorphous being jumped and twirled around like a child at play, skipping down an overgrown path through the trees, arguing with himself.

Tonks leapt to her feet, knocking over a couple of the Headmaster's desk ornaments. "That's what you reported to the Ministry!"

Dumbledore nodded. "Yes, it was indeed. It was my belief at the time. But after investigating the advent of a new, dangerous creature in the forest, I've come to a rather disturbing conclusion."

"And that is?" Tonks asked dangerously.

Dumbledore took a deep breath, and pushed a sheet of parchment over to her. She glanced down to see a map of Hogwarts and the surrounding grounds, along with a name and dot for each person within the castle.

"The Marauder's Map," she said shortly. "What of it?"

"Look at the forest."

Tonks' eyes flickered briefly on Dumbledore, before lowering back down to the parchment. It took her a moment to locate, but a single dot, moving randomly around was fading to almost nothing before returning to full definition before fading again. She gasped at the name underneath.

Harry Potter.