

Amicus Draconis - 1st Cycle: Cycle of the Badger

Translation of Amicus Draconis

Von Yamato_

Kapitel 4: 04. Offers and Offerings

Author's Notes: The fourth episode is in many ways a turning point for the story. It shows a little more what this epic is about and where it's going. In the last chapters our main focus was New Hogwarts; we learned about the new life that the Trio and their friends are leading. Now we'll turn our attention back to the Death Eaters and find out what life is like on the other side. Also, we'll meet some new characters and plunge headfirst into some more mysteries for future chapters. I'm always amazed how accurate some of my reviewers' guesses are, but I'm just as glad that so many of you fall for my red herrings

I want to thank my beta readers Notsosaintly, Ellie, Animagus, Mind_over_Matter, and everyone who reviewed so far. And the extra cookie goes to kannnichtfranzösisch, who had some excellent suggestions for the translation of the Leaky Cauldron scene. I also want to appreciate some web pages that I use in the translation of this fic. Leo has been a great help and so has Thesaurus. And nothing could've been done without the good old Oxford English Dictionary, on- or offline.

Oh, and everyone, please don't forget that AD is an old fic. So if you're bursting to tell me that a certain girl has a Chinese background instead of a Japanese one and that Draco's birthday is in June instead of November, please remember that back in 2002 none of this information was available yet.

* * *

"In the last episode, brave Sir Harry and his merry men..."

"And women..."

"Shut up, Loretta. During our last episode, brave Sir Harry and his merry men visited Merchieftaness Murcus and her Merpeople, had some tea with Hagrid and fought some giant spiders. Also, while the residents of New Hogwarts while away their time with

Quidditch games and dubious love schemes, Harry is..."

"...desperately brooding about his dark past and trying to do penance for his sins?"

"More like: Desperately waiting for a letter from said past and trying to sin some more. The ring, Harry!"

"Oh, yes, Harry. The Ring of Power. One ring to rule them all..."

"Quick, quick! Throw it into Mount Doom! Hurry Harry, before the Dark Side corrupts you!"

*"Ring! Ring!" *Hoarse voice* "Sseven daysss, Harry!"*

"Baka! Hari-chan no uchi ni terebi ga arimasen."

"What?"

"Hari-chan no uchi ni terebi ga arimasen!"

"What?"

*"Shoot the glass, I mean, Harry doesn't own a TV, you stupid" *Glares**

"Oh. I guess that makes him safe from evil little Japanese girls then."

*"Right... I know someone who isn't." *Smirks**

*But do thy worst to steal thyself away,
For term of life thou art assured mine;
And life no longer than thy love will stay,
For it depends upon that love of thine.*

*Then need I not to fear the worst of wrongs,
When in the least of them my life hath end.
I see a better state to me belongs
Than that which on thy humour doth depend:*

*Thou canst not vex me with inconstant mind,
Since that my life on thy revolt doth lie.
O what a happy title do I find,
Happy to have thy love, happy to die!*

But what's so blessed-fair that fears no blot?

Thou mayst be false, and yet I know it not.

*

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Amicus Draconis

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First Cycle: Cycle of the Badger

Episode 4: Offers and Offerings – Part A

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It was the soft crackle in the fireplace that awoke him. When he had gone to sleep a few hours earlier, all Tod had seen in the grate was the faint glow emanating from dying embers. Now, however, a vivid blaze flared up from the ashes; dazzling, burning, spluttering flames blinding his eyes and ringing painfully in his ears. Their colours flashed from orange to bright red to a bluish purple, leaving no doubt that this was no natural fire, but a magical phenomena.

He barely had time to rub sleep out of his eyes when something took shape within the flames. Bright sparks became watery blue eyes, flickering patterns formed facial features, and thick smoke curled into a wreath of matted grey hair framing a bald patch on the now fully shaped head floating inside the fire.

“Your humble servant, sir.” Tod sat up in his bed to give his visitor a courteous bow. It was nothing out of the ordinary to receive important messages this late at night, but until now, Lord Pettigrew had never spoken to him personally. Usually, Tod received all his orders from his father, who was also his direct superior.

There was a situation; he was sure of it. Action had to be taken immediately.

Pettigrew avoided looking him in the eye. Not that this surprised him; there had been rumours about the creepy and crawly demeanour of the fourth Grand Dragon. Responsible for intelligence, Pettigrew conducted a group of spies who passed him information the Dark Lord might find useful. Other than that, Tod had no idea how this man had come to achieve such a high position within the Master’s ranks. He was certainly the only member of the Dark Council who did not come from a wealthy and influential family.

“Diagon Alley,” a voice pronounced from the sizzling flames. “Our master wants you to conduct a search of Diagon Alley. You are to leave at once. Your father will give you...”

Pettigrew broke off and his watery eyes darted across the room when they spotted a second figure moving on the bed. "Nani da, Toto-chan?" sing-songed a sleepy female voice and a thick cloud of bluish black hair spilled out from under the silken covers.

"It's all right, my little butterfly." Tenderly, Tod's hands caressed the dark flood, stroking it back until a delicate face with almond-shaped eyes appeared underneath it. "Go back to sleep. I'll be back before you wake up tomorrow. Promise."

"Hai, Toto-chan."

She gave a deep content purr, stretching and rolling playfully like a kitten. In a hurried movement, Tod spread the covers back over her; he hadn't failed to notice a hungry look enter the watery eyes drawing relentlessly towards the tender white body of the girl. She, however, didn't seem to have noticed; with another soft sigh she snuggled back into the covers and was asleep a moment later.

"Your father will give... will give you further information," Pettigrew stuttered, withdrawing his tongue back into his mouth.

The fire blazed up one last time before it disappeared along with the Grand Dragon's head, leaving nothing behind but ash and dark embers.

* * *

Like souls forlorn, the first keys of a gloomy melody swirled through the hazy air inside the Leaky Cauldron, reverberating off the walls and drifting upwards, reaching towards an imaginary paradise. The space was saturated with the sound of music, with the smell of alcohol and with the dreams of a young generation bound to change the world. Preferably tonight.

They were in charge and they knew it: sinister and dangerous, frightening and formidable, fierce and unstoppable. They would prevail. They were always on call, impatient to bring the Dark Lord's cruelty and terror to the furthest reaches of his kingdom.

Ghost Riders in the sky! Foaming beer bottles clanged together, joining in another toast to victory.

However, since one had called for their services tonight, some five dozen Ghost Riders had to make do with embellishing the stories of past deeds, and washing away their boredom with some more alcohol. At least conversation was a challenge – they had to yell to be heard over the music.

"Where the hell is Flint, anyway?" Gregory Goyle demanded as he returned from the bar, where Draco Malfoy had sent him to procure more drinks. "You'd think as he's our bloody captain, he'd bother to show up once in a while." He banged the four beer bottles down on the table with one oversized fist.

"What?" bellowed Vincent Crabbe over Millicent Bulstrode's head. Millicent scowled at him, grabbing him by the ears and shoving his face away so that he'd stop spitting on her.

"I said, *Flint!*" Greg bellowed back. He brought his hand up as if to shield his eyes from the sun, and mimed looking left and right melodramatically, with obvious irritation.

"Oh, OK." Vince had apparently understood Greg's attempt at sign language and returned it in kind. He smacked a fist repeatedly into his other palm, intending to convey that Flint was probably with his girlfriend, engaged in far more entertaining activities than hanging out with his buddies. The others at the table leered and grinned; some knowing smirks were exchanged and the bottles rose again.

Terrence Higgs, who sat at another table across the room, joined in with his own lecherous smirk. He seemed to have grasped the concept of the discussion, probably largely due to Vince and Greg's impressive acting performances. Terrence swaggered over to them brazenly, swung one of the empty chairs around, and slung a leg over it.

The others renewed their smirks, for his attempt at a pretentious swagger needed some work. As did his maneuver with the chair.

Terrence narrowed his eyes and looked around, as if to make sure no one would overhear the breathtaking news he was about to share with them. "I've heard some things," he boasted. "Nothing concrete, of course, but people are talking about Flint's taste in women."

Millicent, Vince and Greg stared at him open-mouthed. To Terence this might have come across as a gesture of awe at his stunning revelation, but it was, in fact, confusion as they'd only managed to pick up about half of his words and had no idea what he'd been trying to imply. Shrugging their shoulders, they turned to Draco, looking for clues as to how they should react.

Their group leader had been sprawled nonchalantly in his chair, sipping his beer and following the conversation with amusement and a significant amount of boredom. Abruptly, he leaned forward, glaring at Terrence through icy gray eyes. "You should show some respect when you speak about our captain, Higgs."

He hadn't spoken very loudly, but the other boy didn't seem to have any difficulty understanding.

"All right, all right." There was a slight uneasiness in Terence's voice as he shrugged his shoulders, trying to downplay the situation. It was pretty obvious that this wasn't so much about defending the captain, but about marking borders of territory. Everyone knew how ugly Draco Malfoy could get if someone tried to butt in on his little group. Terence's eyes darted about the table, and the sceptical, almost hostile faces told him that he had outworn his welcome. It was time to go back to his own friends and have a nice little chat about elitist bastards and their simpleminded followers.

None of The Malfoy Court paid him any attention though; they were too busy having a laugh at Vince's clumsy attempts to heave a beer bottle open with his wand.

"Give it here, you moron!" Millicent tried to snatch the bottle from his hands, but, at the very same moment, the cap slid off, allowing the frothy beer to foam freely over her hands. This was an even better cause for amusement, and everybody grinned and leered after her as she stomped off to the bathroom scowling, burly arms stretched out, determined to keep her sticky hands away from her clothing.

Other eyes followed her as well. These, however, were not filled with amusement but with suspicion and hostility; to many of the guys, the presence of a girl in their midst posed some sort of threat to their masculinity. Now that she hung out with Malfoy, they had given up on their attempts to bully her, but it still didn't feel right having her here. This job was made for tough men and not for women and wimps.

Ghost Riders in the sky! Devil's hounds! True warriors of darkness!

Just to make sure, another round of beer bottles joined in another toast.

The final chord of the previous song has not yet faded away when a new tune kicks in, much harder and faster than the last one: a deep, droning bass, causing bottles and glasses to hum and jingle. As heavy guitar riffs join with the gruff rhythm, sudden realisation flares in five dozen pairs of eyes; all voices give way to a deafening elation, effortlessly drowning out the music. From trembling throats, the boys are shouting and screaming their enthusiasm; this is their song, the symbol for all they aspire to, ambition of their hopes, field of their dreams. Their song, their hymn, their credo.

*Dark night nothing to see
Invisible hand in front of me
Scared to death, there's someone near
Scared to death, but you can't stay here*

The cheers fade away as more and more voices join the chorus, singing and shouting out the lyrics. Like the fiery outburst of a volcano, sound and rhythm heat up the blood, changing it to a stream of lava flowing through blistering veins. Some uneasy feet start stamping the floor, some anxious heads start to bang back and forth with hair flying in all directions. A fiery fascination flares up, blazing and burning, sweeping the room like a raging bushfire.

*You know me, evil eye
You know me, prepare to die
You know me, the Snakebite Kiss
Devil's Grip, the Iron Fist*

They are in charge and they know it: sinister and dangerous, frightening and formidable, fierce and unstoppable. They come like phantoms of the night, ghostly demons on hellish horses. Invisible and untouchable, they know no danger, no fear and no qualms, and none can hinder them or stand in their path. They are nightmares turned to flesh, masters of life and death, and the tool of their own master: his number one elite force. They are always on call, impatient to bring the Dark Lord's cruelty and terror to the furthest reaches of his kingdom.

*Flying horse don't make a sound
Flying hooves don't touch the ground
Walk in circle, lose your track
Can't go on, but you can't go back*

Draco is the first who can't remain in his seat any longer; he jumps up, pushing his chair aside. Vince and Greg follow suit only moments later and so does the rest of the group. It takes no more than a simple incantation to sweep chairs and tables into the corner of the room and free a space in its middle. As soon as the others realize what Draco is doing, they all leap towards the newly created dance floor, never heeding small obstacles such as falling beer bottles and flying furniture. Draco secures his wand in the inside pocket of his cloak, hurls the cloak into a corner and dashes headfirst into the savage horde.

*You know me, evil eye
You know me, prepare to die
You know me, you can't resist
Devil's Grip, the Iron Fist*

Some of them are thrown to the floor as their bodies collide, but hands pull them up before anyone can become the victim of trampling boots. While Vince stomps elephant-like through the masses, sending people to the ground left and right and shouting out lyrics to no one in particular, Greg and Millicent have grabbed each others' shoulders, swinging one another around. Shirts and cloaks go flying into corners, empty beer bottles are kicked out of the way, and the wild cluster of arms and legs and bodies and banging heads steamrollers from one direction into the other. Gasping breaths and boiling blood flares passion into blazing ecstasy as the music streams into the deepest pits of their quivering souls, filling them with beat and rhythm and drone and mighty guitar riffs until, filled to burst, it all floods over, pouring out into fiery dance. A cycle to last until the end of all times ... or at least until the end of this song.

*Moon eclipse and you know, why
Ghost rider in the sky
Beast of evil, devil's hound*

Tooth and claw, they pull you down

With the grace of a feline, Draco leaps onto the counter, muscles tensing and flexing in his sleek, supple body while he bangs his head back and forth, the lights catching in his silvery hair as it whips the humid air. Like a silken curtain it spills over his face, sticking to his sweaty skin but never concealing the frozen fire of his eyes; icy flames blazing like the first sunbeam on a greying dawn. Tiny beads of sweat glint on his throat, gleaming on his moon-pale skin as they roll down his bare chest past the ripples of his stomach and finally disappear below the black leather breeches clinging to his slender hips like a second skin.

You know me, evil eye

You know me, prepare to die

You know me, the Snakebite Kiss

Devil's Grip, the Iron Fist

He raises his arm, forming his hand into a fist save for two fingers; his forefinger and pinkie piercing the air like two pointed fangs – the sign of the serpent. The answer is a billowing sea of arms over the crowd; the snake is the symbol that unites them all, standing for the new glorious times awaiting them and all wizards of pure blood.

Dark images shine on their forearms, black skulls sprouting serpents; they all wear their tattoos in honour of the Dark Mark that none of them has yet received. But they all hope to be among the chosen ones, somehow, somewhere ... someday in their glorious future....

As the guitars burst into their final crescendo, as the droning sound of the basses finally started to fade, Draco let himself fall forward into the mass of arms catching him and passing him until there was room enough for him to stand. When he felt solid ground under his feet again, he leaned heavily on Greg until he was able to stand straight again. The other boys were in no better condition; they held onto each other as they attempted to catch their breaths, gasping heavily with exhaustion. Vince didn't care about anything anymore; he lay spread-eagle on the ground, ignoring Millicent's desperate attempts to pull him up.

"Hey, Draco." There was a clear warning in Greg's voice, and when he gave a small nod towards the door, they could all feel the cool breeze suddenly penetrating the room. Draco turned around, sweeping his sweaty hair out of his eyes as he did so – and found himself face to face with a young man he was quite familiar with.

Some twenty scarlet robes stood in the entrance of the Leaky Cauldron, a few of them still out on the street. They seemed to have been watching the Ghost Riders for a while; smirking at them as if amused by their childish behaviour. Which they probably were.

"The Blood Legion," Terence gasped. "What are *they* doing here?" It was one of those unwritten laws that the Leaky Cauldron belonged to the Ghost Riders at night; the Blood Legion had their own locations for fun and recreation. They weren't particularly welcome here, and they knew it.

The young man standing before Draco was Tod Macnair, eldest son of Grand Dragon Walden Macnair, the head of the Blood Legion. Since Lord Macnair and Lord Malfoy were old friends, Draco had met him before on several occasions. Tod was four years his senior, and like most members of the Blood Legion, he had gone to school at Durmstrang.

Like his father, Tod was tall and dark-haired, but lacking the moustache. He was of heavy build, which could have been called stocky had he been any shorter. Due to his prominent chin and his distinctive facial features, women usually considered him handsome, especially when he smiled. But now he couldn't have been any further from smiling; his face wore a deep frown and his dark eyes mirrored the contemptuous scowl that was shown in Draco's pale ones.

Draco peeked past him, eyes eagerly searching for his wand, but it lay somewhere in a corner with his shirt and cloak. Not that it would've done much good anyways; in a fight the Ghost Riders wouldn't stand much of a chance. They might be stronger in numbers, but the others had a far better education concerning the Dark Arts. Draco himself might have mastered the Unforgivable curses, maybe even Crabbe and Goyle, whose fathers were Great Titans on the council, but other than that, things didn't look too good for the Ghost Riders.

And who could say what other skills the Red Robes had accomplished? According to rumour, you had to pass difficult tests to be accepted in their midst, whereas the Ghost Riders took pretty much anyone, no questions asked.

But the times when Draco's face had betrayed any of his thoughts were long gone, and so he stood silently and unmoved, eyes locked with his opponent's. The organisation Tod belonged to was without doubt the more powerful one, but in terms of rank both young men were the same – first-born sons of Grand Dragons of the Dark Council – and as long as Tod didn't give a cogent reason for this intrusion, Draco would not step aside.

And as long as he didn't, neither would anyone else.

Like two silent walls, Red and Black stood opposing each other; every single person in the room felt the tension rising between them. Was it only because of the open door that the air had suddenly turned frigid?

"I beg your pardon, my lads!" A cheerful voice broke the silence, tainted with a hint of fake surprise. "What's with all the long faces? We're all on the same side here."

The Red Robes stepped aside, making way for their leader. Walden Macnair was in no hurry; he took his time striding through the newly-created passageway with all the dignity appropriate to his position. It was only when he stood before the Ghost Riders

that he brushed off his hood, addressed Draco with a casual greeting and then turned his attention to the crowd. "We never had the slightest intention to gatecrash your little ... hmm ... party. We are only passing through to Diagon Alley, where we have some business to attend."

"Why weren't we informed of this, sir?" Draco asked, trying to keep suspicion out of his voice.

A jovial smile spread over Macnair's face. "Probably because our master believes the Blood Legion capable of conducting a search without any outside help. Still, should we require assistance, we know where to find you. So better stay ready, just in case."

Draco stepped aside and so did the rest of Ghost Riders. Lead by Tod, the Red Robes marched out through the back entrance, and a moment later they could all hear the scraping of the stones opening the way to Diagon Alley.

But Macnair didn't accompany his people; he turned back to Draco instead. "Is there a place we can talk? I have an offer to make which you might be interested in hearing."

"I'll be back in a moment, sir." Draco gathered all his missing clothes and disappeared off to the bathroom. It took quite a while until he returned fully clothed and with his hair in place; Macnair was starting to get impatient. With a nod of his head he pointed towards the street outside, and Draco followed him. "Sir? Are you sure this place is safe to talk? We might be overheard."

"Well, let's not worry about every little sewer rat crawling about." Macnair laughed at his own joke, which was doubtlessly directed at another council member, but Draco didn't join in or ask any questions about it. Instead, he looked expectantly at the Grand Dragon.

"Well, Draco, my lad..." Macnair switched back to his paternal manner, "... your father keeps me well informed about your career, but it's been a while since I've taken a good look at you. You're all grown-up now; you must be, what ... eighteen?"

"Nineteen in November."

"Time sure does fly these days," Macnair gave a melodramatic sigh. "Right, you finished school this summer. Did you join the Ghost Riders right afterwards?"

Draco nodded. Even if he knew where this conversation was leading to, his face didn't betray anything.

"And you enjoy your job, don't you? According to your father, your skills concerning the Dark Arts are quite extraordinary. And, rumour has it, you have no qualms about putting them to practical use."

Macnair grinned, but Draco didn't look remotely abashed. He hadn't really expected his little escapades to stay secret; too often had he broken the rules and cast the killing curse, usage of which was limited to members of the Council and certain

privileged Special Forces; the Ghost Riders not being one of them. But since he had never used the spell on a fellow witch or wizard, no one had ever bothered to trouble him about it.

"I beg your pardon, sir." Draco smirked back at Macnair. "So you're blaming me for what? Ridding the world of some stinking Muggles?"

"According to my source of information, it was more than just a few." Macnair broke into good-natured laughter, giving Draco an appreciative slap on the shoulder. "Don't worry, laddie, you young people just need to have some fun, eh?"

"Well," his laughter faded and his voice became serious in a matter of seconds, "that's not what we came here to talk about. Draco, did you ever wonder if your extraordinary skills might be put to better use elsewhere?"

"Sir?"

"I mean, just look at those Ghost Riders. Errand boys, nothing more. A pathetic bunch of wannabes trying to have some fun. They may be all right for no names like that Flint guy, but for you? Your father and grandfather sit by the Dark Lord's side; you have a reputation to live up to. Think of your future, your career."

He broke off, waiting for some sort of reaction from Draco that did not come. The boy simply looked at him with cold, expressionless eyes, and if Macnair hadn't known better, he could've sworn he saw a sneer wrinkling his nose.

However, one did not sneer at a Grand Dragon of the Dark Council, so he was sure he had imagined it. "Forget about the Ghost Riders, Draco. Come join us."

"Well, sir, that offer is really ... tempting," Draco said slowly. "However, it's too big a decision to make rashly; I'll need time to consider. I should talk to my father about it first."

"Of course," Macnair agreed. "As for your father, I have to admit that I already mentioned the idea to him and he seems quite in favour of it. Your career certainly means a lot to him. I shouldn't be surprised; what father wouldn't want the best for his only son?"

His last words sounded particularly smug. After all, the Macnairs had three more sons besides Tod; while the Malfoys' only other child was a daughter. "Don't take too much time for your considerations," Macnair added. "After all, how difficult can it be to find out where your true career chances lie?"

"If you really are in need of a quick answer, sir, I shouldn't make you wait." Draco shrugged his shoulders, making a half-hearted attempt at a saddened face. "I'm very sorry, but I have to decline your generous offer. I sincerely hope my decision doesn't cause you any trouble."

"Well if that's the only answer you can give..." The jovial, almost patronizing look on

Macnair's face gave way to an angry frown. "I bid you goodnight, my lad, and I hope for your sake that you won't regret your decision."

"The same to you, sir," Draco answered, "and good luck for your search."

* * *

"...and when the Snitch hid behind those strange weeds, I reckoned we'd never see it again ... anyways Natalie would've got it for sure, if that stupid Grindylow hadn't ... hey, Mi!"

"My name is Hermione and I'm not a possessive pronoun." Without sparing him so much as a glance, Hermione swept past Ron and the group of devoted listeners surrounding him. She appreciated his good work as Quidditch match referee and Quidditch match organiser and such, oh yes, she really did, and he had done a great job and everything, but now it was simply enough! He had spent the better part of the after-match-celebration hopping from one group to the next, entertaining each with boastful stories and colourful anecdotes. And those fools even fell for them, especially the girls. They were staring at him all open-mouthed and glassy-eyed as if they didn't have anything better to do than listen to that little show-off.

"Hermione, wait, where are you going?" he called after her. "It's too early for bed yet. I mean it's only..." a rustle of fabric behind her indicated the desperate search for a clock or watch, "... wicked, one thirty. Can it really be that late?"

"Yes, it can, Ron." She didn't turn around. "And I'm very tired, so please excuse me."

"Wait for me, mates, I'll be back in a moment!" Ron abandoned his audience to chase after Hermione, not hearing Lavender's stifled yawn and Seamus' sleepy: "How 'bout we call it a day?" He looked frantically in the direction of the Gryffindor dormitories, but, to his surprise, Hermione made no attempt to enter any of the little wooden and paper houses. Instead she turned to the pond.

Passing white and purple water lilies, she traversed the wooden plates leading into the middle of the glistening waters. Finally, she sat down, drawing her knees to her chest and staring silently into the darkness around her.

"Why such a temper all of a sudden?" he called, hurrying up to her. "They all admired your decorations for the match, didn't they? The Tritons even wanted to keep most of them. Or are you disappointed that we didn't win?"

"Rubbish." Even in the darkness he could see the familiar frown on her face. "The Ravensclaws really deserve their victory, and I'm perfectly happy for them."

"That's it, isn't it?" Not heeding her answer, Ron dropped down next to her on the wooden plate and claimed: "You're upset because we lost the match. Even if it wasn't the bad S-word who defeated us."

"Why can't you just stop being such a bother?" She jumped up, glaring at him, and then gave a skip onto the next plate to sit down further away from him.

"Maybe because I like to bother you. You see, if we can't talk to each other properly, we could at least argue and bicker and snarl at each other again. You know, I really don't mind you only talking to Harry and not talking to me anymore, I'm used to it by now, and I don't even feel ignored. But now that you've started bickering with him instead of me, I'm afraid he's intruding in my territory."

Utterly bewildered, she turned to look at him, but his face didn't betray whether he was serious or making fun of her. "What are you going on about, Ron? I thought we discussed this. I know that Harry and I spend more time together because of our responsibilities, but it's not like I'm trying to get between the two of you. We're still best friends, all three of us, and there's no reason for you to feel left out. Your jealousy is getting ridiculous, you know."

"And when will you ever learn that not all the world revolves around Harry?" he muttered.

"Just drop it, won't you?" There was fatigue and weariness in her voice as she rested her head on her knees, closing her eyes for a moment. "Maybe you have enough energy left for arguing, bickering and snarling as you put it so nicely, but I really don't, and I don't see why we should make things more difficult than they already are by fighting amongst ourselves."

"I didn't come here to fight. You're getting it all wrong, I only wanted ... well, I..."

"So what did you want?"

"Talk to you, I guess. Just talk to you."

There was an uncomfortable silence for a moment, and when she turned to face him, it was with an irritated scowl in her eyes. "You had all night to talk to me, Ron, or you would've had, if you hadn't been so busy showing off. And now when I'm tired and want to go to sleep, you want to talk. Excellent timing, really."

"It wasn't my fault." Ron shrugged. "There was just so much going on earlier ... the party ... all those people who wanted to talk about the match..."

"So you're telling me you needed an entire four hours to tell them how great you are at Quidditch? Now I can certainly see why we don't talk with each other anymore. I still don't understand why you're trying to blame it on me, though, but that must be a kind of logic I'm not familiar with." She rose from her seated position and turned towards the buildings. "Good night, Ron."

There was a certain finality in her voice as she spun around and swept away. He knew it would be no use going after her, although part of him longed to do just that. "Night, Hermione," he muttered between clenched teeth, but he didn't think she had heard

him. He scowled after her until she had disappeared in one the houses, wondering how a person with so much brains could be so unreasonable.

He didn't feel like sleeping, so he sat back down, watching the lights go out and listening to the voices fading away. She was unreasonable, wasn't she? And why was she withdrawing from him and spending so much time with Harry instead? What were they not telling him? Was he no longer good enough to share their secrets?

He didn't know how long he had been sitting there lost in his thoughts when he suddenly noticed a movement at the edge of the pond. A tiny red light glowed in the darkness only to disappear moments later, but still he could see two shadowy figures hurrying along the shore. The light was gone before he had time to recognize them, but they were carrying brooms, and another second later he heard a soft rustle in the air above him.

They were leaving the hideout.

So they had to be two seventh year Prefects, but who could it be and why?

Would Ernie and Hannah abuse their privileges for a little lover's stroll in the moonlight? Surely not. Or was it the Ravenclaws? No, it couldn't be them, at least not Lisa; she was in the hospital wing. An attack by one of those Water Widows ... what if Ernie and Hannah wanted to take down the Quidditch hoops or something? But why not wait until tomorrow? Why sneak out in the middle of the night?

Harry and Hermione! Was that the reason why she had wanted to get away from him so quick? No, that wasn't possible; she wouldn't draw on a dirty trick like that. Using fatigue as pretence so she could sneak out with Harry? That was definitely not her.

But she had kept secrets from him before, hadn't she?

Secrets, yes, but she would never lie to him. Those were Ernie and Hannah after all. Or maybe Ernie had an affair with Terry from Ravenclaw, and didn't want Hannah to know, or Harry had an affair with Hannah, or maybe...

There had to be an explanation. There just had to be.

* * *

"You really are certain, aren't you?" Eyeing Harry dubiously, Hermione got off her broom. "I sure hope you didn't wake me up for nothing. I'm very tired, and besides, it's not safe to be out here all the time, you know that."

"Yes, I'm certain." Harry fetched his ring from under his shirt, shielding the light with his hands as he showed it to her. The two gemstones inside the ring glowed in a deep red colour, bringing a bizarre, almost demonic life to the dog-shaped head, almost as if it was looking at the two of them. "This has to mean something; the eyes have never

shone like that. I thought it likely that an urgent message is waiting for me, and no – I can't hide beneath that or the owl will not find me." He caught her hand as she raised the Invisibility cloak to drape it over him.

Their eyes searched the sky, but there was no movement between the clouds and stars. "Should we ask Hagrid if he saw something?" she wondered, looking at the black shape of the former gamekeeper's hut barely visible between the trees.

"No, there's no reason to wake him. You know that the owl only comes to me."

"If it comes at all," she muttered, not even trying to hide the suspicion in her voice. Who could say what other powers that ring might have? What if it was a trap?

Silence fell like a shadow, like the soundless shadow hovering around Harry's dark hair; two large feathery wings spreading over his shoulders like angel's wings as it came to land; soft feathers brushing against his cheek like a caress. He closed his eyes for a moment, and as he opened them again, his face was void of all emotion. Yet his hands shook slightly as they took the letter clasped in the owl's beak.

"Is someone in trouble?" Hermione wanted to know, dreading the answer.

"I'm afraid so. We should get back to the hideout and form a rescue mission."

* * *

"Lavender, Parvati, Eloise, Tara!" Hermione raced from one bed to the other trying to shake her roommates awake. "Wake up, there's an emergency!"

As the five Gryffindor girls rushed outside, clasping their brooms, they faced a crowd of anxious, hastily-clad young witches and wizards; some faces stifling yawns, others small and pale and worried. No one had got more than a few hours of sleep after the match, and no one understood yet why they had been so roughly woken.

Harry waited until everyone was within hearing distance and started to explain. "The Blood Legion has been asked to conduct a search of Diagon Alley. We don't know who or what it is they're searching for, but we should try to find out more. If someone's in danger, we could help them."

"Uhm ... sorry, but how do we get past the Leaky Cauldron?" Parvati wanted to know. "Didn't you say the Ghost Riders are in there?"

"I did, but it's possible to reach Diagon Alley via air, and it's quicker at that. It's going to be a hard ride though; we'll need to get there as fast as possible. Everyone who doesn't think him or herself capable of this should better stay. I know you're all tired, so..." A defiant silence answered him, and not one of them stepped back, so he continued: "They aren't expecting us, so that gives us the benefit of surprise, but you all know that we can't face the Blood Legion in an open fight. We stay out of harm's

way unless there are people to be rescued. Then we'll take them and be off."

"We know, Harry, we know." Seamus reached for his wand to make sure it was stowed safely inside his pockets. "It's our usual hit and run strategy."

"That's exactly what I was going to say." Harry mounted his broom. "Let's go."

* * *

Amicus Draconis - 1st Cycle: Cycle of the Badger - Part 4: Offers and Offerings

"I wonder, I wonder, do you know what I wonder?"

"I wonder if I could throw my rubber duck at the other children when Auntie Voldie's not looking."

"Yeah, let's all go throw our toys at each other, that would be heaps of fun. We have so many toys at the Kindergarten and we all watched Home Alone, although it's a Muggle movie and Auntie Voldie has forbidden us to watch Muggle movies, but we don't care as long as they have naked people in them."

"Yesterday, Lord Luscious got framed for watching Notting Hill."

*"Eurgh ... bad image ... very bad image." *throws rubber duck**

"How dare you cast this rubber duck at me, scoundrel! I am Grand Chicken McDonald, Lord of the Burger Legion and I can make you gain weight!"

"Hold your tongue, mingling mongrel. I am Grand Lick Luscious, also known as Mighty Malfoy Mouse, and I do not gain weight, because I'm incredibly sexy. And keep your hands off my son, pervert or I'll go tell on you."

*"Ha!" *scamper scamper* "Can't tell, can't tell!" *sticks out tongue* "Auntie Voldie knows everything you ever did. Naah-nah-nah-naah-naah! I'm Grand Greasy Ripper Rattyglue and I'm telling on you all!"*

"I fart in your general direction, you silly English kaniggets! Your father was a shrubbery and your mother was a pokémon. Cower, mes poupettes, for I am Grand Lay Strange, Master of Disneyland ... uhm ... actually I meant Azkaban, but they both look like Neuschwanstein anyways. I'm Auntie Voldie's favourite, favourite baby in all of Kindergarten."

"No that's me, and I broke your favourite favourite baby doll. Oopsie!"

"I ate your burger!"

"I'm in on playing Hide-and-Seek and you're not!"

"I stole all your little horsies."

"Yeah, that's because you're blackmailing Captain Flintstone with his girlfriend. Grab, Growl, go get my pimpcane. And hit him. Hard."

*"Eurgh ... bad image ... very bad image." *throws another rubber duck**

"Shush ... we have to be good boys now. Here comes Auntie Voldie."

"Shshshshsh...."

"Uhm, Fred?"

"Yeah, George?"

"There're no naked people in Home Alone."

"Thank goodness."

Amicus Draconis - 1. Zyklus: Zyklus des Dachses - Teil 4: Angebote und Opfergaben

* * *

Flames ate their way through the buildings, accompanied by clouds of smoke and the sickening stench of objects sweltering in the heat. Their angry crackle blended into a cacophony of terror: the steady pound of booted footsteps, the brisk bark of orders and the desperate shouts of voices in anguish. Wands flared and doors were blasted apart as the soldiers of the Dark Lord forced their entry into various shops and apartments, driven by their relentless determination to fulfill their master's commands. Pandemonium reigned in Diagon Alley, and it was a near miracle that no one had been seriously injured yet.

Not that the Blood Legion had found anything of importance so far. A few banned books were carelessly thrown into the fire, but none of them seemed to link to resistance groups, let alone the Order of the Phoenix itself. Insignificant romance novels or mystery stories, harmless except for the fact that they had been written by Muggle authors. The proprietors were fined a considerable amount of money, and their names were registered, but the offence was trivial; there were more pressing matters to worry about. Would their search be in vain? Had Lord Pettigrew made a mistake and there was nothing to be found?

Walden Macnair wouldn't have dared to speak any of these thoughts out loud.

Supported by two of his men, he was standing guard for Gringotts. They had to make sure that none of the fires would reach the British Wizarding Bank, or else there would be trouble. Goblins were worthless creatures, certainly, but they controlled the money. Wizarding governments, whether they be old or new, had to abide by the

unwritten laws of economy. Trouble with the bank was the last thing they needed now; the damage to the stores was bad enough.

Macnair frowned; the Dark Lord wouldn't be pleased with all the havoc they had wreaked. Intimidation was one thing, destroying premises was another. But what was he to do? Once rage and murderous frenzy had taken over their minds and repressed all reason, even an elite Special Force was hard to control.

"Father, I believe we're onto something!"

Macnair didn't fail to notice the pride in his son's voice as Tod stepped up the now ashen-grey marble stairs to the bank. "This individual," with a brusque wave of his wand, the younger Macnair flung an elderly man to the ground, "attempted to conceal something from our Forces."

Tod handed a small wooden box to his father. "It doesn't seem to be jinxed," he explained, "but we haven't tried to open it yet."

On first glance the box looked like an ordinary wand case, but one could never be too careful. Macnair ran his own wand over it repeatedly, watching out for hostile spells. When nothing happened, he clicked the case open and found himself looking at a brand-new wand.

He took it out to have a closer look and handed the empty case back to his son. "Tod, as soon as we finish this search, you will Apparate back to headquarters and have this thing taken apart. Double bottoms, secret drawers, built-in mechanisms, magical or non-magical; I want to know about it. Take a couple of people if you need any help. I expect your report at dawn. As for this wand, I'm sure Mr Ollivander will be kind enough to reveal to us what its secret is."

"My most humble and sincere apologies, Grand Dragon Macnair." Wincing, the old man got to his feet. "This wand was a very special order, and I'm not permitted to speak about it, not even to you."

"My, my, aren't we cheeky tonight?" Macnair assumed an air of cheerfulness so that none of the men would notice how taken aback he was at these words. Was there any truth to the old man's claim? Or was it a bold attempt to bluff his way out, fuelled by the courage of desperation? Was this wand the very object they had been sent out to find?

"Who gave the order to have this made?" Without warning his voice hardened, and he pointed his wand at Ollivander's throat. "I will not ask again, old man!"

He was bluffing, at least partly; he couldn't kill Britain's finest wand maker without consulting his superiors first. But his sudden change of manner seemed to have done the trick; Ollivander gaped at him in fear, and his voice trembled as he replied: "He ... it was a man, but I didn't see his face, sir. Nor do I know his name. My most humble apolo...."

"Maybe you forgot his name and it will come back to you once you are properly reminded," Macnair interrupted coldly. "Crucio!"

Ollivander toppled over and fell to Macnair's feet, writhing with pain. He wasn't screaming yet; it was more effective to begin the curse with a subtle pain that you could intensify at will. In Ollivander's case such measures weren't necessary; he gasped for air and blurted out almost at once: "Pettigrew! He was working for Lord Pettigrew ... the ring ... showed me the..."

His voice broke. Macnair, who had discontinued the curse as soon as Ollivander had started talking, waited patiently until the old man had caught his breath. "What kind of ring did the man show to you?" he wanted to know.

"A crest ring, sir. He showed me a silver crest ring with the symbol of a rat as proof that he was working for Grand Dragon Pettigrew. I remember it quite clearly; the rat had small yellow jewels for its eyes. And he could activate the ring and make them glow in the dark. He gave me orders to have this wand made and forbade me to speak about it. That is the truth, Grand Dragon, I swear!"

He sounded sincere, so Macnair took a moment to think the situation over. The rat was indeed Pettigrew's symbol, but that fact wasn't widely known yet. Since Pettigrew wasn't a member of one of the old wizarding families, he had only recently received his crest ring from the Dark Lord. How would Ollivander know about it if he didn't speak the truth?

Macnair glanced down at his own crest ring, wondering how he should handle the situation from here on. He was treading on thin ice; he was still the most junior of the four Grand Dragons, and interfering with Pettigrew's plans could get him into serious trouble. On the other hand, why would Pettigrew interfere with his own plans and send the Blood Legion to Diagon Alley while Ollivander was still working on that special order of his? It just didn't fit together.

What if it was no more than a cover story? If Ollivander secretly worked for the Order of the Phoenix and he let him go now, severe wasn't a proper word to describe the trouble he would be in.

No, he should definitely investigate the situation further. For the safety of the Dark Lord's Empire. Well, probably more to satisfy his own bloody curiosity than anything else, but he liked to be informed about the happenings around him. "What did you use to create this wand?" he barked. "Which magical artefact?"

"Dragon heartstring, sir. Dragon heartstring from a Chinese Fireball. I once sold another wand with heartstring from the same dragon ... let me think ... I can't remember the name, but I'll look it up for you if that is your wish, sir."

"Yes, that is my wish," barked Macnair, not utterly convinced by Ollivander's words. Didn't the wand maker claim to remember every wand he ever sold? "And I also wish to know when your mysterious visitor will return to pick up the wand."

"He won't, sir. He paid in advance and left me an owl. I'm supposed to send the wand to a certain Skuld. I have no idea who that person is, but the owl will find him, I suppose."

Macnair snorted in disbelief. This story was becoming weirder by the minute. A mysterious order, a strange twin wand, an unknown man named Skuld – what was all of this about? A new scheme the Order of the Phoenix had cooked up?

The only thing that didn't fit was the ring. Ollivander had described Pettigrew's crest ring down to the very last detail; how would he know it so well if he hadn't actually seen it? Or had he been fooled as well? Was the ring a hoax?

"Father?" Jason and Michael, two of his younger sons, approached him, leading a second prisoner between them. The elderly woman's hands were tied behind her back; both boys eyed her apprehensively as if she was a particularly vicious creature. "We found a dangerous pamphlet in that woman's chimney," Jason stated.

"I had no idea it was there," the woman tried to defend herself. "Someone must have thrown or Flooed it into my chimney while I was asleep..."

"Of course they did." Macnair had better things to do than listen to pathetic excuses. "Michael, you will stay here, guard the prisoners and keep an eye on the bank. Jason, you will take this wand case to headquarters and then report back here. Tod, you're with me. We still haven't uncovered what our Master sent us here to find."

* * *

"Madam Malkin and Mr Ollivander? They're arresting Malkin and Ollivander? What in the world could *they* have done to deserve this?"

"They don't need a reason, do they?" Harry's eyes narrowed as he peered through the shimmering fabric of the Invisibility Cloak. The street looked dark and deserted now, save for a small fire in one of the houses. Yet, the deep red cloak of the young man guarding the two prisoners was clearly visible in the dim light.

"There's only a single guard." He held out his arm to stop Ron so they wouldn't come within hearing range of the small group. "This doesn't look like efficient security measures to me."

"Maybe they got a bit reckless," Ron wondered. "Or they are busy with something else and don't expect too much trouble from the two old fogies."

"Well, they certainly looked busy a few minutes ago," Harry mumbled. It hadn't been easy to stay hidden and witness the destruction when everything inside him screamed to rush out and fight these criminals. But what choice did they have? They wouldn't save anyone's life by reckless and foolhardy actions, only lose their own. And he could not account for leading his friends to certain death....

"Harry, we can take him." Something must have shown in his face, for Ron seemed to know exactly what he was thinking about. "He's only one man and there are two of us. And we're under the cloak, so he won't see us coming. We'll take him by surprise."

"Too dangerous." Harry shook his head. "We would..."

"Harry, how can you just stand there and watch this?" Ron broke him off in mid-sentence. "These people out there, they are people we know. We've talked to them; we've been to their shops. We can't just leave them to their fate!"

How could his best friend believe such a thing of him? Harry was about to give a hurt and bitter answer when a soft squeaking sound interrupted Ron's passionate appeal and broke the sudden tension rising between them. Harry turned his head, almost bumped his chin against Ron's shoulder and saw him clutching his hands into fists and into the yellow rubber duck he was holding. In a hasty movement Ron dropped the rubber duck into his pocket where it turned back into a wand.

Harry suppressed a smile. Did Ron keep one of Fred and George's fake wands as a lucky charm?

"I have no intention of leaving them to their fate," he assured his friend, "but we need a plan first. Even if we defeat one Death Eater, how will we escape from the others? We can't fit four people under the cloak."

"We need our broomsticks first, so we can take Ollivander and Malkin to safety," Ron agreed, his other hand now holding a pink piggybank. Obviously two lucky charms were luckier than one. "Two people to a broom works out all right if both don't try to fly it. But maybe we should get some help from our friends. One person could attack the Death Eater from under the cloak, and two others could fly in and rescue the prisoners."

"Yes, that sounds like a much better plan to me."

* * *

Guarding two old fogies was not much fun. Michael Macnair was still at odds with his cruel fate of forced boredom when a "*Petrificus Totalus!*" out of nowhere almost took him by surprise. As the full Body-Bind was only a minor hex, he was able to deflect it, but then an "*Expelliarmus!*" swooped down on him from the skies above and almost made him lose his wand.

During the quarter of a second it took him to hold onto this precious possession, the "*Petrificus Totalus!*" hit him again. As he toppled down, stiff as a board, he was forced to watch helplessly as two boys on broomsticks grabbed his precious prisoners, cut them loose and pulled them onto said broomsticks.

When, another quarter of a second later, two more Death Eaters came to his aid, there was no sign of boys or prisoners. Let alone broomsticks.

* * *

"And that'll be fifty points to New Hogwarts," Stephen Cornfoot cheered as the group landed on a distant field to catch breaths and check brooms. "We sure showed them!"

"What if they are still trying to follow us?" Madam Malkin did not share her rescuers' enthusiasm.

"They can't follow us over long distances; they don't use brooms," Harry tried to reassure her. "Through Levitation you couldn't possibly catch up with the height or speed of a broomstick, and Apparation is pretty much useless if you don't know where to go beforehand."

"What they could do is try to bewitch a broom or put a tag on one of us to see where we're going," Ron added. He was going to say more, but fell silent as Harry gave him a sharp look. It wasn't exactly safe to talk to strangers about the precautions they took against being followed.

"It seems you know a lot about our enemies," Mr. Ollivander said admiringly, even with a tone of awe in his voice. "We're very fortunate to have been saved by the Order of the Phoenix."

"No, we're not from...." Neville started, but was silenced by Hermione stepping on his toes. "Why, they're on our side, aren't they?" he shouted, protesting against such rough treatment.

"Of course they are, but with each word we say, we bring them into more danger," Hermione answered. "Madam Malkin, Mr Ollivander, do you have any contact with one of the resistance groups, or do you know any other safe place where we could take you? After tonight, Voldemort's people will be searching for you."

"Yes, there's a friend's place where I could hide." Apparently lost in her thoughts, Madam Malkin raised her head to look at the young woman again. "I wouldn't want to endanger her, but it seems that I've got no choice."

She swallowed hard. "Fighting groups, secret resistance ... I'm not familiar with people like that. I'm merely a simple tailor and certainly not the right person to fight evil dictators and dark lords. I'm sorry, children."

"Everybody has to decide for themselves...." Harry broke off when he noticed an unfamiliar coolness creeping into his voice; it hadn't been his intention to chide the elderly witch. Nevertheless, if everybody thought as she did, there wouldn't be any resistance at all.

"You shouldn't try to contact your family," he added in a softer tone. "They might use your loved ones to get to you. It's the way Death Eaters work."

"I appreciate your advice." Madam Malkin gave a nod of thanks to Harry. "I only hope they don't take the shop away from my daughter. The poor girl ... how would she support her children?"

"Mr. Potter, I would like to accompany you and your friends," Ollivander proposed. "In such dark times every stout soul must take up the fight against evil. Therefore, I offer my services to the Order of the Phoenix. I might not be very skilled in battle, but I do know a thing or two about wands."

The young witches and wizards looked at each other, unsure what to make of this offer. "Well, we could use some help," Eloise Midgeon considered.

"An adult would only push us around," Dean protested. "So far we've got by without them."

"How about we put it to a vote?" suggested Tara Moon.

Harry, who had remained silent so far, shook his head. "I'm sorry, Mr Ollivander. Your intentions are honourable, I'm sure, but we can't risk taking strangers into our hideout. Too many lives would be at stake, and we have to put the safety of the children first."

"Hey, Harry, I'm sure that your intentions are honourable, too, but it wouldn't hurt to talk things over once in a while before making decisions," Seamus complained, and Stephen added: "What about the children we rescued? They were strangers as well."

"Seamus, we do talk things over." At once, Hermione rushed to Harry's defence. "But we can't stand here and hold long debates; it's too dangerous."

Harry opened his mouth to say something, but Ernie Macmillan beat him to it. "Dumbledore always trusted Harry's judgment, and so should we."

"Thanks, Ernie. Stephen, you're right about the children, but in their case we had no choice. They were children and they had no place to go. And besides, they are from Muggle families with no connection to the wizarding world. Do you think it likely that any of them would be working for Voldemort?"

"And now you have a choice?" Ollivander asked with increasing desperation. "I don't have any place to go either. Would you really leave me to those cutthroats? Do you want this on your conscience?"

"You won't be left behind, Mr Ollivander," Madam Malkin promised, and her voice sounded much more firm than before. "You can accompany me. We're not in an easy situation, the two of us, but I'm sure we can figure something out."

"Thank you, Madam." Ollivander seemed none too pleased, but he made no more

efforts to persuade Harry and his friends.

"You can share my broom," Stephen offered. "Just tell us where you want go, and we'll take you there." He looked positively delighted at the prospect of another adventure.

"I'll take Madam Malkin, if it's all right." Ron suggested. "How about we split up? Harry and Hermione come with us while Ernie and Hannah take the rest back home?"

"Sounds good to me," Harry agreed. The third pair of Prefects, Terry Boot and the newly elected Padma Patil, had stayed home to watch over the younger children and the third golden key.

"But shouldn't someone go back to Diagon Alley?" Hannah wanted to know. "What if the Death Eaters try to take more prisoners?"

"No, Harry, we can't risk it," Hermione protested, before he had a chance to answer. "The Blood Legion knows about us now. They're prepared for more attacks, maybe even lying in wait for us. You would lead our people to their deaths. Didn't you just say we have to put the safety of the children first?"

Harry sighed, then gave a tiny nod and turned away from her, facing the two adults. "Before we leave, you should take these. As a precaution...."

With a few steps he walked over to Ron, pulling two wands from the pockets of his friend's robes. He handed the wands to Ollivander and Madam Malkin.

It happened so fast that no one was able to react in time. Ollivander grabbed Stephen, who was standing closest to him, pressing his wand to boy's throat. "Everybody stay calm," he said coldly, "or your friend here will pay the price."

They stared at him, shocked, dumbfounded, unable to believe their eyes. "We saved you!" Hannah was close to tears. "How can you do this?"

"I never asked to be saved, you silly children." His voice no longer sounded cold, but hard and angry. "They took me prisoner, yes, but it was no more than a misunderstanding. I was working on a crucial task, which would've made my fortune, if you fools hadn't meddled with things you don't understand. You ruined everything, do you hear? Everything!"

"Why am I not surprised? You should never trust a man who admires Voldemort."

Harry would never forget the day he had walked into Ollivander's shop to buy his first wand. And he would never forget the words the old man had softly whispered into his ear: "I think we must expect great things from you, Mr Potter ... After all, He Who Must Not Be Named did great things – terrible, yes, but great."

Back then, he hadn't understood. All he had felt was a cold shiver down his spine.

Ollivander trembled at the Dark Lord's name, but he stood his ground. "What a clever boy you are, Mr Potter. Word has it you are also brave, courageous and true. So, be a good little hero now and trade places with your friend here. Harry Potter happens to be a far more valuable hostage than some nameless Ravenclaw."

Still holding Stephen at wandpoint, he took a few menacing steps towards Harry. "You're the one they're all trying to find, didn't you know? For some curious reason you're more important to them than McGonagall, the Weasley family and this Black fellow all put together. Turning you over will grant me entry to their inner circle. Perhaps even a seat in the Dark Council...."

"Ambitious plans," Harry replied coldly. "Take it from a good little hero; a pink piggybank may not be the proper tool to achieve them."

Ollivander stared. Instead of the wand he had been holding, a small rubber piggybank wriggled in his hands.

Harry didn't waste any time. He rushed forward, pulling Stephen away from his confused attacker. The others reacted only a few moments later, seizing their wands and pointing them at Ollivander, who automatically took a step backwards.

He raised his hands, smiling anxiously at the field of wands before him. "My dear friends, you didn't really believe that I..."

"Don't play Pettigrew with us," Harry interrupted Ollivander's would-be defence. His face was calm and impassive; only a fiery spark in his serpentine eyes showed his anger. "And now, be kind enough to leave, before I change my mind."

"You want to let him go?" Ron asked, bewilderment in his voice. "After all he did to us?"

"Do you honestly think we have the time and the means to trouble ourselves with people like him? We don't have room for prisoners, and if we wanted to kill every pathetic Voldemort supporter that crawls in our way, we'd better become Death Eaters ourselves. They're the experts on murder after all."

Harry turned to face his best friend. "No, Ron, I'd rather we left that particular way of solving conflicts to our enemies."

"Speaking of Death Eaters," Stephen cut in. "I may be wrong, but weren't some Red Robes looking for this bloke here?"

"Right." A smirk crossing his mock-concerned face, Seamus Finnigan winked at Ollivander. "Maybe he should start to run and hide or whatever it is people do in such situations."

"Who knows, he might even challenge Harry's position as 'the one they're all trying to find'," Eloise added, playfully raising her wand a little higher.

"Scampering like a rat, that one. Disgusting, don't you think?" Lavender coughed as if she could barely restrain herself from getting sick.

And Ron couldn't refrain from sending a little hex after the fleeing Ollivander. Just a little one. When a rat's tail suddenly appeared from below the wizard's robes, everybody broke into liberating laughter.

"You can tell your Dark Lord that we will never surrender. As long as one last breath is flowing through our veins, Harry Potter and the brave rebels of Gryffindor, Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff... oh, do I have to say it all over again?"

* * *

Ernie and Hannah were given the task of taking Madam Malkin to her friend's house while the others returned to the hideout under the lake with Harry and Hermione. As soon as the young witches and wizards had landed, Harry pulled the Head Girl aside. "Wait for me here, we need to go back up. I'll go fetch Ron; I don't want him to think we're keeping secrets from him again. We're going to need his help with this."

Hermione swallowed hard. Did Harry want to talk to Ron about the letters and the ring? Well, he would eventually have to, but why now?

"Harry, wait!" she called, hurrying after him. "I don't think this is such a good idea." More softly, she added: "I know you hate keeping secrets from your best friend, and you have my full support if you really want to come clean on ... uhm ... you-know-what, but believe me, this is not a good time. We know Ron will take it hard anyway, but right now, he might have even more reason to, because of his feelings...."

"No, Hermione, it's not about that." Harry turned to face her and a frown crossed his face. "I wanted to ask you two a favour, that's all. Take the Map and my Invisibility Cloak and sneak into Hogwarts. I will wait for you at Hagrid's place."

"You want us to give Snape a message?" Hermione gave a sigh of relief; she knew at once where this was headed. "You want to make sure the Order is warned about Ollivander. I think it's a good idea, but Snape won't be pleased at all. He'd rather we didn't interfere with Order business."

"We're not. We'll only pass him a note about what happened with Ollivander, that's all. It's his choice what to make of it."

Hermione agreed with him, but she was certain that Snape would have a different view on the matter. What if he alerted the rest of the Order, and what if they tried to put a stop to the rescue missions of New Hogwarts? And besides, sneaking into the castle was a great risk. It would be safer to send an owl ... but no, it wouldn't be. Since the change of power, all owls were required to bear a Dark Mark on their wing, and sending Snape an owl without such a mark would put him at great risk. It could blow his cover as a spy for the Order.

And the only owl within their reach that bore a Dark Mark was the one they couldn't possibly send. What if Snape recognized it? What if the Order found out where Harry got his information from? They would put a stop to it for sure. And who could blame them?

She followed Harry with her eyes, watching his unruly head of hair disappear within the crowd. Oh, how much he had changed. The Harry of old would have run into danger himself; he would never have delegated an important task to others. But this new Harry understood about the principles of leadership. He still hated most of them, but he understood.

"Hermione? Hey, Hermione, is it true, what they're saying? Did Harry really use a fake wand to expose that evil git, Ollivander? Isn't he an incredible wizard? And so clever!"

A group of younger Gryffindors had approached her, Colin and Dennis Creevey among them. They didn't even wait for her to answer their questions, but rambled on and on about Harry's alleged skills and abilities: "It's his scar, isn't it? It burns when evil people come near him. So he knows exactly who's trustworthy and who's not. Our Harry isn't fooled by false smiles and sweet lies."

'If things only were that simple,' Hermione thought to herself.

* * *

"Enter."

"It's me, Father." Tod stepped into Walden Macnair's office. "I'm here to turn in the report on the wand case. We tried every possible spell on it, but we didn't find anything. I'm sorry, but it seems to be just an ordinary box after all."

"Well, I can't honestly say that I'm surprised."

Tod shuffled his feet uncomfortably as if he was expecting a scolding; then he took a deep breath of relief as Macnair continued: "I have spoken with Lord Pettigrew, and as it turns out, Ollivander was telling the truth all along. He was supposed to create this wand according to the instructions and send it to that Skuld person afterwards. Pettigrew believed the wand already gone when he sent us to Diagon Alley tonight and was surprised, if not to say worried, that it fell into our hands. Now we're supposed to keep it safe until we receive a special owl and then send it off immediately."

"But he didn't tell you who that Skuld is and what he's supposed to do with that wand?" Tod asked curiously.

Macnair shrugged. "No, unfortunately not. I managed to throw a few well-placed questions into our conversation, but Pettigrew doesn't seem to know much about the

matter himself. His only concern was whether the wand had been damaged, and he was relieved when I told him that it's in fine condition. If you ask me, he was merely following orders."

"Orders by whom?" Tod wondered. "There aren't too many people who can give orders to a Grand Dragon of the Dark Council."

"Right you are, son." Macnair flicked his wand to open the bottom drawer of his desk, stowing away the report without sparing the thick bundle of papers so much as a glance. "And that's exactly the reason why I won't pursue this any further. I'll do what I'm told, and so will you. We have more pressing matters at hand than meddling with things that aren't our concern. The Blood Legion is in enough trouble as it is."

"Trouble?" Tod's mouth fell open. "Why, what did we do wrong?"

"Think, boy. That attack last night; it was already the third one in a row. Pot – You-Know-Who is targeting us. Twice now, he and the Order of the Phoenix freed the Mudblood children we captured, and last night they liberated our prisoners from the raid. Do you honestly think that all of this is just coincidence?

Tod gaped at him, then shook his head in disbelief. "Father, I don't understand why everyone is so worried about that little boy and his miserable lot of would-be rebels. It's not like they're doing any real damage, is it? A Muggle here, a Mudblood there, I mean, what's with all the hassle?"

"The Dark Lord considers him dangerous, and you would do well not to doubt our master's judgment," Macnair scolded. "It's possible that these skirmishes are nothing but a distraction from our enemies' true plans. But that isn't what this is about!"

Without warning he slammed his hand down on the table. "Three attacks and all three of them against the Blood Legion! Do you still not understand why this worries me?"

Tod's eyes were completely blank. "No, Father, I'm sorry."

"Do me a favour, lad, and use your brains for once! Can't you see what happened last night? We conducted the Diagon Alley raid only a short while after we had got the order, but we found absolutely nothing. Instead we were attacked. And those children last month? It wasn't that big a secret that we were taking them, but it's not like we put an ad in the paper either. They *knew* where we were taking those children. And they *knew* about the raid. Do you honestly think that all of it was coincidence? Bad luck?"

"You think..." Slowly, comprehension was beginning to dawn on Tod's face. "You think someone told them? Someone from the Blood Legion. But ... but," he sputtered, "that would be treachery!"

Macnair gave a deep sigh. "Yes, son, that's exactly what I'm talking about."

Tod gaped at him. The very idea that someone among their own people could be a

traitor seemed too much to grasp for his son. But after tonight, there could be no other explanation. Someone was passing information to their enemies, and that someone couldn't be an outsider. He knew too much about their plans.

"Do you have any idea who...?" Tod wasn't able to finish his sentence. "Or any proof?" he added after a moment's silence.

"None so far." Macnair lowered his glance, examining his own fingers lying on the table. "And that's what worries me most. A traitor among one's own causes damage enough, but if we can't catch him before others come to the same conclusion, the Blood Legion will be in trouble. We might lose our reputation. If things go bad for us, we might even lose our status as the Master's elite force."

"No, Father, what are you saying?" Tod protested. "We can't lose our status. He needs us. We're far too important for him. I mean, we are his number one. He couldn't just dump us and pick someone else."

"And why couldn't he, Tod? His only true elite force are the Dementors, all human organisations and institutions are exchangeable. We are no more than pawns to his game. He could overthrow his own order if he wanted to and create a new one. It's his game, Tod, and his order. He made it; he can destroy it. The only reason why our world is the way we know is because that's the way that suits him best. He could change it. Any time, any way...."

Macnair broke off. Tod didn't look like he understood any of those things. Probably this was his own fault, not the boy's. He had raised his sons to obey, not to understand.

* * *

"I kept my promise, didn't I, little butterfly? I said I'd be back before you wake up!"

"Hai, Toto-chan."

Tsuzuku...

*

*Dark night, nothing to see,
Invisible hand in front of me.
Scared to death there's someone near,
Scared to move but you can't stay here.*

You know me, evil eye!

*You know me, prepare to die!
You know me, the snakebite kiss!
Devil's grip, the Iron Fist!*

*

extra Extra EXTRA!!!!

"Dear readers, viewers, listeners, spectators, audience, we're muchly disappointed in you. Draco Malfoy, headbanging half-naked on a table..."

"Wearing leather pants..."

*"Wearing leather trousers *glares at George* and none of you cries wolf anymore. Where has all the howling and whining about clichés and fanon assumptions gone? We're actually getting owls about such primitive and boring things as: *fanfare* Plot!"*

"Unbelievable!"

"Storyline!"

"You can't be serious!"

"Character development!"

"The world is a madhouse!"

"Yes, yes, we figured that one out three episodes ago. So, our most sincere (and that's no irony:-)) thanks go to chocolate, loonyluna256, Dragenphly, katherine_15, madam_lash, sikodelika, PerdoAnima, vanilla_taste, jamc91, ali, yuuh and all the other charming witches and wizards who sent owls to our studio.

"Look here! Imperfection Is A Bliss from barking-up-the-right-tree-land muses that a big secret is revealed each cycle and that all those secrets lead up to bigger secrets."

"One secret per cyle? It's more like one per episode, muharharharharhar! You'll see!"

"Episode Number Five will reveal a secret we've been wondering about since Episode One. A sweet and innocent fair maiden, whose name is not Mary Sue and who has no special powers, is attacked by evil wizards. But what do these strange people waving sticks in her face want with a young shop assistant anyway? Kill her, kidnap her, save her, use her?"

A member of the Ghost Rider must face a tough choice. A member of the Blood Legion has already chosen. And someone much more powerful than both of them holds all the threads in his hand. And the scissors which cut them."

"But what happens when someone else takes those scissors away from him and uses them for his own purpose?"

"So, will Hermione, Lavender and Parvati be able to save the day, or are they too busy bickering at each other?"

*

Amicus Draconis - 1st Cycle: Cycle of the Badger - Part 5: Owl SMS

Coming soon to your Favourite Radio Station

*

Draco Dormiens Nunquam Titillandus

* * *

Author's Note: This one's about the Special Forces. But why Special Forces? Wouldn't the Death Eaters be far more powerful if they all fought together in one big group instead of quarrelling with each other in several smaller groups?

Basically, it's the "Divide and Conquer" pattern. Voldemort doesn't have a powerful outside opponent anymore, and his people need something to do. Also, it would be too dangerous for him if all the power was in one place. What if they teamed up against him?

Six different Special Forces will be mentioned in AD (not counting Dementors, Giants etc.) but only two of them play an important role in Cycle of the Badger. The Blood Legion is a well-trained elite force; they are allowed to use special magic such as Apparition or the Unforgivables (you can imagine that in a dictatorship the more powerful magic is limited; it wouldn't be exactly safe for Voldemort to let people Apparate around the country).

At the beginning of the story, the Ghost Riders are little more than 'errand boys', as Macnair puts it so nicely. The plot bunny for them hopped into my mind while my brothers and I were dancing to Iron Fist at a Motörhead concert. The musical scene in the Leaky cauldron was the very first thing I ever wrote for the Ghost Riders; even before I made them a part of my Harry Potter fic.

Also, you might have noticed that the Ghost Riders are a bit of a parody on the Nâzgul from LotR, while the plot bunny for the Blood Legion derived from the Sardukar from Dune.

As some of my German readers were quick to spot, the whole Blood Legion vs. Ghost Riders power struggle bears a certain resemblance to the situation in the Third Reich. Hitler had two Special Forces (SS and SA) that absolutely loathed each other. In the beginning, the SA was the elite force while the SS was basically for anybody who wanted to join, but over time the power between the two shifted.

Which brings us back to the whole "Wizarding Fascism" and "Muggle Fascism" topic. I believe there are also similarities between the HP Pureblood Philosophy and some of the ideas the Nazis used, so I decided on a few parallels between Hitler's and Voldemort's reign of terror. But if you take a look at history, you'll see that many dictatorships follow similar patterns anyway.

Author's Note: This note is about Voldemort's Dark Council.

The Council consists of thirteen members; Voldemort himself and his twelve most loyal Death Eaters. As some of my American readers were quick to notice, the names of their council ranks derive from the Ku Klux Klan. Voldemort calls himself 'Imperial Wizard', the four higher-ranked members of the Council go by the name of 'Grand Dragon', and the eight lower-ranked ones are called 'Great Titan'.

In case you're wondering where I got the idea from, I think there are some parallels between the Death Eaters and KKK in the HP books. When I read GoF, a scene I could picture very clearly in my mind was the attack of the Death Eaters at the campsite. Jo described them as hooded and masked, spreading terror and setting everything on fire. Reading that passage made me think of KKK immediately. I believe that Jo made a few subtle connections between "Wizarding Fascism" and "Muggle Fascism" to show that they're not all that different.

As for the council members, I don't want to give you any spoilers, so I'll only mention the ones we already know from the story. Walden Macnair is a Grand Dragon, as is Peter Pettigrew and Lucius Malfoy, who will make his first appearance in one of the next chapters. The fourth Grand Dragon will remain in the background for a while, but those of you who read the trailer already got a glimpse of him. You could say that he is half canon character and half self-created, because he makes his first appearance in GoF. Since he isn't given a background yet, I created one for him (which is certainly not the one that Jo would later give him in OotP).

The only Great Titans we know so far are Crabbe and Goyle senior, but there'll be more coming up in later chapters. Also, as we found out in Episode Two, Severus Snape is not a member of the Council, but he's trying to get in. In later chapters we'll see whether he's successful in his task.