

He was right, of course. Voldemort might have lost his sanity in the process of splitting his soul, but if the numbers were important to him, he wouldn't have upset that balance. And the numbers likely *were* important to him — someone as obsessed with magical strength would not ignore such a basic tenet of magical power, a fundamental law of their existence.

“So... you think this is the last one, then? Truly? Other than the snake.” Harry bit his lip. “That’s a big assumption to make about something so important.”

“Indeed,” Snape assented. “But it is not unreasonable. And we have precious few other ways of determining the number otherwise.”

Harry snorted to himself. “Yeah, can’t exactly just stroll up and ask him.” He glanced back at the tiara, shuddering at the magic bleeding from it. “What’s so special about this thing, anyway? Everything else has had meaning.” Slytherin’s locket, Hufflepuff’s cup. A family ring, and his childhood diary.

“If I am not mistaken, this is the lost diadem of Rowena Ravenclaw.” Snape’s lips twisted in a sneer. “Another priceless artefact we will have to destroy to end the Dark Lord’s reign.”

Harry frowned — he’d heard of Ravenclaw’s diadem. Read about it, somewhere, perhaps. Or maybe heard his Ravenclaw friends talk about it. “That’s the one that’s supposed to give you infinite knowledge if you wear it, right?” Snape nodded. “Blimey. You’d think he might have bothered to put it on before he cursed it, maybe realised this whole thing was a bad idea.”

A reluctant twitch of amusement flickered across Snape’s face. “Quite. Nevertheless, we must deal with the matter quickly.” The tall man straightened up, striding across his lab past the gently simmering potion, waving his wand to reveal a hidden niche in one of his shelves. From that niche he pulled a wooden box, and from that box came a crystal vial filled with vivid yellow liquid.

Basilisk venom.

Snape’s hands were perfectly steady as he brought the vial over. “Harry, get the crystal slab out, would you? It’s beside the gold cauldron.”

Harry turned, peering at the rack of cauldrons until he saw the shimmering piece of crystal tucked away between them. The size of a regular chopping board, Harry knew the slab was the strongest, most magically resistant material available, used for working with volatile ingredients.

He set the slab up on the worktop, then carefully shifted the diadem atop it, making sure not to touch it with his bare skin.

“Stand back,” Snape warned. Harry didn’t need telling twice. Wand raised in case the horcrux tried to put up a fight, Harry took a large step backwards, watching as Snape uncorked the vial and poured its contents over the diadem.

Immediately, it began to hiss and bubble — and then scream, a black cloud of smoke seeping from the twisted metal, the same scream the diary had given, and his scar, and all the other