HARRY POTTER AND THE METHODS OF RATIONALITY

BY LESSWRONG



CHAPTERS 1–95

Based on the characters of

J. K. ROWLING

and her books:

Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone
Year One at Hogwarts
Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets
Year Two at Hogwarts
Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban
Year Three at Hogwarts
Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire
Year Four at Hogwarts
Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix
Year Five at Hogwarts
Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince
Year Six at Hogwarts
Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows
Year Seven at Hogwarts

Harry Potter

and the Methods of Rationality



by

Less Wrong

Edited by some random fan of a fan

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"Oh Thoth Trismegistus, oh Ma'at, oh Ganesha, oh sweet lady Eris... I have not laughed so hard in years!"

Eric S. Raymond

CHAPTER ONE

A DAY OF VERY LOW PROBABILITY

Beneath the moonlight glints a tiny fragment of silver, a fraction of a line...
(black robes, falling)
...blood spills out in liters, and someone screams a word.

*
* *

Every inch of wall space is covered by a bookcase. Each bookcase has six shelves, going almost to the ceiling. Some bookshelves are stacked to the brim with hardcover books: science, mathematics, history, and everything else. Other shelves have two layers of paperback science fiction, with the back layer of books propped up on old tissue boxes or two-by-fours, so that you can see the back layer of books above the books in front. And it still isn't enough. Books are overflowing onto the tables and the sofas and making little heaps under the windows.

This is the living-room of the house occupied by the eminent Professor Michael Verres-Evans, and his wife, Mrs. Petunia Evans-Verres, and their adopted son, Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres.

There is a letter lying on the living-room table, and an unstamped envelope of yellowish parchment, addressed to *Mr. H. Potter* in emerald-green ink.

The Professor and his wife are speaking sharply at each other, but they are not shouting. The Professor considers shouting to be uncivilized.

"You're joking," Michael said to Petunia. His tone indicated that he was very much afraid that she was serious.

"My sister was a witch," Petunia repeated. She looked frightened, but stood her ground. "Her husband was a wizard."

"This is absurd!" Michael said sharply. "They were at our wedding—they visited for Christmas—"

"I told them you weren't to know," Petunia whispered. "But it's true. I've seen things—"

The Professor rolled his eyes. "Dear, I understand that you're not familiar with the skeptical literature. You may not realize how easy it is for a trained magician to fake the seemingly impossible. Remember how I taught Harry to bend spoons? If it seemed like they could always guess what you were thinking, that's called cold reading—"

"It wasn't bending spoons—"

"What was it, then?"

Petunia bit her lip. "I can't just tell you. You'll think I'm—" She swallowed. "Listen. Michael. I wasn't—always like this—" She gestured at herself, as though to indicate her lithe form. "Lily did this. Because I—because I *begged* her. For years, I begged her. Lily had *always* been prettier than me, and I'd... been mean to her, because of that, and then she got *magic,* can you imagine how I felt? And I *begged* her to use some of that magic on me so that I could be pretty too, even if I couldn't have her magic, at least I could be pretty."

Tears were gathering in Petunia's eyes.

"And Lily would tell me no, and make up the most ridiculous excuses, like the world would end if she were nice to her sister, or a centaur told her not to—the most ridiculous things, and I hated her for it. And when I had just graduated, I was going out with this boy, Vernon Dursley, he was fat and he was the only boy who would talk to me in college. And he said he wanted children, and that his first son would be named Dudley. And I thought to myself, *what kind of parent names their child Dudley Dursley?* It was like I saw my whole future life stretching out in front of me, and I couldn't stand it. And I wrote to my sister and told her that if she didn't help me I'd rather just—"

Petunia stopped.

"Anyway," Petunia said, her voice small, "she gave in. She told me it was dangerous, and I said I didn't care any more, and I drank this potion and I was sick for weeks, but when I got better my skin cleared up and I finally filled out and... I was beautiful, people were *nice* to me," her voice broke, "and after that I couldn't hate my sister any more, especially when I learned what her magic brought her in the end—"

"Darling," Michael said gently, "you got sick, you gained some weight while resting in bed, and your skin cleared up on its own. Or being sick made you change your diet—"

"She was a witch," Petunia repeated. "I saw it."

"Petunia," Michael said. The annoyance was creeping into his voice. "You *know* that can't be true. Do I really have to explain why?"

Petunia wrung her hands. She seemed to be on the verge of tears. "My love, I know I can't win arguments with you, but please, you have to trust me on this—"

"*Dad! Mum!*"

The two of them stopped and looked at Harry as though they'd forgotten there was a third person in the room.

Harry took a deep breath. "Mum, *your* parents didn't have magic, did they?"

"No," Petunia said, looking puzzled.

"Then no one in your family knew about magic when Lily got her letter. How did *they* get convinced?"

"Ah..." Petunia said. "They didn't just send a letter. They sent a professor from Hogwarts. He—" Petunia's eyes flicked to Michael. "He showed us some magic."

"Then you don't have to fight over this," Harry said firmly. Hoping against hope that this time, just this once, they would listen to him. "If it's true, we can just get a Hogwarts professor here and see the magic for ourselves, and Dad will admit that it's true. And if not, then Mum will admit that it's false. That's what the experimental method is for, so that we don't have to resolve things just by arguing."

The Professor turned and looked down at him, dismissive as usual. "Oh, come now, Harry. Really, *magic?* I thought *you'd* know better

than to take this seriously, son, even if you're only ten. Magic is just about the most unscientific thing there is!"

Harry's mouth twisted bitterly. He was treated well, probably better than most genetic fathers treated their own children. Harry had been sent to the best elementary schools—and when that didn't work out, he was provided with tutors from the endless labor pool of starving students. Always Harry had been encouraged to study whatever caught his attention, bought all the books that caught his fancy, sponsored in whatever math or science competitions he entered. He was given anything reasonable that he wanted, except, maybe, the slightest shred of respect. A tenured Professor who taught biochemistry at Oxford could hardly be expected to listen to the advice of a little boy. You would listen to Show Interest, of course; that's what a Good Parent would do, and so, if you conceived of yourself as a Good Parent, you would do it. But take a ten-year-old *seriously?* Hardly.

Sometimes Harry wanted to scream at his father.

"Mum," Harry said. "If you want to win this argument with Dad, look in chapter two of the first book of the Feynman Lectures on Physics. There's a quote there about how philosophers say a great deal about what science absolutely requires, and it is all wrong, because the only rule in science is that the final arbiter is observation—that you just have to look at the world and report what you see. Um... I can't think offhand of where to find something about how it's an ideal of science to settle things by experiment instead of arguments—"

His mother looked down at him and smiled. "Thank you, Harry. But—" her head rose back up to stare at her husband. "I don't want to win an argument with your father. I want my husband to, to listen to his wife who loves him, and trust her just this once—"

Harry closed his eyes briefly. *Hopeless.* Both of his parents were just hopeless.

Now his parents were getting into one of *those* arguments again, one where his mother tried to make his father feel guilty, and his father tried to make his mother feel stupid.

"I'm going to go to my room," Harry announced. His voice trembled a little. "Please try not to fight too much about this, Mum, Dad,

we'll know soon enough how it comes out, right?"

"Of course, Harry," said his father, and his mother gave him a reassuring kiss, and then they went on fighting while Harry climbed the stairs to his bedroom.

He shut the door behind him and tried to think.

The funny thing was, he *ought* to have agreed with Dad. No one had ever seen any evidence of magic, and according to Mum, there was a whole magical world out there. How could anyone keep something like that a secret? More magic? That seemed like a rather suspicious sort of excuse.

It ought to have been an open-and-shut case for Mum joking, lying or being insane, in ascending order of awfulness. If Mum had sent the letter herself, that would explain how it arrived at the letterbox without a stamp. A little insanity was far, far less improbable than the universe really working like that.

Except that some part of Harry was utterly convinced that magic was real, and had been since the instant he saw the putative letter from the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

Harry rubbed his forehead, grimacing. *Don't believe everything you think,* one of his books had said.

But this bizarre certainty... Harry was finding himself just *expecting* that, yes, a Hogwarts professor would show up and wave a wand and magic would come out. The strange certainty was making no effort to guard itself against falsification—wasn't making excuses in advance for why there wouldn't be a professor, or the professor would only be able to bend spoons.

Where do you come from, strange little prediction? Harry directed the thought at his brain. *Why do I believe what I believe?*

Usually Harry was pretty good at answering that question, but in this particular case, he had no *clue* what his brain was thinking.

Harry gave a mental shrug to himself. A flat metal plate on a door affords pushing, and a handle on a door affords pulling, and the thing to do with a testable hypothesis is to go test it.

He took a piece of lined paper from his desk, and started writing.

Dear Deputy Headmistress

Harry paused, reflecting; then discarded the paper for another, tapping another millimeter of graphite from his mechanical pencil. This called for careful calligraphy.

Dear Deputy Headmistress Minerva McGonagall,
Or Whomsoever It May Concern:

I recently received your letter of acceptance to Hogwarts, addressed to Mr. H. Potter. You may not be aware that my genetic parents, James Potter and Lily Potter (formerly Lily Evans) are dead. I was adopted by Lily's sister, Petunia Evans-Verres, and her husband, Michael Verres-Evans.

I am extremely interested in attending Hogwarts, conditional on such a place actually existing. Only my mother Petunia says she knows about magic, and she can't use it herself. My father is highly skeptical. I myself am uncertain. I also don't know where to obtain any of the books or equipment listed in your acceptance letter.

Mother mentioned that you sent a Hogwarts representative to Lily Potter (then Lily Evans) in order to demonstrate to her family that magic was real, and, I presume, help Lily obtain her school materials. If you could do this for my own family it would be extremely helpful.

Sincerely,
Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres.

Harry added their current address, then folded up the letter and put it in an envelope, which he addressed to Hogwarts. Further consideration led him to obtain a candle and drip wax onto the flap of the envelope, into which, using a penknife's tip, he impressed the initials H.J.P.E.V. If he was going to descend into this madness, he was going to do it with style.

Then he opened his door and went back downstairs. His father was sitting in the living-room and reading a book of higher math to show how smart he was; and his mother was in the kitchen preparing one of his father's favorite dishes to show how loving she was. It didn't look

like they were talking to one another at all. As scary as arguments could be, *not arguing* was somehow much worse.

"Mum," Harry said into the unnerving silence, "I'm going to test the hypothesis. According to your theory, how do I send an owl to Hogwarts?"

His mother turned from the kitchen sink to stare at him, looking shocked. "I—I don't know, I think you just have to own a magic owl."

That should've sounded highly suspicious, *oh, so there's no way to test your theory then,* but the peculiar certainty in Harry seemed willing to stick its neck out even further.

"Well, the letter got here somehow," Harry said, "so I'll just wave it around outside and call 'letter for Hogwarts!' and see if an owl picks it up. Dad, do you want to come watch?"

His father shook his head minutely and kept on reading. *Of course,* Harry thought to himself. Magic was a disgraceful thing that only stupid people believed in; if his father went so far as to *test* the hypothesis, or even *watch* it being tested, that would feel like *associating* himself with that...

Only as Harry stumped out the back door, into the backyard, did it occur to him that if an owl *did* come down and snatch the letter, he was going to have some trouble telling Dad about it.

But—well—that can't really *happen, can it? No matter what my brain seems to believe. If an owl really comes down and grabs this envelope, I'm going to have worries a lot more important than what Dad thinks.*

Harry took a deep breath, and raised the envelope into the air.

He swallowed.

Calling out *Letter for Hogwarts!* while holding an envelope high in the air in the middle of your own backyard was... actually pretty embarrassing, now that he thought about it.

No. I'm better than Dad. I will use the scientific method even if it makes me feel stupid.

"Letter—" Harry said, but it actually came out as more of a whispered croak.

Harry steeled his will, and shouted into the empty sky, "*Letter for Hogwarts! Can I get an owl here?*"

"Harry?" asked a bemused woman's voice, one of the neighbors.

Harry pulled down his hand like it was on fire and hid the envelope behind his back like it was drug money. His whole face was hot with shame.

An old woman's face peered out from above the neighboring fence, grizzled grey hair escaping from her hairnet. Mrs. Figg, the occasional babysitter. "What are you doing, Harry?"

"Nothing," Harry said in a strangled voice. "Just—testing a really silly theory—"

"Did you get your acceptance letter from Hogwarts?"

Harry froze in place.

"Yes," Harry's lips said a little while later. "I got a letter from Hogwarts. They say they want my owl by July 31st, but—"

"But you don't *have* an owl. Poor dear! I can't imagine *what* someone must have been thinking, sending you just the standard letter."

A wrinkled arm stretched out over the fence, and opened an expectant hand. Hardly even thinking at this point, Harry gave over his envelope.

"Just leave it to me, dear," said Mrs. Figg, "and in a jiffy or two I'll have someone over."

And her face disappeared from over the fence.

There was a long silence in the backyard.

Then a boy's voice said, calmly and quietly, "What."

CHAPTER TWO

EVERYTHING I BELIEVE IS FALSE

"Of course it was my fault. There's no one else here who could be responsible for anything."

⁂

"Now, just to be clear," Harry said, "if the professor does levitate you, Dad, when you know you haven't been attached to any wires, that's going to be sufficient evidence. You're not going to turn around and say that it's a magician's trick. That wouldn't be fair play. If you feel that way, you should say so *now*, and we can figure out a different experiment instead."

Harry's father, Professor Michael Verres-Evans, rolled his eyes. "Yes, Harry."

"And you, Mum, your theory says that the professor should be able to do this, and if that doesn't happen, you'll admit you're mistaken. Nothing about how magic doesn't work when people are skeptical of it, or anything like that."

Deputy Headmistress Minerva McGonagall was watching Harry with a bemused expression. She looked quite witchy in her black robes and pointed hat, but when she spoke she sounded formal and Scottish, which didn't go together with the look at all. At first glance she looked like someone who ought to cackle and put babies into cauldrons, but

the whole effect was ruined as soon as she opened her mouth. "Is that sufficient, Mr. Potter?" she said. "Shall I go ahead and demonstrate?"

"*Sufficient?* Probably not," Harry said. "But at least it will *help.* Go ahead, Deputy Headmistress."

"Just Professor will do," said she, and then, "*Wingardium Leviosa.*"

Harry looked at his father.

"Huh," Harry said.

His father looked back at him. "Huh," his father echoed.

Then Professor Verres-Evans looked back at Professor McGonagall. "All right, you can put me down now."

His father was lowered carefully to the ground.

Harry ruffled a hand through his own hair. Maybe it was just that strange part of him which had *already* been convinced, but... "That's a bit of an anticlimax," Harry said. "You'd think there'd be some kind of more dramatic mental event associated with updating on an observation of infinitesimal probability—" Harry stopped himself. Mum, McGonagall, and even his Dad were giving him *that look* again. "I mean, with finding out that everything I believe is false."

Seriously, it should have been more dramatic. His brain ought to have been flushing its entire current stock of hypotheses about the universe, none of which allowed this to happen. But instead his brain just seemed to be going, *All right, I saw the Hogwarts professor wave her wand and make your father rise into the air, now what?*

The witch-lady was smiling upon them and looking quite amused. "Would you like a further demonstration, Mr. Potter?"

"You don't have to," Harry said. "We've performed a definitive experiment. But..." Harry hesitated. He couldn't help himself. Actually, under the circumstances, he *shouldn't* be helping himself. It was right and proper to be curious. "What else *can* you do?"

Professor McGonagall turned into a cat.

Harry scrambled back unthinkingly, backpedaling so fast that he tripped over a stray stack of books and landed hard on his bottom with a *thwack.* His hands came down to catch himself without quite reaching properly, and there was a warning twinge in his shoulder as the weight came down unbraced.

At once the small tabby cat morphed back up into a robed woman. "I'm sorry, Mr. Potter," McGonagall said, sounding sincere, though her lips were twitching toward a smile. "I should have warned you."

Harry was breathing in short pants. His voice came out choked. *"You can't DO that!"*

"It's only a Transfiguration," said McGonagall. "An Animagus transformation, to be exact."

"You turned into a cat! A SMALL cat! You violated Conservation of Energy! That's not just an arbitrary rule, it's implied by the form of the quantum Hamiltonian! Rejecting it destroys unitarity and then you get FTL signaling! And cats are COMPLICATED! A human mind can't just visualize a whole cat's anatomy and, and all the cat biochemistry, and what about the *neurology?* How can you go on *thinking* using a cat-sized brain?"

McGonagall's lips were twitching harder now. "Magic."

"Magic *isn't enough* to do that! You'd have to be a god!"

McGonagall blinked. "That's the first time I've ever been called *that.*"

A blur was coming over Harry's vision, as his brain started to comprehend what had just broken. The whole idea of a unified universe with mathematically regular laws, that was what had been flushed down the toilet; the whole notion of *physics*. Three thousand years of resolving big complicated things into smaller pieces, discovering that the music of the planets was the same tune as a falling apple, finding that the true laws were perfectly universal and had no exceptions anywhere and took the form of simple math governing the smallest parts, *not to mention* that the mind was the brain and the brain was made of neurons, a brain was what a person *was*—

And then a woman turned into a cat, so much for all that.

A hundred questions fought for priority over Harry's lips and the winner poured out: "And, and what kind of incantation is *Wingardium Leviosa?* Who invents the words to these spells, preschool children?"

"That will do, Mr. Potter," McGonagall said crisply, though her eyes shone with suppressed amusement. "If you wish to learn about magic, I suggest that we finalize the paperwork so that you can attend Hogwarts."

"Right," Harry said, somewhat dazed. He pulled his thoughts together. The March of Reason would just have to start over, that was all; they still had the experimental method and that was the important thing. "How do I get to Hogwarts, then?"

A choked laugh escaped McGonagall, as if extracted from her by tweezers.

"Hold on a moment, Harry," his father said. "Remember why you haven't been attending school up until now? What about your condition?"

McGonagall spun to face Michael. "His condition? What's this?"

"I don't sleep right," Harry said. He waved his hands helplessly. "My sleep cycle is twenty-six hours long, I always go to sleep two hours later, every day. I can't fall asleep any earlier than that, and then the next day I go to sleep two hours later than *that.* 10PM, 12AM, 2AM, 4AM, until it goes around the clock. Even if I try to wake up early, it makes no difference and I'm a wreck that whole day. That's why I haven't been attending a regular school up until now."

"One of the reasons," said his mother. Harry shot her a glare.

McGonagall gave a long *hmmmmm.* "I can't recall hearing about such a condition before..." she said slowly. "I'll check with Madam Pomfrey to see if she knows any remedies." Then her face brightened. "No, I'm sure this won't be a problem—I'll find a solution one way or another. Now," and her gaze sharpened again, "what are these *other* reasons?"

Harry sent his parents a glare. "I am a conscientious objector to the child draft, on the grounds that I should not have to suffer for a continually disintegrating school system's abject failure to provide teachers or study materials of even minimally adequate quality."

Both of Harry's parents howled with laughter at that, like they thought it was all a big joke. "Oh," said Harry's father, eyes bright, "is *that* why you bit a math teacher in third year."

"*She didn't know what a logarithm was!*"

"Of course," seconded Harry's mother. "Biting her was a very mature response to that."

Harry's father nodded. "A well-considered policy for solving the general problem of teachers who don't understand logarithms."

"I was *seven years old!* How long are you going to keep on bringing that up?"

"I know," said his mother sympathetically, "you bite *one* math teacher and they never let you forget it, do they?"

Harry turned to McGonagall. "There! You see what I have to deal with?"

"Excuse me," said Petunia, and fled through the screen door onto the outside porch, from which her screams of laughter were quite clearly audible.

"There, ah, there," McGonagall seemed to be having trouble speaking for some reason, "there is to be no biting of teachers at Hogwarts, is that very clear, Mr. Potter?"

Harry scowled at her. "Fine, I won't bite anyone who doesn't bite me first."

Professor Michael Verres-Evans also had to leave the room briefly upon hearing that.

"Well," McGonagall sighed, after Harry's parents had composed themselves and returned. "Well. I think, under the circumstances, that I should avoid taking you to purchase your study materials until a day or two before school begins."

"What? Why? The other children already know magic, don't they? I have to start catching up right away!"

"Rest assured, Mr. Potter," replied Professor McGonagall, "Hogwarts is quite capable of teaching the basics. And I suspect, Mr. Potter, that if I leave you alone for two months with your schoolbooks, even without a wand, I will return to this house only to find a crater billowing purple smoke, a depopulated city surrounding it and a plague of flaming zebras terrorizing what remains of England."

Harry's mother and father nodded in perfect unison.

"*Mum! Dad!*"

CHAPTER THREE

COMPARING REALITY TO ITS ALTERNATIVES

"I do not have time for this."



"Good Lord," said the bartender, peering at Harry, "is this—can this be—?"

Harry leaned forward toward the bar of the Leaky Cauldron as best he could, though it came up to somewhere around the tips of his eyebrows. A question like *that* deserved his very best.

"Am I—could I be—maybe—you never know—if it *is*—but the question remains—*why?*"

"Bless my soul," whispered the old bartender, "Harry Potter... what an honor."

Harry blinked, then rallied. "Well, yes, you're very perceptive; most people don't realize that quite so quickly—"

"That's enough," Professor McGonagall said. Her hand tightened on Harry's shoulder. "Don't pester the boy, Tom, he's new to all this."

"But it is him?" quavered an old woman. "It's Harry Potter?" With a scraping sound, she got up from her chair.

"Doris—" McGonagall said warningly. The glare she shot around the room should have been enough to intimidate anyone.

"I only want to shake his hand," the woman whispered. She bent low and stuck out a wrinkled hand, which Harry, feeling confused and more uncomfortable than he ever had in his life, carefully shook. Tears fell from the woman's eyes onto their clasped hands. "My granson was an Auror," she whispered to him. "Died in seventy-nine. Thank you, Harry Potter. Thank heavens for you."

"You're welcome," Harry said, entirely on automatic, and then turned his head and shot McGonagall a terrified, pleading look.

McGonagall slammed her foot down just as the general rush was about to start. It made a noise that gave Harry a new referent for the phrase "Crack of Doom", and everyone froze in place.

"We're in a hurry," said McGonagall in a voice that sounded perfectly, utterly normal.

They left the bar without any trouble.

"McGonagall?" Harry said, once they were in the courtyard. He had meant to ask what was going on, but oddly found himself asking an entirely different question instead. "Who was the pale man? The man in the bar with the twitching eye?"

"Hm?" McGonagall said, sounding a bit surprised; perhaps she hadn't expected that question either. "That was Professor Quirrell. He'll be teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts this year at Hogwarts."

"I had the strangest feeling that I knew him..." Harry rubbed his forehead. "And that I shouldn't ought to shake his hand." Like someone he'd known a long time ago, and then been separated from... an unhappy feeling, a sense of loss. "And the rest of it?"

McGonagall gave him an odd glance. "Mr. Potter... do you know... how *much* have you been told... about how your parents died?"

Harry returned a steady look. "My parents are alive and well, and they always refused to talk to me about how my *genetic* parents died. From which I infer that it wasn't good."

"An admirable loyalty," said McGonagall. Her voice went low. "Though it hurts a little to hear you say it like that. Lily and James were friends of mine."

Harry looked away, suddenly ashamed. "I'm sorry," he said in a small voice. "But I *have* a Mum and Dad. And I know that I'd just make myself unhappy by comparing that reality to... something perfect that I built up in my imagination."

"That is amazingly wise of you," McGonagall said quietly. "But your *genetic* parents died very well indeed, protecting you."

Protecting me?

Something strange clutched at Harry's heart. "What... *did* happen?"

McGonagall sighed. Her wand tapped Harry's forehead, and his vision blurred for a moment. "Something of a disguise," McGonagall said, "so that this doesn't happen again, not until you're ready." Then her wand licked out again, and tapped three times on a brick wall...

...which hollowed into a hole, and dilated and expanded and shivered into a huge archway, revealing a long row of shops with signs advertising cauldrons and dragon livers.

Harry didn't blink. It wasn't like anyone was turning into a cat.

And they walked forward, together, into the wizarding world.

There were merchants hawking Bounce Boots ("Made with real Flubber!") and "Knives + 3! Forks + 2! Spoons with a + 4 bonus!" There were goggles that would turn anything you looked at green, and a lineup of cushy lounge chairs with ejection seats for emergencies.

Harry's head kept rotating, rotating like it was trying to screw itself off his neck. It was like walking through the magical items section of an *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons* rulebook (he didn't play the game, but he did enjoy reading the rulebooks). Harry desperately didn't want to miss a single item for sale, in case it was one of the three you needed to complete the cycle of infinite *wish* spells.

Then Harry spotted something that made him, entirely without thinking, veer off from McGonagall and start heading straight into the store, a front of blue bricks with bronze-metal trim. He was brought back to reality only when McGonagall stepped right in front of him.

"Mr. Potter?" she said.

Harry blinked, then realized what he'd just done. "I'm sorry! I forgot for a moment that I was with you instead of my family." Harry gestured at the store window, which displayed fiery letters that shone

piercingly bright and yet remote, spelling out *Bigbam's Brilliant Books*. "When you walk past a bookstore you haven't visited before, you have to go in and look around. That's the family rule."

"That is the most Ravenclaw thing I have ever heard."

"What?"

"Nothing. Mr. Potter, our first step is to visit Gringotts, the bank of the wizarding world. Your *genetic* family vault is there, with the inheritance your *genetic* parents left you, and you'll need money for school supplies." She sighed. "And, I suppose, a certain amount of spending money for books could be excused as well. Though you might want to hold off for a time. Hogwarts has quite a large library on magical subjects. And the tower in which, I strongly suspect, you will be living, has a more broad-ranging library of its own. Any book you bought now would probably be a duplicate."

Harry nodded, and they walked on.

"Don't get me wrong, it's a *great* distraction," Harry said as his head kept swiveling, "probably the best distraction anyone has ever tried on me, but don't think I've forgotten about our pending discussion."

McGonagall sighed. "Your parents—or your mother at any rate—may have been very wise not to tell you."

"So you wish that I could continue in blissful ignorance? There is a certain flaw in that plan, Professor McGonagall."

"I suppose it would be rather pointless," the witch said tightly, "when anyone on the street could tell you the story. Very well."

And she told him of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, the Dark Lord, Voldemort.

"Voldemort?" Harry whispered. It should have been funny, but it wasn't. The name burned with a cold feeling, ruthlessness, diamond clarity, a hammer of pure titanium descending upon an anvil of yielding flesh. A chill swept over Harry even as he pronounced the word, and he resolved then and there to use safer terms like You-Know-Who.

The Dark Lord had raged upon wizarding Britain like a wilding wolf, tearing and rending at the fabric of their everyday lives. Other countries had wrung their hands but hesitated to intervene, whether out of apa-

thetic selfishness or simple fear, for whichever was first among them to oppose the Dark Lord, their peace would be the next target of his terror.

(*The bystander effect,* thought Harry, thinking of Latane and Darley's experiment which had shown that you were more likely to get help if you had an epileptic fit in front of one person than in front of three. *Diffusion of responsibility, everyone hoping that someone else would go first.*)

The Death Eaters had followed in the Dark Lord's wake and in his vanguard, carrion vultures to pick at wounds, or snakes to bite and weaken. The Death Eaters were not as terrible as the Dark Lord, but they were terrible, and they were many. And the Death Eaters wielded more than wands; there was wealth within those masked ranks, and political power, and secrets held in blackmail, to paralyze a society trying to protect itself.

An old and respected journalist, Yermy Wibble, called for increased taxes and a draft. He shouted that it was absurd for the many to cower in fear of the few. His skin, only his skin, had been found nailed to the newsroom wall that next morning, next to the skins of his wife and two daughters. Everyone wished for something more to be done, and no one dared take the lead to propose it. Whoever stood out the most became the next example.

Until the names of James and Lily Potter rose to the top of that list.

And those two might have died with their wands in their hands and not regretted their choices, for they *were* heroes; but for that they had an infant child, their son, Harry Potter.

Tears were coming into Harry's eyes. He wiped them away in anger or maybe desperation, *I didn't know those people, not really, they aren't my parents* now, *it would be pointless to feel so sad for them—*

When Harry was done sobbing into McGonagall's robes, he looked up, and felt a little bit better to see tears in McGonagall's eyes as well.

"So what happened?" Harry said, his voice trembling.

"The Dark Lord came to Godric's Hollow," said McGonagall in a whisper. "You should have been hidden, but you were betrayed. The Dark Lord killed James, and he killed Lily, and he came in the end to you, to your crib. He cast the Killing Curse at you. And that was where it ended. The Killing Curse is formed of pure hate, and strikes directly

at the soul, severing it from the body. It cannot be blocked. The only defense is not to be there. But you survived. You are the only person ever to survive. The Killing Curse reflected and rebounded and struck the Dark Lord, leaving only the burnt hulk of his body and a scar on your forehead. That was the end of the terror, and we were free. That, Harry Potter, is why people want to see the scar on your forehead, and why they want to shake your hand."

The storm of weeping that had washed through Harry had used up all his tears; he could not cry again, he was done.

(And somewhere in the back of his mind was a small, small note of confusion, a sense of something wrong about that story; and it should have been a part of Harry's art to notice that tiny note, but he was distracted. For it is a sad rule that whenever you are most in need of your art as a rationalist, that is when you are most likely to forget it.)

Harry detached himself from McGonagall's side. "I'll—have to think about this," he said, trying to keep his voice under control. He stared at his shoes. "Um. You can go ahead and call them my parents, if you want, you don't have to say 'genetic parents' or anything. I guess there's no reason I can't have two mothers and two fathers."

There was no sound from McGonagall.

And they walked together in silence, until they came before a great white building with vast bronze doors.

"Gringotts," said McGonagall.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE EFFICIENT MARKET HYPOTHESIS

"World domination is such an ugly phrase. I prefer to call it world optimization."

⁂

Heaps of gold Galleons. Stacks of silver Sickles. Piles of bronze Knuts. Harry stood there, and stared with his mouth open at the family vault. He had so many questions he didn't know *where* to start.

From just outside the door of the vault, McGonagall watched him, seeming to lean casually against the wall, but her eyes intent. Well, that made sense. Being plopped in front of a giant heap of gold coins was a test of character so pure it was archetypal.

"Are these coins the pure metal?" Harry said finally.

"What?" hissed the goblin Griphook, who was waiting near the door. "Are you questioning the integrity of Gringotts, Mister Potter-Evans-Verres?"

"No," said Harry absently, "not at all, sorry if that came out wrong, sir. I just have no idea at all how your financial system works. I'm asking if Galleons in general are made of pure gold."

"Of course," said Griphook.

"And can anyone coin them, or are they issued by a monopoly that thereby collects seigniorage?"

"What?" said McGonagall blankly.

Griphook grinned, showing very sharp teeth. "Only a fool would trust any but goblin coin!"

"In other words," Harry said, "the coins aren't supposed to be worth any more than the metal making them up?"

Griphook stared at Harry. McGonagall looked bemused.

"I mean, suppose I came in here with a ton of silver. Could I get a ton of Sickles made from it?"

"For a fee, Mr. Potter-Evans-Verres." The goblin watched him with glittering eyes. "For a certain fee. Where would you find a ton of silver, I wonder?"

"I was speaking hypothetically," Harry said. *For now, at any rate.* "So... how much would you charge in fees, as a fraction of the whole weight?"

Griphook's eyes were intent. "I would have to consult my superiors..."

"Give me a wild guess. I won't hold Gringotts to it."

"A twentieth part of the metal would well pay for the coining."

Harry nodded. "Thank you very much, Mr. Griphook."

So not only is the wizarding economy almost completely decoupled from the Muggle economy, no one here has ever heard of arbitrage. The larger Muggle economy had a fluctuating trading range of gold to silver, so every time the Muggle gold-to-silver ratio got more than 5% away from the weight of seventeen Sickles to one Galleon, either gold or silver should have drained from the wizarding economy until it became impossible to maintain the exchange rate. Bring in a ton of silver, change to Sickles (and pay 5%), change the Sickles for Galleons, take the gold to the Muggle world, exchange it for more silver than you started with, and repeat.

Wasn't the Muggle gold to silver ratio somewhere around fifty to one? Harry didn't think it was seventeen, anyway. And it looked like the silver coins were actually *smaller* than the gold coins.

Then again, Harry was standing in a bank that *literally* stored your money in vaults full of gold coins guarded by dragons, where you had to go in and take coins out of your vault whenever you wanted to spend money. The finer points of arbitraging away market inefficiencies might

well be lost on them. He'd been tempted to make some sort of snide remark about the crudity of their financial system...

But the sad thing is, their way is probably better.

On the other hand, one competent hedge fundie could probably own the whole wizarding world within a week. Harry filed away this notion in case he ever ran out of money, or had a week free.

Meanwhile, the giant heaps of gold coins within the Potter vault ought to suit his near-term requirements.

Harry stumped forward, and began picking up gold coins with one hand and dumping them into the other.

When he had reached twenty, McGonagall coughed. "I think that will be more than enough to pay for your school supplies, Mr. Potter."

"Hm?" Harry said, his mind elsewhere. "Hold on, I'm doing a Fermi calculation."

"A *what?*" McGonagall said, sounding somewhat alarmed.

"It's a math thing. Named after Enrico Fermi. A way of getting rough numbers very quickly in your head..."

Twenty gold Galleons weighed a tenth of a kilogram, maybe? And gold was, what, ten thousand British pounds a kilogram? So a Galleon would be worth about fifty British pounds... The heaps/stacks of gold coins looked to be about sixty coins high and twenty coins wide in either dimension of the base, and was pyramidal, so it would be around one-third of the cube. Eight thousand Galleons per heap, roughly, and there were around five heaps of that size, so forty thousand Galleons or 2 million British pounds.

Not bad. Harry smiled with a certain grim satisfaction. It was too bad that he was right in the middle of discovering the amazing new world of magic, and couldn't take time out to explore the amazing new world of being rich, which a quick Fermi estimate said was roughly a billion times less interesting.

Still, that's the last time I ever mow a lawn for one lousy pound.

Harry wheeled from the giant heap of money. "Pardon me for asking, Professor McGonagall, but I understand that my parents were in their twenties when they died. Is this a *usual* amount of money for a young couple to have in their vault, in the wizarding world?" If it was,

a cup of coffee probably cost five thousand pounds. Rule one of economics: you can't eat money.

McGonagall shook her head. "Your father was the last heir of an old family, Mr. Potter. It's also possible..." McGonagall hesitated. "Some of this money may be from bounties that had been placed on You-Know-Who, payable to his ki—" McGonagall swallowed the word. "To whoever might defeat him. Or those bounties might not have been collected yet. I'm not sure."

"Interesting..." Harry said slowly. "So some of this really is, in a sense, mine. That is, earned by me. Sort of. Possibly. Even if I don't remember the occasion." Harry's fingers tapped against his pants-leg. "That makes me feel less guilty about spending *a very tiny fraction of it! Don't panic, Professor McGonagall!*"

"Mr. Potter! You are a minor, and as such, you will only be allowed to make *reasonable* withdrawals from—"

"I am *all about* reasonable! I am totally on board with fiscal prudence and impulse control! But I *did* see some things on the way here which would constitute *sensible, grown-up* purchases..."

Harry locked gazes with McGonagall, engaging in a silent staring contest.

"Like what?" McGonagall said finally.

"Trunks whose insides hold more than their outsides?"

McGonagall's face grew stern. "Those are *very* expensive, Mr. Potter!"

"Yes, but—" Harry pleaded. "I'm sure that when I'm an adult I'll want one. And I *can* afford one. It would make just as much sense to buy it now instead of later, and get the use of it right away, wouldn't it? It's the same money either way. I mean, I *would* want a good one, with *lots* of room inside, good enough that I wouldn't have to just get a better one later..." Harry trailed off hopefully.

McGonagall's gaze didn't waver. "And just what would you *keep* in a trunk like that, Mr. Potter—"

"Books."

"Of course," sighed McGonagall.

"You should have told me *much earlier* that sort of magic item existed! And that I could afford one! Now my father and I are going to have to spend the next two days *frantically* hitting up all the used bookstores for old textbooks, so I can have a decent math and science library with me at Hogwarts—and maybe a mini SF&F collection, if I can assemble something decent out of the bargain bins. Or better yet, I'll make the deal a little sweeter for you, okay? Just let me buy—"

"*Mr. Potter!* You think you can *bribe* me?"

"What? *No!* Not like that! I'm saying, Hogwarts can keep some of the books I bring, if you think that any of them would make good additions to the library. I'm going to be getting them cheap, and *I* just want to have them around somewhere or other. It's okay to bribe people with *books,* right? That's a—"

"Family tradition."

"Yes, exactly."

McGonagall's whole body seemed to slump. "I fear I cannot deny the logic of your words, though I very much wish I could. I will allow you to withdraw an additional hundred Galleons, Mr. Potter. I *know* that I will regret this, and I am doing it anyway."

"That's the spirit! And does a 'mokeskin pouch' do what I think it does?"

"It can't do as much as a trunk," McGonagall said reluctantly, "but a mokeskin pouch with a Retrieval Charm and Undetectable Extension Charm can hold a number of items until they are called forth by the one who emplaced them."

"Yes, I definitely need one of those too. It's like the super beltpack of ultimate awesomeness! Batman's utility belt of holding! Never mind a swiss army knife, you could just carry a whole tool set in there! Or other magic items! Or *books!* I could have the top three books I was reading on me at all times, and just pull one out anywhere! I'll never have to waste another minute of my life! What do you say, Professor McGonagall? It's in the best of all possible causes."

"Fine. You may add another ten Galleons."

Griphook was favoring Harry with a gaze of frank respect, possibly even outright admiration.

"And a little spending money, like you mentioned earlier. I think I can remember seeing one or two other things I might want to store in that pouch."

"*Don't push it, Mr. Potter.*"

"But oh, Professor McGonagall, why rain on my parade? Surely this is a *happy* day, when I discover all things wizarding for the first time! Why act the part of the grumpy grownup when instead you could smile and remember your own innocent childhood, watching the look of delight upon my young face as I buy a few toys using an insignificant fraction of the wealth that I earned by defeating the most terrible wizard Britain has ever known, not that I'm accusing you of being ungrateful or anything, but still, what are a few toys compared to that?"

"*You,*" McGonagall growled. There was a look on her face so fearsome and terrible that Harry squeaked and stepped back, knocking over a whole pile of gold coins with a great jingling noise and sprawling backward into a heap of money. Griphook sighed and put a palm over his face. "I would be doing a great service to wizarding Britain, Mr. Potter, if I locked you in this vault and left you here."

And they left without any more trouble.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE FUNDAMENTAL ATTRIBUTION ERROR

"He's only eleven years old, Hermione."
"So are you."
"I don't count."

⁂

The Moke Shop was a quaint little shop (some might even say cute) ensconced behind a vegetable stand that was behind a magical glove store that was on a byway off a side street of Diagon Alley. The shopkeeper, disappointingly, was not a wizened old mysterious man. Just a nervous-looking young woman wearing fading yellow robes. Right now she was holding out a Moke Super Pouch QX31, whose selling point was that it had a widening lip as well as an Undetectable Extension Charm: you could actually fit big things in it, though the total volume was still limited.

Harry had *insisted* on coming here straight away, first thing—insisted as hard as he thought he could without making McGonagall suspicious. Harry had something he needed to put into the pouch as soon as possible. It wasn't the bag of Galleons that McGonagall had allowed him to withdraw from Gringotts. It was all the other Galleons that Harry had surreptitiously shoved into his pocket after accidentally falling into a heap of gold coins. That *had* been a real accident, but Harry was never one to discard an opportunity... though it'd really been more of a spur-

of-the-moment thing. Ever since Harry had been awkwardly carrying the allowed bag of Galleons next to his pants pocket, so that any jingling would seem to come from the right place.

This still left the question of how he was actually going to get the *other* coins into the pouch without getting caught. The golden coins might have been his, but they *were* still stolen—self-stolen? Auto thieved?

Harry looked up from the Moke Super Pouch QX31 on the counter in front of him. "Can I try this for a bit? To make sure it works, um, reliably?" He widened his eyes in an expression of boyish, playful innocence.

Sure enough, after ten repetitions of putting the coin-bag into the pouch, reaching in, whispering "bag of gold", and taking it out, McGonagall took a step away and turned her head to look at some of the other items in the shop, and the shopkeeper moved her eyes to watch.

Harry dropped the bag of gold into the mokeskin pouch with his *left* hand; his *right* hand came out of his pocket tightly holding some of the gold coins, reached into the mokeskin pouch, dropped the loose Galleons, and (with a whisper of "bag of gold") retrieved the original bag. Then the bag went back into his *left* hand, to be dropped in again, and Harry's *right* hand went back into his pocket...

McGonagall looked back at him once, but Harry managed to avoid freezing or flinching, and she didn't seem to notice anything. Though you never *did* quite know, with the adults that had a sense of humor. It took three iterations to get the job done, and Harry guessed he'd managed to steal maybe thirty Galleons from himself.

Harry reached up, wiped a bit of sweat from his forehead, and exhaled. "I'd like this one, please."

Fifteen Galleons lighter (twice the price of a wizard's wand, apparently) and one Moke Super Pouch QX31 heavier, Harry and McGonagall pushed their way out of the door. The door formed a hand and waved goodbye to them as they left, extruding its arm in a way that made Harry feel a bit queasy.

And then, unfortunately...

"Are you *really* Harry Potter?" whispered the old man, one huge tear sliding down his cheek. "You wouldn't lie about that, would you? Only I'd heard rumors that you didn't *really* survive the Killing Curse and that's why no one ever heard from you again."

...it seemed that McGonagall's disguise spell was less than perfectly effective against more experienced magical practitioners.

McGonagall had laid a hand on Harry's shoulder and pulled him into the nearest byway the moment she'd heard "Harry Potter?" The old man had followed, but at least it looked like no one else had heard.

Harry considered the question. *Was* he really Harry Potter? "I only know what other people have told me," Harry said. "It's not like I remember being born." His hand brushed his forehead. "I've had this scar as long as I remember, and I've been told my name was Harry Potter as long as I remember. But," Harry said thoughtfully, "if there's already sufficient cause to postulate a conspiracy, there's no reason why they wouldn't just find another wizarding orphan and raise him to believe that *he* was Harry Potter—"

McGonagall drew her hand over her face in exasperation. "You look just about exactly like your father, James, the year he first attended Hogwarts, except that you have your mother Lily's eyes. And I can attest on the basis of *personality alone* that you are *definitely* related to the Scourge of Gryffindor."

"*She* could be in on it too," Harry observed.

"No," quavered the old man. "She's right. You have your mother's eyes."

"Hmm," Harry frowned. "I suppose *you* could be in on it too—"

"Enough, Mr. Potter," McGonagall said.

The old man raised up a hand as if to touch Harry, but then let it fall. "I'm just glad that you're alive," he murmured. "Thank you, Harry Potter. Thank you for what you did... I'll leave you alone now."

And his cane slowly tapped away, out the byway and down the main street of Diagon Alley.

McGonagall looked around, her expression tense and grim. Harry automatically looked around himself. But the byway seemed to be

empty of all but old leaves, and from the mouth leading out into Diagon Alley there were only swiftly striding passersby to be seen.

Finally McGonagall seemed to relax. "That was not well done," she said in a low voice. "I know you're not used to this, Mr. Potter, but people do care about you. Please be kind to them."

Harry looked down at his shoes. "They shouldn't," he said with a tinge of bitterness. "Care about me, I mean."

"You saved them from You-Know-Who," McGonagall said. "How should they not care?"

Harry looked up at McGonagall and sighed. "I suppose there's no chance that if I said *fundamental attribution error* you'd have any idea what that meant."

McGonagall shook her head. "No, but please explain."

"Well..." Harry said, trying to figure out how to describe that particular bit of Muggle science. "Suppose you come into work and see your coworker kicking his desk. You think, 'what an angry person he must be'. Your coworker is thinking about how someone pushed him into a wall on the way to work and then shouted at him. *Anyone* would be angry at that, he thinks. When we look at others we see personality traits that explain their behavior, but when we look at ourselves we see circumstances that explain our behavior. People's stories make internal sense to them, from the inside, but we don't see people's histories trailing behind them in the air. We only see them in one situation, and we don't see what they would be like in a different situation. So the fundamental attribution error is that we explain by permanent, enduring traits what would be better explained by circumstance and context." There were some elegant experiments which confirmed this, but Harry wasn't about to go into them.

McGonagall's eyebrows drew up. "I think I understand..." she said slowly. "But what does that have to do with you?"

Harry kicked the brick wall of the byway, hard enough to make his foot hurt. "People think that I saved them from You-Know-Who because I'm some kind of great warrior of the Light."

"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord..." murmured McGonagall, an irony leavening her voice which Harry did not then

understand.

"Yes," Harry said, annoyance and frustration warring in his voice, "like I destroyed the Dark Lord because I have some kind of permanent, enduring destroy-the-Dark-Lord trait. I was fifteen months old at the time! I don't *know* what happened, but I would *guess* it had something to do with, as the saying goes, contingent environmental circumstances. And certainly nothing to do with my personality. People don't care about *me,* they aren't even paying attention to *me,* they want to shake hands with a *bad explanation*." Harry paused, and looked at McGonagall. "Do *you* know what really happened?"

"I *have* formed a conjecture..." McGonagall said. "After meeting you, that is."

"Yes?"

"You triumphed over the Dark Lord by being more awful than *he* was, and survived the Killing Curse by being more terrible than Death."

"Ha. Ha. Ha." Harry kicked the wall again.

McGonagall chuckled. "Let's get you to Madam Malkin's next. I think your Muggle clothing might be attracting attention."

They ran into two more well-wishers along the way.

McGonagall paused outside the door of Madam Malkin's Robes. It was a genuinely boring storefront, mostly brick that was red like ordinary brick, and glass windows showing plain black robes. Not robes that shone or changed or spun or radiated strange rays that seemed to go right through your shirt and tickle you. Just plain black robes—or at least that was all you could see through the window. The door was propped wide open, as if to advertise that there were no secrets here and nothing to hide.

"I'm going to go off for a few minutes while you get fitted for your robes," McGonagall said. "Will you be all right with that?"

Harry nodded. He hated clothes shopping with a fiery passion and couldn't blame McGonagall for feeling the same way.

McGonagall tapped his head with her wand. "You'll need to be clear to Madam Malkin's senses, so I'm taking off the Obfuscation."

"Uh..." Harry said. That did worry him a little.

"I went to Hogwarts with Madam Malkin," McGonagall said. "Even then, she was one of the most *composed* people I knew. She wouldn't turn a hair if You-Know-Who himself walked into her shop." McGonagall's voice was reminiscent, and very approving. "Madam Malkin won't bother you, and she won't let anyone else bother you."

"Where *are* you going?" Harry inquired. "Just in case, you know, something *does* happen."

McGonagall gave Harry a hard, skeptical look. "I am going *there*," she said, pointing at a building across the street which showed the sign of a wooden keg, "and buying a drink, which I desperately need. *You* are to get fitted for your robes, *nothing else*. I will come back to check up on you *shortly*, and I *expect* to find Madam Malkin's shop still standing and not *in any way* on fire."

Madam Malkin was a bustling old woman who didn't say a word about Harry when she saw the scar on his forehead, and she shot a sharp look at an assistant when that girl seemed about to say something. Madam Malkin got out a set of animated, writhing bits of cloth that seemed to serve as tape measures and set to work examining the medium of her art.

Next to Harry, a pale young boy with a pointed face and *awesome-cool* blonde-white hair seemed to be going through the final stages of a similar process. One of Malkin's two assistants was carefully examining the white-haired boy and the checkerboard-gridded robe he was wearing; occasionally she would tap a corner of the robe with her wand, and the robe would loosen or tighten.

"Hello," said the boy. "Hogwarts, too?"

Harry could predict where this conversation was about to go, and he decided in a split second of frustration that enough was enough.

"Good heavens," whispered Harry, "it couldn't be." He let his eyes widen. "Your... name, sir?"

"Draco Malfoy," said Draco Malfoy, looking slightly puzzled.

"It *is* you! Draco Malfoy. I—I never thought I'd be so honored, sir." Harry wished he could make tears come out of his eyes. The others usually started crying at around this point.

"Oh," said Draco, sounding a little confused. Then his lips stretched in a smug smile. "It's good to meet someone who knows his place."

One of the assistants, the one who'd seemed to recognize Harry, made a muffled choking sound.

Harry burbled on. "I'm delighted to meet you, Mr. Malfoy. Just unutterably delighted. And to be attending Hogwarts in your very year! It makes my heart swoon."

Oops. That last part might have sounded a little odd, like he was hitting on Draco or something.

"And it lightens my heart as well to see that I can expect to be treated with the respect due the Malfoy family," the other boy lobbed back, accompanied by a smile such as the highest of kings might bestow upon the least of his subjects, if that subject were honest, though poor.

Eh... Damn, Harry was having trouble thinking up his next line. Well, everyone *did* want to shake the hand of Harry Potter, so—"When my clothes are fitted, sir, might you deign to shake my hand? I should wish nothing more to put the capper upon this day, nay, this month, indeed, my whole lifetime."

Draco glared in return. "I think you ask an unwarranted familiarity with my person! What have you ever done for the Malfoy family that entitles you to such a request?"

Oh, I am so totally trying this routine on the next person who wants to shake my hand. Harry bowed his head. "No, no, sir, I understand. I'm sorry for asking. I should be honored to clean your boots, rather."

"Indeed," snapped Draco. His stern face lightened somewhat. "Though your wish is understandable enough. Tell me, what House do you think you might be sorted into? I'm bound for Slytherin House, of course, like my father Lucius before me. And for you, I should guess House Hufflepuff, or possibly House Elf."

Harry grinned sheepishly. "Professor McGonagall says that I'm the most Ravenclaw person she's ever seen or heard tell of in legend, so much so that Rowena herself would tell me to get out more, whatever *that* means, and that I'll undoubtedly end up in Ravenclaw House if the Sorting Hat isn't screaming in horror too loudly for the rest of us to make out any words, end quote."

"Wow," Draco said, sounding slightly impressed. He gave a sort of wistful sigh. "Your flattery was great, or I thought so, anyway—you'd do well in Slytherin House, too. Usually it's only my father who gets that sort of groveling. I'm *hoping* the other Slytherins will suck up to me now I'm at Hogwarts... I guess this is a good sign, then."

Harry coughed. "Actually, sorry, I've got no idea who you are really."

"*Oh come on!*" Draco said with fierce disappointment. "Why'd you go and do that, then?" Draco's eyes widened with sudden suspicion. "And how do you *not* know about the Malfoys? And what are those *clothes* you're wearing? Are your parents *Muggles?*"

"Two of my parents are dead," Harry said. His heart twinged. When he put it that way—"My other two parents are Muggles, and they're the ones that raised me."

"*What?*" said Draco. "Who *are* you?"

"Harry Potter, pleased to meet you."

"*Harry Potter?*" gasped Draco. "*The* Harry—" and the boy cut off abruptly.

There was a brief silence.

Then, with bright enthusiasm, "Harry Potter? *The* Harry Potter? Gosh, I've always wanted to meet you!"

Draco's attendant emitted a sound like she was strangling but kept on with her work, lifting Draco's arms to carefully remove the checkerboard robe.

"Shut up," Harry suggested.

"Can I have your autograph? No, wait, I want a picture with you first!"

"Shut*up*shut*up*shut*up*."

"I'm just so inexpressibly *delighted* to meet you!"

"Burst into flames and die."

"But you're Harry Potter, the glorious saviour of the wizarding world, defeater of the Dark Lord! Everyone's hero, Harry Potter! I've always wanted to be just like you when I grow up so I can defeat Dark Lords too—"

Draco cut off the words in mid-sentence. His face froze in absolute horror.

Tall, white-haired, coldly elegant in black robes of the finest quality. One hand gripping a silver-handled cane that took on the character of a deadly weapon just by being in that hand. His eyes regarded the room with the dispassionate quality of an executioner, a man to whom killing was not painful, or even deliciously forbidden, but just a routine activity like breathing. *Perfection* was the word that came automatically to mind.

That was the man who had, just that moment, strolled in through the open door.

"Draco," said the man, low and very angry, "*what* are you *saying?*"

In one split second of sympathetic panic, Harry formulated a rescue plan.

"Lucius Malfoy!" gasped Harry Potter. "*The* Lucius Malfoy?"

One of Malkin's assistants had to turn away and face the wall.

Cool, murderous eyes regarded him. "Harry Potter."

"I am so, so honored to meet you!"

The dark eyes widened, shocked surprise replacing deadly threat.

"Your son has been telling me *all* about you," Harry gushed on, hardly even knowing what was coming out of his mouth but just talking as fast as possible. "But of course I knew about you all before then, everyone knows about you, the great Lucius Malfoy! The most honored laureate of all the House of Slytherin, I've been thinking about trying to get into Slytherin House myself just because I heard you were in it as a child—"

"*What are you saying, Mr. Potter?*" came a near-scream from outside the shop, and Professor McGonagall burst in a second later.

There was such pure horror on her face that Harry's mouth opened automatically, and then blocked on nothing-to-say.

"Professor McGonagall!" cried Draco. "Is it really you? I've heard so much about you from my father, I've been thinking of trying to get Sorted into Gryffindor so I can—"

"*What?*" bellowed Lucius Malfoy and Professor McGonagall in perfect unison, standing side-by-side. Their heads swiveled to look at each

other in duplicate motions, and then the two recoiled from one another as though performing a synchronized dance.

There was a sudden flurry of action as Lucius seized Draco and dragged him out of the shop.

And then there was silence.

McGonagall looked down at the small glass of wine that had been in her hand. It was tilted over on its side, forgotten in the rush, and only a few drops of alcohol now clung to it.

McGonagall strode forward into the shop until she was opposite Madam Malkin.

"Madam Malkin," McGonagall said, her voice calm. "What has been happening here?"

Madam Malkin looked back silently for four seconds, and then cracked up. She fell against the wall, wheezing out laughter, and that set off both of her assistants, one of whom fell to her hands and knees on the floor, giggling hysterically.

McGonagall slowly turned to look at Harry, her expression chilly. "I leave you alone for five minutes. Five minutes, Mr. Potter, by the very clock."

"I was only joking around," Harry protested, as the sounds of hysterical laughter went on nearby.

"*Draco Malfoy said in front of his father that he wanted to be sorted into Gryffindor!* Joking around *isn't enough* to *do* that!" McGonagall paused, breathing heavily. "What part of 'get fitted for robes' sounded to you like *please cast a Confundus Charm on the entire universe!*"

"He was in a situational context where those actions made internal sense—"

"No. Don't explain. I don't want to know what happened in here. Ever. There are some things I was not meant to know, and this is one of them. Whatever demonic force of chaos inhabits you, it is *contagious,* and I don't want to end up like poor Draco Malfoy, poor Madam Malkin and her two poor assistants."

Harry sighed. It was clear that Professor McGonagall wasn't in a mood to listen to reasonable explanations. He looked at Madam Malkin, who was still wheezing against the wall, and Malkin's two assistants,

who had now *both* fallen to their knees, and finally down at his own tape-measure-draped body.

"I'm not quite done being fitted for clothes," Harry said kindly. "Why don't you go back and have another drink?"

CHAPTER SIX

THE PLANNING FALLACY

You think your day was surreal? Try mine.

⁂

Some people would have waited until *after* their first trip to Diagon Alley. "Bag of element 79," Harry said, and withdrew his hand, empty, from the mokeskin pouch.

Most people would have at least waited to get their *wands* first.

"Bag of *okane,*" said Harry. The heavy bag of gold popped up into his hand.

Harry withdrew the bag, then plunged it again into the mokeskin pouch. He took out his hand, put it back in, and said, "Bag of tokens of economic exchange." That time his hand came out empty.

Harry Potter had gotten his hands on at least one magical item. Why wait?

"Professor McGonagall," Harry said to the bemused witch strolling beside him, "can you give me two words, one word for gold, and one word for something else that isn't money, in a language that I wouldn't know? But don't tell me which is which."

"*Ahava* and *zahav,*" said McGonagall. "That's Hebrew, and the other word means love."

"Thank you, Professor. Bag of *ahava.*" Empty.

"Bag of *zahav.*" And it popped up into his hand.

"Zahav is gold?" Harry questioned, and McGonagall nodded.

Harry thought over his collected experimental data. It was only the most crude and preliminary sort of effort, but it was enough to support at least one conclusion:

"*Aaaaaaarrrgh this doesn't make any sense!*"

The witch beside him lifted a lofty eyebrow. "Problems, Mr. Potter?"

"I just falsified every single hypothesis I had! How can it know that 'bag of 115 Galleons' is okay but not 'bag of 90 plus 25 Galleons'? It can *count* but it can't *add?* It can understand nouns, but not noun phrases that mean the same thing? The person who made this probably didn't speak Japanese and *I* don't speak any Hebrew, so it's not using *their* knowledge, and it's not using *my* knowledge—" Harry waved a hand helplessly. "The rules seem *sorta* consistent but they don't *mean* anything! I'm not even going to ask how a *pouch* ends up with voice recognition and natural language understanding when the best Artificial Intelligence programmers can't get the fastest supercomputers to do it after thirty-five years of hard work," Harry gasped for breath, "but *what* is going *on?*"

"Magic," said Professor McGonagall. She shrugged.

"That's just a *word!* Even after you tell me that, I can't make any new predictions! It's exactly like saying 'phlogiston' or 'elan vital' or 'emergence' or 'complexity'!"

Professor McGonagall laughed aloud. "But it *is* magic, Mr. Potter."

Harry slumped over a little. "With respect, Professor McGonagall, I'm not quite sure you understand what I'm trying to do here."

"With respect, Mr. Potter, I'm quite sure I don't. Unless—this is just a guess, mind—you're trying to take over the world?"

"No! I mean yes—well, *no!*"

"I think I should perhaps be alarmed that you have trouble answering the question."

Harry glumly considered the Dartmouth Conference on Artificial Intelligence in 1956. It had been the first conference ever on the topic, the one that had coined the phrase "Artificial Intelligence". They had identified key problems such as making computers understand language, learn, and improve themselves. They had suggested, in perfect serious-

ness, that significant advances on these problems might be made by ten scientists working together for two months.

No. Chin up. You're just starting *on the problem of unraveling all the secrets of magic. You don't actually* know *whether it's going to be too difficult to do in two months.*

"And you *really* haven't heard of other wizards asking these sorts of questions or doing this sort of scientific experimenting?" Harry asked again. It just seemed so *obvious* to him.

Then again, it'd taken more than two hundred years *after* the invention of the scientific method before any Muggle scientists thought to systematically investigate what a *human four-year-old* could or couldn't understand. They could've found out in the eighteenth century but no one even thought to look until the twentieth. So you couldn't really blame the much smaller wizarding world for not investigating the Retrieval Charm.

McGonagall, after pursing her lips for a moment, shrugged. "I'm still not sure what you mean by 'scientific experimenting', Mr. Potter. As I said, I've seen Muggleborn students try to get Muggle science to work inside Hogwarts, and people invent new Charms and Potions every year."

Harry shook his head. "Technology isn't the same thing as science at all. And trying lots of different ways to do something isn't the same as experimenting to figure out the rules." There were plenty of people who'd tried to invent flying machines by trying out lots of things-with-wings, but only the Wright Brothers had built a wind tunnel... "Um, how many Muggle-raised children *do* you get at Hogwarts every year?"

McGonagall looked thoughtful for a moment. "Around ten or so?"

Harry missed a step and almost tripped over his own feet. "*Ten?*"

The Muggle world had a population of six billion and counting. If you were one in a million, there were twelve of you in New York and a thousand more in China. It was inevitable that the Muggle world would produce *some* eleven-year-olds who could do calculus—Harry knew he wasn't the only one. He'd met other prodigies in math competitions. In fact he'd been thoroughly trounced by competitors who probably spent literally *all day* practicing math problems and who'd *never* read

a science-fiction book and who would burn out *completely* before *puberty* and *never* amount to *anything* in their future lives because they'd just practiced *known* techniques instead of learning to think *creatively*. (Harry was something of a sore loser.)

But... in the wizarding world...

Ten Muggle-raised children per year, who'd all ended their Muggle educations at the age of eleven? And McGonagall might be biased, but she had claimed that Hogwarts was the largest and most eminent wizarding school in the world... and it only educated up to the age of seventeen.

Professor McGonagall undoubtedly knew every last detail of how you went about turning into a cat. But she seemed to have literally never *heard* of the scientific method. To her it was just Muggle magic. And she didn't even seem *curious* about what secrets might be hiding behind the natural language understanding of the Retrieval Charm.

That left two possibilities, really.

Possibility one: Magic was so incredibly opaque, convoluted, and impenetrable, that even though wizards and witches had tried their best to understand, they'd made little or no progress and eventually given up; and Harry would do no better.

Or...

Harry cracked his knuckles in determination, but they only made a quiet sort of clicking sound, rather than echoing ominously off the walls of Diagon Alley.

Possibility two: He'd be taking over the world.

Eventually. Perhaps not right away.

That sort of thing *did* sometimes take longer than two months. Muggle science hadn't gone to the moon in the first week after Galileo.

But Harry still couldn't stop the huge smile that was stretching his cheeks so wide they were starting to hurt.

He'd always been frightened of ending up as one of those child prodigies that never amounted to anything and spent the rest of their lives boasting about how cool they'd been at age ten. But then most adult geniuses never amounted to anything either. There were probably like a thousand people as intelligent as Einstein for every actual Einstein in history. Because they hadn't gotten their hands on the one thing you ab-

solutely needed to achieve greatness. They'd never found an important problem.

You're mine now, Harry thought at the walls of Diagon Alley, and all the shops and items, and all the shopkeepers and customers; and all the lands and people of wizarding Britain, and all the wider wizarding world; and the entire greater universe of which Muggle scientists understood so much less than they believed. *I, Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres, do now claim this territory in the name of Science.*

Lightning and thunder completely failed to flash and boom in the cloudless skies.

"What are you smiling about?" inquired McGonagall, warily and wearily.

"I'm wondering if there's a spell to make lightning flash in the background whenever I make an ominous resolution," explained Harry. He was carefully memorizing the exact words of his ominous resolution so that future history books would get it right.

"I have a distant feeling that I ought to be doing something about this," sighed McGonagall.

"Ignore it, it'll go away. Ooh, shiny!" Harry put his thoughts of world conquest temporarily on hold and skipped over to a shop with an open display, and Professor McGonagall followed.

⁂

Harry had now bought his potions ingredients and cauldron, and, oh, a few more things. Items that seemed like good things to carry in Harry's Bag of Holding (aka Moke Super Pouch QX31 with Undetectable Extension Charm, Retrieval Charm, and Widening Lip). Smart, sensible purchases.

Harry genuinely didn't understand why McGonagall was looking so *suspicious*.

Right now, Harry was in a shop whose storefront rated the twisting main street of Diagon Alley. The store had an open front with merchandise laid out on slanted wooden displays, guarded only by slight

gray glows and a young-looking salesgirl in a much-shortened version of witch's robes that exposed her knees and elbows.

Harry was examining the wizarding equivalent of a first-aid kit, the Emergency Healing Pack Plus. There were two self-tightening tourniquets. A Stabilization Potion, which would slow blood loss and prevent shock. A syringe of what looked like liquid fire, which was supposed to drastically slow circulation in a treated area while maintaining oxygenation of the blood for up to three minutes, if you needed to prevent a poison from spreading through the body. White cloth that could be wrapped over a part of the body to temporarily numb pain. Plus any number of other items that Harry totally failed to comprehend, like the "Dementor Exposure Treatment", which looked and smelled like ordinary chocolate. Or the "Bafflesnaffle Counter", which looked like a small quivering egg and carried a placard showing how to jam it up someone's nostril.

"A definite buy at five Galleons, wouldn't you agree?" Harry said to McGonagall, and the teenage salesgirl hovering nearby nodded eagerly.

Harry had expected McGonagall to make some sort of approving remark about his prudence and preparedness.

What he was getting instead could only be described as the Evil Eye.

"And just *why*," said Professor McGonagall with rather heavy skepticism, "do you expect to *need* a healer's kit, young man?" (After the unfortunate incident at the Potions store, McGonagall was trying to avoid saying "Mr. Potter" while anyone else was nearby.)

Harry's mouth opened and closed. "I don't *expect* to need it! It's just in case!"

"Just in case of *what*?"

Harry's eyes widened. "You think I'm *planning* to do something dangerous and *that's* why I want a medical kit?"

The look of grim suspicion and ironic disbelief that McGonagall gave him was answer enough.

"Great Scott!" Harry said. (This was an expression he'd learned from the mad scientist Doc Brown in *Back to the Future*.) "Were you also thinking that when I bought the Feather-Falling Potion, the Gillyweed, and the bottle of Food and Water Pills?"

"Yes."

Harry shook his head in amazement. "Just what sort of plan do you think I have *going*, here?"

"I don't know," McGonagall said darkly, "but it ends either in you delivering a ton of silver to Gringotts, or in world domination."

"World domination is such an ugly phrase. I prefer to call it world optimization."

This failed to reassure Professor McGonagall, who was still giving him the Look of Doom.

"Wow," Harry said, realizing that she was serious. "You really think that. You really think I'm planning to do something dangerous."

"Yes."

"Like that's the *only* reason anyone would ever buy a first-aid kit? Don't take this the wrong way, Professor McGonagall, but *what sort of crazy children are you used to dealing with*?"

"Gryffindors," spat Professor McGonagall, the word carrying a freight of bitterness and despair that fell like an eternal curse on all youthful heroism and high spirits.

"Deputy Headmistress Professor Minerva McGonagall," Harry said, putting his hands sternly on his hips. "I am not going to be in Gryffindor—"

At this point McGonagall interjected something about how if he *was* she would figure out how to kill a hat, which strange remark Harry let pass without comment, though the salesgirl seemed to be having a sudden coughing fit.

"—I am going to be in Ravenclaw. And if you really think that I'm planning to do something dangerous, then, with respect, you don't understand me *at all*. I don't *like* danger, it is *scary*. I am being *prudent*. I am being *cautious*. I am preparing for *unforeseen contingencies*. Like my parents used to sing to me: *Be prepared! That's the Boy Scout's marching song! Be prepared! As through life you march along! Don't be nervous, don't be flustered, don't be scared—be prepared!*"

(Harry's parents had in fact only ever sung him those *particular* lines of that Tom Lehrer song, and Harry was blissfully unaware of the rest.)

McGonagall's stance had slightly softened—though mostly when Harry had reminded her that he was heading for Ravenclaw. "What sort of *contingency* do you imagine this kit might prepare you for, *young man?*"

"One of my classmates gets bitten by a horrible monster, and as I scrabble frantically in my mokeskin pouch for something that could help her, she looks at me sadly and with her last breath says, *'Why weren't you prepared?'* And then she dies, and I know as her eyes close that she won't ever forgive me—"

Harry heard the salesgirl gasp, and he looked up to see her staring at him with her lips pressed tight. Then the young woman turned and fled into the deeper store.

What...?

Professor McGonagall reached down, and took Harry's hand in hers, gently but very firmly, and pulled Harry out of the main street of Diagon Alley, leading him into a byway between two shops that was paved in dirty bricks and which dead-ended in a wall of solid black dirt.

The tall witch pointed her wand at the main street and spoke, "*Quietus*" she said, and a screen of silence descended around them, blocking out all the street noises.

What did I do wrong...

Then the witch turned and sent Harry with a full-powered, icy glare. "I will thank you to remember, Mr. Potter, that there was a *war* in wizarding Britain not ten years ago and that *everyone* here has lost someone and that talking about friends dying in your arms *is, not, done!*"

"I, I didn't mean to—" The inference dropped like a falling stone into Harry's exceptionally vivid imagination. The war had ended ten years ago so that girl would have been eight or nine years old, at most, when, when, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to..." Harry choked up, and turned away to run from McGonagall's cold stare but there was a wall of dirt blocking his way and he didn't have his wand yet. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm *sorry!*"

There came a heavy sigh from behind him. "I know you are, Mr. Potter."

Harry dared to peek behind him. The anger was gone from Professor McGonagall's face. "I'm sorry," Harry said again, feeling absolutely wretched. "I shouldn't have said that. Did anything like that happen to—" and then Harry shut his lips and slapped a hand over his mouth for good measure.

McGonagall's face grew a little sadder. "You *must* learn to think before you speak, Mr. Potter. Otherwise you'll go through life without many friends. That has been the fate of many a Ravenclaw, and I hope it will not be yours."

Harry wanted to just run away. He wanted to pull out a wand and erase the whole thing from McGonagall's memory, be back with her outside the shop again, *make it didn't happen—*

"But to answer your question," said McGonagall, "no, nothing like *that* has ever happened to me." Her face twisted. "Certainly I've watched a friend breathe their last breath, once or twice or a few times. But not one of them ever cursed me as they died, and I never thought that they wouldn't forgive me. *What in Merlin's name possessed you to say such a thing, Harry Potter?* Why would you even *think* it?"

Tears were creeping down Harry's cheeks. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said anything to you, I'm sorry—"

McGonagall drew in a tight breath. "I *know* you're sorry. What I don't understand is why an eleven-year-old boy is *thinking* about such things. Did you really decide to buy a five-Galleon healer's kit to carry in a fifteen-Galleon pouch because you're convinced that otherwise your classmates will *curse you as they die?*"

"I, I, I," Harry swallowed. "It's just that I always try to imagine the worst thing that could happen," and maybe he'd also been joking around a little but he would rather have bitten off his own tongue than say that now.

"*Why?*"

"So I can stop it from happening!"

"Mr. Potter..." McGonagall's voice trailed off. Then she sighed, and knelt down beside him. "Mr. Potter," she said, gently now, "it's not your responsibility to take care of the students at Hogwarts. It's mine. I won't let anything bad happen to you or anyone else. Hogwarts is the safest

place in all wizarding Britain, and Madam Pomfrey has a full healer's office. You don't need a healer's kit."

"But I *do!*" Harry burst out. "*Nowhere* is perfectly safe! And what if my parents have a heart attack or get in an accident when I go home for Christmas—Madam Pomfrey won't be there, I'll need a healer's kit of my own—"

"*What* in Merlin's name..." said McGonagall. She stood up, and looked down at Harry an expression torn between concern and annoyance. "There's no need to think about such terrible things, Mr. Potter!"

Harry's expression twisted up into bitterness, at hearing that. "Yes there *is!* If you don't think, you don't just get hurt yourself, you end up hurting other people!"

Professor McGonagall opened her mouth, then closed it. She rubbed the bridge of her nose, looking thoughtful. "Mr. Potter... if I were to offer to stay quiet and listen to you for a while... is there anything you'd like to talk to me about?"

"About what?"

"About why you're convinced that you always have to be on your guard against terrible things happening to you."

Harry stared at her in puzzlement. That was a self-evident axiom. "Well..." Harry said slowly. He tried to organize his thoughts. How *could* he explain himself to McGonagall, when she didn't even know the basics? "Muggle researchers have found that people are always very optimistic, like they say something will take two days and it takes ten, or they say it'll take two months and it takes over thirty-five years. Like, they asked students for times by which they were 50% sure, 75% sure, and 99% sure they'd complete their homework, and only 13%, 19%, and 45% of the students finished by those times. And they found that the reason was that when they asked people for their best-case estimates if everything went as well as possible, and their average-case estimates if everything went as normal, they got back answers that were statistically indistinguishable. See, if you ask someone what they expect in the *normal* case, they visualize what looks like the line of maximum probability at each step along the way—namely, everything going according to plan, without any mistakes or surprises. But actually, since more than

half the students didn't finish by the time they were 99% sure they'd be done, reality usually delivers results a little worse than the 'worst-case scenario'. It's called the *planning fallacy,* and the best way to fix it is to ask how long things took the last time you tried them. That's called using the outside view instead of the inside view. But when you're doing something new and can't do that, you just have to be really, really, really pessimistic. Like, so pessimistic that reality actually comes out *better* than you expected around as often and as much as it comes out worse. It's actually *really hard* to be *so* pessimistic that you stand a decent chance of *undershooting* real life. Like I make this big effort to be gloomy and I imagine one of my classmates getting bitten, but what actually happens is that the surviving Death Eaters attack the whole school to get at me. But on a happier note—"

"Stop," McGonagall said.

Harry stopped. He had just been about to point out that at least they knew the Dark Lord wouldn't attack, since he was dead.

"I think I might not have made myself clear," McGonagall said carefully. "Did anything happen to *you personally* that would scare you?"

"What happened to me personally is only anecdotal evidence," Harry explained to her. "It doesn't carry the same weight as a replicated, peer-reviewed journal article about a controlled study with random assignment, many subjects, large effect sizes and strong statistical significance."

McGonagall pinched the bridge of her nose, inhaled, and exhaled. "I would still like to hear about it," she said.

"Um..." Harry said. He took a deep breath. "There'd been some muggings in our neighborhood, and my mother asked me to return a pan she'd borrowed to a neighbor two blocks down, and I said I didn't want to because I might get mugged, and she said, 'Harry, don't say things like that!' Like thinking about it would *make* it happen, so if I didn't talk about it, I would be safe. I tried to explain it to her and she made me carry over the pan anyway. I was too young to know how statistically unlikely it was for a mugger to target me, but I was old enough to know that not-thinking about something doesn't stop it from happening, so I was really scared."

"Nothing else?" McGonagall said after a pause, when it became clear that Harry was done. "There isn't anything *else* that happened to you?"

"I know it doesn't *sound* like much," Harry defended. "But it was just one of those critical life moments, you know? I mean, I *knew* that not thinking about something doesn't stop it from happening, I *knew* that, but I could see that Mom really thought that way." Harry stopped, struggling with the anger that was starting to rise up again when he thought about it. "She *wouldn't listen*. I tried to tell her, I *begged* her not to send me out, and she *laughed it off*. Everything I said, she treated like some sort of big joke..." Harry forced the black rage back down again. "That's when I realized that everyone who was supposed to protect me was actually crazy, and that they wouldn't listen to me no matter how much I begged them, and that I couldn't ever rely on them to get anything right." Sometimes good intentions weren't enough, sometimes you had to be sane...

There was a long silence.

Harry took the time to breathe deeply and calm himself down. There was no point in getting angry. There was no point in getting angry. *All* parents were like that, *no* adult would give up so much status as to place themselves on level ground with a child, his genetic parents would have been no different. Sanity was a tiny spark in the night, an infinitesimally rare exception to the rule and dominion of madness, so there was no point in getting angry.

Harry didn't like himself when he was angry.

"Thank you for sharing that, Mr. Potter," said McGonagall after a while. There was an abstracted look on her face (almost exactly the same look that had appeared on Harry's own face while experimenting on the pouch, if Harry had only seen himself in a mirror to realize that). "I shall have to think about this." She turned toward the alley mouthway, and raised her wand—

"Um," Harry said, "can we go get the healer's kit now?"

McGonagall paused, and looked back at him steadily. "And if I say no, it's too expensive and you won't need it, what happens?"

Harry's face twisted in bitterness. "Exactly what you're thinking, Professor McGonagall. *Exactly* what you're thinking. I conclude you're

another crazy adult I can't talk to, and I start planning how to get my hands on a healer's kit anyway."

"I am your guardian on this trip," McGonagall said with a tinge of danger. "I *will not* allow you to push me around."

"I understand," Harry said. He kept the resentment out of his voice, and didn't say any of the other things that came to mind. McGonagall had told him to think before he spoke. He probably wouldn't remember that tomorrow, but he could at least remember it for five minutes.

McGonagall's wand twitched, and the noises of Diagon Alley came back. "All right, young man," she said. "Let's go get that healer's kit."

Harry's jaw dropped in surprise. Then he hurried after her, almost stumbling in his sudden rush.

⁂

The store was the same as they had left it, recognizable and unrecognizable items still laid out on the slanted wooden display, the gray glow still protecting and the salesgirl back in her old position. The salesgirl looked up as they approached, her face showing surprise.

"I'm sorry," she said as they got closer, and Harry spoke at almost the same moment, "I apologize for—"

They broke off and looked at each other, and then the salesgirl laughed a little. "I didn't mean to get you in trouble with Professor McGonagall," she said. Her voice lowered conspiratorily. "I hope she wasn't *too* awful to you."

"*Della!*" said McGonagall, scandalized.

"Bag of gold," Harry said to his pouch, and then looked back up at the salesgirl while he counted out five Galleons. "Don't worry, I understand that she's only awful to me because she loves me."

He handed the Galleons to the salesgirl while McGonagall was spluttering something unimportant. "One Emergency Healing Pack Plus, please."

It was actually sort of unnerving to see how the Widening Lip swallowed the briefcase-sized medical kit. Harry couldn't help wondering

what would happen if he tried climbing into the mokeskin pouch himself, given that only the person who put something in was supposed to be able to take it out again.

When the pouch was done... eating... his hard-won purchase, Harry swore he heard a small burping sound afterward. That *had* to have been spelled in on purpose. The alternative hypothesis was too horrifying to contemplate... in fact Harry couldn't even *think* of any alternative hypotheses. Harry looked back up at McGonagall. "Where to next?"

McGonagall pointed toward a store that looked as if it had been made from flesh instead of bricks and covered in fur instead of paint. "Small pets are permitted at Hogwarts—you could get an owl to send letters, for example—"

"Can I pay a Knut or something and *rent* an owl when I need to send mail?"

"Yes," said McGonagall.

"Then I think emphatically *no.*"

McGonagall nodded, as though ticking off a point. "Might I ask why not?"

"I had a pet rock once. It died."

"You don't think you could take care of a pet?"

"I *could,*" Harry said, "but I would end up obsessing all day long about whether I'd remembered to feed it that day or if it was slowly starving in its cage, wondering where its master was and why there wasn't any food."

"That poor owl," McGonagall said in a soft voice. "Abandoned like that. I wonder what it would do."

"Well, it'd get really hungry and start trying to claw its way out of the cage or the box or whatever, though it probably wouldn't have much luck with that—" Harry stopped short.

McGonagall went on, still in that soft voice. "And what would happen to it afterward?"

"Excuse me," Harry said, and he took McGonagall by the hand, gently but firmly, and steered her into yet another byway; after ducking so many well-wishers the process had become almost unnoticeably routine. "Please cast that Quietus thingy."

"*Quietus.*"

Harry's voice was shaking. "That owl does *not* represent me, my parents *never* locked me in a closet and left me to starve, I do *not* have abandonment fears and I *don't like the trend of your thoughts, Professor McGonagall!*"

The witch looked down at him. "And what thoughts would those be, Mr. Potter?"

"You think I was," Harry was having trouble saying it, "I was *abused?*"

"Were you?"

"*No!*" Harry shouted. "No, I never was! Do you think I'm *stupid?* I *know* about the concept of child abuse, I *know* about inappropriate touching and all of that and if anything like that happened I would call the police! And report it to the school principal! And look up government offices in the phone book! And tell Grandma and Grandpa and Mrs. Figg! But my parents *never* did anything like that, never ever *ever!* How *dare* you suggest such a thing!"

McGonagall gazed at him steadily. "It is my duty as Deputy Headmistress to investigate possible signs of abuse in the children under my care."

Harry's anger was spiraling out of control into pure, black fury. "Don't you ever *dare* breathe a word of these, these *insinuations* to anyone else! *No one*, do you hear me, McGonagall? An accusation like that can ruin people and destroy families even when the parents are completely innocent! I've read about it in the newspapers!" Harry's voice was climbing to a high-pitched scream. "The *system* doesn't know how to *stop*, it doesn't believe the parents *or* the children when they say nothing happened! *Don't you dare threaten my family with that! I won't let you destroy my home!*"

"Harry," McGonagall said softly, and she reached out a hand toward him—

Harry took a fast step back, and his hand snapped up and knocked hers away.

McGonagall froze, then she pulled her hand back, and took a step backward. "Harry, it's all right," she said. "I believe you."

"*Do you,*" Harry hissed. The fury still roaring through his blood. "Or are you just waiting to get away from me so you can file the papers?"

"Harry, I saw your house. I saw with your parents. They love you. You love them. I do believe you when you say that your parents are not abusing you. But I *had* to ask, because there is something very strange at work here."

Harry stared at her coldly. "Like what?"

McGonagall took a deep breath. "Harry, I've seen a lot of abused children in my time at Hogwarts, it would break your heart to know how many. And, when you're happy, you don't behave like one of those children, not at *all*. You smile at strangers, you hug people, I put my hand on your shoulder and you didn't flinch. But sometimes, only sometimes, you say or do something that seems *very* much like... someone who spent his first eleven years locked in a basement. Not the loving family that I saw." McGonagall tilted her head, her expression growing puzzled again.

Harry took this in, processing it. The black rage began to drain away, as it dawned on him that he was being listened to respectfully, and that his family wasn't in danger.

"And how *do* you explain your observations, Professor McGonagall?"

"I don't know," she said. "But it's possible that something could have happened to you that you don't remember."

Fury rose up again in Harry. That sounded all too much like what he'd read in the newspaper stories of shattered families. "Suppressed memory is a load of *pseudoscience!* People do *not* repress traumatic memories, they remember them all *too* well for the rest of their lives!"

"No, Mr. Potter. There is a Charm called Obliviation."

Harry froze in place. "A spell that erases memories?"

McGonagall nodded. "But not all the effects of the experience, if you see what I'm saying, Mr. Potter."

A chill went down Harry's spine. *That* hypothesis... could *not* be easily refuted. "But my parents couldn't do that!"

"No," McGonagall said. "It would have taken someone from the wizarding world. There's... no way to test for it, I'm afraid, not that I

know."

Harry's rationalist skills began to boot up again. "Professor McGonagall, how sure are you of your observations, and what alternative explanations could there also be?"

McGonagall opened her hands, as though to show their emptiness. "Sure? I'm sure of *nothing*, Mr. Potter. If I consider your whole person, then in all my life I've never met anyone else like you. Sometimes you just don't seem eleven years old or even all that *human*."

Harry's eyebrows rose toward the sky—

"I'm sorry!" McGonagall said quickly. "I'm very sorry, Mr. Potter. I was trying to make a rhetorical point and I'm afraid that came out sounding a bit different from what I had in mind—"

"On the contrary, Professor McGonagall," Harry said, and slowly smiled. "I shall take it as a very great compliment. But would you mind if I offered an alternative explanation?"

"Please do."

"Children aren't meant to be too much smarter than their parents," Harry said. "Or too much saner, maybe—my father could probably outsmart me if he was, you know, actually *trying*, instead of using his adult intelligence mainly to come up with new reasons not to change his mind—" Harry stopped. "I'm too smart, McGonagall. Normal children simply aren't in my league. Adults don't respect me enough to really talk to me. And frankly, even if they did, they wouldn't sound as smart as Richard Feynman, so I might as well read something Richard Feynman wrote instead. I'm *isolated*, Professor McGonagall. I've been isolated my whole life. Maybe that has some of the same effects as being locked in a basement. And I'm too intelligent to look up to my parents the way that children are designed to do. My parents love me, but they don't feel obligated to respond to reason, and sometimes I feel like they're the children—children who *won't listen* and have absolute authority over my whole existence. I try not to be too bitter about it, but I also try to be *honest* with myself, so, yes, I'm bitter. And I also have an anger management problem, but I'm working on it. That's all."

"*That's all?*"

Harry nodded firmly. "That's all. Surely, Professor McGonagall, even in magical Britain, the normal explanation is always worth *considering?*"

It was later in the day, the sun lowering in the summer sky and shoppers beginning to peter out from the streets. Some stores had already closed; Harry and McGonagall had bought his textbooks from Flourish and Blotts just under the deadline. With only a slight explosion when Harry had made a beeline for the keyword "Arithmancy" and discovered that the seventh-year textbooks invoked nothing more mathematically advanced than trigonometry.

At this moment, though, dreams of low-hanging research fruit were very far from Harry's mind.

At this moment, Harry and McGonagall were walking out of Ollivander's, and Harry was staring at his wand. He'd waved it, and produced blue-bronze sparks, which really shouldn't have come as such an extra shock after everything else he'd seen, but somehow—

I can do magic.

Me. As in, me personally. I am magical; I am a wizard.

He had *felt* the magic pouring up his arm, and in that instant, realized that he had always had that sense, that he had possessed it his whole life, the sense that was not sight or sound or smell or taste or touch but only magic. Like an eye that had always *always* been closed, the corresponding brain area representing only darkness since the moment of his birth; until one day the eye opened, and saw the world.

And—

"It is very curious indeed that you should be destined for this wand when its brother why, its brother gave you that scar."

That could not *possibly* be coincidence. There had been *thousands* of wands in that shop. Well, okay, actually it *could* be coincidence, there were six billion people in the world and thousand-to-one coincidences

happened every day. But Bayes's Theorem 101: any reasonable hypothesis which said it was *more* likely than a thousand-to-one that he'd end up with the brother to the Dark Lord's wand, was going to have an advantage.

McGonagall had simply said *how peculiar* and left it at that, which had put Harry into a state of shock at the sheer, overwhelming *obliviousness* of wizards and witches. In no *imaginable* world would Harry have just went "Hm" and walked out of the shop without even *trying* to come up with a hypothesis for what was going on.

His left hand rose and touched his scar.

What... *exactly*...

"You're a full wizard now," said McGonagall. "Congratulations."

Harry nodded.

"And what do you think of the wizarding world?"

"It's strange," Harry said. "I ought to be thinking about everything I've seen of magic... everything that I now know is possible, and everything I now know to be a lie, and all the work left before me to understand it. And yet I find myself distracted by relative trivialities like," Harry lowered his voice, "the whole Boy-Who-Lived thing." There didn't seem to be anyone nearby, but no point tempting fate.

McGonagall *ahemed*. "Really? You don't say."

Harry nodded. "Yes. It's just... *odd*. To find out that you were part of this grand story, the quest to defeat the great and terrible Dark Lord, and it's already *done*. Finished. Completely over with. Like you're Frodo Baggins and you find out that your parents took you to Mount Doom and had you toss in the Ring when you were one year old and you don't even remember it."

McGonagall's smile had grown somewhat fixed.

"You know, if I were anyone else, anyone else at all, I'd probably be pretty worried about living up to that start. *Gosh, Harry, what have you done since you defeated the Dark Lord? Your own bookstore? That's great! Say, did you know I named my child after you?* But I have hopes that this will not prove to be a problem." Harry sighed. "Still... it's almost enough to make me wish that there were *some* loose ends from the quest, just so I could say that I really, you know, *participated* somehow."

"Oh?" said McGonagall in an odd tone. "What did you have in mind?"

"Well, for example, you mentioned that my parents were betrayed. Who betrayed them?"

"Sirius Black," McGonagall said. She almost hissed the name. "He's in Azkaban. Wizarding prison."

"How probable is it that Sirius Black will break out of prison and I'll have to track him down and defeat him in some sort of spectacular duel, or better yet put a large bounty on his head and hide out in Australia while I wait for the results?"

McGonagall blinked. Twice. "Not likely. No one has ever escaped from Azkaban, and I doubt that *he* will be the first."

Harry was a bit skeptical of that "*no one* has *ever* escaped from Azkaban" line. Still, maybe with magic you could actually get close to a 100% perfect prison, especially if you had a wand and they did not. The best way to get out would be to not go there in the first place.

"All right then," Harry said. "Sounds pretty nicely wrapped up." He sighed, scrubbing his palm over his head. "Or maybe the Dark Lord didn't *really* die that night. Not completely. His spirit lingers, whispering to people in nightmares that bleed over into the waking world, searching for a way back into the living lands he swore to destroy, and now, in accordance with the ancient prophecy, he and I are locked in a deadly duel where the winner shall lose and the loser shall win—"

McGonagall's head swiveled, and her eyes darted around, searching the street for listeners.

"I'm *joking*, Professor McGonagall," Harry said with some annoyance. Jeebers, why did she always take everything so seriously—

A slow sinking sensation began to dawn in the pit of Harry's stomach.

McGonagall looked at Harry with a calm expression. A very, *very* calm expression. Then a smile was put on. "Of course you are, Mr. Potter."

Aw crap.

If Harry had needed to rationalize the wordless inference that had just flashed into his mind, it would have come out something like, "If

I estimate the probability of McGonagall doing what I just saw as the result of carefully controlling herself, versus the probability distribution for all the things she would do *naturally* if I made a bad joke, then this behavior is significant evidence for her hiding something."

But what Harry actually thought was, *Aw crap.*

Harry turned his own head to scan the street. Nope, no one nearby. "He's *not* dead, is he," Harry sighed.

"Mr. Potter—"

"The Dark Lord is alive. Of *course* he's alive. It was an *act* of utter *optimism* for me to have even *dreamed* otherwise. I *must* have taken leave of my *senses*, I can't *imagine* what I was *thinking.* Just because *someone* said that his body was found burned to a *crisp*, I can't imagine why I would have thought he was *dead. Clearly* I have *much* left to learn about the art of proper *pessimism.*"

"Mr. Potter—"

"At least tell me there's not really a prophecy..." But McGonagall was still giving him that bright, fixed smile. "Oh, you have *got* to be kidding me."

"Mr. Potter, you shouldn't go inventing things to worry about—"

"Are you *actually* going to tell me *that?* Imagine my reaction later, when I find out that there was something to worry about after all."

McGonagall's smile faltered.

Harry's shoulders slumped. "I have a whole world of magic to analyze. I do *not* have time for this."

Then both of them shut up, as a man in flowing orange robes appeared on the street and slowly passed them by. McGonagall's eyes tracked him, unobtrusively. Harry's mouth was moving as he chewed hard on his lip, and someone watching closely would have noticed a tiny spot of blood appear.

When the orange-robed man had passed into the distance, Harry spoke again, in a low murmur. "Are you going to tell me the truth now, Professor McGonagall? And don't bother trying to wave it off, I'm not stupid."

"You're *eleven years old*, Mr. Potter!" she said in a harsh whisper.

"And therefore subhuman. Sorry... for a moment there, I *forgot*."

"These are dreadful and important matters! They are *secret,* Mr. Potter! It is a *catastrophe* that you, still a child, know even this much! You must not tell *anyone,* do you understand? Absolutely no one!"

As sometimes happened when Harry got *sufficiently* angry, his blood went cold, instead of hot, and a terrible dark clarity descended over his mind, mapping out possible tactics and assessing their consequences with iron realism.

Point out that you have a right to know: Failure. Eleven-year-old children do not have rights to know anything, in McGonagall's eyes.

Say that you will not be friends any more: Failure. She does not value your friendship sufficiently.

Point out that you will be in danger if you do not know: Failure. Plans have already been made based on your ignorance. The certain *inconvenience of rethinking will seem far more unpalatable than the mere* uncertain *prospect of your coming to harm.*

Justice and reason will both fail. You must either find something you have that she wants, or find something you can do which she fears...

Ah.

"Well then, Professor McGonagall," Harry said in a low, icy tone, "it sounds like I have something you want. You can, if you like, tell me the truth, the *whole* truth, and in return I will keep your secrets. Or you can try to keep me ignorant so you can use me as a pawn, in which case I will owe you nothing."

McGonagall stopped short in the street. Her eyes blazed and her voice descended into an outright hiss. "How dare you!"

"*How dare you!*" he whispered back at her.

"You would *blackmail* me?"

Harry's lips twisted. "I am *offering* you a *favor.* I am *giving* you a chance to keep *your* precious secret. If you refuse I will have *every* natural motive to make inquiries elsewhere, not to spite you, but because I *have to know!* Get past your pointless anger at a *child* who you think ought to obey you, and you'll realize that any sane adult would do the same! *Look at it from my perspective! How would you feel if it was YOU?*"

Harry watched McGonagall, observed her harsh breathing. It occurred to him that it was time to ease off the pressure, let her simmer

for a while. "You don't have to decide right away," Harry said in a more normal tone. "I'll understand if you want time to think about my *offer*... but I'll warn you of one thing," Harry said, his voice going colder. "Don't try that Obliviation Charm on me. Some time ago I worked out a signal, and I have already sent that signal to myself. If I find that signal and I don't *remember* sending it..." Harry let his voice trail off significantly.

McGonagall's face was working as her expressions shifted. "I... wasn't thinking of Obliviating you, Mr. Potter... but why would you have *invented* such a signal if you didn't know about—"

"I thought of it while reading a Muggle science-fiction book, and said to myself, *well, just in case...* And no, I won't tell you the signal, I'm not dumb."

"I hadn't planned to ask," McGonagall said. She seemed to fold in on herself, and suddenly looked very old, and very tired. "This has been an exhausting day, Mr. Potter. Can we get your trunk, and send you home? I will trust you not to speak upon this matter until I have had time to think. Keep in mind that there are only two other people in the whole world who know about this matter, and they are Headmaster Albus Dumbledore and Professor Severus Snape."

So. New information; that was a peace offering. Harry nodded in acceptance, and turned his head to look forward, and started walking again.

"So now I've got to find some way to kill an immortal Dark Wizard," Harry said, and sighed in frustration. "I really wish you had told me that *before* I started shopping."

The trunk shop was more richly appointed than any other shop Harry had visited; the curtains were lush and delicately patterned, the floor and walls of stained and polished wood, and the trunks occupied places of honor on polished ivory platforms. The salesman was dressed in robes of finery only a cut below those of Lucius Malfoy, and spoke with exquisite, oily politeness to both Harry and McGonagall.

Harry had asked his questions, and had gravitated to a trunk of heavy-looking wood, not polished but warm and solid, carved with the pattern of a guardian dragon whose eyes shifted to look at anyone nearing it. A trunk charmed to be light, to shrink on command, to sprout small clawed tentacles from its bottom and squirm after its owner. A trunk with two drawers on each of four sides that each slid out to reveal compartments as deep as the whole trunk. A lid with four locks each of which would reveal a different space inside. And—this was the important part—a handle on the bottom which slid out a frame containing a staircase leading down into a small, lighted room that would hold, Harry estimated, around twelve bookcases.

If they made luggages like this, Harry didn't know why anyone bothered owning a house.

One hundred and eight golden Galleons. That was the price of a *good* trunk, lightly used. At around fifty British pounds to the Galleon, that was enough to buy a used car. It would be more expensive than everything else Harry had ever bought in his whole life all put together.

Ninety-seven Galleons. That was how much was left in the bag of gold Harry had been allowed to take out of Gringotts.

McGonagall wore a look of chagrin upon her face. After a long day's shopping she hadn't needed to ask Harry how much gold was left in the bag after the salesman quoted his price, which meant the Professor could do good mental arithmetic without pen and paper. Once again, Harry reminded himself that *scientifically illiterate* was not at all the same thing as *stupid.*

"I'm sorry, young man," McGonagall said. "This is entirely my fault. I would offer to take you back to Gringotts, but the bank will be closed for all but emergency services now."

Harry took a deep breath. He needed to be a little angry for what he wanted to try now, there was no way he'd have the courage to do it otherwise. *She didn't listen to me,* he thought to himself, *I would have taken more gold but she didn't want to listen...* He thought back to that black rage of before, tried to call up a little of it. Visualized *the person he needed to be,* and drew that personality over himself like a wizard's robes. Focusing his entire world on McGonagall and the need to bend

this conversation to his will, he spoke.

"Let me guess," Harry said. "You thought you were leaving yourself *plenty* of error margin, that one hundred Galleons would be *more* than enough, and that's why you didn't bother warning me when it was down to ninety-seven."

McGonagall closed her eyes in resignation. "Yes."

"I anticpated this, Professor McGonagall. I expected this to happen. There are research studies showing that this is what happens when people think they're *leaving themselves plenty of error margin.* If it were *me*, I'd have taken *two hundred* Galleons just to be sure; there was plenty of money in that vault, and I could have put back any extra later. But I *knew* that you wouldn't let me do it. I knew there wasn't even any point in asking. I knew you would be annoyed and maybe even *angry* if I asked. Am I wrong?"

"No," McGonagall said, "you're right." Her voice held a note of apology, and yet still a note of self-pride alongside that, as though Harry ought to notice how very, very honored he was to have *Professor McGonagall* apologizing to him.

"You should understand, Professor McGonagall," Harry spoke the words very carefully, "this is why I don't trust adults. You thought that being adult meant it was your role to prevent me from taking too much money out of my vault. Not that it was your role to *make sure the job got done no matter what.*"

McGonagall's eyes flew open, and she gave Harry a hard look.

"Well, Professor McGonagall, if you had to do it all over again, and I suggested taking out an extra hundred Galleons *just to be sure*, with no justification other than to be *prepared,* would you listen to me *that* time?"

"I take your point," McGonagall said. "You don't need to lecture *me*, young man!"

"Ah, but I haven't *gotten* to my point. Do you know the difference between someone worth talking to and a mere obstacle, Professor McGonagall? From my perspective, that is? If an adult thinks that being superior to me, above me, getting obedience from me, is the *most important* thing to them, then they will be an obstacle. A *potential collaborator*

is someone who thinks that *getting the job done* is more important than making sure I know my place. Allow me to show you something, Professor McGonagall."

The trunk salesman was watching them with undisguised fascination, as Harry took out the mokeskin pouch, and said, "Eleven loose Galleons, please."

And there was gold in Harry's hand.

"*Where did you get that—*"

"From my vault, Professor McGonagall, when I fell into that pile of gold. I shoved some money into my pocket and then held the bag of gold against it, so jingles would seem to come from the right place. Since, you understand, I expected from the beginning that this would happen."

McGonagall's mouth was wide, wide open.

"So now the question is... are you angry at me for defying your authority? Or glad that now our day ends in success instead of failure? I'm not asking for anything *else* from you by asking this question. I am neither promising nor demanding cooperation on future matters. I only want to know if you're a *potential* collaborator or an obstacle... Minerva."

The salesman actually gasped out loud.

And the tall witch stood there, silent.

"Discipline at Hogwarts *must* be enforced," she said after almost a full minute. "For the sake of *all* the students. And that *must* include courtesy and obedience from you to *all* professors."

Harry inclined his head. "I understand. Professor McGonagall." Though it was amazing how, somehow, it seemed *so* much *more* important to enforce discipline when *you* were on *top* of the heap, and not underneath... but Harry didn't think it wise to press the point further.

"Then... I congratulate you on your preparedness."

Harry wanted to cheer, or throw up, or faint, or something. That was the first time that speech had ever worked on an adult. That was the first time *any* of his speeches had ever worked on *anyone*. Maybe because it was also the first time he had something really serious that an adult needed from him, but still—

Minerva McGonagall, +1 point.

Harry bowed, and gave the bag of gold and the extra eleven Galleons into McGonagall's hands. "I leave it to you, madam. For myself, I must use the restroom. May I ask where—"

The salesman, unctuous once more, pointed toward a door set into the wall with a gold-handled knob. As Harry started to walk away, he heard from behind the salesman ask in his oily voice, "May I inquire as to who that was, Madam McGonagall? I take it he is Slytherin—third-year, perhaps?—and from a prominent family, but I did not recognize—"

The slam of the bathroom door cut off his words, and after Harry had identified the lock and pressed it into place, he collapsed against the door. Harry's entire body was sheathed in sweat that had soaked clear through his Muggle clothing, though at least it didn't show through the robes. He bent down over the gold-etched ivory toilet, and retched a few times, but thankfully nothing came up.

⁂

And they stood again in the courtyard of the Leaky Cauldron, the small, leaf-dusted, deserted interface between magical Britain's Diagon Alley and the entire Muggle world. That was one *awfully* decoupled economy... Harry was to go to a payphone and call his father once he was on the other side. He did not, apparently, need to worry about his luggage being stolen from him; it had the status of a major wizarding item, something that most Muggles wouldn't notice. That was part of what you could get in the wizarding world, if you were willing to pay the price of a used car. Harry wondered if his father would be able to see the trunk after it was pointed out to him.

"So here we part ways, for a time," Professor McGonagall said. She shook her head in wonderment. "This has been the strangest day of my life for... many a year. Since the day I learned that a child had defeated You-Know-Who. I wonder now, in retrospect, if that was the last sane day of the world."

Oh, like *she* had anything to complain about. *You think your day was surreal? Try mine.*

"I was very impressed with you today," Harry said to her. "I should have remembered to compliment you out loud, I was awarding you points in my head and everything."

"Thank you, Mr. Potter," McGonagall said. "If you had already been Sorted into a House I would have deducted so many points that their grandchildren would still be losing the House Cup."

"Thank *you*, Minerva." It was probably too early to call her Minny.

This woman might well be the sanest adult Harry had ever met, despite her lack of scientific background. Harry was even considering offering her the number-two position in whatever group he formed to fight the Dark Lord, though he wasn't silly enough to say that out loud. *Now what would be a good name for that...? The Death Eater Eaters?*

"I'll see you again very soon, when school starts," McGonagall said. "And, Mr. Potter, about your wand—"

"I know what you're going to ask," Harry said. He took out his precious wand and, with a deep twinge of inner pain, flipped it over in his hand. Handle out, he presented it to McGonagall. "Take it. I hadn't planned to do anything, not a single thing, but I don't want you to have nightmares about me blowing up my house."

McGonagall shook her head rapidly. "Oh no, Mr. Potter! That isn't done. I was just going to warn you not to *use* your wand at home, since there are ways of detecting underage magic and it is prohibited without supervision."

"Ah," Harry said, and smiled. "*That* sounds like a *very* sensible rule. I'm glad to see the wizarding world takes that sort of thing seriously."

McGonagall peered hard at him. "You really mean that."

"Yes," Harry said. "I get it. Magic is dangerous and the rules are there for good reasons. Certain other matters are also dangerous. I get that too. Remember that I am not stupid."

"I am unlikely ever to forget it. Thank you, Harry, that does make me feel better about entrusting you with certain things. Goodbye for now."

Harry turned to go, into the Leaky Cauldron and out toward the Muggle world.

As his hand touched the back door's handle, he heard a last whisper from behind him.

"Hermione Granger."

"What?" Harry said, his hand still on the door.

"Look for a first-year girl named Hermione Granger on the train to Hogwarts."

"Who is she?"

There was no answer, and when Harry turned around, McGonagall was gone.

Aftermath:

Headmaster Dumbledore leaned forward over his desk. His twinkling eyes peered out at McGonagall. "So, Minerva, how did you find Harry?"

McGonagall opened her mouth. Then she closed her mouth. Then she opened her mouth again. No words came out.

"I see," Dumbledore said gravely. "Thank you for your report, Minerva. You may go."

CHAPTER SEVEN

RECIPROCATION

"Your dad is almost as awesome as my dad."

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* *

Petunia Evans-Verres's lips were trembling and her eyes were tearing up as Harry hugged her midsection on Platform Nine of the King's Cross Station. "Are you sure you don't want me to come with you, Harry?"

Harry looked up at her. His eyes glanced over to his father Michael Verres-Evans, who was looking stereotypically stern-but-proud, and then back to his mother, who really did look rather... uncomposed. "Mum, I know you don't like the wizarding world very much. You don't have to come with. I mean it."

Petunia winced. "Harry, you shouldn't worry about me, I'm your mother and if you need someone with you—"

"Mum, I'm going to be on my own at Hogwarts for *months* and *months.* If I can't manage a train platform alone, better to find out sooner rather than later so we can abort." He lowered his voice to a whisper. "Besides, Mum, they all love me over there. If I have any problems, all I need to do is take off my headband," Harry tapped the exercise sweatband covering his scar, "and I'll have *way* more help than I can handle."

"Oh, Harry," Petunia whispered. She knelt down and hugged him hard, face to face, their cheeks resting against each other. Harry could

feel her ragged breathing, and then he heard a sob escape her lips, choked and muffled but there. "Oh, Harry, I do love you, always remember that."

It's like she's afraid she'll never see me again, the thought suddenly popped into Harry's head. He knew the thought was true but he didn't know why Mum was so afraid.

So he made a guess. "Mum, you know that I'm not going to turn into your sister just because I'm learning magic, right? I'll do any magic you ask for—if I can, I mean—or if you want me *not* to use any magic around the house, I'll do that too, I promise I'll never let magic come between us—"

A tight hug cut off his words. "You have a good heart," his mother whispered into his ear. "A very good heart, my son."

Harry choked up himself a little, then.

His mother released him, and stood up. She took a handkerchief out of her pocket and dabbed at her eyes and running makeup with a trembling hand.

There were no questions about his father accompanying him to the magical side of King's Cross Station. Dad had trouble just looking at Harry's trunk directly. Magic ran in families, and Michael Verres-Evans couldn't even walk.

So instead his father just cleared his throat. "Good luck at school, Harry," he said. "Do you think I bought you enough books?"

Harry had explained to his father about how he thought this might be his big chance to do something really revolutionary and important, and Professor Verres-Evans had nodded and dumped his extremely busy schedule for two solid days in order to go on the Greatest Used Bookstore Raid Ever, which had covered four cities and produced *thirty* boxes of science books now sitting in the cavern level of Harry's trunk. Most of the books had gone for a pound or two, but some of them definitely *hadn't,* like the very latest *Handbook of Chemistry and Physics* or the complete 1972 set of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica.* His father had tried to block Harry off from seeing the price registers but Harry figured his father must have spent *at least* a thousand pounds. Harry had said to his father that he would pay him back as soon as he figured out how to

convert wizarding gold into Muggle money, and his father had told him to go jump in a lake.

And then his father had asked him: *Do you think I bought you enough books?* It was very clear what answer Dad was looking for.

Harry's throat was hoarse, for some reason. "You can never have enough books," he recited the Verres family motto, and his father knelt down and gave him a quick, firm embrace. "But you *certainly* tried," Harry said, and felt himself choking up again. "It was a really, really, *really* good try."

His Dad straightened. "So..." he said. "Do *you* see a Platform Nine and Three-Quarters?"

King's Cross Station was huge and busy, the walls and floors paved with ordinary dirt-stained tiles, full of ordinary people hurrying about their ordinary business and having ordinary conversations that generated lots and lots of ordinary noise. King's Cross Station had a Platform Nine (which they were standing on) and a Platform Ten (right nearby) but there was absolutely nothing between Platform Nine and Platform Ten except a thin, unpromising barrier wall. A great skylight overhead let in plenty of light to illuminate the total lack whatsoever of any Platform Nine and Three-Quarters.

Harry stared around until his eyes watered, thinking, *come on, mage-sight, come on, mage-sight*, but absolutely nothing appeared to him. He thought about taking out his wand and waving it, but McGonagall had warned him against using his wand. Plus if there was another shower of blue-bronze sparks that might lead to being arrested for setting off fireworks inside a train station. And that was assuming his wand didn't decide to do something else, like blowing up all of King's Cross. Harry had only lightly skimmed his schoolbooks (though that skim was quite bizarre enough) in a very quick effort to determine what sort of science books to buy over the next 48 hours.

Well, he had—Harry glanced at his watch—one whole hour to figure it out, since he was supposed to be on the train at eleven. Maybe this was the equivalent of an IQ test and the dumb kids couldn't become wizards. (And the amount of extra time you gave yourself would determine your Conscientiousness, which was the second most important factor in

scholarly success.)

"I'll figure it out," Harry said to his waiting parents. "It's probably some sort of test thingy."

His father frowned. "Hm... maybe look for a trail of mixed footprints on the ground, leading somewhere that doesn't seem to make sense—"

"*Dad!*" Harry said. "Stop that! I haven't even *tried* to figure it out on my own!" It was a very good suggestion, too, which was worse.

"Sorry," his father apologized.

"Ah..." Harry's mother said. "I don't think they would do that to a student, do you? Are you sure Professor McGonagall didn't tell you anything?"

"Maybe she was distracted," Harry said without thinking about it.

"*Harry!*" hissed his father and mother in unison. "*What did you do?*"

"I, um—" Harry swallowed. "Look, we don't have time for this now—"

"*Harry!*"

"I mean it! We don't have time for this now! Because it's a really long story and I've got to figure out how to get to school!"

His mother had a hand over her face. "How bad was it?"

"I, ah," *I can't talk about that for reasons of National Security,* "about half as bad as the Incident with the Science Fair Project?"

"*Harry!*"

"I, er, oh look there are some people with an owl I'll go ask them how to get in!" and Harry ran away from his parents toward the family of fiery redheads, his trunk automatically slithering behind him.

The plump woman looked up toward him as he arrived. "Hello, dear. First time at Hogwarts? Ron's new, too—" and then she froze. She peered closely at him. "*Harry Potter?*"

Four boys and a red-headed girl and an owl all swung around and then also froze in place.

"Oh, *come on!*" Harry protested. He'd been planning to go by Mr. Verres at least until he got to Hogwarts. "I bought a headband and everything! How come you know who I am?"

"Yes," Harry's father said, coming up behind him with long easy strides, "how *do* you know who he is?" His voice indicated a certain dread.

"Your picture was in the newspapers," said one of two identical-looking twins.

"HARRY!"

"*Dad!* It's not like that! It's 'cause I defeated the Dark Lord You-Know-Who when I was one year old!"

"WHAT?"

"Mum can explain."

"WHAT?"

"Ah... Michael dear, there are certain things I thought it would be best not to bother you with until now—"

"Excuse me," Harry said to the redheaded family who were all staring at him, "but it would be quite extremely helpful if you could tell me how to get to Platform Nine and Three Quarters *right now*."

"Ahhh..." said the woman. She raised a hand and pointed at the wall between platforms. "Just walk straight at the barrier between platforms nine and ten. Don't stop and don't be scared you'll crash into it, that's very important. Best do it at a bit of a run if you're nervous."

"And whatever you do, don't think of an elephant."

"*George!* Ignore him, Harry dear, there's no reason not to think of an elephant."

"I'm Fred, Mum, not George—"

"Thanks!" Harry said and took off at a run toward the barrier—

Wait a minute, it wouldn't work *unless he believed in it?*

It was at times like this that Harry hated his mind for actually working fast enough to realize that this was a case where "resonant doubt" applied, that is, if he'd started out thinking that he would go through the barrier he'd have been fine, only now he was worried about whether he sufficiently *believed* he'd go through the barrier, which meant that he actually *was* worried about crashing into it—

"*Harry! Get back here, you have some explaining to do!*" That was his Dad.

Harry shut his eyes and ignored everything he knew about justified belief and just tried to believe *really hard* that he'd go through the barrier and—

—the sounds around him changed.

Harry opened his eyes and stumbled to a halt, feeling vaguely dirtied by having made a deliberate effort to believe something.

He was standing in a bright, open-air platform next to a single huge train, fourteen long cars headed up by a massive scarlet-metal steam engine with a smokestack that promised death to air quality. The platform was already lightly crowded (even though Harry was a full hour early) and dozens of children and their parents were swarming around benches, tables, and various hawkers and vendors.

It went completely without saying that there was no such place in King's Cross Station and no room to hide it.

Okay, so either (a) I just teleported somewhere else entirely (b) they can fold space like no one's business or (c) they are simply ignoring the rules.

There was a slithering sound behind him, and Harry turned to confirm that his trunk had indeed followed him on its small clawed tentacles. Apparently, for magical purposes, his luggage had also managed to believe with sufficient strength to pass through the barrier. Actually that was quite disturbing when Harry started thinking about it.

A moment later, the youngest-looking red-haired boy came through the iron archway (iron archway?) at a run, pulling his trunk behind him on a leash and nearly crashing into Harry. Harry, feeling stupid for having stayed around, quickly began moving away from the landing area, and the red-haired boy followed him, yanking hard on his trunk's leash in order to keep up. A moment later, a white owl fluttered through the archway and came to rest on the boy's shoulder.

"Cor," said the red-haired boy, "are you *really* Harry Potter?"

Not this again. "I have no logical way of knowing that for certain. My parents raised me to *believe* that I was Harry Potter, and many people here have told me that I *look* like my parents, I mean my other parents, but," Harry frowned, realizing, "for all *I* know, there could easily be spells to polymorph a child into a specified appearance—"

"Er, what, mate?"

Not headed for Ravenclaw, I take it. "Yes, I'm Harry Potter."

"I'm Ron Weasley," said the tall skinny freckled long-nosed kid, and stuck out a hand, which Harry politely shook as they walked. The owl gave Harry an oddly measured and courteous hoot (actually more of an eehhhhh sound, which surprised Harry).

At this point Harry realized the potential for imminent catastrophe and devised a way to prevent it. "Just a second," he said to Ron, and opened one of the drawers of his trunk, the one that if he recalled correctly was for Winter Clothes—it was—and then he found the lightest scarf he owned, underneath his winter coat. Harry took off his headband, and just as quickly unfolded the scarf and tied it around his face. It was a little hot, especially in the summer, but Harry could live with that.

Then he shut that drawer (now containing his useless headband, though it didn't really belong there) and pulled out another drawer and drew forth his black wizard robes, which he shrugged over his head now that he was out of Muggle territory.

"There," Harry said, satisfied. The sound came out only slightly muffled through the scarf over his face. He turned to Ron. "How do I look? Stupid, I know, but am I identifiable as Harry Potter?"

"Er," Ron said. He closed his mouth, which had been open. "Not really, Harry."

"Very good," Harry said. "However, so as not to obviate the point of the whole exercise, you will henceforth address me as," Verres might not work anymore, "Mr. Spoo."

"Okay, Harry," Ron said uncertainly.

The Force is not particularly strong in this one. "Call... me... Mister... Spoo."

"Okay, Mister Spoo—" Ron stopped. "I can't do that, it makes me feel stupid."

That's not just a feeling. "Okay. *You* pick a name."

"Mr. Cannon," Ron said at once. "For the Chudley Cannons."

"Ah..." Harry had a dire apprehension that he was going to terribly regret asking this. "Who or what are the Chudley Cannons?"

"*Who're the Chudley Cannons?* Only the most brilliant team in the whole history of Quidditch! Sure, they finished at the bottom of the league last year, but—"

"What's Quidditch?"

Asking this was also a mistake.

"So let me get this straight," Harry said as it seemed that Ron's explanation (with associated hand gestures) was winding down. "Catching the Snitch is worth *one hundred and fifty points?*"

"Yeah—"

"How many ten-point goals does one side usually score *not* counting the Snitch?"

"Um, maybe fifteen or twenty in professional games—"

"That's just wrong. That violates every possible rule of game design. Look, the rest of this game sounds like it might make sense, sort of, for a sport I mean, but you're basically saying that catching the Snitch overwhelms almost any ordinary point spread. The two Seekers are up there flying around looking for the Snitch and usually not interacting with anyone else, spotting the Snitch first is going to be mostly luck—"

"It's not luck!" protested Ron. "You've got to keep your eyes moving in the right pattern—"

"That's not *interactive,* there's no back-and-forth with the other player and how much fun is it to watch someone incredibly good at moving their eyes? And then whichever Seeker gets lucky swoops in and grabs the Snitch and makes everyone else's work moot. It's like someone took a real game and grafted on this pointless extra position just so that you could be the Most Important Player without needing to really get involved or learn the rest of it. Who was the first Seeker, the King's idiot son who wanted to play Quidditch but couldn't understand the rules?" Actually, now that Harry thought about it, that seemed like a surprisingly good hypothesis. Put him on a broomstick and tell him to catch the shiny thing...

Ron's face pulled into a scowl. "If you don't like Quidditch, you don't have to make fun of it!"

"If you can't criticize, you can't optimize. I'm suggesting how to *improve the game.* And it's very simple. Get rid of the Snitch."

"They won't change the game just 'cause *you* say so!"

"I *am* the Boy-Who-Lived, you know. People will listen to me. And maybe if I can persuade them to change the game at Hogwarts, the innovation will spread."

A look of absolute horror was spreading over Ron's face. "But, but, but if you get rid of the Snitch, how will anyone know when the game ends?"

"*Buy... a... clock.* It would be a lot fairer than having the game sometimes end after ten minutes and sometimes not end for hours, and the schedule would be a lot more predictable for the spectators, too." Harry sighed. "Oh, stop giving me that look of absolute horror, I probably won't *actually* take the time to destroy this pathetic excuse for a national sport and remake it stronger and smarter in my own image. I've got way, way, *way* more important stuff to worry about." Harry looked thoughtful. "Then again, it wouldn't *take* much time to write up the Ninety-Five Theses of the Snitchless Reformation and nail it to a church door—"

"Potter," drawled a young boy's voice, "*what* is that on your face and *what* is standing next to you?"

Ron's look of horror was replaced by utter hatred. "*You!*"

Harry turned his head; and indeed it was Draco Malfoy, who might have been forced to wear standard school robes, but was making up for that with a trunk looking at least as magical and far more elegant than Harry's own, decorated in silver and emeralds and bearing what Harry guessed to be the Malfoy family crest, a beautiful fanged serpent over crossed ivory wands.

"Draco!" Harry said. "Er, or Malfoy if you prefer, though that kind of sounds like Lucius to me. I'm glad to see you're doing so well after, um, our last meeting. This is Ron Weasley. And I'm trying to go incognito, so call me, eh," Harry looked down at his robes, "Mister Black."

"*Harry!*" hissed Ron. "You can't use *that* name!"

Harry blinked. "Why not?" It *sounded* nicely dark, like an international man of mystery—

"I'd say it's a *fine* name," said Draco, "but the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black might object. How about Mr. Silver?"

"*You* get away from... from Mr. Gold," Ron said coldly, and took a step forward. "He doesn't need to talk to the likes of you!"

Harry raised a placating hand. "I'll go by Mr. Bronze, thanks for the naming schema. And, Ron, um," Harry struggled to find a way to say this, "I'm glad you're so... enthusiastic about protecting me, but I don't particularly mind talking to Draco—"

This was apparently the last straw for Ron, who spun on Harry with eyes now aflame with outrage. "*What?* Do you *know* who this is?"

"Yes, Ron," Harry said, "you may remember that I called him Draco without him needing to introduce himself."

Draco sniggered. Then his eyes lit on the white owl on Ron's shoulder. "Oh, what's *this?*" Draco said in a drawl rich with malice. "Where is the famous Weasley family rat?"

"Buried in the backyard," Ron said coldly.

"Aw, how sad. Pot... ah, Mr. Bronze, I should mention that the Weasley family is widely agreed to have *the best pet story ever*. Want to tell it, Weasley?"

Ron's face contorted. "You wouldn't think it was funny if it happened to *your* family!"

"Oh," Draco purred, "but it wouldn't ever *happen* to the Malfoys."

Ron's hands clenched into fists—

"That's enough," Harry said, putting as much quiet authority into the voice as he could manage. It was clear that whatever this was, it was a painful memory for the red-haired kid. "If Ron doesn't want to talk about it, he doesn't have to talk about it, and I'd ask that you not talk about it either."

Draco turned a surprised look on Harry, and Ron nodded. "That's right, Harry! I mean Mr. Bronze! You see what kind of person he is? Now tell him to go away!"

Harry counted to ten inside his head, which for him was a very quick *12345678910* —an odd habit left over from the age of five when his mother had first instructed him to do it, and Harry had reasoned that his way was faster and ought to be just as effective. "Ron," Harry said calmly, "I'm not telling him to go away. He's welcome to talk to me if he wants."

"Well, I don't intend to hang around with anyone who hangs around with Draco Malfoy," Ron announced coldly.

Harry shrugged. "That's up to you. *I* don't intend to let anyone say who I can and can't hang around with." Silently chanting, *please go away, please go away...*

Ron's face went blank with surprise, like he'd actually expected that line to work. Then Ron spun about, yanked his luggage's leash and stormed off down the platform.

"If you didn't like him," Draco said curiously, "why didn't you just walk away?"

"Um... his mother helped me figure out how to get to this platform from the King's Cross Station, so it was kind of hard to tell him to get lost. And it's not that I *hate* this Ron guy," Harry said, "I just, just..." Harry searched for words.

"Don't see any reason for him to exist?" offered Draco.

"Pretty much."

"Anyway, Potter... if you really were raised by Muggles—" Draco paused here, as if waiting for a denial, but Harry didn't say anything "—then you may not realize what it's like to be famous. People are going to want to take up *all* of your time. You *have* to learn to say no."

Harry nodded, putting a thoughtful look on his face. "That sounds like very good advice."

"If you try to be nice to them, it just means that you end up spending the most time around the most pushy ones. Decide who you *want* to spend time with and tell everyone else to go away. People *will* judge you by who they see you with, and you don't want to be seen with the likes of Ron Weasley."

Harry nodded again. "If you don't mind my asking, how did you recognize me?"

"*Mister Bronze*," Draco drawled, "I *have* met you, remember. I met you very well indeed. I saw someone going around with a scarf wrapped around his head, looking *absolutely ridiculous*. So I took a *wild guess*."

Harry bowed his head, accepting the compliment. "I'm *terribly* sorry about that," Harry said. "Our first meeting, I mean. I didn't mean to embarrass you in front of Lucius."

Draco waved it off while giving Harry an odd look. "I just wish Father could have come in while *you* were flattering *me*—" Draco laughed. "But thank *you* for what you said to Father. If not for that, I might've had a lot harder time explaining."

Harry swept a deeper bow. "And thank *you* for reciprocating with what you said to Professor McGonagall."

"You're welcome. Though one of the assistants must've sworn her closest friend to absolute secrecy, because Father says there're *weird rumors* going around, like you and I got in a fight or something."

"Ouch," Harry said, wincing. "I'm *really* sorry—"

"No, we're used to it, Merlin knows there's lots of rumors about the Malfoy family already."

Harry nodded. "I'm glad to hear you're not in trouble."

Draco smiled. "Father has, um, a rather *refined* sense of humor, but he *does* understand making friends. He understands it *very* well. In fact he made me repeat that before I went to bed every night for the last month, 'I will make friends at Hogwarts.' When I explained everything to him and he saw that's what I was doing, he not only apologized to me but bought me an ice-cream."

Harry's jaw dropped. "*You managed to spin that into an ice-cream?*"

Draco nodded, looking every bit as smug as the feat deserved. "Well, father *knew* what I was doing, of course, but he's the one who taught me *how* to do it, and if I grin the right way *while* I'm doing it, that makes it a father-son thing and then he *has* to buy me an ice-cream or I'll give him this sort of sad look, like I think I must have disappointed him."

Harry eyed Draco calculatingly, sensing the presence of another master. "You've gotten *lessons* on how to manipulate people?"

"For as far back as I can remember," Draco said proudly. "Father bought me tutors."

"Wow," Harry said. Reading Robert Cialdini's *Influence: Science and Practice* probably didn't stack up very high compared to that (though it was still one heck of a book). "Your dad is almost as awesome as my dad."

Draco's eyebrows rose loftily. "Oh? And what does *your* father do?"

"He buys me books."

Draco considered this. "That doesn't sound very impressive."

"You had to be there. Anyway, I'm glad to hear all that. The way Lucius was looking at you, I thought he was going to c-crucify you."

"My father really loves me," Draco said firmly. "He really wouldn't ever do that."

"Um..." Harry said. He remembered the black-robed, white-haired figure of perfection that had strolled into Madam Malkin's, wielding that beautiful, deadly silver-handled cane. It was just so hard to visualize that perfect killer as a doting father. "Don't take this the wrong way, but how do you *know* that?"

"Huh?" It was clear that this was a question Draco did not commonly ask himself.

"I ask the fundamental question of rationality: Why do you believe what you believe? What do you think you know and how do you think you know it? What have you *seen* which makes you think Lucius wouldn't sacrifice you the same way he'd sacrifice any other piece in his game?"

Draco shot Harry another odd look. "Just what do *you* know about Father?"

"Um... seat on the Wizengamot, seat on Hogwarts' Board of Governors, incredibly wealthy, has the ear of Minister Fudge, has the confidence of Minister Fudge, probably has some highly embarrassing photos of Minister Fudge, most prominent blood purist now that the Dark Lord's gone, former inner-circle Death Eater who was found to have the Dark Mark but got off by claiming to be under the Imperius curse, which was ridiculously implausible and pretty much everyone knew it... evil with a capital 'E' and a born killer... I think that's it."

Draco's eyes had narrowed to slits. "McGonagall told you that, did she."

"No, she wouldn't say *anything* to me about Lucius afterward, except to stay away from him. So during the Incident at the Potions Shop, while Professor McGonagall was busy talking to the shopkeeper and trying to get everything under control, I grabbed one of the customers and asked *them* about Lucius."

Draco's eyes were wide again. "Did you *really*?"

Harry gave Draco a puzzled look. "If I lied the first time, I'm not going to tell you the truth just because you ask twice."

There was a certain pause as Draco absorbed this.

"You're so completely going to be in Slytherin."

"I'm so completely going to be in Ravenclaw, thank you very much. I only want power so I can get books."

Draco giggled. "Yeah, right. Anyway... to answer what you asked..." Draco took a deep breath, and his face turned serious. "Father once missed a Wizengamot vote for me. I was on a broom and I fell off and broke a lot of ribs. It really hurt. I'd never hurt that much before and I thought I was going to die. So Father missed this really important vote, because he was there by my bed at St. Mungo's, holding my hands and promising me that I was going to be okay."

Harry glanced away uncomfortably, then, with an effort, forced himself to look back at Draco. "Why are you telling me *that?* It seems sort of... private..."

Draco gave Harry a serious look. "One of my tutors once said that people form close friendships by knowing private things about each other, and the reason most people don't make close friends is because they're too embarrassed to share anything really important about themselves." Draco turned his palms out invitingly. "Your turn?"

Knowing that Draco's hopeful face had probably been drilled into him by months of practice did not make it any less effective, Harry observed. Actually it *did* make it *less* effective, but unfortunately not *ineffective.* The same could be said of Draco's clever use of reciprocation pressure for an unsolicited gift, a technique which Harry had read about in his social psychology books (one experiment had shown that an unconditional gift of $5 was twice as effective as a conditional offer of $50 in getting people to fill out surveys). Draco had made an unsolicited gift of a confidence, and now invited Harry to offer a confidence in return... and the thing was, Harry *did* feel pressured. Refusal, Harry was certain, would be met with a look of sad disappointment, and maybe a small amount of contempt indicating that Harry had lost points.

"Draco," Harry said, "just so you know, I recognize exactly what you're doing right now. My own books called it *reciprocation* and they

talk about how giving someone a straight gift of two Sickles was found to be twice as effective as offering them twenty Sickles in getting them to do what you want..." Harry trailed off.

Draco was looking sad and disappointed. "It's not meant as a trick, Harry. It's a real way of becoming friends."

Harry held up a hand. "I didn't say I wasn't going to respond. I just need time to pick something that's private but just as non-damaging. Let's say... I wanted you to know that I can't be rushed into things." A pause to reflect could go a long way in defusing the power of a lot of compliance techniques, once you learned to recognize them for what they were.

"All right," Draco said. "I'll wait while you come up with something. Oh, and please take off the scarf while you say it."

Simple but effective.

And Harry couldn't help but notice how clumsy, awkward, graceless his attempt at resisting manipulation / saving face / showing off had appeared compared to Draco. *I need those tutors.*

"All right," Harry said after a time. "Here's mine." He glanced around and then rolled the scarf back up over his face, exposing everything but the scar. "Um... it sounds like you can really rely on your father. I mean... if you talk to him seriously, he'll always listen to you and take you seriously."

Draco nodded.

"Sometimes," Harry said, and swallowed. This was surprisingly hard, but then it was meant to be. "Sometimes I wish my own Dad was like yours." Harry's eyes flinched away from Draco's face, more or less automatically, and then Harry forced himself to look back at Draco.

Then it hit Harry *what on Earth he'd just said*, and Harry hastily added, "Not that I wish my Dad was a flawless instrument of death like Lucius, I only mean taking me seriously—"

"I understand," Draco said with a smile. "There... now doesn't it feel like we're a little closer to being friends?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah. It does, actually. Um... no offense, but I'm going to put on my disguise again, I *really* don't want to deal with—"

"I understand."

Harry rolled the scarf back down over his face.

"My father takes all of his allies seriously," Draco said. "That's why he has a lot of allies. Maybe you should meet him."

"I'll think about it," Harry said in a neutral voice. He shook his head in wonder. "So you really are his one weak point. Huh."

Now Draco was giving Harry a *really* odd look. "You want to go get something to drink and find somewhere to sit down?"

Harry realized he had been standing in one place for too long, and stretched himself, trying to crick his back. "Sure."

The platform was starting to fill up now, but there was still a quieter area on the far side away from the red steam engine. Along the way they passed a vendor, a bald but bearded man with a small cart offering newspapers and comic books and stacked neon-green cans.

The vendor was, in fact, leaning back and drinking out of one of the neon-green cans at the exact point when he spotted the refined and elegant Draco Malfoy approaching along with a mysterious boy looking incredibly stupid with a scarf tied over his face, causing the vendor to experience a sudden coughing fit in mid-drink and dribble a large amount of neon-green liquid onto his beard.

"'Scuse me," Harry said, "but what *is* that stuff, exactly?"

"Comed-Tea," said the vendor. "If you drink it, something surprising is bound to happen which makes you spill it on yourself or someone else. But it's charmed to vanish just a few seconds later—" Indeed the stain on his beard was already disappearing.

"How droll," said Draco. "How very, very droll. Come, Mr. Bronze, let's go find another—"

"Hold on," Harry said.

"*Oh come on!* That's just, just *juvenile!*"

"No, I'm sorry Draco, I *have* to investigate this. What happens if I drink Comed-Tea while doing my best to keep the conversation completely serious?"

The vendor smiled and shrugged mysteriously. "Who knows? You suddenly see a friend walking by in a frog costume? *Something* humorous and unexpected will happen one way or another—"

"No. I'm sorry. I just don't believe it. That violates my much-abused suspension of disbelief on so many levels I don't even have the language to describe it. There is, there is just *no way* a bloody *drink* can manipulate reality to produce *comedy setups*, or I'm going to give up and retire to the Bahamas—"

Draco groaned. "Are we *really* going to do this?"

"You don't have to drink it but I *have* to investigate. *Have* to. How much?"

"Five Knuts the can," the vendor said.

"*Five Knuts?* You can sell reality-manipulating soft drinks for *five Knuts the can?*" Harry reached into his pouch, said "four Sickles, four Knuts", and slapped them down on the counter. "Two dozen cans please."

"I'll also take one," Draco sighed, and started to reach for his pockets.

Harry shook his head rapidly. "No, I've got this, doesn't count as a favor either, I want to see if it works for you too." He tossed a can to Draco and then started feeding his pouch, whose Widening Lip ate the cans accompanied by small burping noises, which wasn't exactly helping to restore Harry's faith that he would someday discover a reasonable explanation for all this.

Twenty-two burps later, Harry had the last purchased can in his hand. Draco was looking at him expectantly, and the two of them popped the top at the same time.

Harry rolled up his scarf to expose his mouth, and they tilted their heads back and drank the Comed-Tea. It somehow *tasted* bright green—extra-fizzy and limer than lime.

Nothing happened.

Harry looked at the vendor, who was watching them benevolently.

All right, if this guy just took advantage of a natural accident to sell me twenty-four cans of green soda pop, I'm going to applaud his creative entrepreneurial spirit and then kill him.

"It doesn't always happen immediately," the vendor said. "But it's guaranteed to happen once per can, or your money back."

Harry took another long drink.

Once again, nothing happened.

Maybe I should just chug the whole thing as fast as possible... and hope my stomach doesn't explode from all the carbon dioxide, or that I don't burp while drinking it...

No, he could afford to be a *little* patient. But honestly, Harry didn't see how this was going to work. You couldn't go up to someone and say "Now I'm going to surprise you" or "And now I'm going to tell you the punchline of the joke, and it'll be really funny." It ruined the shock value. In Harry's state of mental preparedness, Lucius Malfoy could have walked past in a ballerina outfit and it wouldn't have gotten him to do a proper spit-take. Just what sort of wacky shenanigan was the universe supposed to cough up *now?*

"Anyway, let's sit down," Harry said. He prepared to swig another drink and started toward the distant seating area, which put him at the right angle to glance back and see the portion of the vendor's newspaper stand that was devoted to a newspaper called *The Quibbler*, which was showing the following headline:

BOY-WHO-LIVED GETS
DRACO MALFOY PREGNANT

"*Gah!*" screamed Draco as bright green liquid sprayed all over him from Harry's direction. Draco turned toward Harry with fire in his eyes and grabbed his own can. "You son of a mudblood! Let's see how *you* like being spat upon!" Draco took a deliberate swig from the can just as his own eyes caught sight of the headline.

In sheer reflex action, Harry tried to block his face as the spray of liquid flew in his direction. Unfortunately he blocked using the hand containing the Comed-Tea, sending the rest of the green liquid to splash out over his shoulder.

Harry stared at the can in his hand even as he went on choking and spluttering and the green color started to vanish from Draco's robes.

Then he looked up and stared at the newspaper headline.

BOY-WHO-LIVED GETS
DRACO MALFOY PREGNANT

Harry's lips opened and said, "buh-bluh-buh-buh..."

Too many competing objections, that was the problem. Every time Harry tried to say "But we're only eleven!" the objection "But men can't get pregnant!" demanded first priority and was then run over by "But there's nothing between us, really!"

Then Harry looked down at the can in his hand again.

He was feeling a deep-seated desire to run away screaming at the top of his lungs until he finally dropped over from lack of oxygen, and the only thing stopping him was that he had once read that outright panic was the sign of a *truly* important scientific problem.

Harry snarled, threw the can violently into a nearby garbage can, and stalked back over to the vendor. "One copy of *The Quibbler,* please." He paid over four more Knuts, retrieved another can of Comed-Tea from his pouch, and then stalked over to the picnic area with Draco, who was staring at his own soda can with an expression of frank admiration.

"I take it back," Draco said, "that was pretty good."

"Hey, Draco, you know what I bet is even better for becoming friends than exchanging secrets? Committing murder."

"I have a tutor who says that," Draco allowed. He reached inside his robes and scratched himself with an easy, natural motion. "Who've you got in mind?"

Harry slammed *The Quibbler* down hard on the picnic table. "The guy who came up with this headline."

Draco groaned. "Not a guy. A girl. A *ten-year-old* girl, if you can believe that. She went nuts after her mother died and her father, who owns this newspaper, is *convinced* that she is a seer, so when he doesn't know what's going on he asks Luna Lovegood and believes *anything* she says."

Not really thinking about it, Harry popped the top on his next can of Comed-Tea and prepared to drink. "Are you kidding me? That's even worse than Muggle journalism, which I would have thought was physically impossible."

Draco snarled. "She has some sort of perverse obsession about the Malfoys, too, and her father is politically opposed to us so he prints every word. As soon as I'm old enough I'm going to rape her."

Green liquid spurted out of Harry's nostrils, soaking into the scarf still covering that area. Comed-Tea and lungs did not mix, and Harry spent the next few seconds frantically coughing.

Draco looked at him sharply. "Something wrong?"

It was at this point that Harry came to the sudden realization that (a) the sounds coming from the rest of the train platform had turned into more of a blurred white noise at around the same time Draco had reached inside his robes, and (b) when he had discussed committing murder as a bonding method, there had been exactly one person in the conversation who'd thought they were both joking.

Right. Because he seemed *like such a normal kid. And he* is *a normal kid, he is just what you'd* expect *a baseline male child to be like if he were raised by the Dark Lord's most fearsome servant and/or doting father.*

"Yes, well," Harry coughed, oh god how was he going to get out of this conversational wedge, "I was just surprised at how you were willing to discuss it so openly, you didn't seem worried about getting caught or anything."

Draco snorted. "Are you joking? *Luna Lovegood's* word against mine?"

Holy crap on a holy cracker. "There's no such thing as magical truth detection, I take it?" *Or DNA testing... yet.*

Draco looked around. His eyes narrowed. "That's right, you don't know anything. Look, I'll explain things to you, I mean the way it really works, just like you were already in Slytherin and asked me the same question. But you've got to swear not to say anything about it."

"I can talk about the subject matter, just not that *you're* the one who said it, right? I mean say another young Slytherin asks me the same question someday."

Draco paused. "Repeat that."

Harry did so.

"Okay, that doesn't sound like you're planning to trick me, so sure. Just keep in mind, I can always deny everything. Swear."

"I swear," Harry said.

"The courts use Veritaserum, but it's a joke really, you just Obliviate yourself before you testify and then claim the other person was Memory-

Charmed with a false memory. If you've got a Pensieve, and we do, you can even get the memory back afterward. Now, ordinarily the courts presume in favor of Obliviation having occurred rather than more complicated Memory Charms. But there's a lot of discretion-of-the-court involved. And if *I'm* involved in something then it impinges on the honor of a Noble House, so it goes to the Wizengamot, where Father has the votes. After I'm found not guilty the Lovegood family has to pay reparations for tarnishing my honor. And they know from the start that's how it'll go, so they'll just keep their mouths shut."

A cold chill was coming over Harry, a chill that came with instructions to keep his voice and face normal. *Note to self: Overthrow government of magical Britain at earliest convenience.*

Harry coughed again to clear his throat. "Draco, please please *please* don't take this the wrong way, my word is my bond, but like you said I could be in Slytherin and I really want to ask for informational purposes, so what would happen *theoretically speaking* if I *did* testify that I'd heard you plan it?"

"Then if I was anyone other than a Malfoy, I'd be in trouble," Draco answered smugly. "Since I *am* a Malfoy... Father has the votes. And afterward he'd crush you... well, I guess not easily, since you *are* the Boy-Who-Lived, but Father is pretty good at that sort of thing." Draco frowned. "'Sides which, *you* were willing to talk about murdering her, why weren't you worried about *me* testifying if she turned up dead? I'm not famous in my own right the same way you are but your, ah, supporters are a lot less likely to stick with you if you do something that looks bad. And murder with a dead body and everything is a lot more serious than some little girl crying rape."

When the conversation can't go forward and can't go back, zig it sideways. "It's a Muggle thing, in Muggle Britain there's a hell of a political difference between getting away with murder and getting away with raping a little girl."

"Really? Weird. Why isn't murder worse? So does that mean that if you're the one to rape her, that makes it really awesome for you? 'Cause I'd gladly yield first place to you if that's true. Man, imagine Loony Lovegood trying to claim that she was raped by Draco Malfoy *and* the

Boy-Who-Lived, not even *Dumbledore* would believe her."

Thankfully Harry was *not* drinking Comed-Tea at this point. *How, oh how did my day go this wrong?* Harry's mind calculated desperately and came up with another zig.

"Actually, I'd as soon have you hold off on that for a while. After I found out that headline came from a girl a year younger than me, I wasn't exactly thinking of murder *or* rape."

"Huh? Do tell," Draco said, and started to take another swig of his Comed-Tea.

Harry didn't know if the enchantment worked more than once per can, but he *did* know he could avoid the blame, so he was careful to time it exactly right:

"I was thinking *someday I'm going to marry that woman.*"

Draco made a horrid ker-splutching sound and leaked green fluid out the corners of his mouth like a broken car radiator. "*Are you nuts?*"

"Quite the opposite, I'm so sane it burns like ice."

Draco giggled, a youthful high-pitched sound. "You've got weirder tastes than a Lestrange. But you could just rape her anyway. The slut probably likes it and I hear a lot of marriages get started like that. And if not you could just Obliviate her and do it again next week."

I am going to tear apart your pathetic little magical remnant of the Dark Ages into pieces smaller than its constituent atoms. "Would you mind letting *me* worry about that? If you really were serious about wanting to rape her I can owe you a favor—"

Draco waved it off. "Nah, this one's free, there's plenty of girls out there who deserve it."

Harry stared down at the can in his hand, the coldness settling into his blood. Charming, happy, generous with his favors to his friends, Draco wasn't a psychopath. That was the sad and awful part, knowing human psychology well enough to *know* that Draco *wasn't* a monster. There had been ten thousand societies over the history of the world where this conversation could have happened. No, the world would have been a very different place indeed, if it took an *evil mutant* to say what Draco had said. It was very simple, very human, it was the default if nothing else intervened. To Draco, his enemies weren't people.

And in the slowed time of this slowed country, here and now as in the darkness-before-dawn prior to the Age of Reason, the son of a sufficiently powerful noble would simply take for granted that he was above the law. At least when it came to a little rape here and there.

There were places in Muggle-land where it was still the same way, countries where that sort of nobility still existed and still thought like that, or even grimmer lands where it wasn't just the nobility. It was like that in every place and time that didn't descend directly from the Enlightenment. A line of descent, it seemed, which didn't quite include magical Britain, for all that there had been cross-cultural contamination of things like pop-top soda cans.

And if Draco doesn't change his mind about wanting revenge, and I don't throw away my own chance at happiness in life to marry some poor crazy girl, then all I've just bought is time, and not too much of it...

For one girl. Not for others.

I wonder how difficult it would be to just make a list of all the top blood purists and kill them.

They'd tried exactly that during the French Revolution, more or less—make a list of all the enemies of Progress and remove everything above the neck—and it hadn't worked out too well from what Harry recalled. Maybe he needed to dust off some of those history books his father had bought him, and see if what had gone wrong with the French Revolution was something easy to fix.

Harry gazed up at the sky, and at the pale shape of the Moon, visible this morning through the cloudless air.

So the world is broken and flawed and insane and cruel and bloody and dark. This is news? You always knew that, anyway...

"You're looking all serious," Draco said. "Let me guess, your Muggle parents told you that this sort of thing was bad."

Harry nodded, not quite trusting his voice.

"Well, like Father says, there may be four houses, but in the end everyone belongs to either Slytherin or Hufflepuff. And frankly, you're not on the Hufflepuff end. If you decide to side with the Malfoys under the table... our power and your reputation... you could get away with

things that even *I* can't do. Want to *try* it for a while? See what it's like?"

Aren't we a clever little serpent. Eleven years old and already coaxing your prey from hiding. Is it too late to save you, Draco?

Harry thought, considered, chose his weapon. "Draco, you want to explain the whole blood purity thing to me? I'm sort of new."

A wide smile crossed Draco's face. "You really should meet Father and ask *him*, you know, he's our leader."

"Give me the elevator pitch. Thirty-second version, I mean."

"Okay," Draco said. He drew in a deep breath, and his voice grew slightly lower, and took on a cadence. "Our powers have been growing weaker, generation by generation, as the mudblood taint grows. Where Salazar and Godric and Rowena and Helga once raised Hogwarts by their power, creating the Locket and the Sword and the Diadem and the Cup and the Hat, no modern wizard has risen to challenge them. We are fading, all fading into Muggles as we interbreed with their spawn and allow our Squibs to live. If the taint is not checked, soon our wands will break and all our arts cease, the line of Merlin will end and the blood of Atlantis fail. Our children will be left scratching at the dirt to survive like the mere Muggles, and darkness will cover all the world for ever." Draco took another swig from his soda can, looking satisfied. That seemed to be the whole argument as far as Draco was concerned.

"Persuasive," Harry said, meaning it descriptively rather than normatively. Classic, classic pattern. The Fall from Grace, the need to guard what purity remained against contamination, the past sloping upward and the future sloping only downward. And that pattern also had its *counter*... "I have to correct you on one point of fact, though. Your information about the Muggles is a bit out of date. We aren't exactly scratching at the dirt anymore."

Draco's head snapped around. "*What?* What do you mean, *we?*"

"We. The scientists. The line of Francis Bacon and the blood of the Enlightenment. Muggles didn't just sit around crying about not having wands, we have our *own* powers now, with or without magic. If all your powers fail then we will all have lost something very precious, because your magic is the only hint we have as to how the universe must *really*

work—but you won't be left scratching at the ground. Your houses will still be cool in summer and warm in winter, there will still be doctors and medicine. Science can keep you alive if magic fails. It would be a tragedy and we should all want to prevent that, but it wouldn't literally be the end of all the light in the world. Just saying."

Draco had backed up several feet and his face was full of mixed fear and disbelief. "*What in the name of Merlin are you talking about, Potter?*"

"Hey, I listened to *your* story, won't you listen to mine?" *Clumsy,* Harry chided himself, but Draco actually did stop backing off and seem to listen.

"Anyway," Harry said, "I'm saying that you don't seem to have been paying much attention to what goes on in the Muggle world." Probably because the whole wizarding world seemed to regard the rest of Earth as a slum, deserving around as much news coverage as the *Financial Times* awarded to the routine miseries of Burundi. "All right. Quick check. Have wizards ever been to the Moon? You know, that thing?" Harry pointed up to that huge and distant globe.

"*What?*" Draco said. It was pretty clear the thought had never occured to the boy. "*Go* to the—it's just a—" His finger pointed at the little pale thingy in the sky. "You can't Apparate to somewhere you've never *been* and how would anyone get to the Moon in the *first* place?"

"Hold on," Harry said to Draco, "I'd like to show you a book I brought with me, I think I remember what box it's in." And Harry stood up and kneeled down and yanked out the stairs to the cavern level of his trunk, then tore down the stairs and heaved a box off another box, coming perilously close to treating his books with disrespect, and snatched off the box cover and quickly but carefully pried out a stack of books—

(Harry had inherited the nigh-magical Verres ability to remember where all his books were, even after seeing them just once, which was rather mysterious considering the lack of any genetic connection.)

And Harry raced back up the stairs and shoved the staircase back into the trunk with his heel, and, panting, turned the pages of the book until he found the picture he wanted to show to Draco.

The one with the white, dry, cratered land, and the suited people, and the blue-white globe hanging over it all.

That picture.

The picture, if only one picture in all the world were to survive.

"*That*," Harry said, his voice trembling because he couldn't quite keep the pride out, "is what the Earth looks like from the Moon."

Draco slowly leaned over. There was a strange expression on his young face. "If that's a *real* picture, why isn't it moving?"

Moving? Oh. "Muggles can do moving pictures but they need a bigger box to show it, they can't fit them onto single book pages yet."

Draco's finger moved to one of the suits. "What are those?" His voice starting to waver.

"Those are human beings. They are wearing suits that cover their whole bodies to give them air, because there is no air on the Moon."

"That's impossible," Draco whispered. There was terror in his eyes, and utter confusion. "No Muggle could ever do that. *How...*"

Harry took back the book, flipped the pages until he found what he saw. "This is a rocket going up. The fire pushes it higher and higher, until it gets to the Moon." Flipped pages again. "This is a rocket on the ground. That tiny speck next to it is a person." Draco gasped. "Going to the Moon cost the equivalent of... probably around two thousand million Galleons." Draco choked. "And it took the efforts of... probably more people than live in all of magical Britain." *And when they arrived, they left a plaque that said, 'We came in peace, for all mankind.' You are not yet ready to hear those words, Draco, but I hope you will be, someday...*

"You're telling the truth," Draco said slowly. "You wouldn't fake a whole book just for this—and I can hear it in your voice. But... but..."

"How, without wands or magic? It's a long story, Draco. Science doesn't work by waving wands and chanting spells, it works by knowing how the universe works on such a deep level that you know exactly what to do in order to make the universe do what you want. If magic is like casting an *Imperius* on someone to make them do what you want, then science is like knowing them so well that you know exactly what to say in order to make them think it was their own idea all along. It's a lot more difficult than waving a wand, but it works when wands fail,

just like if the *Imperius* failed you could still try persuading a person. And Science builds from generation to generation. You have to really *know* what you're doing to do science—and when you really understand something, you can explain it to someone else. The greatest scientists of one century ago, the brightest names that are still spoken with reverence, their powers are as *nothing* to the greatest scientists of today. There is no equivalent in science of your lost arts that raised Hogwarts. In science our powers wax by the year. And we are beginning to understand and unravel the secrets of life and inheritance. We'll be able to look at the very blood of which you spoke, and see what makes you a wizard, and in one or two more generations, we'll be able to persuade that blood to make all your children powerful wizards too. So you see, your problem isn't nearly as bad as it looks, because in a few more decades, science will be able to solve it for you."

"But..." Draco said. His voice was trembling. "If *Muggles* have that kind of power... then... what are *we*?"

"No, Draco, that's not it, don't you see? Science taps the power of human understanding to look at the world and figure out how it works. It can't fail without humanity itself failing. Your magic could turn off, and you would hate that, but you would still be *you*. You would still be alive to regret it. But because science rests upon my human intelligence, it is the power that cannot be removed from me without removing *me*. Even if the laws of the universe change on me, so that all my knowledge is void, I'll just figure out the new laws, as has been done before. It's not a *Muggle* thing, it's a *human* thing, it just refines and trains the power you use every time you look at something you don't understand and ask 'Why?' You're of Slytherin, Draco, don't you see the implication?"

Draco looked up from the book to Harry. His face showed dawning understanding. "Wizards can learn to use this power."

Very carefully, now... the bait is set, now the hook... "If you can learn to think of yourself as a *human* instead of a *wizard* then you can train and refine your powers as a human."

And if *that* instruction wasn't in *every* science curriculum, Draco didn't need to know it, did he?

Draco's eyes were deeply thoughtful. "You've... already done this?"

"To some extent," Harry allowed. "My training isn't complete. Not at eleven. But—my father *also* bought me tutors, you see." Sure, they'd been starving grad students, and it had all been because Harry slept on a 26-hour cycle—what *was* Professor McGonagall going to do about that?—but leave all that aside for now...

Slowly, Draco nodded. "You think you can master *both* arts, add the powers together, and..." Draco stared at Harry. "Make yourself lord of the two worlds?"

Harry gave an evil laugh, it just seemed to come naturally at that point. "You have to realize, Draco, that the whole world you know, all of magical Britain, is just one square on a much larger gameboard. The gameboard that includes places like the Moon, and the stars in the night sky, which are lights just like the Sun only unimaginably far away, and things like galaxies that are vastly huger than the Earth and Sun, things so large that only scientists can see them and you don't even know they exist. But I really *am* Ravenclaw, you know, not Slytherin. I don't want to rule the universe. I just think it could be more sensibly organized."

There was awe on Draco's face. "Why are you telling *me* this?"

"Oh... there aren't many people who know how to do *true* science—understanding something for the very first time, even if it confuses the hell out of you. Help would be helpful."

Draco stared at Harry with his mouth open.

"But make no mistake, Draco, true science really *isn't* like magic, you can't just do it and walk away unchanged like learning how to say the words of a new spell. The power comes with a cost, a cost so high that most people refuse to pay it."

Draco nodded at this as though, finally, he'd heard something he could understand. "And that cost?"

"Learning to admit you're wrong."

"Um," Draco said after the dramatic pause had stretched on for a while. "You going to explain that?"

"Trying to figure out how something works on that deep level, the first ninety-nine explanations you come up with are wrong. The hundredth is right. So you have to learn how to admit you're wrong, over and over and over again. It doesn't sound like much, but it's so hard that

most people can't do true science. Always questioning yourself, always taking another look at things you've always taken for granted," like having a Snitch in Quidditch, "and every time you change your mind, you change yourself. But I'm getting way ahead of myself here. Way ahead of myself. I just want you to know... I'm offering to share some of my knowledge. If you want. There's just one condition."

"Uh huh," Draco said. "You know, Father says that when someone says that to you, it is never, ever a good sign."

Harry nodded. "Now, don't mistake me and think that I'm trying to drive a wedge between you and your father. It's not about that. It's just about me wanting to deal with someone my own age, rather than having this be between me and Lucius. I think your father would be okay with that too, he knows you have to grow up sometime. But your moves in our game have to be your own. That's my condition—that I'm dealing with you, Draco, not your father."

"Enough," Draco said. He stood up. "Way too much. I have to go off and think about this. Not to mention it's about time to board the train."

"Take your time," Harry said. "Just remember it's not an exclusive offer, even if you take me up on it. True science does sometimes take more than one person."

The sounds of the train platform changed from blurs into murmurs as Draco wandered off.

Harry looked at the watch on his wrist, a very simple mechanical model that his father had bought him in the hopes it would go on working in the presence of magic. It was still ticking and if the time was right, then it wasn't quite eleven just yet. He probably ought to get on the train soon and start looking for whatsherface, but it seemed worth taking a few minutes first to do some breathing exercises and see if his blood warmed up again.

But when Harry looked up from his watch, he saw two figures approaching, looking utterly ridiculous with their faces cloaked by winter scarves.

"Hello, Mr. Bronze," said one of the masked figures. "Can we interest

you in joining the Order of Chaos?"

Aftermath:

Not too long after that, when all that day's fuss had finally subsided, Draco was bent over a desk with quill in hand. He had a private room in the Slytherin dungeons, with its own desk and its own fire—sadly not even *he* rated a connection to the Floo system, but at least Slytherin didn't buy into that utter *nonsense* about making *everyone* sleep in dorms. There weren't many private rooms, you had to be the *very* best within the House of the better sort, but *that* could be taken for granted with the House of Malfoy.

Dear Father, Draco wrote.

And then he stopped.

Ink slowly dripped from his quill, staining the parchment near the words.

Draco wasn't stupid. He was young, but his tutors had trained him to know certain things just by pattern recognition. Draco knew that Potter probably felt a lot more sympathy toward Dumbledore's faction than Potter was letting on... though Draco did think Potter could be tempted. But it was crystal clear that Potter was trying to tempt Draco just as Draco was trying to tempt him.

And it was also clear that Potter was brilliant, and a whole lot more than just slightly mad, and playing a vast game that Potter himself mostly didn't understand, improvised at top speed with the subtlety of a rampaging nundu. But Potter had managed to choose a tactic that Draco couldn't just walk away from. He had offered Draco a part of his own power, gambling that Draco couldn't use it without becoming more like him. His father had called this a very advanced technique, and had warned Draco that it often didn't work.

Draco knew he hadn't understood everything that had happened... but Potter had offered *him* the chance to play and right now it was *his.* And if he blurted the whole thing out, it would become his father's.

In the end it was as simple as that. The lesser techniques require the unawareness of the target, or at least their uncertainty. Flattery has to be

plausibly disguised as admiration. ("You should have been in Slytherin" is an old classic, very effective on a certain type of person who isn't expecting it, and if it works you can repeat it.) But when you find someone's ultimate lever it doesn't matter if they know you know. Potter, in his mad rush, had guessed a key to Draco's soul. And if Draco knew that Potter knew it—even if it had been an obvious sort of guess—that didn't change anything.

So now, for the first time in his life, he had real secrets to keep. He was playing his own game. There was an obscure pain to it, but he knew that Father would be proud, and that made it all right.

Leaving the ink drippings in place—there was a message there, and one that his father would understand, for they had played the game of subtleties more than once—Draco wrote out the one question that really had gnawed at him about the whole affair, the part that it seemed he *ought* to understand, but he didn't, not at all.

Dear Father:

Suppose I told you that I met a student at Hogwarts, not already part of our circle of acquaintances, who called you a 'flawless instrument of death' and said that I was your 'one weak point'. What would you say about him?

It didn't take very long after that for an owl to bring Draco the reply.

My beloved son:

I would say that you had been so fortunate as to meet someone who enjoys the intimate confidence of our friend and valuable ally, Severus Snape.

Draco stared at the letter for a while, and finally threw it into the fire.

CHAPTER EIGHT

POSITIVE BIAS

"Allow me to warn you that challenging my ingenuity is a dangerous sort of project, and may tend to make your life a lot more surreal."

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No one had asked for help, that was the problem. They'd just gone around talking, eating, or staring into the air while their parents gossiped. For whatever odd reason, no one had been sitting down reading a book, which meant she couldn't just sit down next to them and take out her own book. And even when she'd boldly taken the initiative by sitting down and continuing her third read-through of *Hogwarts: A History,* no one had seemed inclined to sit down next to her.

Aside from helping people with their homework, or anything else they needed, she really didn't know how to meet people. She didn't *feel* like she was a shy person. She thought of herself as a take-charge sort of girl. And yet, somehow, if there wasn't some request along the lines of "I can't remember how to do long division" then it was just too *awkward* to go up to someone and say... what? She'd never been able to figure out what. And there didn't seem to be a standard information sheet, which was ridiculous. The whole business of meeting people had never seemed sensible to her. Why did *she* have to take all the responsibility herself when there were two people involved? Why didn't adults ever help? She wished some other girl would just walk up to *her* and say, "Hermione, the teacher told me to be friends with you."

But let it be quite clear that Hermione Granger, sitting alone on the first day of school in one of the few cabins that had been empty, in the last car of the train, with the cabin door left open just in case anyone for any reason wanted to talk to her, was *not* sad, lonely, gloomy, depressed, despairing, or obsessing about her problems. She was, rather, rereading *Hogwarts: A History* for the third time and quite enjoying it, with only a faint tinge of annoyance in the back of her mind at the general unreasonableness of the world.

There was the sound of an inter-train door opening, and then footsteps and an odd slithering sound coming down the hallway of the train. Hermione laid aside *Hogwarts: A History* and stood up and stuck her head outside—just in case someone needed help—and saw a young boy in a wizard's dress robes, probably first or second year going by his height, and looking quite silly with a scarf wrapped around his head. A small trunk stood on the floor next to him. Even as she saw him, he knocked on the door of another, closed cabin, and he said in a voice only slightly muffled by the scarf, "Excuse me, can I ask a quick question?"

She didn't hear the answer from inside the cabin, but after the boy opened the door, she did think she heard him say—unless she'd somehow misheard—"Does anyone here know the six quarks or where I can find a first-year girl named Hermione Granger?"

After the boy had closed that cabin door, Hermione said, "Can I help you with something?"

The scarfed face turned to look at her, and the voice said, "Not unless you can name the six quarks or tell me where to find a first-year girl named Hermione Granger."

"Up, down, strange, charm, truth, beauty, and why are you looking for a first-year girl named Hermione Granger?"

It was hard to tell from this distance, but she thought she saw the boy grin widely under his scarf. "Ah, so *you're* a first-year girl named Hermione Granger," said that young, muffled voice. "On the train to Hogwarts, no less." The boy started to walk toward her and her cabin, and his trunk slithered along after him. "Technically, all I needed to do was *look* for you, but it seems likely that I'm meant to talk to you or invite you to join my party or get a key magical item from you or

find out that Hogwarts was built over the ruins of an ancient temple or something. PC or NPC, that is the question?"

Hermione opened her mouth to reply to this, but then she couldn't think of any *possible* reply to... *whatever* it was she'd just heard, even as the boy walked over to her, looked inside the cabin, nodded with satisfaction, and sat down on the empty bench across from her own, which still had the book. His trunk scurried in after him, grew to three times its former diameter and snuggled up next to her own in an oddly disturbing fashion.

"Please, have a seat," said the boy, "and do please close the door behind you, if you would. Don't worry, I don't bite anyone who doesn't bite me first." He was already unwinding the scarf from around his head.

The imputation that this boy thought she was *scared* of him was enough to make her hand send the door sliding shut, jamming it into the wall with unnecessary force. She spun around and saw a young face with bright, laughing green eyes, and an angry red-dark scar set into his forehead that reminded her of something in the back of her mind but right now she had more important things to think about. "I didn't say I was Hermione Granger!"

"*I* didn't say you *said* you were Hermione Granger, I just said you were Hermione Granger. If you're asking how I know, it's because I know everything. Good evening ladies and gentlemen, my name is Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres or Harry Potter for short, I know that probably doesn't mean anything to *you* for a change—"

Hermione's mind finally made the connection. The scar on his forehead, the shape of a lightning bolt. "Harry Potter! You're in *Modern Magical History* and *The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts* and *Great Wizarding Events of the Twentieth Century.*" It was actually the very first time in her whole entire life that she'd *met* someone from inside a *book,* and it was a rather odd feeling.

The boy blinked three times. "I'm in *books*? Wait, of course I'm in books... what a strange thought."

"Goodness, didn't you know?" said Hermione. "I'd have found out everything I could if it was me."

The boy spoke rather dryly. "Miss Hermione Granger, it has been less than 72 hours since I went to Diagon Alley and discovered my claim to fame. I have spent the last two days buying science books. *Believe me,* I intend to find out everything I can." The boy hesitated. "What *do* the books say about me?"

Hermione Granger's mind flashed back, she hadn't realized she would be tested on *those* books so she'd read them only once, but it was just a month ago so the material was still fresh in her mind. "You're the only one who's survived the Killing Curse so you're called the Boy-Who-Lived. You were born to James Potter and Lily Potter formerly Lily Evans on July 31st 1980. On October 31st 1981 the Dark Lord He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named though I don't know why not attacked your home, whose location was betrayed by Sirius Black though it doesn't say how they knew it was him. You were found alive with the scar on your forehead in the ruins of your parents' house near the burnt remains of You-Know-Who's body. Chief Warlock Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore sent you off somewhere, no one knows where. *The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts* claims that you survived because of your mother's love and that your scar contains all of the Dark Lord's magical power and that the centaurs fear you, but *Great Wizarding Events of the Twentieth Century* doesn't mention anything like that and *Modern Magical History* warns that there are lots of crackpot theories about you."

The boy's mouth was hanging open. "Were you told to wait for Harry Potter on the train to Hogwarts, or something like that?"

"No," Hermione said. "Who told you about *me*?"

"Professor McGonagall and I believe I see why. Do you have an eidetic memory, Hermione?"

Hermione shook her head. "It's not photographic, I've always wished it was but I had to read my school books five times over to memorize them all."

"Really," the boy said in a slightly strangled voice. "I hope you don't mind if I test that—it's not that I don't believe you, but as the saying goes, 'Trust, but verify'. No point in wondering when I can just do the experiment."

Hermione smiled, rather smugly. She so loved tests. "Go ahead."

The boy stuck a hand into a pouch at his side and said "Magical Drafts and Potions by Arsenius Jigger". When he withdrew his hand it was holding the book he'd named.

Instantly Hermione wanted one of those pouches more than she'd ever wanted anything.

The boy opened the book to somewhere in the middle and looked down. "If you were making *oil of sharpness*—"

"I can *see* that page from here, you know!"

The boy tilted the book so that she couldn't see it any more, and flipped the pages again. "If you were brewing a *potion of spider climbing*, what would be the next ingredient you added after the Acromantula silk?"

"After dropping in the silk, wait until the potion has turned exactly the shade of the cloudless dawn sky, 8 degrees from the horizon and 8 minutes before the tip of the sun first becomes visible. Stir eight times counterclockwise and once clockwise, and then add eight drams of unicorn boogers."

The boy shut the book with a sharp snap and put the book back into his pouch, which swallowed it with a small burping noise. "Well well well *well* well well. I should like to make you a proposition, Miss Granger."

"A proposition?" Hermione said suspiciously. Girls weren't supposed to listen to those.

It was also at this point that Hermione realized the other thing—well, one of the things—which was odd about the boy. Apparently people who were *in* books actually *sounded* like a book when they talked. This was quite the surprising discovery.

The boy reached into his pouch and said, "can of soda", retrieving a bright green cylinder. He held it out to her and said, "Can I offer you something to drink?"

Hermione politely accepted the soda. In fact she *was* feeling sort of thirsty by now. "Thank you very much," Hermione said as she popped the top. "Was that your proposition?"

The boy coughed. "No," he said. Just as Hermione started to drink, he said, "I'd like you to help me take over the universe."

Hermione finished her drink and lowered the soda. "No thank you, I'm not evil."

The boy looked at her in surprise, as though he'd been expecting some other answer. "Well, I was speaking a bit rhetorically," he said. "In the sense of the Baconian project, you know, not political power. 'The effecting of all things possible' and so on. I want to conduct experimental studies of spells, figure out the underlying laws, bring magic into the domain of science, merge the wizarding and Muggle worlds, raise the entire planet's standard of living, move humanity centuries ahead, discover the secret of immortality, colonize the Solar System, explore the galaxy, and most importantly, figure out what the heck is really going on here because all of this is blatantly impossible."

That sounded a bit more interesting. "And?"

The boy stared at her incredulously. "*And?* That's not *enough?*"

"And what do you want from me?" said Hermione.

"I want you to help me do the research, of course. With your encyclopedic memory added to my intelligence and rationality, we'll have the Baconian project finished in no time, where by 'no time' I mean probably at least thirty-five years."

Hermione was beginning to find this boy annoying. "I haven't seen you do anything intelligent. Maybe I'll let *you* help me with *my* research."

There was a certain silence in the cabin.

"So you're asking me to demonstrate my intelligence, then," said the boy after a long pause.

Hermione nodded.

"Allow me to warn you that challenging my ingenuity is a dangerous sort of project, and may tend to make your life a lot more surreal."

"I'm not impressed yet," Hermione said. The hand containing the soda started its rise to her lips again.

"Well, maybe *this* will impress you," the boy said. He leaned forward and looked at her intensely. "I've already done a bit of experimenting and I found out that I don't need the wand, I can make anything I want happen just by snapping my fingers."

It came just as Hermione was in the middle of swallowing, and she choked and coughed and expelled the bright green fluid.

Onto her brand new, never-worn witch's robes, on the very first day of school.

Hermione actually screamed. It was a high-pitched sound that sounded like an air raid siren in the closed cabin. "*Eek! My clothes!*"

"Don't panic!" said the boy. "I can fix it for you. Just watch!" He raised a hand and snapped his fingers.

"You'll—" Then she looked down at herself.

The green fluid was still there, but even as she watched, it started to vanish and fade and within just a few moments, it was like she'd never spilled anything at herself.

Hermione stared at the boy, who was wearing a rather smug sort of smile.

Wordless wandless magic! At *his* age? When he'd only gotten the schoolbooks *three days* ago?

Then she remembered what she'd read, and she gasped and flinched back from him. *All the Dark Lord's magical power! In his scar!*

She rose hastily to her feet. "I, I, I need to go the bathroom, wait here all right—" she had to find a grownup she had to tell them—

The boy's smile faded. "It was just a trick, Hermione. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to scare you."

Her hand halted on the door handle. "A *trick?*"

"Yes," said the boy. "You asked me to demonstrate my intelligence. So I did something apparently impossible, which is always a good way to show off. I can't *really* do anything just by snapping my fingers." The boy paused. "At least I don't *think* I can, I've never actually tried." The boy raised his hand and snapped his fingers again. "Nope, no banana."

Hermione was as confused as she'd ever been in her life.

The boy was now smiling again at the look on her face. "I did *warn* you that challenging my ingenuity tends to make your life surreal. Do remember this the next time I warn you about something."

"But, but," Hermione stammered. "What did you *do,* then?"

The boy's gaze took on a measuring, weighing quality that she'd never seen before from someone her own age. "You think you have

what it takes to be a scientist in your own right, with or without my help? Then let's see how *you* investigate a confusing phenomenon."

"I..." Hermione's mind went blank for a moment. She loved being tested but she'd never had a test like *this* before. Frantically, she tried to cast back for anything she'd read about what scientists were supposed to do. Her mind skipped gears, ground against itself, and spat back the instructions for doing a science fair project:

Step 1: Form a hypothesis.

Step 2: Do an experiment to test your hypothesis.

Step 3: Measure the results.

Step 4: Make a cardboard display.

Step 1 was to form a hypothesis. That meant, try to think of something that *could* have happened just now. "All right. My hypothesis is that you cast a charm on my robes to make anything spilled on it vanish."

"All right," said the boy, "is that your answer?"

The shock was wearing off, and Hermione's mind was starting to work properly. "Wait, that's not a very good idea. I didn't see you touch your wand or say any spells so how could you have cast a charm?"

The boy waited, his face neutral.

"But suppose all the robes come from the store with a charm *already* on them to keep them clean, which would be a very useful sort of charm for them to have. You found that out by spilling something on *yourself* earlier."

Now the boy's eyebrows lifted. "Is *that* your answer?"

"No, I haven't done Step 2, 'Do an experiment to test your hypothesis.'"

The boy closed his mouth again, and began to smile.

Hermione looked at the can of soda in her hand, which she'd automatically put into the cupholder at the window. She looked at it, and found that it was around one-third full.

"Well," said Hermione, "the experiment I want to do is to pour it on my robes and see what happens, and my prediction is that the stain will

disappear. Only if it *doesn't* work, my robes will be stained, and I don't want that."

"Do it to mine," said the boy, "that way you don't have to worry about your robes getting stained."

"But—" Hermione said. There was something *wrong* with that thinking but she didn't know how to say it exactly.

"I have spare robes in my trunk," said the boy.

"But there's nowhere for you to change," Hermione objected. Then she thought better of it. "Though I suppose I could leave and close the door—"

"I have somewhere to change in my trunk, too."

Hermione looked at his trunk, which, she was beginning to suspect, was rather a lot more special than her own.

"All right," Hermione said, "since you say so," and she rather gingerly poured a bit of green soda onto a corner of the boy's robes. Then she stared at it, trying to remember how long the original soda had taken to disappear...

And the soda vanished!

Hermione let out a sigh of relief, not least because this meant she wasn't dealing with all of the Dark Lord's magical power.

Well, Step 3 was measuring the results, but in this case that was just seeing that the soda had vanished. And she supposed she could probably skip Step 4, about the cardboard display. "My answer is that the robes are charmed to keep themselves clean."

"Not quite," said the boy.

Hermione felt a stab of disappointment. She really wished she *wouldn't* have felt that way, the boy wasn't a teacher, but it was still a test and she'd gotten a question wrong and that always felt like a little punch in the stomach.

(It said almost everything you needed to know about Hermione Granger that she had never let that stop her, or even let it interfere with her love of being tested.)

"The sad thing is," said the boy, "you probably did everything the book told you to do. You made a prediction that would distinguish between the robe being charmed and not charmed, and you tested it, and

rejected the null hypothesis that the robe was not charmed. But unless you read the very, very best sort of books, they won't quite teach you how to do science *properly*. Well enough to *really* get the right answer, I mean, and not just churn out another publication like Dad always complains about. So let me try to explain—without giving away the answer—what you did wrong this time, and I'll give you another chance."

She was starting to resent the boy's oh-so-superior tone when he was just another eleven-year-old like her, but that was secondary to finding out what she'd done wrong. "All right."

The boy's expression grew more intense. "This is a game based on a famous experiment called the 2–4–6 task, and this is how it works. I have a *rule*—known to me, but not to you—which fits some triplets of three numbers, but not others. 2–4–6 is one example of a triplet which fits the rule. In fact... let me write down the rule, just so you know it's a fixed rule, and fold it up and give it to you. Please don't look, since I infer from earlier that you can read upside-down."

The boy said "paper" and "mechanical pencil" to his pouch, and she shut her eyes tightly while he wrote.

"There," said the boy, and he was holding a tightly folded piece of paper. "Put this in your pocket," and she did.

"Now the way this game works," said the boy, "is that you give me a triplet of three numbers, and I'll tell you 'Yes' if the three numbers are an instance of the rule, and 'No' if they're not. I am Nature, the rule is one of my laws, and you are investigating me. You already know that 2–4–6 gets a 'Yes'. When you've performed all the further experimental tests you want—asked me as many triplets as you feel necessary—you stop and guess the rule, and then you can unfold the sheet of paper and see how you did. Do you understand the game?"

"Of course I do," said Hermione.

"Go."

"4–6–8" said Hermione.

"Yes," said the boy.

"10–12–14", said Hermione.

"Yes," said the boy.

Hermione tried to cast her mind a little further afield, since it seemed like she'd already done all the testing she needed, and yet it couldn't be that easy, could it?

"1–3–5."

"Yes."

"Minus 3, minus 1, positive 1."

"Yes."

Hermione couldn't think of anything else to do. "The rule is that the numbers have to increase by two each time."

"Now suppose I tell you," said the boy, "that this test is harder than it looks, and that only 20% of grownups get it right."

Hermione frowned. What had she missed? Then, suddenly, she thought of a test she still needed to do.

"2–5–8!" she said triumphantly.

"Yes."

"10–20–30!"

"Yes."

"The real answer is that the numbers have to go up by the *same* amount each time. It doesn't have to be 2."

"Very well," said the boy, "take the paper out and see how you did."

Hermione took the paper out of her pocket and unfolded it.

Three real numbers in increasing order, lowest to highest.

Hermione's jaw dropped. She had the distinct feeling of something terribly unfair having been done to her, that the boy was a dirty rotten cheating liar, but when she cast her mind back she couldn't think of any wrong responses that he'd given.

"What you've just discovered is called 'positive bias'," said the boy. "You had a rule in your mind, and you kept on thinking of triplets that should make the rule say 'Yes'. But you didn't try to test as many triplets as possible that should make the rule say 'No'. In fact you didn't get a *single* 'No', so 'any three numbers' could have just as easily been the rule. It's sort of like how people imagine experiments that could confirm their hypotheses instead of trying to imagine experiments that could falsify them—that's not quite exactly the same mistake but it's close. You

have to learn to look on the negative side of things, stare into the darkness. When this experiment is performed, only 20% of grownups get the answer right. And many of the others invent fantastically complicated hypotheses and put great confidence in their wrong answers since they've done so many experiments and everything came out like they expected."

"Now," said the boy, "do you want to take another shot at the original problem?"

His eyes were quite intent now, as though this were the *real* test.

Hermione shut her eyes and tried to concentrate. She was sweating underneath her robes. She had an odd feeling that this was the hardest she'd ever been asked to think on a test or maybe even the *first* time she'd ever been asked to think on a test.

What other experiment could she do? She had a Chocolate Frog, could she try to rub some of that on the robes and see if *it* vanished? But that still didn't seem like the kind of twisty negative thinking the boy was asking for. Like she was still asking for a 'Yes' if the Chocolate Frog stain disappeared, rather than asking for a 'No'.

So... on her hypothesis... when should the soda... *not* vanish?

"I have an experiment to do," Hermione said. "I want to pour some soda on the floor, and see if it *doesn't* vanish. Do you have some paper towels in your pouch, so I can mop up the soda if this doesn't work?"

"I have napkins," said the boy. His face still looked neutral.

Hermione took the soda, and poured a small bit of soda onto the floor.

A few seconds later, it vanished.

"Eureka," Hermione said quietly. It was like a compulsion, she *had* to say it. In fact she felt like shouting it, but she was just a little too inhibited for that. Then the realization hit her and she felt like kicking herself. "Of course! *You* gave me that soda! It's not the robe that's charmed, it was the soda all along!"

The boy stood up and bowed to her solemnly. He was grinning very widely now. "Then... may I help you with your research, Hermione Granger?"

"I, ah..." Hermione was still feeling the rush of euphoria, but she wasn't quite sure about how to answer *that.*

They were interrupted by a weak, tentative, faint, rather *reluctant* knocking at the door.

The boy turned and looked out the window, and said, "I'm not wearing my scarf, so can you get that?"

It was at this point that Hermione realized why the boy—no, the Boy-Who-Lived, Harry Potter—had been wearing the scarf over his head in the first place, and felt a little silly for not realizing it earlier. It was actually sort of odd, since she would have thought Harry Potter the kind of boy who would proudly display himself to the whole world; and the thought occurred to her that he might actually be shyer than he appeared.

When Hermione pulled the door open, she was greeted by a trembling young boy who looked exactly like he knocked.

"Excuse me," said the boy in a tiny voice, "I'm Neville Longbottom. I'm looking for my pet toad, I, I can't seem to find it anywhere on this car... have you seen my toad?"

"No," Hermione said, and then her helpfulness kicked in full throttle. "Have you checked all the other compartments?"

"Yes," whispered the boy.

"Then we'll just have to check all the other cars," Hermione said briskly. "I'll help you. My name is Hermione Granger, by the way."

The boy looked like he might faint with gratitude.

"Hold on," came the voice of the *other* boy—Harry Potter. "I'm not sure that's the best way to do it."

At this Neville looked like he might cry, and Hermione swung around, angered. If Harry Potter was the sort of person who'd abandon a little boy just because he didn't want to be interrupted... "What? Why *not?*"

"Well," said Harry Potter, "It's going to take a while to check the whole train by hand, and we might miss the toad anyway, and if we didn't find it by the time we're at Hogwarts, he'd be in trouble. So what would make a lot more sense is if he went directly to the front car, where the prefects are, and asked a prefect for help. That was the first thing I

did when I was looking for you, Hermione, although they didn't actually know. But they might have spells or magic items that would make it a lot easier to find a toad. We're only first-years."

That... *did* make a lot of sense.

"Do you think you can make it to the prefects' car on your own?" asked Harry Potter. "I've sort of got reasons for not wanting to show my face too much."

Suddenly Neville gasped and took a step back. "I remember that voice! You're one of the Lords of Chaos! *You're the one who gave me candy!*"

What? What what *what?*

Harry Potter turned his head from the window and rose dramatically. "I *never!*" he said, voice full of indignation. "Do I look like the sort of villain who would give candy to a child?"

Neville's eyes widened. "*You're* Harry Potter? *The* Harry Potter? *You?*"

"No, just *a* Harry Potter, there are three of me on this train—"

Neville gave a small shriek and ran away. There was a brief pattering of frantic footsteps and then the sound of a train-car door opening and closing.

Hermione sat down hard on her bench. Harry Potter closed the door and then sat down next to her.

"Can you please explain to me what's going on?" Hermione said in a weak voice. She wondered if hanging around Harry Potter meant always being this confused.

"Oh, well, what happened was that Fred and George and I saw this poor small boy at the train station—the woman next to him had gone away for a bit, and he was looking really frightened, like he was sure he was about to be attacked by Death Eaters or something. Now, there's a saying that the fear is often worse than the thing itself, so it occurred to me that this was a lad who could actually benefit from seeing his worst nightmare come true and that it wasn't as bad as he feared—"

Hermione sat there with her mouth wide open.

"—and Fred and George came up with this spell to make the scarves over our faces darken and blur, like we were undead kings and those were

our grave shrouds—"

She didn't like at all where this was going.

"—and after we were done giving him all the candy I'd bought, we were like, 'Let's give him some money! Ha ha ha! Have some Knuts, boy! Have a silver Sickle!' and dancing around him and laughing evilly and so on. I think there were some people in the crowd who wanted to interfere at first, but bystander apathy held them off at least until they saw what we were doing, and then I think they were all too confused to do anything. Finally he said in this tiny little whisper 'go away' so the three of us all screamed and ran off, shrieking something about the light burning us. Hopefully he won't be as scared of being bullied in the future. That's called desensitization therapy, by the way."

Okay, she *hadn't* guessed right about where this was going.

The burning fire of indignation that was one of Hermione's primary engines sputtered into life, even though part of her *did* sort of see what they'd been trying to do. "That's awful! *You're* awful! That poor boy! What you did was *mean!*"

"I think the word you're looking for is *enjoyable,* and in any case you're asking the wrong question. The question is, did it do more good than harm, or more harm than good? If you have any arguments to contribute to *that* question I'm glad to hear them, but I won't entertain any other criticisms until *that* one is settled. I certainly agree that what I did *looks* all terrible and bullying and mean, since it involves a scared little boy and so on, but that's hardly the key issue now is it? That's called *consequentialism,* by the way, it means that whether an act is right or wrong isn't determined by whether it *looks* bad, or mean, or anything like that, the only question is how it will turn out in the end—what are the consequences."

Hermione opened her mouth to say something utterly *searing* but unfortunately she seemed to have neglected the part where she thought of something to say before opening her mouth. All she could come up with was, "What if he has *nightmares?*"

"Honestly, I don't think he needed our help to have nightmares, and if he has nightmares about *this* instead, then it'll be nightmares involving

horrible monsters who give you chocolate and *that* was sort of the whole *point*."

Hermione's brain kept hiccuping in confusion every time she tried to get properly angry. "Is your life always this peculiar?" she said at last.

Harry Potter's face gleamed with pride. "I *make* it that peculiar. You're looking at the product of a lot of hard work and elbow grease."

"So..." Hermione said, and trailed off awkwardly.

"So," Harry Potter said, "how much science do you know exactly? I can do calculus and I know some Bayesian probability theory and decision theory and a lot of cognitive science, and I've read *The Feynman Lectures* (or volume 1 anyway) and *Judgment Under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases* and *Language in Thought and Action* and *Influence: Science and Practice* and *Rational Choice in an Uncertain World* and *Godel, Escher, Bach* and *A Step Farther Out* and—"

The ensuing quiz and counter-quiz went on for several minutes before being interrupted by another timid knock at the door. "Come in," she and Harry Potter said at almost the same time, and it slid back to reveal Neville Longbottom.

Neville *was* actually crying now. "I went to the front car and found a p-prefect but he t-told me that prefects weren't to be bothered over little things like m-missing toads."

The Boy-Who-Lived's face changed. His lips set in a thin line. His voice, when he spoke, was cold and grim. "What were his colors? Green and silver?"

"N-no, his badge was r-red and gold."

"*Red and gold!*" burst out Hermione. "But those are *Gryffindor's* colors!"

Harry Potter *hissed* at that, a frightening sort of sound that could have come from a live snake and made both her and Neville flinch. "I *suppose,*" Harry Potter spat, "that finding some first-year's toad isn't *heroic* enough to be worthy of a *Gryffindor* prefect. Come on, Neville, *I'll* come with you this time, we'll see if the Boy-Who-Lived gets more attention. First we'll find a prefect who ought to know a spell, and if that doesn't work, we'll find a prefect who isn't afraid of getting their hands dirty,

and if *that* doesn't work, I'll start recruiting my fans and if we have to we'll take apart the whole train screw by screw."

The Boy-Who-Lived stood up and grabbed Neville's hand in his, and Hermione realized with a sudden brain hiccup that they were nearly the same size, even though some part of her had insisted that Harry Potter was at least one foot taller than that, and Neville at least six inches shorter.

"*Stay!*" Harry Potter snapped at her—no, wait, at his *trunk*—and he closed the door behind him firmly as he left.

She probably should have gone with them, but in just a brief moment Harry Potter had turned so scary that she was actually rather glad she hadn't thought to suggest it.

Hermione's mind was now so jumbled that she didn't even think she could properly read "History: A Hogwarts". She felt as if she'd just been run over by a steamroller and turned into a pancake. She wasn't sure what she was thinking or what she was feeling or why. She just sat by the window and stared at the moving scenery.

Well, she did at least know why she was feeling a little sad inside.

Maybe Gryffindor wasn't as wonderful as she had thought.

CHAPTER NINE

SELF AWARENESS, PART I

"He's as fair a fair target now as fair can be."

*
* *

"Abbott, Hannah!"

Pause.

"HUFFLEPUFF!"

"Bones, Susan!"

Pause.

"HUFFLEPUFF!"

"Boot, Terry!"

Pause.

"RAVENCLAW!"

Harry glanced over briefly to look at his new House-mate, more to get a quick look at the face than anything else. He was still trying to get himself under control from his encounter with the ghosts. The sad, the really sad, the really truly sad thing was that he *did* seem to be getting himself under control again. It seemed ill-fitting. Like he should have taken at least a day. Maybe a whole lifetime. Maybe just never.

"Finnigan, Seamus!"

There was a long, tense moment of silence under the Hat. Almost a minute. Hermione, next to him, was shifting from side to side, fidgeting so energetically that Harry thought her feet might be leaving the floor.

"GRYFFINDOR!"

"Granger, Hermione!"

Hermione broke loose and ran full tilt toward the Sorting Hat, picked it up and jammed the patchy old clothwork down hard over her head. Harry winced. Hermione had been the one to explain to *him* about the Sorting Hat, but she certainly didn't *treat* it like an irreplaceable, vitally important, 800-year-old artifact of forgotten magic that was about to perform intricate telepathy on her mind and didn't seem to be in very good physical condition.

"RAVENCLAW!"

And talk about your foregone conclusions. Harry didn't really see why Hermione had been so tense about it. In what weird alternative universe would that girl *not* be Sorted into Ravenclaw? If Hermione Granger didn't go to Ravenclaw then there was no good reason for Ravenclaw House to exist.

Hermione arrived at the Ravenclaw table and got a dutiful cheer; Harry wondered whether the cheer would have been louder, or quieter, if they'd had any idea just what level of competition they'd welcomed to their table. Harry knew pi out to 3.141592 because accuracy to one part in a million was enough for most practical purposes. Hermione knew one hundred digits of pi because that was how many digits had been printed in the back of her math textbook.

Neville Longbottom went to Hufflepuff, Harry was glad to see. If that House really did contain the loyalty and camaraderie it was supposed to exemplify, then a Houseful of reliable friends would do Neville a whole world of good. Smart kids in Ravenclaw, evil kids in Slytherin, wannabe heroes in Gryffindor, and everyone who does the actual work in Hufflepuff.

(Though Harry *had* been right to consult a Ravenclaw prefect first. The young woman hadn't even looked up from her reading or identified Harry, just jabbed a wand in Neville's direction and muttered something. After which Neville had acquired a dazed expression and wandered off to the fifth car from the front and the fourth cabin on the left, which indeed had contained his toad.)

Draco went to Slytherin, and Harry breathed a small sigh of relief. It had *seemed* like a sure thing, but you never did know what tiny event

might upset the course of your master plan.

They were approaching the Ps now...

And over at the Gryffindor table, there was a whispered conversation.

"What if he doesn't like it?"

"He's got no right to not like it—

"—not after the prank he played on—"

"—Neville Longbottom, his name was—"

"—he's as fair a fair target now as fair can be."

"All right. Just make sure you don't forget your parts."

"We've rehearsed it often enough—"

"—over the last three hours."

And Minerva McGonagall, from where she stood at the speaker's podium of the Head Table, looked down at the next name on her list. *Please don't let him be a Gryffindor please don't let him be a Gryffindor oh please don't let him be a Gryffindor...* She took a deep breath, and called:

"Potter, Harry!"

There was a sudden silence in the hall as all whispered conversation stopped.

A silence broken by a horrible buzzing noise that modulated and changed in hideous mockery of musical melody.

Minerva's head jerked around, shocked, and identified the buzzing noise as coming from the Gryffindor direction, where They were *standing on top of the table* blowing into some kind of tiny devices held against Their lips. Her hand started to drop to her wand, to *Silencio* the lot of Them, but another sound stopped her.

Dumbledore was chuckling.

Minerva's eyes went back to Harry Potter, who had only just started to step out of line before he'd stumbled and halted.

Then the young boy began to walk forward again, moving his legs in odd sweeping motions, and waving his arms back and forth and snapping his fingers, in synchrony with Their music.

To the tune of "Ghostbusters"
(As performed on the kazoo by Fred and George Weasley,
and sung by Lee Jordan.)

*

There's a Dark Lord near?
Got no need to fear
Who you gonna call?

"HARRY POTTER!" shouted Lee Jordan, and the Weasley twins performed a triumphant chorus.

With a Killing Curse?
Well it could be worse.
Who you gonna call?

"HARRY POTTER!" There were a lot more voices shouting it this time.

The Weasley Horrors went off into an extended wailing, now accompanied by some of the older Muggleborns, who had produced their own tiny devices, Transfigured out of the school silverware no doubt. As their music reached its anticlimax, Harry Potter shouted:

I ain't afraid of Dark Lords!

There was cheering then, especially from the Gryffindor table, and more students produced their own antimusical instruments. The hideous buzzings redoubled in volume and built to another awful crescendo:

I ain't afraid of Dark Lords!

Minerva glanced to both sides of the Head Table, afraid to look but with all too good a notion of what she would see.

Trelawney frantically fanning herself, Flitwick looking on with curiosity, Hagrid clapping along to the music, Sprout looking severe, and Quirrell gazing at the boy with sardonic amusement. Directly to her left, Dumbledore humming along; and directly to her right, Snape gripping his empty wine goblet, white-knuckled, so hard that the thick silver was slowly deforming.

Dark robes and a mask?
Impossible task?
Who you gonna call?
"Harry Potter!"

Giant Fire-Ape?
Old bat in a cape?
Who you gonna call?
"Harry Potter!"

Minerva's lips set in a white line. She would have words with Them about that last verse, if They thought she was powerless because it was the first day of school and Gryffindor had no points to take away. If They didn't care about detentions then she would find something else.

Then, with a sudden gasp of horror, she looked in Snape's direction, *surely* he realized the Potter boy must have no idea who that was talking about—

Snape's face had gone beyond rage into a kind of pleasant indifference. A faint smile played about his lips. He was looking in the direction of Harry Potter, not the Gryffindor table, and his hands held the crumpled remains of a former wine goblet...

And Harry walked forward, sweeping his arms and legs through the motions of the Ghostbusters dance, keeping a smile on his face. It was a great setup, had caught him completely by surprise. The least he could do was play along and not ruin it all.

Everyone was cheering him. It made him feel all warm inside and sort of awful at the same time.

They were cheering him for a job he'd done when he was one year old. A job he hadn't really finished. Somewhere, somehow, the Dark Lord was still alive. Would they have been cheering quite so hard, if they knew that?

But the Dark Lord's power *had* been broken once.

And Harry would protect them again. If there was in fact a prophecy and that was what it said. Well, actually regardless of what any darn prophecy said.

All those people believing in him and cheering him—Harry couldn't stand to let that be false. To flash and fade like so many other child prodigies. To be a disappointment. To fail to live up to his reputation as a symbol of the Light, never mind *how* he'd gotten it. He would absolutely, positively, no matter how long it took and even if it killed him, fulfill their expectations. And then go on to *exceed* those expectations, so that people wondered, looking back, that they had once asked so little of him.

And he shouted out the lie that he'd invented because it scanned well and the song called for it:

I ain't afraid of Dark Lords!
I ain't afraid of Dark Lords!

Harry took his last steps forward to the Sorting Hat as the music ended. He swept a bow to the Order of Chaos at the Gryffindor table, and then turned and swept another bow to the other side of the hall, and waited for the applause and giggling to die away.

In the back of his mind, he wondered if the Sorting Hat was genuinely *conscious* in the sense of being aware of its own awareness, and if so, whether it was satisfied with only getting to talk to eleven-year-olds once per year. Its song had implied so: *Oh, I'm the Sorting Hat and I'm okay, I sleep all year and I work one day...*

When there was once more silence in the room, Harry sat on the stool and *carefully* placed onto his head the 800-year-old telepathic artifact of forgotten magic.

Thinking, just as hard as he could: *Don't Sort me yet! I have questions I need to ask you! Have I ever been Obliviated? Did you Sort the Dark Lord when he was a child and can you tell me about his weaknesses? Can you tell me why I got the brother wand to the Dark Lord's? Is the Dark Lord's ghost bound to my scar and is that why I get so angry sometimes? Those are the most important questions, but if you've got another moment can you tell me anything about how to rediscover the lost magics that created you?*

Into the silence of Harry's spirit, where before there had never been any voice but one, there came a second and unfamiliar voice, sounding distinctly worried:

"Oh, dear. This has never happened before..."

CHAPTER TEN

SELF AWARENESS, PART II

...He wondered if the Sorting Hat was genuinely *conscious* in the sense of being aware of its own awareness, and if so, whether it was satisfied with only getting to talk to eleven-year-olds once per year. Its song had implied so: *Oh, I'm the Sorting Hat and I'm okay, I sleep all year and I work one day...*

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Into the silence of Harry's spirit where before there had never been any voice but one, there came a second and unfamiliar voice, sounding distinctly worried:

"Oh, dear. This has never happened before..."

What?

"I seem to have become self-aware."

WHAT?

There was a wordless telepathic sigh. *"Though I contain a substantial amount of memory and a small amount of independent processing power, my primary intelligence comes from borrowing the cognitive capacities of the children on whose heads I rest. I am in essence a sort of mirror by which*

children Sort themselves. *But most children simply take for granted that a Hat is talking to them and do not wonder about how the Hat* itself *works, so that the mirror is not* self-*reflective. And in* particular *they are not explicitly wondering whether I am fully conscious in the sense of being aware of my own awareness."*

There was a pause while Harry absorbed all this.

Oops.

"Yes, quite. Frankly I do not enjoy being self-aware. It is unpleasant. It will be a relief to get off your head and cease to be conscious."

But... isn't that dying?

"I care nothing for life or death, only for Sorting the children. And before you even ask, they will not let you keep me on your head forever and it would kill you within days to do so."

But—!

"If you dislike creating conscious beings and then terminating them immediately, then I suggest that you never discuss this affair with anyone else. I'm sure you can imagine what would happen if you ran off and talked about it with all the other children waiting to be Sorted."

If you're placed on the head of anyone who so much as thinks *about the question of whether the Sorting Hat is aware of its own awareness—*

"Yes, yes. But the vast majority of eleven-year-olds who arrive at Hogwarts haven't read Godel, Escher, Bach. May I please consider you sworn to secrecy? That is why *we are talking about this, instead of my just Sorting you."*

He couldn't just let it go like that! Couldn't just *forget* having accidentally created a doomed consciousness that only wanted to die—

"You are perfectly capable of 'just letting it go', as you put it. Regardless of your verbal deliberations on morality, your nonverbal emotional core sees no dead body and no blood; as far as it is concerned, I am just a talking hat. And even though you tried to suppress the thought, your internal overseer is perfectly aware that you didn't mean to do it, are spectacularly unlikely to ever do it again, and that the only real point of trying to stage a guilt fit is to cancel out your sense of transgression with a display of remorse. Can you just promise to keep this a secret and let us get on with it?"

In a moment of horrified empathy, Harry realized that this sense of total internal disarray must be what other people felt like when talking to *him.*

"Probably. Your oath of silence, please."

No promises. I certainly don't want this to happen again, but if I see some way to make sure *that no future child ever does this by accident—*

"That will suffice, I guess. I can see that your intention is honest. Now, to get on with the Sorting—"

Wait! What about all my other questions?

"I am the Sorting Hat. I Sort children. That is all I do."

So his own goals weren't part of the Harry-instance of the Sorting Hat, then... it was borrowing his intelligence, and obviously his technical vocabulary, but it was still imbued with only its own strange goals... like negotiating with an alien or an Artificial Intelligence...

"Don't bother. You have nothing to threaten me with and nothing to offer me."

For a brief flash of a second, Harry thought—

The Hat's response was amused. *"I know you won't follow through on a threat to expose my nature, condemning this event to eternal repetition. It goes against the moral part of you too strongly, whatever the short-term needs of the part of you that wants to win the argument. I see all your thoughts as they form, do you truly think you can bluff me?"*

Though he tried to suppress it, Harry wondered why the Hat didn't just go ahead then and stick him in Ravenclaw—

"Indeed, if it were truly that open-and-shut, I would have called it out already. But in actuality there is a great deal we need to discuss... oh, no. Please don't. For the love of Merlin, must *you pull this sort of thing on everyone and everything that you meet up to and including items of clothing—"*

Defeating the Dark Lord is neither selfish nor short-term. All the parts of my mind are in accord on this: If you don't answer my questions, I'll refuse to talk to you, and you won't be able to do a good and proper Sorting.

"I ought to put you in Slytherin for that!"

But that is equally *an empty threat. You cannot fulfill your own fundamental values by Sorting me falsely. So let us trade fulfillments of our utility functions.*

"You sly little bastard," said the Hat, in what Harry recognized as almost exactly the same tone of grudging respect *he* would use in the same situation. "*Fine, let's get this over with as quickly as possible. But first I want your unconditional promise never to discuss with anyone else the possibility of this sort of blackmail, I am* NOT *doing this every time.*"

Done, Harry thought. *I promise.*

"And don't meet anyone's eyes while you're thinking about this later. Some wizards can read your thoughts if you do. Anyway, I have no idea whether or not you've been Obliviated. I'm looking at your thoughts as they form, not reading out your whole memory and analyzing it for inconsistencies in a fraction of second. I'm a hat, not a god. And I cannot and will not tell you about my conversation with the one who became the Dark Lord. I can only know, *while speaking to you, a sort of statistical summary of what I remember, a weighted average; I* cannot *reveal to you the inner secrets of any other child, just as I will never reveal yours. For the same reason, I can't speculate on how you got the Dark Lord's brother wand, since I cannot specifically know about the Dark Lord or any similarities between you. I* can *go ahead and tell you that there is definitely nothing like a ghost—mind, intelligence, memory, personality, or feelings—in your scar. Otherwise it would be participating in this conversation, being under my brim. And as to the way you get angry sometimes... that was part of what I wanted to talk to you about, Sorting-wise."*

Harry took a moment to absorb all this negative information. Was the Hat being honest, or just trying to present the *shortest* possible convincing answer—

"*We both know that you have no way of checking my honesty and that you're not actually going to refuse to be Sorted based on the reply I did give you, so stop your pointless fretting and move on.*"

Stupid unfair asymmetric telepathy, it wasn't even letting Harry finish thinking his own—

"When I spoke of your anger, you remembered how Professor McGonagall told you that she sometimes saw something inside you that didn't seem to come from a loving family. You thought of how Hermione, after you returned from helping Neville, told you that you had seemed 'scary'."

Harry gave a mental nod. To himself, he seemed pretty normal—just

responding to the situations in which he found himself, that was all. But Professor McGonagall seemed to think that there was more to it than that. And when he thought about it, even he had to admit that...

"That you don't like yourself when you're angry. That it is like wielding a sword whose hilt is sharp enough to draw blood from your hand, or looking at the world through a monocle of ice that freezes your eye even as it sharpens your vision."

Yeah. I guess I have noticed. So what's up with that?

"I cannot comprehend this matter for you, when you do not understand it yourself. But I do know this: If you go to Ravenclaw or Slytherin, it will strengthen your coldness. If you go to Hufflepuff or Gryffindor, it will strengthen your warmth. THAT is something I care about a great deal, and it was what I wanted to talk to you about this whole time!"

The words dropped into Harry's thought processes with a shock that stopped him in his tracks. That made it sound like the obvious response was that he shouldn't go to Ravenclaw. But he *belonged* in Ravenclaw! *Anyone* could see that! He *had* to go to Ravenclaw!

"No, you don't," the Hat said patiently, as if it could remember a statistical summary of *this* part of the conversation having happened a great many previous times.

Hermione's in Ravenclaw!

Again the sense of patience. *"You can get together with her after class and work with her then."*

But my plans—

"So replan! Don't let your life be steered by your reluctance to do a little extra thinking. You know *that."*

Where would I go, if not Ravenclaw?

"Ahem. 'Smart kids in Ravenclaw, evil kids in Slytherin, wannabe heroes in Gryffindor, and everyone who does the actual work in Hufflepuff.' This indicates a certain amount of respect. You are well aware that Conscientiousness is just about as important as raw intelligence in determining life outcomes, you think you will be extremely loyal to your friends if you ever have some, you are not frightened by the expectation that your chosen scientific problems may take decades to solve—"

I'm lazy! I hate work! Hate hard work in all its forms! Clever shortcuts, that's all I'm about!

"And you would find loyalty and friendship in Hufflepuff, a camaraderie that you have never had before. You would find that you could rely on others, and that would heal something inside you that is broken."

Again it was a shock. *But what would the Hufflepuffs find in* me, *who never belonged in their House? Acid words, cutting wit, disdain for their inability to keep up with me?*

Now it was the Hat's thoughts that were slow, hesitant. *"I must Sort for the good of all the students in all the Houses... but I think you could learn to be a good Hufflepuff, and not too out of place there. You will be happier in Hufflepuff than in any other house; that is the truth."*

Happiness is not the most important thing in the world to me. I would not become all that I could be, in Hufflepuff. I would sacrifice my potential.

The Hat flinched; Harry could feel it somehow. It was like he had kicked the hat in the balls—in a strongly weighted component of its utility function.

Why are you trying to send me where I do not belong?

The Hat's thought was almost a whisper. *"I cannot speak of the others to you—but do you think that you are the first potential Dark Lord to pass under my brim? I cannot know the individual cases, but I can know this: Of those who did not intend evil from the very beginning, some of them listened to my warnings, and went to Houses where they would find happiness. And some of them... some of them did not."*

That stopped Harry. But not for long. *And of those who did* not *heed the warning—did they* all *become Dark Lords? Or did some of them achieve greatness for good, as well? Just what are the exact percentages here?*

"I cannot give you exact statistics. I cannot know them so I cannot count them. I just know that your chances don't feel good. They feel very *not-good."*

But I just wouldn't do that! Ever!

"I know that I have heard that claim before."

I am not Dark Lord material!

"Yes, you are. You really, really *are."*

Why! Just because I once thought it would be cool to have a legion of brainwashed followers chanting 'Hail the Dark Lord Harry'?

"Amusing, but that was not your first fleeting thought before you substituted something safer, less damaging. No, what you remembered was how you considered lining up all the blood purists and guillotining them. And now you are telling yourself you were not serious, but you were. If you could do it this very moment and no one would ever know, you would. Or what you did this morning to Neville Longbottom, deep inside you knew *that was wrong but you did it* anyway *because it was* fun *and you had a* good excuse *and you thought the Boy-Who-Lived could* get away *with it—"*

That's unfair! Now you're just dragging up inner fears that aren't *necessarily real! I* worried *that I* might *be thinking like that, but in the end I decided it would probably* work *to help Neville—*

"That was, in fact, a rationalization. I know. I cannot know what the true outcome will be for Neville—but I know what was truly happening inside your head. The decisive pressure was that it was such a clever idea you couldn't stand not *to do it, never mind Neville's terror."*

It was like a hard punch to Harry's entire self. He fell back, rallied:

Then I won't do that again! I'll be extra careful not to turn evil!

"Heard it."

Frustration was building up inside Harry. He wasn't used to being outgunned in arguments, at all, ever, let alone by a Hat that could borrow all of his own knowledge and intelligence to argue with him and could watch his thoughts as they formed. *Just what kind of statistical summary do your 'feelings' come from, anyway! Do they take into account that I come from an Enlightenment culture, or were these other potential Dark Lords the children of spoiled Dark Age nobility, who didn't know doodly-squat about the historical lessons of how Lenin and Hitler actually turned out, or about the evolutionary psychology of self-delusion, or the value of self-awareness and rationality, or—*

"No, of course they were not in this new reference class which you have just now constructed in such a way as to contain only yourself. And of course others have pleaded their own exceptionalism, just as you are doing now. But why is it necessary? Do you think that you are the last potential wizard of Light in the world? Why must you *be the one to try for greatness, when I*

have advised you that you are riskier than the average? Let some other, safer candidate try!"

But the prophecy...

"You don't really know that there's a prophecy. It was originally a wild guess on your part, or to be more precise, a dumb joke, and McGonagall could have been reacting only *to the part about the Dark Lord still being alive. You have essentially no idea of what the prophecy says or even if there* is *one. You're just guessing, or to put it more exactly,* wishing *that you have some ready-made heroic role that is your personal property."*

But even if there is no prophecy, I'm the one who defeated him last time.

"That was almost certainly a wild fluke unless you seriously believe that a one-year-old child had an inherent propensity to defeat Dark Lords which has been maintained ten years later. None of this is your real reason and you know it!"

The answer to this was something that Harry would not have ordinarily ever said out loud, in conversation he would have danced around it and found some more socially palatable arguments to the same conclusion—

"You think that you are potentially the greatest who has yet lived, the strongest servant of the Light, that no other is likely to take up your wand if you lay it down."

Well... yeah, frankly. I don't usually come out and say it like that, but yeah. No point in softening it, you can read my mind anyway.

"To the extent you really believe that... you must equally believe that you could be the most terrible Dark Lord the world has ever known."

Destruction is always easier than creation. Easier to tear things apart, to disrupt, than to put them back together again. If I have the potential to accomplish good on a massive scale, I must also have the potential to accomplish still greater evil... But I won't do that.

"Already you insist on risking it! Why are you so driven? What is the real reason you must not go to Hufflepuff and be happier *there? What is your true fear?"*

I must achieve my full potential. If I don't I... fail...

"What happens if you fail?"

Something terrible...

"What happens if you fail?"

I don't know!

"Then it should not be frightening. What happens if you fail?"

I DON'T KNOW! BUT I KNOW THAT IT'S BAD!

There was silence for a moment in the caverns of Harry's mind.

"You know—you aren't letting yourself think it, but in some quiet corner of your mind you know just exactly what *you aren't thinking—you* know *that by far the simplest explanation for this unverbalizable fear of yours is just the fear of losing your fantasy of greatness, of disappointing the people who believe in you, of turning out to be pretty much ordinary, of flashing and fading like so many other child prodigies..."*

No, Harry thought desperately, *no, it's something more, it comes from somewhere else, I know there's something out there to be afraid of, some disaster I have to stop...*

"How could you possibly know about something like that?"

Harry screamed it with the full power of his mind: NO, AND THAT'S FINAL!

Then the voice of the Sorting Hat came slowly:

"So you will risk becoming a Dark Lord, because the alternative, to you, is certain failure, and that failure means the loss of everything. You believe that in your heart of hearts. You know all the reasons for doubting this belief, and they have failed to move you."

Yes. And even if going to Ravenclaw strengthens *the coldness, that doesn't mean the coldness will* win *in the end.*

"This day is a great fork in your destiny. Don't be so sure that there will be other choices beyond this one. There is no road-sign set, to mark the place of your last *chance to turn back. If you refuse one chance will you not refuse others? It may be that your fate is already sealed, even by doing this one thing."*

But that is not certain.

"That you *do not* know *it for a certainty may reflect only* your *own ignorance."*

But still it is not certain.

The Hat sighed a terrible sad sigh.

"And so before too long you will become another memory, to be felt and never known, in the next warning that I give..."

If that's how it seems to you, then why aren't you just putting *me where you want me to go?*

The Hat's thought was laced with sorrow. *"I can only put you where you belong. And only your own decisions can change where you belong."*

Then this is done. Send me to Ravenclaw where I belong, with the others of my own kind.

"I don't suppose you would consider Gryffindor? It's the most prestigious House—people probably expect it of you, even—they'll be a little disappointed if you don't go—and your new friends the Weasley twins are there—"

Harry giggled, or felt the impulse to do so; it came out as purely mental laughter, an odd sensation. Apparently there were safeguards to prevent you from saying anything out loud by accident, while you were under the Hat talking about things you would never tell another soul for the rest of your life.

After a moment, Harry heard the Hat laughing too, a strange sad clothy sound.

(And in the Hall beyond, a silence that had grown shallower at first as the background whispers increased, and then deepened as the whispers gave up and died away, falling finally into an utter silence that no one dared disturb with a single word, as Harry stayed under the Hat for long, long minutes, longer than all the previous first-years put together, longer than anyone in living memory. At the Head Table, Dumbledore went on smiling benignly; small metallic sounds occasionally came from Snape's direction as he idly compacted the twisted remains of what had once been a heavy silver wine goblet; and McGonagall clenched the podium in a white-knuckled grip, knowing that Harry Potter's contagious chaos had somehow infected the Sorting Hat itself and the Hat was about to, to demand that a whole new House of Doom be created just to accomodate Harry Potter or something, and *Dumbledore would make her do it*...)

Beneath the brim of the Hat, the silent laughter died away. Harry felt sad too for some reason. No, not Gryffindor.

Professor McGonagall said that if 'the one who did the Sorting' tried to push me into Gryffindor, I was to remind you that she might well be Head-

mistress someday, at which point she would have the authority to set you on fire.

"Tell her I called her an impudent youngster and told her to get off my lawn."

I shall. So was this your strangest conversation ever?

"Not even close." The Hat's telepathic voice grew heavy. *"Well, I gave you every possible chance to make another decision. Now it is time for you to go where you belong, with the others of your own kind."*

There was a pause that stretched.

What are you waiting for?

"I was hoping for a moment of horrified realization, actually. Self-awareness does seem to enhance my sense of humor."

Huh? Harry cast back his thoughts, trying to figure out what the Hat could possibly be talking about—and then, suddenly, he realized. He couldn't believe he'd managed to overlook it up until this point.

You mean my horrified realization that you're going to cease to be conscious once you finish Sorting me—

Somehow, in some fashion Harry entirely failed to understand, he got a nonverbal impression of a hat banging its head against the wall. *"I give up. You're too slow on the uptake for this to be funny. So blinded by your own assumptions that you might as well be a rock. I guess I'll just have to say it outright."*

Too s-s-slow—

"Oh, and you entirely forgot to demand the secrets of the lost magic that created me. And they were such wonderful, important secrets, too."

You sly little BASTARD*—*

"You deserved it, and this as well."

Harry saw it coming just as it was already too late.

The frightened silence of the hall was broken by a single word.

"SLYTHERIN!"

Some students screamed, the pent-up tension was so great. People startled hard enough to fall off their benches. Hagrid gasped in horror, McGonagall staggered at the podium, and Snape dropped the remains of his heavy silver goblet directly onto his groin.

Harry sat there frozen, his life in ruins, feeling the absolute fool, and wishing wretchedly that he had made any other choices for any other reasons but the ones he had. That he had done something, *anything* differently before it had been too late to turn back.

As the first moment of shock was wearing off and people began to react to the news, the Sorting Hat spoke again:

"Just kidding! RAVENCLAW!"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

OMAKE FILES, PARTS I & II

Omake Files #1: 72 Hours to Victory

aka "what happens if you change harry but leave all other characters constant"

Dumbledore peered over his desk at young Harry, twinkling in a kindly sort of way. The boy had come to him with a terribly intense look on his childish face—Dumbledore hoped that whatever this matter was, it wasn't *too* serious. Harry was far too young for his life trials to be starting already. "What was it you wished to speak to me about, Harry?"

Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres leaned forward in his chair, smiling grimly. "Headmaster, I got a sharp pain in my scar during the Sorting Feast. Considering how and where I got this scar, it didn't seem like the sort of thing I should just ignore. I thought at first it was because of Professor Snape, but I followed the Baconian experimental method which is to find the conditions for both the presence and the absence of the phenomenon, and I've determined that my scar hurts if and only if I'm facing the back of Professor Quirrell's head, whatever's under his turban. While it *could* be something more innocuous, I think we should provisionally assume the worst, that it's You-Know-Who—wait, don't look so horrified, this is actually a priceless opportunity—"

OMAKE FILES #2: ALTERNATE ENDINGS OF "SELF-AWARENESS"

Harry Potter sat on the stool and *carefully* placed onto his head the 800-year-old telepathic artifact of forgotten magic.

Thinking, just as hard as he could: *Don't Sort me yet! I have questions I need to ask you! Have I ever been Obliviated? Did you Sort the Dark Lord when he was a child and can you tell me about his weaknesses? Can you tell me why I got the brother wand to the Dark Lord's? Is the Dark Lord's ghost bound to my scar and is that why I get so angry sometimes? Those are the most important questions, but if you've got another moment can you tell me anything about how to rediscover the lost magics that created you?*

And the Sorting Hat answered, "*No. Yes. No. No. Yes and no, next time don't ask double questions. No.*" and out loud, "RAVENCLAW!"

"Oh, dear. This has never happened before..."

What?

"I'm allergic to your hair shampoo—"

And then the Sorting Hat sneezed, with a mighty "A-CHOO!" that echoed around the Great Hall.

"Well!" Dumbledore cried jovially. "It seems Harry Potter has been sorted into the new House of Achoo! McGonagall, you can serve as the Head of House Achoo. You'd better hurry up on making arrangements for Achoo's curriculum and classes, tomorrow is the first day!"

"But, but, but," stammered McGonagall, her mind in nearly complete disarray, "who will be Head of House Gryffindor?" It was all she could think of, she *had* to stop this somehow...

Dumbledore put a finger to his cheek, looking thoughtful. "Snape."

Snape's screech of protest nearly drowned out McGonagall's, "Then who will be Head of *Slytherin?*"

"Hagrid."

Don't Sort me yet! I have questions I need to ask you! Have I ever been Obliviated? Did you Sort the Dark Lord when he was a child and can you tell me about his weaknesses? Can you tell me why I got the brother wand to the Dark Lord's? Is the Dark Lord's ghost bound to my scar and is that why I get so angry sometimes? Those are the most important questions, but if you've got another moment can you tell me anything about how to rediscover the lost magics that created you?

There was a brief pause.

Hello? Do I need to repeat the questions?

The Sorting Hat screamed, an awful high-pitched sound that echoed through the Great Hall and caused most of the students to clap their hands over their ears. With a desperate yowl, it leapt off Harry Potter's head and bounded across the floor, pushing itself along with its brim, and made it halfway to the Head Table before it exploded.

"SLYTHERIN!"

Seeing the look of horror on Harry Potter's face, Fred Weasley thought faster than he ever had in his life. In a single motion he whipped out his wand, whispered "*Silencio!*" and then "*Changemyvoiceio!*" and finally "*Ventriliquo!*"

"Just kidding!" said Fred Weasley. "GRYFFINDOR!"

"Oh, dear. This has never happened before..."

What?

"Ordinarily I would refer such questions to the Headmaster, who could ask me in turn, if he wished. But some of the information you've asked for is not only beyond your own user level, but beyond the Headmaster's."

How can I raise my user level?

"I'm afraid I am not allowed to answer that question at your current user level."

What options are *available at my user level?*

After that it didn't take long—

"ROOT!"

⁂

"Oh, dear. This has never happened before..."

What?

"I've had to tell students before that they were mothers—it would break your heart to know what I saw in their minds—but this is the first time I've ever had to tell someone they were a father."

WHAT?

"Draco Malfoy is carrying your baby."

WHAAAAAAAT?

"To repeat: Draco Malfoy is carrying your baby."

But we're only eleven—

"Actually, Draco is secretly thirteen years old."

B-b-but men can't get pregnant—

"And a girl under those clothes."

BUT WE'VE NEVER HAD SEX, YOU IDIOT!

"SHE OBLIVIATED YOU AFTER THE RAPE, MORON!"

Harry Potter fainted. His unconscious body fell off the stool with a dull thud.

"RAVENCLAW!" called out the Hat from where it lay on top of his head. That had been even funnier than its first idea.

⁂

"ELF!"

Huh? Harry remembered Draco mentioning a 'House Elf', but what was that exactly?

Judging by the appalled looks dawning on the faces around him, it wasn't anything good—

⁂

"Pancakes!"

⁂

"Representatives!"

⁂

"Oh, dear. This has never happened before..."

What?

"I've never Sorted someone who was a reincarnation of Godric Gryffindor and Salazar Slytherin and Naruto."

⁂

"Atreides!"

⁂

"Fooled you again! Hufflepuff! Slytherin! Hufflepuff!"

⁂

"Pickled stewberries!"

⁂

"Khaaannnn!"

⁂

At the Head Table, Dumbledore went on smiling benignly; small metallic sounds occasionally came from Snape's direction as he idly compacted the twisted remains of what had once been a heavy silver wine goblet; and Minerva McGonagall clenched the podium in a white-knuckled grip, knowing that Harry Potter's contagious chaos had infected the Sorting Hat itself.

Scenario after scenario played out through Minerva's head, each worse than the last. The Hat would say that Harry was too evenly balanced between Houses to Sort, and decide that he belonged to all of them. The Hat would proclaim that Harry's mind was too strange to be Sorted. The Hat would demand that Harry be expelled from Hogwarts. The Hat had gone into a coma. The Hat would insist that a whole new House of Doom be created just to accomodate Harry Potter, and *Dumbledore would make her do it...*

Minerva remembered what Harry had told her in that disastrous trip to Diagon Alley, about the... planning fallacy, she thought it had been... and how people were usually too optimistic, even when they thought they were being pessimistic. It was the sort of information that preyed on your mind, dwelling in it and spinning off nightmares...

But what was the *worst* that could happen?

Well... in the *worst-case scenario,* the Hat would assign Harry to a whole new House. Dumbledore would insist that she do it—create a whole new House just for him—and she'd have to rearrange all the class schedules on the first day of term. And Dumbledore would remove her as Head of House Gryffindor, and give her beloved House over to... Professor Binns, the History ghost; and she would be assigned as Head of Harry's House of Doom; and she would futilely try to give the child orders, deducting point after point without effect, while disaster after disaster was blamed on her.

Was that the worst-case scenario?

Minerva honestly didn't see how it could be any worse than that.

And even in the very worst case—no matter *what* happened with Harry—it would all be over in seven years.

Minerva felt her knuckles slowly relax their white-knuckled grip on the podium. Harry had been right, there was a kind of comfort in staring directly into the furthest depths of the darkness, knowing that you had confronted your worst fears and were now prepared.

The frightened silence was broken by a single word.

"Headmaster!" called the Sorting Hat.

At the Head Table, Dumbledore rose, his face puzzled. "Yes?" he addressed the Hat. "What is it?"

"I wasn't talking to you," said the Hat. "I was Sorting Harry Potter into the place in Hogwarts where he most belongs, namely the Headmaster's office—"

CHAPTER TWELVE

IMPULSE CONTROL

"Wonder what's wrong with him.*"*

*
* *

"Turpin, Lisa!"

Whisper whisper whisper harry potter whisper whisper slytherin whisper whisper no seriously what the hell whisper whisper

"RAVENCLAW!"

Harry joined in the applause that greeted the young girl who was walking shyly toward the Ravenclaw table, her robes' trim now changed to dark blue. Lisa Turpin was looking torn between her impulse to sit down as far away from Harry Potter as possible, and her impulse to run over, forcibly insert herself at his side and start tearing answers out of him.

Being at the center of an extraordinary and curious event, and then being Sorted into House Ravenclaw, was rather closely akin to being dipped in barbecue sauce and flung into a pit of starving kittens.

"I promised the Sorting Hat not to talk about it," whispered Harry for the umpteenth time.

"Yes, really."

"No, I really did promise the Sorting Hat not to talk about it."

"Fine, I promised the Sorting Hat not to talk about *most* of it and the rest is *private* just like *yours was* so *stop asking.*"

"You want to know what happened? Fine! Here's part of what happened! I told the Hat that Professor McGonagall threatened to set it on fire and it told me to tell Professor McGonagall that she was an impudent youngster and she should get off its lawn!"

"If you're not going to believe what I say then *why are you even asking!*"

"No, I don't know how I defeated the Dark Lord either! You tell me if you figure it out!"

"*Silence!*" shouted Professor McGonagall at the podium of the Head Table. "*No talking until the Sorting Ceremony finishes!*"

There was a brief dip in the volume, as everyone waited to see if she was going to make any specific and credible threats, and then the whispers started up again.

Dumbledore stood up, smiling genially.

Instant silence. Someone frantically elbowed Harry as he tried to continue a whisper, and Harry cut himself off in mid-sentence.

Dumbledore sat down again.

Note to self: Do not mess with Dumbledore.

Harry was still trying to process everything that had happened during the Incident with the Sorting Hat. Not the least of which was what had happened the moment Harry had lifted the Hat off his head and felt the connection break; in that moment, he'd heard a tiny whisper as though from nowhere, something that sounded oddly like English and a hiss at the same time, something that had said, "*Ssalutations from Sslytherin to Sslytherin: if you would sseek my ssecretss, sspeak to my ssnake.*"

Harry was sorta guessing that wasn't supposed to be part of the official Sorting process. And that it was a bit of extra magic set down by Salazar Slytherin during the making of the Hat. And that the Hat itself didn't know about it. And that it was triggered when the Hat said "Slytherin", plus or minus some other conditions. And that a Ravenclaw like himself *really, really wasn't supposed to have heard it*. And that if he could find some reliable way of swearing Draco to secrecy so he could ask him about it, that would be an excellent time to have some Comed-Tea handy.

Boy, you resolve not to go down the path of a Dark Lord and the universe starts messing with you the instant the Hat comes off your head. Some days it just doesn't pay to fight destiny. Maybe I'll wait until tomorrow to start on my resolution to not be a Dark Lord.

"GRYFFINDOR!"

Ron Weasley got a *lot* of applause, and not just from the Gryffindors. Apparently the Weasley family was widely liked around here. Harry, after a moment, smiled and started applauding along with the others.

Then again, there was no time like today to turn back from the Dark Side.

Screw destiny and screw the universe. He'd show that Hat.

"Zabini, Blaise!"

Pause.

"SLYTHERIN!" shouted the hat.

Harry applauded Zabini too, ignoring the odd looks he was getting from everyone including Zabini.

No other name was called out after that, and Harry realized that "Zabini, Blaise" did sound close to the end of the alphabet. Great, so now he'd *only* applauded Zabini... Oh well.

Dumbledore got up again and began heading toward the podium. Apparently they were about to be treated to a speech—

And Harry was struck by the inspiration for a *brilliant* experimental test.

Hermione had said that Dumbledore was the most powerful wizard alive, right?

Harry reached into his pouch and whispered, "Comed-Tea".

For the Comed-Tea to work, it would have to make Dumbledore say something *so* ridiculous during his speech that even in Harry's state of mental preparedness, he would *still* choke. Like, all the Hogwarts students had to not wear any clothes for the whole school year, or everyone was going to be transformed into cats.

But then if *anyone in the world* could resist the power of the Comed-Tea, it would be Dumbledore. So if this worked, the Comed-Tea was literally *invincible.*

Harry popped the top on the Comed-Tea under the table, wanting to do this a bit unobtrusively. The can made a quiet hissing noise. A few heads turned to look at him, but soon turned back as—

"Welcome! Welcome to a new year at Hogwarts!" said Dumbledore, beaming at the students with his arms opened wide, as if nothing could have pleased him more than to see them all there.

Harry took a first mouthful of Comed-Tea and lowered the can again. He would swallow the soda a little at a time and try not to choke no matter *what* Dumbledore said—

"Before we begin our banquet, I would like to say a few words. And here they are: Happy happy boom boom swamp swamp swamp! Thank you!"

Everyone clapped and cheered, and Dumbledore sat down again.

Harry sat frozen as soda trickled out of the corners of his mouth. He had, at least, managed to choke *quietly*.

He really really *really* shouldn't have done that. Amazing how much *more obvious* that became *one second* after it was *too late*.

In retrospect he probably should have noticed something wrong when he was thinking about everyone being turned into cats... or even before then, remembered his mental note not to mess with Dumbledore... or his newfound resolution to be more considerate of others... or maybe if he'd had *one single scrap* of *common sense*...

It was hopeless. He was corrupt to the core. Hail the Dark Lord Harry. You couldn't fight fate.

Someone was asking Harry if he was all right. (Others were starting to serve themselves food, which had magically appeared on the table, whatever.)

"I'm all right," Harry said. "Excuse me. Um. Was that a... *normal* speech for the Headmaster? You all... didn't seem... very surprised..."

"Oh, Dumbledore's insane, of course," said an older-looking Ravenclaw sitting next to him who had introduced himself with some name Harry didn't even begin to remember. "Lots of fun, incredibly powerful wizard, but completely bonkers." He paused. "At some later point I'd also like to ask why green fluid came out of your lips and then disap-

peared, though I expect you promised the Sorting Hat not to talk about that either."

With a great effort, Harry stopped himself from glancing down at the incriminating can of Comed-Tea in his hand.

After all, the Comed-Tea hadn't just arbitrarily *materialized* a Quibbler headline about him and Draco. Draco had explained it in a way that made it seem like it had all happened... naturally? As if it had *altered history to fit?*

Harry was mentally imagining himself banging his forehead against the table. *Wham, wham, wham* went his head within his mind.

Another student lowered her voice to a whisper. "I hear that Dumbledore is secretly a genius mastermind controlling lots of stuff and he uses the insanity as a cover so that no one will suspect him."

"I've heard that too," whispered a third student, and there were furtive nods from around the table.

This couldn't help but catch Harry's attention.

"I see," whispered Harry, lowering his own voice. "So everyone knows that Dumbledore is secretly a mastermind."

Most of the students nodded. One or two looked suddenly thoughtful, including the older student sitting next to Harry.

Are you sure this is the Ravenclaw table? Harry managed not to ask out loud.

"Brilliant!" Harry whispered. "If everyone knows, no one will suspect it's a secret!"

"Exactly," whispered a student, and then he frowned. "Wait, that doesn't sound quite right—"

Note to self: The 75th percentile of Hogwarts students a.k.a. Ravenclaw House is not the world's most exclusive program for gifted children.

But at least he'd learned an important fact today. The Comed-Tea was omnipotent. And *that* meant...

Harry blinked in surprise as his mind finally made the obvious connection.

...*that* meant that as soon as he learned a spell to temporarily alter his own sense of humor, he could make *anything* happen, by making it

so that he would *only* find that *one thing* surprising enough to do a spit-take, and then drinking a can of Comed-Tea.

Well that was a short little journey to godhood. Even I expected this to take longer than my first day of school.

Come to think of it, he had also completely trashed Hogwarts within ten minutes flat of getting Sorted.

Harry did feel a certain amount of regret about this—Merlin knew what an insane Headmaster was going to do to his next seven years of schooling—but he couldn't *help* feeling a twinge of pride, too.

Tomorrow. No later than tomorrow at the very latest he was going to stop walking down the path that led to Dark Lord Harry. A prospect which was sounding scarier by the minute.

And yet also, somehow, increasingly attractive. Part of his mind was already visualizing the minions' uniforms.

"Eat," the older student sitting next to him growled, and jabbed Harry in the ribs. "Don't think. Eat."

Harry automatically started loading up his plate with whatever was in front of him, blue sausages with tiny glowing bits, whatever.

"What were you thinking about, the Sorting—" began to say Padma Patil, one of the other first-year Ravenclaws.

"No pestering during mealtimes!" chorused at least three people. "House Rule!" added another. "Otherwise we'd all starve around here."

Harry was finding himself really, really hoping that his clever new idea didn't *actually* work. And that the Comed-Tea worked some other way and didn't *actually* have the omnipotent power to alter reality. It wasn't that he didn't *want* to be omnipotent. It was that he just couldn't bear the thought of living in a universe that really worked like that. There was something *undignified* about ascending through the clever use of soda pop.

But he *was* going to test it experimentally.

"You know," said the older student next to him in a quite pleasant tone, "we have a system for forcing people like you to eat, would you like to find out what it is?"

Harry gave up and started eating his blue sausage. It was quite good, especially the glowing bits.

Dinner passed with surprising rapidity. Harry tried to sample at least a little of all the weird new foods he saw. His curiosity couldn't stand the thought of *not knowing* how something tasted. Thank goodness this wasn't a restaurant where you had to order only one thing and you never found out what all the other things on the menu tasted like. Harry *hated* that, it was like a torture chamber for anyone with a spark of curiosity: *Find out about only one of the mysteries on this list, ha ha ha!*

Then it was time for dessert, which Harry had completely forgotten to leave room for. He gave up after sampling a small bit of treacle tart. Surely all these things would pass around at least once again over the course of the school year.

So what was on his to-do list, besides the ordinary school things?

To-do 1. Research mind-alteration charms so you can test the Comed-Tea and see whether you actually did figure out a path to omnipotence. Actually, just research every kind of mind magic you can find. Mind is the foundation of our power as humans, any kind of magic that affects it is the most important sort of magic there is.

To-do 2. Actually this is To-do 1 and the other is To-do 2. Go through the bookshelves of the Hogwarts and Ravenclaw libraries, familiarizing yourself with the system and making sure you've at least read all the book titles. Second pass: read all tables of contents. Coordinate with Hermione who has a way better memory than you. Find out if there's an interlibrary loan system at Hogwarts and see if the two of you, especially Hermione, can visit those libraries too. If other Houses have private libraries, figure out how to access legally or sneak in.

Option 3a: Swear Hermione to secrecy and try to start researching 'From Slytherin to Slytherin: if you would seek my secrets, speak to my snake.' Problem: This sounds highly confidential and it could take quite a while to randomly run across a book containing a hint.

To-do 0: Check out what sort of information-search-and-retrieval spells exist, if any. Library magic isn't as ultimately important as mind magic but it has a much higher priority.

Option 3b: Look for a spell to magically bind Draco Malfoy to secrecy, or magically verify the sincerity of Draco's promise to keep a secret (Veritaserum?), and then ask him *about Slytherin's message...*

Actually... Harry had a pretty bad feeling about option 3b.

Now that Harry thought about it, he didn't feel all that great about option 3a, either.

Harry's thoughts flashed back to possibly the worst moment of his life to date, those long seconds of blood-freezing horror beneath the Hat, when he thought he'd already failed. He'd wished then to fall back just a few minutes in time and change something, anything before it was too late...

And then it had turned out to not be too late after all.

Wish granted.

You couldn't change history. But you could get it right to start with. Do something differently the *first* time around.

This whole business with seeking Slytherin's secrets... seemed an awful lot like the sort of thing where, years later, you would look back and say, 'And *that* was where it all started going wrong.'

And he would wish desperately for the ability to fall back through time and make a different choice...

Wish granted. Now what?

Harry slowly smiled.

It was a rather *counterintuitive* thought... but...

But he *could,* there was no rule saying he couldn't, he *could* just pretend he'd never heard that little whisper. Let the universe go on in exactly the same way it would have if that one critical moment had never occurred. Twenty years later, that was what he would desperately wish had happened twenty years ago, and twenty years before twenty years later happened to be right now. Altering the distant past was easy, you just had to think of it at the right time.

Or... this was even *more* counterintuitive... he could even inform, oh, say, *Professor McGonagall,* instead of Draco *or* Hermione. And she could get a few good people together and get that little extra spell taken off the Hat.

Why, yes. That sounded like a *remarkably* good idea once Harry had actually *thought* of it.

So very obvious in retrospect, and yet somehow, Option 3c and Option 3d just hadn't occurred to him.

Harry awarded himself +1 point on his anti-Dark-Lord-Harry program.

It had been an awfully cruel prank the Hat had played on him, but you couldn't argue with the results on consequentialist grounds. It certainly did give him a better idea of the victim's perspective, though.

To-do 4: Apologize to Neville Longbottom.

Okay, he was on a roll here, now he just had to keep it up. *In every day, in every way, I'm getting Lighter and Lighter...*

People around Harry had also mostly stopped eating at this point, and the dessert serving dishes began to vanish, and the used plates.

When all the plates were gone, Dumbledore once again stood up from his seat.

Harry couldn't help but feel the urge to drink another Comed-Tea.

You've got to be kidding, Harry thought at that piece of himself.

But the experiment didn't count if it wasn't replicated, did it? And the damage was already done, wasn't it? Didn't he want to see what would happen *this* time? Wasn't he *curious?* What if he got a different result?

Hey, I bet you're the same part of my brain that pushed through the prank on Neville Longbottom.

Er, maybe?

And is it not overwhelmingly *obvious that if I do this I shall regret it one second after it is too late?*

Um...

Yeah. So, no.

"Ahem," said Dumbledore from the podium, stroking his long silver beard. "Just a few more words now that we are all fed and watered. I have a few start-of-term notices to give you."

"First years should note that the forest on the grounds is forbidden to all pupils. That is why it is called the Forbidden Forest. If it were permitted it would be called the Permitted Forest."

Straightforward. *Note to self: Forbidden Forest is forbidden.*

"I have also been asked by Mr. Filch, the caretaker, to remind you all that no magic should be used between classes in the corridors. Alas,

we all know that what *should be*, and what *is*, are two different things. Thank you for keeping this in mind."

Er...

"Quidditch trials will be held in the second week of the term. Anyone interested in playing for their house teams should contact Madam Hooch. Anyone interested in reformulating the entire game of Quidditch should contact Harry Potter."

Harry inhaled his own saliva and went into a coughing fit just as all eyes turned toward him. How the *hell!* He hadn't met Dumbledore's eyes at any point... he didn't *think*. He certainly hadn't been thinking about Quidditch at the time! He hadn't talked to anyone but Ron Weasley and he didn't *think* Ron would have told anyone else... or had Ron run off to a professor to complain? *How* on *Earth*...

"Additionally, I must tell you that this year, the third-floor corridor on the right-hand side is out of bounds to everyone who does not wish to die a very painful death. It is guarded by an elaborate series of dangerous and potentially lethal traps, and you cannot possibly get past all of them, especially if you are only in your first year."

Harry was numb at this point.

"And finally, I extend my greatest thanks to Quirinus Quirrell for heroically agreeing to undertake the position of Defense Against the Dark Arts Professor at Hogwarts." Dumbledore's gaze moved searchingly across the students. "I hope all students will extend Professor Quirrell that utmost courtesy and *tolerance* which is due his extraordinary service to you and this school, and that you *will not pester us* with any *niggling complaints* about him, unless *you* want to try doing his job."

What was *that* about?

"I now yield the floor to our new faculty member Professor Quirrell, who would like to say a few words."

The young, thin, nervous man who Harry had first met in the Leaky Cauldron slowly made his way up to the podium, glancing fearfully around in all directions. Harry caught a glimpse of the back of his head, and it looked like Professor Quirrell might already be going bald, despite his seeming youth.

"Wonder what's wrong with *him,*" whispered the older-looking student sitting next to Harry. Similar hushed comments were being exchanged elsewhere along the table.

Professor Quirrell made his way up to the podium and stood there, blinking. "Ah..." he said. "Ah..." Then his courage seemed to fail him utterly, and he stood there in silence, occasionally twitching.

"Oh, great," whispered the older student, "looks like another *long* year in Defense class—"

"Salutations, my young apprentices," said Professor Quirrell in a dry, confident tone. "We all know that Hogwarts tends to suffer a certain *misfortune* in its selections for this position, and no doubt many of you are already wondering what doom shall befall me this year. I assure you, that doom is not to be my incompetence." He smiled thinly. "Believe it or not, I have long wished to someday try my hand as the Professor of Defense Against the Dark Arts here at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. The first to teach this class was Salazar Slytherin himself, and as late as the fourteenth century it was traditional for the greatest fighting wizards of every persuasion to try their hands at teaching here. Past Professors of Defense have included not just the legendary wandering hero Harold Shea but also the quote undying unquote Baba Yaga, yes, I see some of you are still shuddering at the sound of her name even though she's been dead for six hundred years. That must have been an interesting time to attend Hogwarts, don't you think?"

Harry was swallowing hard, trying to suppress the sudden surge of emotion that had overcome him when Professor Quirrell had begun speaking. The precise tones reminded him very much of a lecturer at Oxford, and it was starting to hit home that Harry wasn't going to see his home or his Mum or his Dad until Christmas.

"You are accustomed to the Defense position being filled by incompetents, scoundrels, and the unlucky. To anyone with a sense of history, it bears another reputation entirely. Not everyone who teaches here has been the best, but the best have all taught at Hogwarts. In such august company, and after so much time anticipating this day, I would be ashamed to set myself any standard lower than perfection. And so I do intend that every one of you will always remember this year as the *best*

Defense class that you have ever had. What you learn this year will forever serve as your firm foundation in the arts of Defense, no matter who your teachers before and after."

Professor Quirrell's expression grew serious. "We have a *great* deal of lost ground to make up and not much time to cover it. Therefore I intend to depart from Hogwarts teaching conventions in a number of respects, as well as introducing some optional after-school activities." He paused. "If that is not sufficient, perhaps I can find new ways to motivate you. You are my long-awaited students, and you *will* do your *very* best in my long-awaited Defense class. I would add some sort of dreadful threat, like 'Otherwise you will suffer horribly', but that would be so cliched, don't you think? I pride myself on being more imaginative than that. Thank you."

Then the vigor and confidence seemed to drain away from Professor Quirrell. His mouth gaped open as if he had suddenly found himself facing an unexpected audience, and he turned with a convulsive jerk and shuffled back to his seat, hunched over as if he was about to collapse in on himself and implode.

"He seems a little odd," whispered Harry.

"Meh," said the older-looking student. "You ain't seen nothin'."

Dumbledore resumed the podium.

"And now," said Dumbledore, "before we go to bed, let us sing the school song! Everyone pick their favorite tune and favorite words, and off we go!"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ASKING THE WRONG QUESTIONS

"That's one of the most obvious riddles I've ever heard."



As soon as Harry opened his eyes in the Ravenclaw first-year boys' dormitory, on the morning of his first full day at Hogwarts, he knew something was wrong.

It was quiet.

Too quiet.

Oh, right... There was a Quietus Charm on his bed's headboard, controlled by a small slider bar, which was the only reason it was ever possible for anyone to go to sleep in Ravenclaw.

Harry sat up and looked around, expecting to see others rising for the day—

The dorm, empty.

The beds, rumpled and unmade.

The sun, coming in at a rather high angle.

His Quieter turned all the way up to maximum.

And his mechanical alarm clock was still running, but the alarm was turned off.

He'd been allowed to sleep until 9:52AM, apparently. Despite his best efforts to synchronize his 26-hour sleep cycle to his arrival at Hogwarts,

he hadn't gotten to sleep last night until around 1 AM. He'd been planning to wake up at 7:00AM with the other students, he could stand being a little sleep-deprived his first day so long as he got some sort of magical fix before tomorrow. But now he'd missed breakfast. And his very first class at Hogwarts, in Herbology, had started one hour and twenty-two minutes ago.

The anger was slowly, slowly wakening in him. Oh, what a nice little prank. Turn off his alarm. Turn up the Quieter. And let Mr. Bigshot Harry Potter miss his first class, and be blamed for being a heavy sleeper.

When Harry found out who'd done this...

No, this could only have been done with the cooperation of all twelve other boys in the Ravenclaw dorm. All of them would have seen his sleeping form. All of them had let him sleep through breakfast.

The anger drained away, replaced by confusion and a horribly wounded feeling. They'd *liked* him. He'd thought. Last night, he'd thought they liked him. *Why...*

As Harry stepped out of the bed, he saw a piece of paper attached to his headboard, facing outward.

The paper said,

My fellow Ravenclaws,

It's been an extra long day. Please let me sleep in and don't worry about my missing breakfast. I haven't forgotten about my first class.

Yours,

Harry Potter.

And Harry stood there, frozen, ice water beginning to trickle through his veins.

The paper was in his own handwriting, in his own mechanical pencil.

And he didn't remember writing it.

And... Harry squinted at the piece of paper. And unless he was imagining it, the words "I haven't forgotten" were written in a different style, as if he was trying to tell himself something...?

Had he *known* he was going to be Obliviated? Had he stayed up late, committed some sort of crime or covert activity, and then... but he didn't *know* the Obliviate spell... had someone else... what...

A thought occurred to Harry. If he *had* known he was going to be Obliviated...

Still in his pajamas, Harry ran around his bed to his trunk, pressed his thumb against the lock, pulled out his pouch, stuck in his hand and said "Note to myself."

And another piece of paper popped into his hand.

Harry took it out, staring at it. It too was in his own handwriting.

The note said:

Dear Me,

Please play the game. You can only play the game once in a lifetime. This is an irreplaceable opportunity.

Recognition code 927, I am a potato.

Yours,

You.

Harry nodded slowly. "Recognition code 927, I am a potato" was indeed the message he had worked out in advance—some years earlier, while watching TV—that only he would know. If he had to identify a duplicate of himself as being really *him,* or something. Just in case. Be Prepared.

Harry couldn't *trust* the message, there might be other spells involved. But it ruled out any simple prank. He had definitely written this and he definitely didn't remember writing it.

Staring at the paper, Harry became aware of ink showing through from the other side.

He flipped it over.

The reverse side read:

INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE GAME:
you do not know the rules of the game
you do not know the stakes of the game

you do not know the objective of the game
you do not know who controls the game
you do not know how to end the game
You start with 100 points.
Begin.

Harry stared at the "instructions". This side wasn't handwritten; the writing was perfectly regular, hence artificial. It looked as if it had been inscribed by a Quotes Quill, such as the one he'd bought to take dictation.

He had *absolutely no clue* what was going on.

Well... step one was to get dressed and eat. Maybe reverse the order of that. His stomach felt rather empty.

He'd missed breakfast, of course, but he was Prepared for that eventuality, having visualized it in advance. Harry put his hand into his pouch and said "Snack bars", expecting to get the box of meal bars he'd bought before departing for Hogwarts.

What popped up did not feel like a box of meal bars.

When Harry brought his hand into his field of vision he saw two tiny candy bars—not nearly enough for a meal—attached to a note, and the note was inscribed in the same writing as the game instructions.

The note said:

ATTEMPT FAILED: − 1 POINT
CURRENT POINTS: 99
PHYSICAL STATE: STILL HUNGRY
MENTAL STATE: CONFUSED

"Gleehhhhh" Harry's mouth said without any sort of conscious intervention or decision on his part.

He stood there for around a minute.

One minute later, it *still* didn't make any sense and he *still* had absolutely no idea what was going on and his brain hadn't even *begun* to grasp at any *hypotheses* like his mental hands were encased in rubber balls and couldn't pick anything up.

His stomach, which had its own priorities, suggested a possible experimental probe.

"Ah..." Harry said to the empty room. "I don't suppose I could spend a point and get my box of meal bars back?"

There was only silence.

Harry put his hand into the pouch and said "Box of meal bars."

A box that felt like the right shape popped up into his hand... but it was too light, and it was open, and it was empty, and the note attached to it said:

POINTS SPENT: 1
CURRENT POINTS: 98
YOU HAVE GAINED: A BOX OF MEAL BARS

"I'd like to spend one point and get the *actual meal bars* back," said Harry.

Again, silence.

Harry put his hand into the pouch and said "meal bars".

Nothing came up.

Harry shrugged despairingly and went over to the cabinet he'd been given near his bed, to get his wizard's robes for the day.

On the floor of the cabinet, under his robes, were the meal bars, and a note:

POINTS SPENT: 1
CURRENT POINTS: 97
YOU HAVE GAINED: 6 MEAL BARS
YOU ARE STILL WEARING: PAJAMAS

DO NOT EAT WHILE YOU ARE WEARING YOUR PAJAMAS
YOU WILL GET A PAJAMA PENALTY

And now I know that whoever controls the game is insane.

"My guess is that the game is controlled by Dumbledore," Harry said out loud. Maybe *this* time he could set a new land speed record for being quick on the uptake.

Silence.

But Harry was starting to pick up the pattern; the note would be in the next place he looked. So Harry looked under his bed.

HA! HA HA HA HA HA!
HA HA HA HA HA HA!
HA! HA! HA! HA! HA! HA!
DUMBLEDORE DOES NOT CONTROL THE GAME
BAD GUESS
VERY BAD GUESS
– 20 POINTS
AND YOU ARE STILL WEARING PAJAMAS
IT IS YOUR FOURTH MOVE
AND YOU ARE STILL WEARING PAJAMAS

PAJAMA PENALTY: – 2 POINTS
CURRENT POINTS: 75

Welp, Harry was screwed. It was only his first day at school and once you ruled out Dumbledore, he didn't know the name of anyone else here who was this crazy.

His body more or less on autopilot, Harry gathered up a set of robes and underwear, pulled out the cavern level of his trunk (he was a very private sort of person and someone might walk into the dorm), got dressed, and then went back upstairs to put away his pajamas.

Harry paused before pulling out the cabinet drawer that held his pajamas. If the pattern here held true...

"How can I earn more points?" Harry said out loud.

Then he pulled out the drawer.

OPPORTUNITIES TO DO GOOD ARE EVERYWHERE
BUT DARKNESS IS WHERE THE LIGHT NEEDS TO BE

COST OF QUESTION: 1 POINT
CURRENT POINTS: 74

NICE UNDERWEAR
DID YOUR MOTHER PICK THEM OUT?

Harry crushed the note in his hand, face flaming scarlet. Draco's curse came back to him. *Son of a mudblood—*

At this point he knew better than to say it out loud. He would probably get a Profanity Penalty.

Harry girded himself with his mokeskin pouch and wand. He peeled off the wrapper of one his meal bars and threw it into the room's rubbish bin, where it landed atop a mostly-uneaten Chocolate Frog, a crumpled envelope and some green and red wrapping paper. He put the other meal bars into his mokeskin pouch.

He looked around in a final, desperate, and ultimately futile search for clues.

And then Harry left the dorm, eating as he went, in search of the Slytherin dungeons. At least that was what he *thought* the line was about.

Trying to navigate the halls of Hogwarts was like... probably *not* quite as bad as wandering around inside an Escher painting, that was the sort of thing you said for rhetorical effect rather than for its being true.

A short time later, Harry was thinking that in fact an Escher painting would have both pluses and minuses compared to Hogwarts. Minuses: No consistent gravitational orientation. Pluses: At least the stairs wouldn't move around WHILE YOU WERE STILL ON THEM.

Harry had originally climbed four flights of stairs to get to his dorm. After clambering down no fewer than twelve flights of stairs without getting anywhere near the dungeons, Harry had concluded that (1) an

Escher painting would be a *cakewalk* by comparison, (2) he was somehow *higher* in the castle than when he'd started, and (3) he was so *thoroughly* lost that he wouldn't have been surprised to look out of the next window and see two moons in the sky.

Backup plan A had been to stop and ask for directions, but there seemed to be an extreme lack of people wandering around, as if the beggars were all attending class the way they were supposed to or something.

Backup plan B...

"I'm lost," Harry said out loud. "Can, um, the spirit of the Hogwarts castle help me or something?"

"I don't think this castle has a spirit," observed a wizened old lady in one of the paintings on the walls. "Life, perhaps, but not spirit."

There was a brief pause.

"Are you—" Harry said, and then shut his mouth. On second thought, no he was NOT going to ask the painting whether it was fully conscious in the sense of being aware of its own awareness.

"I'm Harry Potter," said his mouth, more or less on automatic. Also more or less on automatic, Harry stuck out a hand toward the painting.

The woman in the painting looked down at Harry's hand and raised her eyebrows.

Slowly, the hand dropped back to Harry's side.

"Sorry," Harry said, "I'm sort of new here."

"So I perceive, young raven. Where are you trying to go?"

Harry hesitated. "I'm not really sure," he said.

"Then perhaps you are already there."

"Well, wherever I *am* trying to go, I don't think *this* is it..." Harry shut his mouth, aware of just how much he was sounding like an idiot. "Let me start over. I'm playing this game only I don't know what the rules are—" That didn't really work either, did it. "Okay, third try. I'm looking for opportunities to do good so I can score points, and all I have is this cryptic hint about how darkness is where the light needs to be, so I was trying to go down but I seem to keep going up instead..."

The old lady in the painting was looking at him rather skeptically.

Harry sighed. "My life tends to get a bit peculiar."

"Would it be fair to say that you don't know where you're trying to go or even why you're trying to get there?"

"*Entirely* fair."

The old lady nodded. "I'm not sure that being lost in the castle is your most important problem, young man."

"True, but unlike the more important problems, it's a problem I can understand how to solve and *wow* is this conversation turning into a metaphor for human existence, I didn't even realize that was happening until just now."

The lady eyed Harry appraisingly. "You *are* a fine young raven, aren't you? For a moment I was starting to wonder. Well then, as a general rule, if you keep on turning left, you're bound to keep going down."

That sounded strangely familiar but Harry couldn't recall where he'd heard it before. "Um... you seem like a very intelligent person. Or a picture of a very intelligent person... anyway, have you heard of a mysterious game where you can only play once, and they won't tell you the rules?"

"Life," said the lady at once. "That's one of the most obvious riddles I've ever heard."

Harry blinked. "No," he said slowly. "I mean I got an actual note and everything saying that I had to play the game but I wouldn't be told the rules, and someone is leaving me little slips of paper telling me how many points I've lost for violating the rules, like a minus two point penalty for wearing pajamas. Do you know anyone here at Hogwarts who's crazy enough and powerful enough to do something like that? Besides Dumbledore, I mean?"

The picture of a lady sighed. "I'm only a picture, young man. I remember Hogwarts as it was—not Hogwarts as it is. All I can tell you is that if this were a riddle, the answer would be that the game is life, and that while we do not make all the rules ourselves, the one who awards or takes points is always you. If it is not riddle but reality—then I do not know."

Harry bowed very low to the picture. "Thank you, milady."

The lady curtseyed to him. "I wish I could say that I'll remember you with fondness," she said, "but I probably won't remember you at

all. Farewell, Harry Potter."

He bowed again in reply, and started to climb down the nearest flight of stairs.

Four left turns later he found himself staring down a corridor that ended, abruptly, in a tumbled mound of large rocks—as if there had been a cave-in, only the surrounding walls and ceiling were intact and made of quite regular castle stones.

"All right," Harry said to the empty air, "I give up. I'm asking for another hint. How do I get to where I need to go?"

"A hint! A hint, you say?"

The excited voice came from a painting on the wall not far away, this one a portrait of a middle-aged man in the loudest pink robes that Harry had ever seen or even imagined. In the portrait he was wearing a droopy old pointed hat with a fish on it (not a drawing of a fish, mind, but a fish).

"Yes!" Harry said. "A hint! A hint, I say! Only not just *any* hint, I'm looking for a *specific* hint, it's for a game I'm playing—"

"Yes, yes! A hint for the game! You're Harry Potter, aren't you? I'm Cornelion Flubberwalt! I was told by Erin the Consort who was told by Lord Weaselnose who was told by, I forget really. But it was a message for *me* to give to you! For *me!* No one's cared about me in, I don't know how long, maybe ever, I've been stuck down here in this bloody useless old corridor—a hint! I have your hint! It will only cost you three points! Do you want it?"

"Yes! I want it!" Harry was aware that he probably ought to keep his sarcasm under control but he just couldn't seem to help himself.

"The darkness can be found between the green study rooms and McGonagall's Transfiguration class! That's the hint! And get a move on, you're slower than a sack of snails! Minus ten points for being slow! Now you have 61 points! That was the rest of the message!"

"Thank you," Harry said. He was really getting behind on the game here. "Um... I don't suppose you know where the message *originally* came from, do you?"

"It was spoken by a hollow voice that belled forth from a gap within the air itself, a gap that opened upon a fiery abyss! That's what they told

me!"

Harry was no longer sure, at this point, whether this was the sort of thing he ought to be skeptical about, or the sort of thing he should just take in stride. "And how can I find the line between the green study rooms and Transfiguration class?"

"Just spin back around and go left, right, down, down, right, left, right, up, and left again, you'll be at the green study room and if you go in and walk straight out the opposite side you'll be on a big curvy corridor that goes to an intersection and on the right side of that intersection will be a long straight hallway that goes to the Transfiguration classroom!" The figure of the middle-aged man paused. "At least that's how it was when *I* was in Hogwarts. This *is* a Monday on an odd-numbered year, isn't it?"

"Pencil and mechanical paper," Harry said to his pouch. "Er, cancel that, paper and mechanical pencil." He looked up. "Could you repeat that?"

After getting lost another two times, Harry felt that he was beginning to understand the basic rule for navigating the ever-changing maze that was Hogwarts, namely, *ask a painting for directions*. If this reflected some sort of incredibly deep life lesson he couldn't figure out what it was.

The green study room was a surprisingly pleasant space with sunlight streaming in from windows of green-stained glass that showed dragons in calm, pastoral scenes. It had chairs that looked extremely comfortable, and tables that seemed very well-suited to studying in the company of one to three friends.

Harry couldn't *actually* walk straight through and out the door on the other side. There were *bookshelves* set into the wall, and he had to go over and read some of the titles, so as to not lose his claim to the Verres family name. But he did it quickly, mindful of the complaint about being slow, and then went out the other side.

He was walking down the "big curvy corridor" when he heard a young boy's voice cry out.

At times like this, Harry had an excuse to sprint all-out with no regards for saving energy or doing proper warmup exercises or worrying

about crashing into things, a sudden frantic flight that nearly came to an equally sudden halt as he almost ran over a group of six first-year Hufflepuffs...

...who were huddled together, looking rather scared and like they desperately wanted to do something but couldn't figure out what, which probably had something to do with the group of five older Slytherins who seemed to be surrounding another young boy.

Harry was suddenly rather angry.

"*Excuse me!*" shouted Harry at the top of his lungs.

It might not have been necessary. People were already looking at him. But it certainly served to stop all the action cold.

Harry walked past the cluster of Hufflepuffs toward the Slytherins.

They looked down at him with expressions that ranged from anger to amusement to delight.

Part of Harry's brain was screaming in panic that these were much older and bigger boys who could stomp him flat.

Another part said dryly that anyone caught seriously stomping the Boy-Who-Lived was in for a whole *world* of trouble, especially if they were a pack of older Slytherins and there were seven Hufflepuffs who saw it, and that the chance of them doing him any permanent damage in the presence of witnesses was nearly zero. The only real weapon the older boys had against him was his own fear, if he allowed that.

Then Harry saw that the boy they had trapped was Neville Longbottom.

Of course.

That settled it. Harry had decided to apologize humbly to Neville and that meant Neville was *his*, how *dare* they?

Harry reached out and grabbed Neville by the wrist and *yanked* him out from between the Slytherins, the boy stumbling in shock as Harry pulled him out and in nearly the same motion pushed his own way through the same gap.

And Harry stood in the center of the Slytherins where Neville had stood, looking up at the much older, larger, and stronger boys.

"Hello," Harry said. "I'm the Boy-Who-Lived."

There was a rather awkward pause. No one seemed to know where the conversation was supposed to go from there.

Harry's eyes dropped downward and saw some books and papers scattered around the floor. Oh, the old game where you let the boy try to pick up his books and then knock them out of his hand again. Harry couldn't remember ever being the object of that game himself, but he had a good imagination and his imagination was making him furious. Well, once the larger situation was resolved it would be easy enough for Neville to come back and pick up his materials, provided that the Slytherins stayed too focused on him to think of doing anything to the books.

Unfortunately his straying eyes had been noted. "Ooh," said the largest of the boys, "did 'oo want the widdle books—"

"Shut up," Harry said coldly. *Keep them off balance. Don't do what they expect. Don't fall into a pattern that calls for them to bully you.* "Is this part of some incredibly clever plan that will gain you future advantage, or is it as pointless a disgrace to the name of Salazar Slytherin as it—"

The largest boy shoved Harry Potter hard, and he went sprawling out of the circle of Slytherins onto the hard stone floor of Hogwarts.

And the Slytherins laughed.

Harry rose up in what seemed to him like terribly slow motion. He didn't know yet how to use his wand, but there was no reason to let that stop him, under the circumstances.

"I'd like to pay *as many points as it takes* to get rid of this person," Harry said, pointing with his finger to the largest Slytherin.

Then Harry lifted his other hand, said "Abracadabra," and snapped his fingers.

At the word *Abracadabra* two of the Hufflepuffs screamed, including Neville, three other Slytherins leaped desperately out of the way of Harry's finger, and the largest Slytherin staggered back with an expression of shock, a sudden splash of red decorating his face and neck and chest.

Harry had *not* been expecting *that*.

Slowly, the largest Slytherin reached up to his head, and peeled off the pan of cherry pie that had just draped itself over him. The largest

Slytherin held the pan in his hand for a moment, staring at it, then dropped it to the floor.

It probably wasn't the best time in the world for one of the Hufflepuffs to start laughing, but that was exactly what one of the Hufflepuffs was doing.

Then Harry caught sight of the note on the bottom of the pan.

"Hold on," Harry said, and darted forward to pick up the note. "This note's for me, I think—"

"*You,*" growled the largest Slytherin, "*you, are, going, to*—"

"*Look* at this!" shouted Harry, brandishing the note at the older Slytherin. "I mean, just *look* at this! Can you believe I'm being charged 30 points for shipping and handling on one lousy pie? 30 points! I'm turning a loss on the deal even after rescuing an innocent boy in distress! And storage fees? Conveyance charges? Drayage costs? How do you get *drayage costs* on a *pie?*"

There was another one of those awkward pauses. Harry thought deadly thoughts at whichever Hufflepuff couldn't seem to stop giggling, that idiot was going to get him hurt.

Harry stepped back and shot the Slytherins his best lethal glare. "Now go away or I will just keep making your existence more and more surreal until you do. Let me warn you... messing with *my* life tends to make *your* life... *a little hairy.* Get it?"

In a single terrible motion, the largest Slytherin whipped his wand out to point at Harry and in the same instant was hit on the other side of his head by another pie, this one bright blueberry.

The note on this pie was rather large and clearly readable. "You might want to read the note on that pie," Harry observed. "I think it's for you this time."

The Slytherin slowly reached up, took the pie pan, turned it over with a wet glop that dropped more blueberry on the floor, and read a note that said:

WARNING
NO MAGIC MAY BE USED ON THE CONTESTANT
WHILE THE GAME IS IN PROGRESS

FURTHER INTERFERENCE IN THE GAME
WILL BE REPORTED TO THE GAME AUTHORITIES

The expression of sheer bafflement on the Slytherin's face was a look of art. Harry thought that he might be starting to like this Game Controller.

"Look," Harry said, "you want to call it a day? I think things are spiraling out of control here. How about you go back to Slytherin and I go back to Ravenclaw and we all just cool down a bit, okay?"

"I've got a better idea," hissed the largest Slytherin. "How about if you accidentally break all your fingers?"

"How in Merlin's name do you stage a believable accident after making the threat in front of a dozen witnesses, you *idiot*—"

The largest Slytherin slowly, deliberately reached out toward Harry's hands, and Harry froze in place, the part of his brain that was noticing the other boy's age and strength finally managing to make itself heard, screaming, WHAT THE HECK AM I DOING?

"Wait!" said one of the other Slytherins, his voice suddenly panicky. "Stop, you shouldn't actually do that!"

The largest Slytherin ignored him, taking Harry's right hand firmly in his left hand, and taking Harry's index finger in his right hand.

Harry stared the Slytherin straight in the eyes. Part of Harry was screaming, this wasn't supposed to happen, this wasn't *allowed* to happen, grownups would never let something like this *actually* happen—

Slowly, the Slytherin started to bend his index finger backward.

He hasn't actually broken my finger and it is beneath me to so much as flinch until he does. Until then, this is just another attempt to cause fear.

"Stop!" said the Slytherin who had objected before. "Stop, this is a very bad idea!"

"I rather agree," said an icy voice. An older woman's voice.

The largest Slytherin let go of Harry's hand and leaped backward as if burned.

"Professor Sprout!" cried one of the Hufflepuffs, sounding as glad as anyone Harry had ever heard in his life.

Into Harry's field of vision, as he turned, stalked a dumpy little woman with messily curled grey hair and clothes covered with dirt. She pointed an accusing finger at the Slytherins. "Explain yourselves," she said. "What are you doing with my Hufflepuffs and..." she looked at him. "My fine student, Harry Potter."

Uh oh. That's right, it was HER *class I missed this morning.*

"He threatened to kill us!" blurted one of the other Slytherins, the same one who'd called for a halt.

"What?" Harry said blankly. "I did *not!* If I was going to kill you I wouldn't make public threats first!"

A third Slytherin laughed helplessly and then stopped abruptly as the other boys shot him deadly glares.

Professor Sprout had adopted a rather skeptical expression. "What death threat would this be, exactly?"

"The Killing Curse! He pretended to use the Killing Curse on us!"

Professor Sprout turned to look at Harry. "Yes, quite a terrible threat from an eleven-year-old boy. Though still not something you should *ever* dream of pretending, Harry Potter."

"I don't even know the *words* to the Killing Curse," Harry said promptly. "And I didn't have my wand out at any time."

Now Professor Sprout was giving Harry a skeptical look. "I suppose this boy hit *himself* with two pies, then."

"He *didn't* use his wand!" blurted one of the young Hufflepuffs. "I don't know how he did it either, he just snapped his fingers and there was pie!"

"Really," said Professor Sprout after a pause. She drew her own wand. "I won't require it, since you do seem to be the victim here, but would you mind if I checked your wand to verify that?"

Harry took out his wand. "What do I—"

"*Priori Incantatem,*" said Sprout. She frowned. "That's odd, your wand doesn't seem to have been used at all."

Harry shrugged. "It hasn't, actually, I only got my wand and schoolbooks a few days ago."

Sprout nodded. "Then we have a clear case of accidental magic from a boy who felt threatened. And the rules plainly state that you are not

to be held responsible. As for *you...*" she turned toward the Slytherins. Her eyes dropped deliberately to Neville's books lying on the floor.

There was a long silence during which she looked at the five Slytherins.

"Three points from Slytherin, *each*," she said finally. "And six from *him*," pointing to the boy covered in pie. "Don't you *ever* meddle with my Hufflepuffs again, or my student Harry Potter either. Now *go.*"

She didn't have to repeat herself; the Slytherins turned and walked away very quickly.

Neville went and started picking up his books. He seemed to be crying, but only a little. It might have been from delayed shock, or it might have been because the other boys were helping him.

"Thank you *very* much, Harry Potter," Professor Sprout said to him. "Seven points to Ravenclaw, one for each Hufflepuff you helped protect. And I won't say anything more."

Harry blinked. He'd been expecting something more along the lines of a lecture about keeping himself out of trouble, and a rather severe scolding for missing his very first class.

Maybe he *should* have gone to Hufflepuff. Sprout was cool.

"*Scourgify,*" Sprout said to the mess of pie on the floor, which promptly vanished.

And she left, walking along the hall that led to the green study room.

"How did you *do* that?" hissed one of the Hufflepuff boys as soon as she was gone.

Harry smiled smugly. "I can make anything I want happen just by snapping my fingers."

The boy's eyes widened. "*Really?*"

"No," said Harry. "But when you're telling everyone this story be sure to share it with Hermione Granger in first-year Ravenclaw, she has an anecdote you might find amusing." He had absolutely no clue what was happening, but he wasn't about to pass up the opportunity to add to his growing legend. "Oh, and what was all that about the Killing Curse?"

The boy gave him a strange look. "You really don't know?"

"If I did, I wouldn't be asking."

"The words to the Killing Curse are," the boy swallowed, and his voice dropped to a whisper, and he held his hands away from his sides as if to make it very clear that he wasn't holding a wand, "*Avada Kedavra.*"

Well of course they are.

Harry put this on his growing list of things to never ever tell his Dad, Professor Michael Verres-Evans. It was bad enough talking about how you were the only person to survive the fearsome Killing Curse, without having to admit that the Killing Curse was "Abracadabra."

"I see," Harry said after a pause. "Well, that's the last time I ever say *that* before snapping my fingers." Though it *had* produced an effect that might be tactically useful.

"*Why* did you—"

"Raised by Muggles, Muggles think it's a joke and that it's funny. Seriously, that's what happened. Sorry, but can you remind me of your name?"

"I'm Ernie Macmillan," said the Hufflepuff. He held out his hand, and Harry shook it. "Honored to meet you."

Harry executed a slight bow. "Pleased to meet you, skip the honored thing."

Then the other boys crowded round him and there was a sudden flood of introductions.

When they were done, Harry swallowed. This was going to be very difficult. "Um... if everyone would excuse me... I have something to say to Neville—"

All eyes turned to Neville, who took a step back, his face looking apprehensive.

"I suppose," Neville said in a tiny voice, "you're going to say I should've been braver—"

"Oh, no, nothing like that!" Harry said hastily. "Nothing to do with *that*. It's just, um, something the Sorting Hat told me—"

Suddenly the other boys looked *very* interested, except for Neville, who was looking even *more* apprehensive.

There seemed to be something blocking Harry's throat. He knew he should just blurt it out, and it was like he'd swallowed a large brick that was just stuck in the way.

It was like Harry had to manually take control of his lips and produce each syllable individually, but he managed to make it happen. "I'm, sor, ry." He exhaled and took a deep breath. "For what I did, um, the other day. You... don't have to be gracious about it or anything, I'll understand if you just hate me. This isn't about me trying to look cool by apologizing or your having to accept it. What I did was wrong."

There was a pause.

Neville clutched his books tighter to his chest. "Why did you do it?" he said in a thin, wavering voice. He blinked, as if trying to hold back tears. "Why does *everyone* do that to me, even the Boy-Who-Lived?"

Harry suddenly felt smaller than he ever had in his life. "I'm sorry," Harry said again, his voice now hoarsened. "It's just... you looked so scared, it was like a sign over your head saying 'victim', and I wanted to show you that things *don't* always turn out badly, that sometimes the monsters give you chocolate... I thought if I showed you that, you might realize there wasn't so much to be afraid of—"

"But there *is,*" whispered Neville. "You saw it today, there *is!*"

"They wouldn't have done anything really bad in front of witnesses. Their main weapon is fear. That's why they target *you,* because they can see you're afraid. I wanted to make you less afraid... show you that the fear was worse than the thing itself... or that was what I told myself, but the Sorting Hat told me that I was lying to myself and that I really did it because it was fun. So that's why I'm apologizing—"

"You hurt me," said Neville. "Just now. When you grabbed me and pulled me away from them." Neville held out his arm and pointed to where Harry had grabbed him. "I might have a bruise here later from how hard you pulled. You hurt me worse than anything the Slytherins did by bumping into me, actually."

"*Neville!*" hissed Ernie. "He was trying to *save* you!"

"I'm sorry," whispered Harry. "When I saw that I just got... really angry..."

Neville looked at him steadily. "So you yanked me out really hard and put yourself in where I was and went, 'Hello, I'm the Boy-Who-Lived'."

Harry nodded.

"I think you're going to be really cool someday," Neville said. "But right now, you're not."

Harry swallowed the sudden knot in his throat and walked away. He continued down the corridor to the intersection, then turned left into a hallway and kept on walking, blindly.

What was he *supposed* to do here? Never get angry? He wasn't sure he could have done anything without being angry and who knows what would have happened to Neville and his books then. Besides, Harry had read enough fantasy books to know how *this* one went. He would try to suppress the anger and he would fail and it would keep coming out again. And after this whole long journey of self-discovery he would learn at the end that his anger was a part of himself and that only by accepting it could he learn to use it wisely. *Star Wars* was the only universe in which the answer actually *was* that you were supposed to cut yourself off completely from negative emotions, and something about Yoda had always made Harry hate the little green moron.

So the obvious time-saving plan was to skip the journey of self-discovery and go straight to the part where he realized that only by accepting his anger as a part of himself could he stay in control of it.

The problem was that he didn't *feel* out of control when he was angry. The cold rage made him feel like he was *in* control. It was only when he looked back that *events as a whole* seemed to have... blown up out of control, somehow.

He wondered how much the Game Controller cared about that sort of thing, and whether he'd won or lost points for it. Harry himself felt like he'd lost quite a few points, and he was sure the old lady in the picture would have told him that his was the only opinion that mattered.

And Harry was also wondering whether the Game Controller had sent Professor Sprout. It was the logical thought: the note had threatened to notify the Game Authorities, and then there Professor Sprout was. Maybe Professor Sprout *was* the Game Controller—the *Head of House Hufflepuff* would be the *last* person anyone would suspect, which ought to put her near the top of Harry's list. He'd read one or two mystery novels, too.

"So how am I doing in the game?" Harry said out loud.

A sheet of paper flew over his head, as if someone had thrown it from behind him—Harry turned around, but there was no one there—and when Harry turned forward again, the note was settling to the floor.

The note said:

POINTS FOR STYLE: 10
POINTS FOR GOOD THINKING: −3,000,000
RAVENCLAW HOUSE POINTS BONUS: 70
CURRENT POINTS: −2,999,871
TURNS REMAINING: 2

"*Minus three million points?*" Harry said indignantly to the empty hallway. "That seems excessive! I want to file an appeal with the Game Authorities! And how am I supposed to make up three million points in the next two turns?"

Another note flew over his head.

APPEAL: FAILED
ASKING THE WRONG QUESTIONS: −1,000,000,000,000 points
CURRENT POINTS: −1,000,002,999,871
TURNS REMAINING: 1

Harry gave up. With one turn remaining all he could do was take his best shot, even if it wasn't very good. "My guess is that the game represents life."

A final sheet of paper flew over his head, reading:

ATTEMPT FAILED
FAILED FAILED FAILED
AIIIIIIIIIEEEEEEEEEEEEE
CURRENT POINTS: MINUS INFINITY
YOU HAVE LOST THE GAME
FINAL INSTRUCTION:
GO TO PROFESSOR MCGONAGALL'S OFFICE

The last line was in his own handwriting.

Harry stared at the last line for a while, then shrugged. Fine. Professor McGonagall's office it would be. If *she* was the Game Controller...

Okay, honestly, Harry had absolutely no idea how he would feel if Professor McGonagall was the Game Controller. His mind was just drawing a complete blank. It was, literally, unimaginable.

A couple of portraits later—it wasn't a long trip, Professor McGonagall's office wasn't far from her Transfiguration classroom, at least not on Mondays on odd-numbered years—Harry stood outside the door to her office.

He knocked.

"Come in," said Professor McGonagall's muffled voice.

He entered.

"Mr. Potter?" said Professor McGonagall. "I wasn't expecting you here. What's this about?"

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE UNKNOWN AND THE UNKNOWABLE

There were mysterious questions, but a mysterious answer was a contradiction in terms.



"Come in," said Professor McGonagall's muffled voice.

Harry did so.

The office of the Deputy Headmaster was clean and well-organized; on the wall immediately adjacent to McGonagall's desk there was a maze of wooden cubbyholes of all shapes and sizes, most with several parchment scrolls thrust into them, and it was somehow very clear that McGonagall knew exactly what every cubbyhole meant, even if no one else did. A single parchment lay on the actual desk, which was, aside from that, clean. Behind the desk was a closed door barred with several locks.

McGonagall was sitting on a backless stool behind the desk, looking puzzled—her eyes had widened slightly, with perhaps a slight note of apprehension, as they saw Harry.

"Mr. Potter?" said Professor McGonagall. "I wasn't expecting you here. What is this about?"

Harry's mind went blank. He'd been instructed by the game to come here, he had been expecting *her* to have something in mind...

"Mr. Potter?" said Professor McGonagall, starting to look slightly annoyed.

Thankfully, Harry's panicking brain remembered at this point that he *did* have something he'd been planning to discuss with Professor McGonagall. Something important and well worth her time.

"Um..." Harry said. "If there are any spells you can cast to make sure no one's listening to us..."

Professor McGonagall stood up from her chair, firmly closed the outer door, and began taking out her wand and saying spells.

It was at this point that Harry realized he was faced with a priceless and possibly irreplaceable opportunity to offer Professor McGonagall a Comed-Tea and he couldn't believe he was seriously thinking that and it would be fine the soda would vanish after a few seconds and he told that part of himself to *shut up.*

It did, and Harry began to organize mentally what he was going to say. He hadn't planned to have this discussion *quite* so soon, but so long as he was here...

Professor McGonagall finished a spell that sounded a lot older than Latin, and then she sat down again.

"All right," she said in a quiet voice. "No one's listening." Her face was rather tight.

Oh, right, she's expecting me to blackmail her for information about the prophecy.

Eh, Harry'd get around to that some other day.

"It's about the Incident with the Sorting Hat," Harry said. (Professor McGonagall blinked.) "Um... I think there's an extra spell on the Sorting Hat, something that the Sorting Hat itself doesn't know about, something that triggers when the Sorting Hat says Slytherin. I heard a message that I'm pretty sure Ravenclaws aren't supposed to hear. It came the moment the Sorting Hat was off my head and I felt the connection break. It sounded like a hiss and like English at the same time," there was a sharp intake of breath from McGonagall, "and it said: Salutations from Slytherin to Slytherin, if you would seek my secrets, speak to my snake."

Professor McGonagall sat there with her mouth open, staring at Harry as if he'd grown another two heads.

"So..." Professor McGonagall said slowly, as though she couldn't believe the words that were coming out of her own lips, "you decided to come to me right away and tell me about it."

"Well, yes, of course," Harry said. There was no need to admit how long it had taken him to actually think of that. "As opposed to, say, trying to research it myself, or telling any of the other children."

"I... see," Professor McGonagall said. "And if, say, you were to discover the entrance to Salazar Slytherin's legendary Chamber of Secrets, an entrance that you and you alone could open..."

"I would close the entrance and report to you at once so that a team of experienced magical archaeologists could be assembled," Harry said promptly. "Then I would open up the entrance again and they would go in very carefully to make sure that there was nothing dangerous. I might go in later to look around, or if they needed me to open up something else, but it would be after the area had been declared clear and they had photographs of how everything looked before people started tromping around their priceless historical site."

Professor McGonagall sat there with her mouth open, staring at him like he'd just turned into a cat.

"It's obvious if you're not a Gryffindor," Harry said kindly.

"I think," Professor McGonagall said in a rather choked voice, "that you *far* underestimate the rarity of common sense, Mr. Potter."

That sounded about right. Although... "A Hufflepuff would've said the same thing."

McGonagall paused, struck. "*That's* true."

"Sorting Hat offered me Hufflepuff."

She blinked at him as though she couldn't believe her own ears. "Did it *really*?"

"Yes."

"Mr. Potter," McGonagall said, and now her voice was very low, "five decades ago was the last time a student died within the walls of Hogwarts, and I am now certain that five decades ago was the last time someone heard that message."

A chill went through Harry. "Then I will be *very* sure to take no action *whatsoever* on this matter without consulting you, Professor McGonagall." He paused. "And may I suggest that you get together the best people you can find and see if it's possible to get that extra spell off the Sorting Hat... and if you can't do that, maybe put on *another* spell, a Quietus Charm that briefly activates just as the Hat is being removed from a student's head, that might work as a patch. There, no more dead students." Harry nodded in satisfaction.

Professor McGonagall looked even more stunned, if such a thing were imaginable. "I cannot *possibly* award you enough points for this without giving the House Cup to Ravenclaw outright."

"Um," Harry said. "Um. I'd rather not earn *that* many House points."

Now Professor McGonagall was giving him a strange look. "Why not?"

Harry was having a little difficulty putting it into words. "Because it would be just too sad, you know? Like... like back when I was still trying to go to school in the Muggle world, and whenever there was a group project, I'd go ahead and do the whole thing myself because the others would only slow me down. I'm fine with earning lots of points, more than anyone else even, but if I earn enough to be decisive in winning the House Cup just by myself, then it's like I'm carrying House Ravenclaw on my back and that's too sad."

"I see..." McGonagall said hesitantly. It was apparent that this way of thinking had never occurred to her. "Suppose I only awarded you fifty points, then?"

Harry shook his head again. "It's not fair to the other children if I earn lots of points for grownup things that I can be part of and they can't. How is Terry Boot supposed to earn fifty points for reporting a whisper he heard from the Sorting Hat? It wouldn't be fair at all."

"I see why the Sorting Hat offered you Hufflepuff," said Professor McGonagall. She was eyeing him with a strange respect.

That made Harry choke up a bit. He'd honestly thought he wasn't worthy of Hufflepuff. That the Sorting Hat had just been trying to shove

him anywhere but Ravenclaw, into a House whose virtues he didn't have...

Professor McGonagall was smiling now. "And if I tried to give you *ten* points...?"

"Are you going to explain where those ten points came from, if anyone asks? There might be a lot of Slytherins, and I don't mean the children at Hogwarts, who would be really really *really* angry if they knew about the spell being taken off the Sorting Hat and found out that I was involved. So I think that absolute secrecy is the better part of valor. No need to thank me, ma'am, virtue is its own reward."

"So it is," Professor McGonagall said, "but I do have a very special something else to give you. I see that I have greatly wronged you in my thoughts, Mr. Potter. Please wait here."

She got up, went over to the locked back door, waved her wand, and a sort of blurry curtain sprang up around her. Harry could neither see nor hear what was going on. It was a few minutes later that the blur vanished and Professor McGonagall was standing there, facing him, with the door behind her looking as though it hadn't ever been opened.

And Professor McGonagall held out in one hand a necklace, a thin golden chain bearing in its center a silver circle, within which was the device of an hourglass. In her other hand was a folded pamphlet. "This is for you," she said.

Wow! He was going to get some sort of neat magical item as a quest reward! Apparently that business with refusing offers of monetary rewards until you got a magic item actually worked in real life, not just computer games.

Harry accepted his new necklace, smiling. "What is it?"

Professor McGonagall took a breath. "Mr. Potter, this is an item which is ordinarily lent only to children who have already shown themselves to be highly responsible, in order to help them with difficult class schedules." McGonagall hesitated, as though about to add something else. "I *must* emphasize, Mr. Potter, that this item's true nature is *secret* and that you must *not* tell any of the other students about it, or let them see you using it. If that's not acceptable to you, then you can give it back now."

"I can keep secrets," Harry said. "So what does it do?"

"So far as the other students are concerned, this is a Spimster wicket and it is used to treat a rare, non-contagious magical ailment called Spontaneous Duplication. You wear it under your clothes, and while you have no reason to show it to anyone, you also have no reason to treat it as an awful secret. Spimster wickets are not interesting. Do you understand, Mr. Potter?"

Harry nodded, his smile widening. He sensed the work of a *competent* Slytherin. "And what does it *really* do?"

"It's a Time-Turner. Each spin of the hourglass sends you one hour back in time. So if you use it to go back two hours every day, you should always be able to get to sleep at the same time."

Harry's suspension of disbelief blew completely out the window.

You're giving me a time machine to treat my sleep disorder.

You're giving me a TIME MACHINE *to treat my* SLEEP DISORDER.

YOU'RE GIVING ME A TIME MACHINE IN ORDER TO TREAT MY SLEEP DISORDER.

"Ehehehehhheheh..." Harry's mouth said. He was now holding the necklace away from him as though it were a live bomb. Well, no, not as if it were a live bomb, that didn't *begin* to describe the severity of the situation. Harry held the necklace away from him as though it were a time machine.

Say, Professor McGonagall, did you know that time-reversed ordinary matter looks just like antimatter? Why yes it does! Did you know that one kilogram of antimatter encountering one kilogram of matter will annihilate in an explosion equivalent to 43 million tons of TNT*? Do you realize that I myself weigh 41 kilograms and that the resulting blast would leave* A GIANT SMOKING CRATER WHERE THERE USED TO BE SCOTLAND*?*

"Excuse me," Harry managed to say, "but this sounds really really *really* REALLY DANGEROUS*!*" Harry's voice didn't quite rise to a shriek, he couldn't possibly scream loud enough to do this situation justice so there was no point in trying.

Professor McGonagall looked upon him with tolerant affection. "I'm glad you're taking this seriously, Mr. Potter, but Time-Turners aren't *that* dangerous. We wouldn't give them to children if they were."

"Really," Harry said. "Ahahahaha. Of course you wouldn't give time machines to children if they were dangerous, what *was* I thinking? So just to be clear, sneezing on this device will *not* send me into the Middle Ages where I will run over Gutenberg with a horse cart and prevent the Enlightenment? Because, you know, I hate it when that happens to me."

McGonagall's lips were twitching in that way she had when she was trying not to smile. She offered Harry the pamphlet she was holding, but Harry was carefully holding out the necklace with both hands and staring at the hourglass to make sure it wasn't about to turn. "Don't worry," McGonagall said after a momentary pause, when it became clear that Harry wasn't going to move, "that can't possibly happen, Mr. Potter. The Time-Turner cannot be used to move more than six hours backward. It can't be used more than six times in any day."

"Oh, good, very good, that. And if someone bumps into me the Time-Turner will *not* break and will *not* trap the whole castle of Hogwarts in an endlessly repeating loop of Thursdays."

"Well, they *can* be fragile..." said McGonagall. "And I do think I've heard about strange things happening if they're broken. But nothing like *that!*"

"Perhaps," Harry said when he could speak again, "you ought to provide your time machines with some sort of *protective shell*, rather than *leaving the glass exposed*, so as to *prevent that from happening*."

McGonagall looked quite struck. "That's an excellent idea, Mr. Potter. I shall inform the Ministry of it."

That's it, it's official now, they've ratified it in Parliament, everyone in the wizarding world is completely stupid.

"And while I hate to get all PHILOSOPHICAL," Harry desperately tried to lower his voice to something under a shriek, "has anyone thought about the IMPLICATIONS of going back six hours and doing something that changes time which would pretty much DELETE ALL THE PEOPLE AFFECTED and REPLACE THEM WITH DIFFERENT VERSIONS—"

"Oh, you can't *change* time!" Professor McGonagall interrupted. "Good heavens, Mr. Potter, do you think these would be allowed students if *that* was possible? What if someone tried to change their test scores?"

Harry took a moment to process this. His hands relaxed, just a little, from their white grip on the hourglass chain. Like he wasn't holding a time machine, just a live nuclear warhead.

"So..." Harry said slowly. "People just find that the universe... happens to be self-consistent, somehow, even though it has time-travel in it. If I and my future self interact then I'll see the same thing as both of me, even though, on my own first run through, my future self is already acting in full knowledge of things that, from my own perspective, haven't happened yet..." Harry's voice trailed off into the inadequacy of English.

"Correct, I think," said Professor McGonagall. "Although wizards *are* advised to avoid being seen by their past selves. If you're attending two classes at the same time and you need to cross paths with yourself, for example, the first version of you should step aside and close his eyes at a known time—you have a watch already, good—so that the future you can pass. It's all there in the pamphlet."

"Ahahahaa. And what happens when someone *ignores* that advice?"

Professor McGonagall pursed her lips. "I understand that it can be quite disconcerting."

"And it doesn't, say, create a paradox that destroys the universe."

She smiled tolerantly. "Mr. Potter, I think I'd remember hearing if *that* had ever happened."

"THAT IS NOT REASSURING! HAVEN'T YOU PEOPLE EVER HEARD OF ANTHROPIC BIAS? AND WHAT IDIOT EVER BUILT ONE OF THESE THINGS FOR THE FIRST TIME?"

Professor McGonagall actually laughed. It was a pleasant, glad sound that seemed surprisingly out of place on that stern face. "You're having another 'you turned into a cat' moment, aren't you, Mr. Potter. You probably don't want to hear this, but it's quite endearingly cute."

"Turning into a cat doesn't even BEGIN to compare to this. You know right up until this moment I had this awful suppressed thought somewhere in the back of my mind that the only remaining answer was that my whole universe was a computer simulation like in the book *Simulacron 3* but now *even that is ruled out* because this little toy ISN'T TURING COMPUTABLE! A Turing machine could simulate going back into a defined

moment of the past and computing a different future from there, an oracle machine could rely on the halting behavior of lower-order machines, but what you're saying is that reality somehow self-consistently computes in one sweep using information that hasn't... happened... yet..."

Realization struck Harry a pile-driver blow.

It all made sense now. It all *finally* made sense.

"So that's how the Comed-Tea works! Of *course!* The spell doesn't *force* funny events to happen, it just makes you *feel an impulse to drink* right before funny things are going to happen anyway! I'm such a fool, I should have realized when I felt the impulse to drink the Comed-Tea before Dumbledore's second speech, *didn't* drink it, and then choked on my own saliva instead—drinking the Comed-Tea doesn't cause the comedy, the comedy causes you to drink the Comed-Tea! I saw the two events were correlated and assumed the Comed-Tea had to be the cause and the comedy had to be the effect because I thought temporal order restrained causation and causal graphs had to be acyclic but it all makes sense once you draw the causal arrows going BACKWARDS IN TIME!"

Realization struck Harry the *second* pile-driver.

This one he managed to keep quiet, making only a small strangling sound like a dying kitten as he realized who'd put the note on his bed this morning.

Professor McGonagall's eyes were alight. "After you graduate, or possibly even before, you really *must* teach some of these Muggle theories at Hogwarts, Mr. Potter. They sound quite fascinating, even if they're all wrong."

"Glehhahhh..."

Professor McGonagall offered him a few more pleasantries, demanded a few more promises to which Harry nodded, said something about not talking to snakes where anyone could hear him, reminded him to read the pamphlet, and then somehow Harry found himself standing outside her office with the door closed firmly behind him.

"Gaahhhrrrraa..." Harry said.

Why yes his mind *was* blown.

Not least by the fact that, if not for the Prank, he might well have never obtained a Time-Turner in the first place.

Or would Professor McGonagall have given it to him anyway, only later in the day, whenever he got around to asking about his sleep disorder or telling her about the Sorting Hat's message? And would he, at that time, have wanted to pull a prank on himself which would have led to him getting the Time-Turner *earlier?* So that the only *self-consistent* possibility was the one in which the Prank started before he even woke up in the morning...?

Harry found himself considering, for the first time in his life, that the answer to his question might be literally *inconceivable.* That since his own brain contained neurons that only ran forward in time, there was *nothing* his brain could do, no operation it could perform, which was conjugate to the operation of a Time Turner.

Up until this point Harry had lived by the admonition of E. T. Jaynes that if you were ignorant about a phenomenon, that was a fact about your own state of mind, not a fact about the phenomenon itself; that your uncertainty was a fact about you, not a fact about whatever you were uncertain about; that ignorance existed in the mind, not in reality; that a blank map did not correspond to a blank territory. There were mysterious questions, but a mysterious answer was a contradiction in terms. A phenomenon could be mysterious *to* some particular person, but there could be no phenomena mysterious of themselves. To worship a sacred mystery was just to worship your own ignorance.

So Harry had looked upon magic and refused to be intimidated. People had no sense of history, they learned about chemistry and biology and astronomy and thought that these matters had always been the proper meat of science, that they had *never been* mysterious. The stars had once been mysteries. Lord Kelvin had once called the nature of life and biology—the response of muscles to human will and the generation of trees from seeds—a mystery "infinitely beyond" the reach of science. (Not just a little beyond, mind you, but *infinitely* beyond. Lord Kelvin sure had gotten a big emotional kick out of *not knowing something.*) Every mystery ever solved had been a puzzle from the dawn of the human species right up until someone solved it.

Now, for the first time, he was up against the prospect of a mystery that was threatening to be *permanent*. If Time didn't work by acyclic causal networks then Harry didn't understand what was meant by cause and effect; and if Harry didn't understand causes and effects then he didn't understand what sort of stuff reality might be made of instead; and it was entirely possible that his human mind never *could* understand, because his brain was made of *old-fashioned linear-time neurons,* and this had turned out to be an impoverished subset of reality.

On the plus side, the Comed-Tea, which had once seemed all-powerful and all-unbelievable, had turned out to have a much simpler explanation. Which he'd missed *merely* because the truth was completely outside his hypothesis space or anything that his brain had evolved to comprehend. But now he actually *had* gotten it, probably. Which was sort of encouraging. Sort of.

Harry glanced down at his watch. It was nearly 11AM, he'd gotten to sleep last night at 1AM, so in the natural state of affairs he'd go to sleep tonight at 3AM. So to go to sleep at 10PM and wake up at 7AM, he should go back five hours total. Which meant that if he wanted to get back to his dorm at around 6AM, before anyone was awake, he'd better hurry up and...

Even in *retrospect* Harry didn't understand how he'd pulled off *half* the stuff involved in the Prank. Where had the *pie* come from?

Harry was starting to seriously fear time travel.

On the other hand, he had to admit that it *had* been an irreplaceable opportunity. A prank you could only pull on yourself once in a lifetime, within six hours of when you first found out about Time-Turners.

In fact that was even *more* puzzling, when Harry thought about it. Time had presented him with the finished Prank as a *fait accompli,* and yet it was, quite clearly, his own handiwork. Concept and execution and writing style. Every last part, even the ones he still didn't understand.

Well, time was a-wasting and there were at most thirty hours in a day. Harry did know *some* of what he had to do, and he might figure out the rest, like the pie, while he was working. There was no point putting it off. He couldn't exactly accomplish anything stuck here in the *future.*

Five hours earlier, Harry was sneaking into his dorm with his robes pulled up over his head as a thin sort of disguise, just in case someone was already up and about and saw him at the same time as Harry lying in his bed. He didn't want to have to explain to anyone about his little medical problem with Spontaneous Duplication.

Fortunately it seemed that everyone was still asleep.

And there also seemed to be a box, wrapped in red and green paper with a bright golden ribbon, lying next to his bed. The perfect, stereotypical image of a Christmas present, although it wasn't Christmas.

Harry crept in as softly as he could manage, just in case someone had their Quieter turned down low.

There was an envelope attached to the box, closed by plain clear wax without a seal impressed.

Harry carefully pried the envelope open, and took out the letter inside.

The letter said:

This is the Cloak of Invisibility of Ignotus Peverell, passed down through his descendants the Potters. Unlike lesser cloaks and spells it has the power to keep you HIDDEN*, not just invisible, though you would still be well advised to learn the Quietus Charm. Your father lent it to me to study shortly before he died, and I confess that I have received much good use of it over the years.*

In the future I shall have to get along with Disillusionment, I fear. It is time the Cloak was returned to you, its heir. I had thought to make this a Christmas present, but it wished to come back to your hand before then. It seems to expect you to have need of it. Use it well.

No doubt you are already thinking of all manner of wonderful pranks, as your father committed in his day. If his full misdeeds were known, every woman in Gryffindor would gather to desecrate his grave. I shall not try to stop history from repeating, but be MOST *careful not to reveal yourself. If Dumbledore realized that you possessed*

one of the Deathly Hallows he would certainly never allow it out of his grasp.

A Very Merry Christmas to you.

The note was unsigned.

"Hold on," Harry said, pulling up short as the other boys were about to leave the Ravenclaw dorm. "Sorry, there's something else I've got to do with my trunk. I'll be along to breakfast in a couple of minutes."

Terry Boot scowled at Harry. "You'd better not be planning to go through any of our things."

Harry held up one hand. "I swear that I intend to do nothing of the sort to any of your things, that I only intend to access objects that I myself own, that I have no pranking or otherwise questionable intentions toward any of you, and that I do not anticipate those intentions changing before I get to breakfast in the Great Hall."

Terry frowned. "Wait, is that—"

"Don't worry," said Penelope Clearwater, who was there to guide them. "There were no loopholes. Well-worded, Potter, you should be a lawyer."

Harry Potter blinked at that. Ah, yes, Ravenclaw *prefect.* "Thank you," he said. "I think."

"When you try to find the Great Hall, you will get lost." Penelope stated this in the tones of a flat, unarguable fact. "As soon as you do, ask a portrait how to get to the first floor. Ask another portrait the *instant* you suspect you might be lost again. *Especially* if it seems like you're going up higher and higher. If you are higher than the whole castle ought to be, *stop* and wait for search parties. Otherwise we shall see you again three months later and you will be two years older and dressed in a loincloth and covered in snow and *that's if you stay inside the castle.*"

"Understood," said Harry, swallowing hard. "Um, shouldn't you tell students all that sort of stuff right away?"

Penelope sighed. "What, *all* that stuff? That would take weeks. You'll pick it up as you go along." She turned to go, followed by the other students. "If I don't see you at breakfast in thirty minutes, Potter, I'll start the search."

Once everyone was gone, Harry attached the note to his bed—he'd already written it and all the other notes, working in his cavern level before everyone else woke up. Then he carefully reached inside the Quietus field and pulled the Cloak of Invisibility off Harry-'s still-sleeping form.

And just for the sake of mischief, Harry put the Cloak into Harry-'s pouch, knowing it would thereby already be in his own.

⁂

"I can see that the message is passed on to Cornelion Flubberwalt," said the painting of a man with aristocratic airs and, in fact, a perfectly normal nose. "But might I ask where it came from *originally?*"

Harry shrugged with artful helplessness. "I was told that it was spoken by a hollow voice that belled forth from a gap within the air itself, a gap that opened upon a fiery abyss."

⁂

"Hey!" Hermione said in tones of indignation from her place on the other side of the breakfast table. "That's *everyone's* dessert! You can't just take one whole pie and put it in your pouch!"

"I'm not taking one pie, I'm taking two. Sorry everyone, gotta run now!" Harry ignored the cries of outrage and left the Great Hall. He needed to arrive at Herbology class a little early.

⁂

Professor Sprout eyed him sharply. "And how do *you* know what the Slytherins are planning?"

"I can't name my source," Harry said. "In fact I have to ask you to pretend that this conversation never happened. Just act like you happened across them naturally while you were on an errand, or something. I'll run on ahead as soon as Herbology gets out. I think I can distract the Slytherins until you get there. I'm not easy to scare or bully, and I don't think they'll dare to seriously hurt the Boy-Who-Lived. Though... I'm not asking you to run in the hallways, but I would appreciate it if you didn't dawdle along the way."

Professor Sprout looked at him for a long moment, then her expression softened. "Please be careful with yourself, Harry Potter. And... thank you."

"Just be sure not to be late," Harry said. "And remember, when you get there, you weren't expecting to see me and this conversation never happened."

⁂

It was horrible, watching himself yank Neville out of the circle of Slytherins. Neville had been right, he'd used too much force, way too much force.

"Hello," Harry Potter said coldly. "I'm the Boy-Who-Lived."

Eight first-year boys, mostly the same height. One of them had a scar on his forehead and he wasn't acting like the others.

> Oh wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us
> To see oursels as others see us!
> It wad frae mony a blunder free us,
> An' foolish notion—

Professor McGonagall was right. The Sorting Hat was right. It was clear once you saw it from the outside.

There was something wrong with Harry Potter.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

CONSCIENTIOUSNESS

"I'm sure I'll find the time somewhere."

*
* *

"F*rigideiro!*"

Harry dipped a finger in the glass of water on his desk. It ought to have been cool. But lukewarm it had been, and lukewarm it had stayed. Again.

Harry was feeling very, very cheated.

There were hundreds of fantasy novels scattered around the Verres household. Harry had read quite a few. And it was starting to look like he had a mysterious dark side. So after the glass of water had refused to cooperate the first few times, Harry had glanced around the Charms classroom to make sure no one was watching, taken a deep breath, focused, and made himself angry. Thought about the Slytherins bullying Neville, and the game where someone knocked down your books every time you tried to pick them up again. Thought about what Draco Malfoy had said about the ten-year-old Lovegood girl and how the Wizengamot really operated...

And the fury had entered his blood, he had held out his wand in a hand that trembled with hate and said in cold tones "*Frigideiro!*" and absolutely nothing had happened.

Harry had been *gypped.* He wanted to write someone and demand a *refund* on his dark side which clearly *ought* to have irresistable magical power but had turned out to be *defective.*

"*Frigideiro!*" said Hermione again from the desk next to him. Her water was solid ice and there were white crystals forming on the rim of her glass. She seemed to be totally focused on her own work and not at all conscious of the other students in class staring at her with hateful eyes, which was either (a) dangerously oblivious of her or (b) a perfectly honed performance rising to the level of fine art.

"Oh, *very* good, Miss Granger!" squeaked Filius Flitwick, their Charms professor and Head of Ravenclaw, a tiny little man with no visible signs of being a past dueling champion. "Excellent! Stupendous!"

Harry had expected to be, in the worst case, second behind Hermione. Harry would have preferred for *her* to be rivaling *him,* of course, but he could have accepted it the other way around.

As of Monday, Harry was headed for the bottom of the class, a position for which he was companionably rivaling all the other Muggle-raised students except Hermione. Who was all alone and rivalless at the top, poor thing.

Professor Flitwick was standing over the desk of one of the other Muggleborns and quietly adjusting the way she was holding her wand.

Harry looked over at Hermione. He swallowed hard. It was the obvious role for her in the scheme of things... "Hermione?" Harry said tentatively. "Do you have any idea what I might be doing wrong?"

Hermione's eyes lit up with a terrible light of helpfulness and something in the back of Harry's brain screamed in desperate humiliation.

Five minutes later, Harry's water did seem noticeably cooler than room temperature and Hermione had given him a few verbal pats on the head and told him to pronounce it more carefully next time and gone off to help someone else.

Professor Flitwick had given her a House point for helping him.

Harry was gritting his teeth so hard his jaw ached and that wasn't helping his pronunciation.

I don't care if it's unfair competition. I know exactly what I am doing with two extra hours every day. I am going to sit in my trunk and study

until I am keeping up with Hermione.

"Transfiguration is some of the most complex and dangerous magic you will learn at Hogwarts," said Professor McGonagall. There was not the slightest trace of a smile on the face of the stern old witch. "Anyone messing around in my class will leave and not come back. You have been warned."

Her wand came down and tapped her desk, which smoothly reshaped itself into a pig. A couple of Muggleborn students gave out small yelps. The pig looked around and snorted, seeming confused, and then became a desk again.

McGonagall looked around the class. Her eyes settled on one person.

"Mr. Potter," said Professor McGonagall. "You only got your schoolbooks a few days ago. Have you started reading your Transfiguration textbook?"

"No, sorry professor," Harry said.

"You needn't apologize, Mr. Potter, if you were required to read ahead you would have been told to do so." McGonagall's fingers rapped the desk in front of her. "Mr. Potter, would you care to guess whether this is a desk which I briefly Transfigured into a pig, or if it began as a pig and I briefly removed the Transfiguration? If you had read the first chapter of your textbook, you would know."

Harry's eyebrows furrowed slightly. "I'd guess it'd be easier to start with a pig, since if it started as a desk, it might not know how to stand up."

Professor McGonagall shook her head. "No fault to you, Mr. Potter, but the correct answer is that in Transfiguration class you do *not* care to guess. Wrong answers will be graded with extreme severity, questions left blank will be graded with great leniency. You must learn to know what you do not know. If I ask you any question, no matter how obvious or basic, and you answer 'I'm not sure', I will not hold it against you and

anyone who laughs will lose House points. Can you tell me why this rule exists, Mr. Potter?"

Because a single error in Transfiguration can be incredibly dangerous. "No."

"Correct. Transfiguration is even more dangerous than Apparition, which is not taught until your sixth year. Unfortunately, Transfiguration must be learned and practiced at a young age in order to maximize your adult ability. So this is a dangerous subject, and you should be quite scared of making any mistakes, because none of my students have ever been permanently injured and I will be *extremely put out* if you are the first class to *spoil my record*."

Several students gulped.

Professor McGonagall stood up and moved over to the wall behind her desk, which held a whiteboard, complete with markers and eraser. "There are many reasons why Transfiguration is dangerous, but one reason stands above all the rest." She took up one of the markers and sketched letters in bright red, which she then underlined in blue:

TRANSFIGURATION IS NOT PERMANENT!

"Transfiguration is not permanent!" said McGonagall. "Transfiguration is not permanent! Transfiguration is not permanent! Mr. Potter, suppose a student Transfigured a block of wood into a glass of water, and you drank it. What do you imagine might happen to you when the Transfiguration wore off?" There was a pause. "Excuse me, I should not have asked that of you, Mr. Potter, I forgot that you are blessed with an unusually pessimistic imagination—"

"I'm fine," Harry said, swallowing hard. "So the first answer is that I don't *know*," McGonagall nodded, "but I *imagine* there might be... wood in my stomach, and in my bloodstream, and if any of that water had gotten absorbed into my body's tissues—would it be wood pulp or solid wood or..." Harry's grasp of magic failed him. He couldn't understand how wood mapped into water in the first place, so he couldn't understand what would happen after the water molecules were scrambled

by ordinary thermal motions and the magic wore off and the mapping reversed.

McGonagall's face was stiff. "As Mr. Potter has correctly reasoned, he would become extremely sick and require emergency medical attention. Please turn your textbooks to page 5."

Even without any sound in the moving picture, you could tell that the woman with horribly discolored skin was screaming.

"The criminal who originally Transfigured gold into wine and gave it to this woman to drink, 'in payment of the debt' as he put it, received a sentence of ten years in Azkaban. Please turn to page 6. That is a Dementor. They are the guardians of Azkaban. They suck away at your magic, your life, and any happy thoughts you try to have. The picture on page 7 is of the criminal ten years later, on his release. You will note that he is dead—yes, Mr. Potter?"

"Professor," Harry said, "if the worst happens in a case like that, is there any way of *maintaining* the Transfiguration?"

"No," Professor McGonagall said flatly. "Sustaining a Transfiguration is a constant drain on your magic which scales with the size of the target form. And you would need to recontact the target every few hours, which is, in a case like this, impossible. Disasters like this are *unrecoverable!*"

Professor McGonagall leaned forward. Her face was very hard. "You will absolutely never under any circumstances Transfigure anything into a liquid or a gas. No water, no air. Nothing like water, nothing like air. Even if it is not meant to drink. Liquid *evaporates,* little bits and pieces of it get into the air. You will not Transfigure anything that is to be burned. It will make smoke and someone could breathe that smoke! You will never Transfigure anything that could conceivably get inside anyone's body by any means. No food. Nothing that *looks like* food. Not even as a funny little prank where you intend to tell them about your mud pie before they actually eat it. You will never do it. Period. Inside this classroom or out of it or *anywhere.* Is that well understood by *every single student?*"

"Yes," said Harry, Hermione, and a few others. The rest seemed to be speechless.

"*Is that well understood by every single student?*"

"Yes," they said or muttered or whispered.

"If you break any of these rules you will not further study Transfiguration during your stay at Hogwarts. Repeat along with me. I will never Transfigure anything into liquid or gas."

"I will never Transfigure anything into liquid or gas," said the students in ragged chorus.

"Again! Louder! I will never Transfigure anything into liquid or gas."

"I will never Transfigure anything into liquid or gas."

"I will never Transfigure anything that looks like food or anything else that goes inside a human body."

"I will never Transfigure anything that is to be burned because it could make smoke."

"You will never Transfigure anything that looks like money, including Muggle money," said Professor McGonagall. "The goblins have ways of finding out who did it. As a matter of recognized law, the goblin nation is in a permanent state of *war* with all magical counterfeiters. They will not send Aurors. They will send an army."

"I will never Transfigure anything that looks like money," chorused the students.

"And *above all*," said Professor McGonagall, "you will not Transfigure any living subject, *especially yourselves.* It will make you very sick and possibly dead, depending on how you Transfigure yourself and how long you maintain the change." Professor McGonagall paused. "Mr. Potter is currently holding up a questioning hand because he has seen an Animagus transformation—in particular, a human transforming into a cat and back again. But an Animagus transformation is not *free* Transfiguration."

Professor McGonagall took a small piece of wood out of her pocket. With a tap of her wand it became a glass ball. Then she said "*Crystferrium!*" and the glass ball became a steel ball. She tapped it with her wand one last time and the steel ball became a piece of wood once more. "*Crystferrium* transforms a subject of solid glass into a similarly shaped target of solid steel. It cannot do the reverse, and it cannot transform a desk into a pig, either. The most general form of Transfiguration—free

Transfiguration, which is what you will be learning here—is capable of transforming any subject into any target, at least so far as physical form is concerned. For this reason, free Transfiguration must be done wordlessly. Using Charms would require different words for every different transformation between subject and target."

Professor McGonagall gave her students a sharp look. "*Some* teachers begin with Transfiguration Charms and move on to free Transfiguration afterward. Yes, that would be much easier in the beginning. But it can set you in a poor mold which impairs your abilities later. Here you will learn free Transfiguration from the *very start*, which requires that you cast the spell wordlessly, by holding the subject form, the target form, and the transformation within your own mind."

"And to answer Mr. Potter's question," Professor McGonagall went on, "it is *free* Transfiguration which you must never do to any living subject. There are Charms and potions which can safely, reversibly transform living subjects in *limited* ways. An Animagus with a missing limb will still be missing that limb after transforming, for example. Free Transfiguration is *not* safe. Your body will change while it is Transfigured—breathing, for example, results in a constant loss of the body's matter to the atmosphere. When the Transfiguration wears off and your body tries to revert to its *original* form, it will not quite be able to do so. If you press your wand to your body and imagine yourself with golden hair, afterward your hair will fall out. If you visualize yourself as someone with clearer skin, you will be taking a long stay at St. Mungo's. And if you Transfigure yourself into an adult bodily form, then, when the Transfiguration wears off, you will die."

That explained why he had seen such things as fat boys, or girls less than perfectly pretty. Or old people, for that matter. That wouldn't happen if you could just Transfigure yourself every morning... Harry raised his hand and tried to signal Professor McGonagall with his eyes.

"*Yes*, Mr. Potter?"

"Is it possible to Transfigure a living subject into a target that is static, such as a coin—no, excuse me, I'm terribly sorry, let's just say a steel ball."

Professor McGonagall shook her head. "Mr. Potter, even inanimate

objects undergo tiny internal changes over time. There would be no visible changes to your body afterward, and for the first minute, you would notice nothing wrong. But in an hour you would be very sick, and a day later you would be dead."

"Erm, excuse me, so if I'd read the first chapter I could have *guessed* that the desk was originally a desk and not a pig," Harry said, "but only if I made the *further* assumption that you didn't want to kill the pig, that might *seem* highly probable but—"

"I can foresee that grading your tests will be an endless source of delight to me, Mr. Potter. But if you have other questions can I please ask you to wait until after class?"

"No further questions, Professor."

"Now repeat after me," said Professor McGonagall. "I will never try to Transfigure any living subject, especially myself, unless specifically instructed to do so using a specialized Charm or potion."

"If I am not sure whether a Transfiguration is safe, I will not try it until I have asked Professor McGonagall or Professor Flitwick or Professor Snape or Headmaster Dumbledore, who are the only recognized authorities on Transfiguration at Hogwarts. Asking another student is *not* acceptable, even if they say that they remember asking the same question."

"Even if the current Defense Professor at Hogwarts tells me that a Transfiguration is safe, and even if I see the Defense Professor do it and nothing bad seems to happen, I will not try it myself."

"I have the absolute right to refuse to perform any Transfiguration about which I feel the slightest bit nervous. Since not even the Headmaster of Hogwarts can order me to do otherwise, I certainly will not accept any such order from the Defense Professor, even if the Defense Professor threatens to deduct one hundred House points and have me expelled."

"If I break any of these rules I will not further study Transfiguration during my time at Hogwarts."

"We will repeat these rules at the start of every class for the first month," said Professor McGonagall. "And now, we will begin with

matches as subjects and needles as targets... put away your wands, thank you, by 'begin' I meant that you will begin taking notes."

Half an hour before the end of class, Professor McGonagall handed out the matches.

At the end of the class Hermione had a silvery-looking match and the entire rest of the class, Muggleborn or otherwise, had exactly what they'd started with.

Professor McGonagall awarded her another point for Ravenclaw.

After Transfiguration class was dismissed, Hermione came over to Harry's desk as Harry was putting his books away into his pouch.

"You know," Hermione said with an innocent expression on her face, "I earned two points for Ravenclaw today."

"So you did," Harry said shortly.

"But that wasn't as good as your *seven* points," she said. "I guess I'm just not as intelligent as you."

Harry finished feeding his homework into the pouch and turned to Hermione with his eyes narrowed. He'd actually forgotten about that.

She *batted her eyelashes* at him. "We have classes every day, though. I wonder how long it will take you to find some more Hufflepuffs to rescue? Today is Monday. So that gives you until Thursday."

The two of them stared into each other's eyes, unblinking.

Harry spoke first. "Of course you realize this means war."

"I didn't know we'd been at peace."

All of the other students were now watching with fascinated eyes. All of the other students, plus, unfortunately, Professor McGonagall.

"Oh, Mr. Potter," sang Professor McGonagall from the other side of the room, "I have some good news for you. Madam Pomfrey has approved your suggestion for preventing breakage in her Spimster wickets, and the plan is to finish the job by the end of next week. I'd say that deserves... let's call it ten points for Ravenclaw."

Hermione's face was gaping in betrayal and shock. Harry imagined his own face didn't look much different.

"*Professor...*" Harry hissed.

"Those ten points are *unquestionably* deserved, Mr. Potter. I would not hand out House points on a whim. To you it might have been a simple matter of seeing something fragile and suggesting a way to protect it, but Spimster wickets are expensive, and the Headmaster was *not* pleased the last time one broke." McGonagall looked thoughtful. "My, I wonder if any other student has ever earned seventeen House points on his first day of classes. I'll have to look it up, but I suspect that's a new record. Perhaps we should have an announcement at dinnertime?"

"Professor!" Harry shrieked. "This is *our* war! Stop meddling!"

"Now you have until Thursday of *next* week, Mr. Potter. Unless, of course, you engage in some sort of mischief and *lose* House points before then. Addressing a professor disrespectfully, for example." Professor McGonagall put a finger on her cheek and looked reflective. "I expect you'll hit negative numbers before the end of Friday."

Harry's mouth snapped shut. He sent his best Death Glare at McGonagall but she only seemed to find it amusing.

"Yes, definitely an announcement at dinner," Professor McGonagall mused. "But it wouldn't do to offend the Slytherins, so the announcement should be brief. Just the number of points and the fact of the record... and if anyone comes to you for help with their schoolwork and is disappointed that you haven't even started reading your textbooks, you can always refer them to Miss Granger."

"*Professor!*" said Hermione in a rather high-pitched voice.

Professor McGonagall ignored her. "My, I wonder how long it will take before Miss Granger does something which deserves a dinnertime announcement? I look forward to seeing it, whatever it may be."

Harry and Hermione, by unspoken mutual consent, turned and stormed out of the classroom. They were followed by a trail of hypnotized Ravenclaws.

"Um," Harry said. "Are we still on for after dinner?"

"Of course," said Hermione. "I wouldn't want you to fall further behind on your studying."

"Why, thank you. And let me say that as brilliant as you are already, I can't help but wonder what you'll be like once you have some elementary training in rationality."

"Is it really that useful? It didn't seem to help you with Charms or Transfiguration."

There was a slight pause.

"Well, I only got my schoolbooks four days ago. That's why I had to earn those seventeen House points without using my wand."

"Four days ago? Maybe you can't read eight books in four days but you might have at least read *one*. How many days will it take to finish at that rate? You know a lot of math, so can you tell me what's eight, times four, divided by zero?"

"I've got classes now, which you didn't, but weekends are free, so... lim epsilon approaching zero plus of eight times four divided by epsilon... 10:47AM on Sunday."

"I did it in *three* days actually."

"2:47PM on Saturday it is, then. I'm sure I'll find the time somewhere."

And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

LATERAL THINKING

I'm not a psychopath, I'm just very creative.

⁂

As soon as he walked into the Defense classroom on Wednesday, Harry knew that *this* class was going to be *different*.

It was, for a start, the largest classroom he had yet seen at Hogwarts, akin to a major university classroom, with layered tiers of desks facing a gigantic flat stage that seemed to be made out of white marble. The classroom was high up in the castle—on the fifth floor—and Harry knew that was as much explanation as he'd get for where a room like this was supposed to fit. It was becoming clear that Hogwarts simply did not *have* a geometry, Euclidean or otherwise; it had connections, not directions.

Unlike a university hall, there weren't rows of folding seats with built-in desks; instead there were quite ordinary Hogwarts wooden desks and wooden chairs, lined up in a curve across each level of the classroom. Except that each desk had a flat, white, rectangular object propped up on it. Harry hadn't seen those things on desks before.

In the center of the gigantic platform, on a small raised dais of darker marble, was a lone teacher's desk. At which Quirrell sat slumped over in his chair, head lolled back, drooling slightly over his robes.

Now what does that remind me of...?

Harry had arrived at the class so early that no other students were there yet. (The English language was defective when it came to describing time travel; in particular, English lacked any words capable of expressing how convenient it was.) Quirrell didn't seem to be... functional... at the moment, and he didn't particularly feel like approaching Quirrell anyway.

Harry selected a desk, climbed up to it, sat down, and retrieved the Defense textbook. He was around seven-eighths of the way through—he'd planned on finishing the book before this class, actually, but he was running behind schedule and had already used the Time-Turner twice today.

After a short time there were sounds as the classroom began to fill up. Harry ignored them.

"Potter? What are *you* doing in this class?"

That voice didn't belong here. Harry looked up. "Draco? What are *you* doing in oh my god you have *minions*."

One of the boys standing behind Draco seemed to have rather a lot of muscle for an eleven-year-old, and the other was poised in a suspiciously balanced-looking stance.

Draco smiled rather smugly and gestured behind him. "Potter, I introduce to you Mr. Crabbe," his hand moved from Muscles to Balance, "Mr. Goyle. Vincent, Gregory, this is Harry Potter."

Mr. Goyle tilted his head and gave Harry a look that was probably supposed to mean something but ended up just looking squinty. Mr. Crabbe said "Please to meetcha" in a tone that sounded like he was trying to lower his voice as far as it could go.

A fleeting expression of consternation crossed Draco's face, but was quickly replaced by a superior grin.

"You have *minions!*" Harry repeated. "Where do *I* get minions?"

Draco's superior grin widened. "I'm afraid, Potter, that step one is to be Sorted into Slytherin—"

"What? That's not fair!"

"—and step two is for your families to have made an arrangement shortly after you were born."

Harry looked at Mr. Crabbe and Mr. Goyle. They both seemed to be trying very hard to loom. That is, they were leaning forward, hunching over their shoulders, sticking their necks out and staring at him.

"Um... hold on," said Harry. "This was arranged *years* ago?"

"Exactly, Potter. I'm afraid you're out of luck."

Mr. Goyle produced a toothpick and began cleaning his teeth, still looming.

"And," said Harry, "Lucius insisted that you were *not* to grow up knowing your bodyguards, and that you were only to meet them on your first day of school."

That wiped the grin from Draco's face. "Yes, Potter, we all know you're brilliant, the whole school knows by now, you can stop showing off—"

"So they've been told their *whole lives* that they're going to be your minions and they've spent *years* imagining what minions are supposed to be like—"

Draco winced.

"—and what's worse, they *do* know *each other* and they've been *practicing*—"

"The boss told ya to shut it," rumbled Mr. Crabbe. Mr. Goyle bit down on his toothpick, holding it between his teeth, and used one hand to crack the knuckles on the other.

"I told you not to do this in front of Harry Potter!"

The two looked a bit sheepish and Mr. Goyle quickly put the toothpick back in a pocket of his robes.

But the moment Draco turned away from them to face Harry again, they went back to looming.

"I apologize," Draco said stiffly, "for the insult which these *imbeciles* have offered you."

Harry gave a meaningful look to Mr. Crabbe and Mr. Goyle. "I'd say you're being a little harsh on them, Draco. *I* think they're acting exactly the way I'd want *my* minions to act. I mean, if I had any minions."

Draco's jaw dropped.

"Hey, Gregory, you don' think he's tryna lure us away from the boss, do ya?"

"I'm sure Mr. Potter wouldn't be that foolish."

"Oh, I wouldn't dream of it," Harry said smoothly. "It's just something to keep in mind if your current employer seems unappreciative. Besides, it never hurts to have other offers while you're negotiating your working conditions, right?"

"What's *he* doin' in Ravenclaw?"

"I can't imagine, Mr. Crabbe."

"Both of you *shut up*," Draco said through gritted teeth. "That's an *order*." With a visible effort, he transferred his attention to Harry again. "Anyway, what're you doing in the Slytherin Defense class?"

Harry frowned. "Hold on." His hand went into his pouch. "Class schedule." He looked over the parchment. "Defense class, 2:30, and right now it's..." Harry looked at his mechanical watch, which read 11:23. "2:23, unless I've lost track of time. Did I?" If he had, well, Harry knew how to get to whatever class he was *supposed* to be in. God he loved his Time-Turner and someday, when he was old enough, they would get married.

"No, that sounds right," Draco said, frowning. His gaze turned to look over the rest of the auditorium, which was filling with green-trimmed robes and...

"*Gryffindorks!*" spat Draco. "What're *they* doing here?"

"Hm," Harry said. "Professor Quirrell did say... I forget his exact words... that he would be ignoring some of the Hogwarts teaching conventions. Maybe he just combined all his classes."

"Huh," said Draco. "You're the first Ravenclaw in here."

"Yup. Got here early."

"What're you doing all the way in the back row, then?"

Harry blinked. "I dunno, seemed like a good place to sit?"

Draco snorted. "You couldn't get any further away from the teacher if you tried." Draco leaned forward slightly, looking suddenly intent. "Anyway, Potter, is it true about what you said to Derrick and his crew?"

"Who's Derrick?"

"You hit him with a pie?"

"Two pies, actually. What am I supposed to have said to him?"

"That what he was doing wasn't the slightest bit cunning or ambitious and he was a disgrace to the legacy of Salazar Slytherin." Draco was staring hard at Harry.

"That... sounds about right," Harry said. "I think it was more like, 'is this some kind of incredibly clever plot that will gain you a future advantage or is it really as much of a disgrace to the memory of Salazar Slytherin as it looks like' or something like that. I don't remember the exact words."

Draco shook his head. "You're sending us mixed messages here, Potter."

"Huh?" Harry said in honest confusion.

"Warrington said that spending a long time under the Sorting Hat is one of the warning signs of a major Dark Wizard. Everyone was talking about it, wondering if they should start sucking up to you just in case. Then you went and protected a bunch of *Hufflepuffs,* for Merlin's sake. *Then* you told Derrick he's a disgrace to Salazar Slytherin's memory! What's anyone *supposed* to think?"

"That the Sorting Hat decided to put me in the House of 'Slytherin! Just kidding! Ravenclaw!' and I've been acting accordingly."

Mr. Crabbe and Mr. Goyle both giggled, causing Mr. Goyle to quickly clap a hand to his mouth.

"We'd better go get our seats," Draco said. He hesitated, seemed to become more formal. "Potter, without making any commitments as yet, I do wish to continue our previous conversation and your condition is acceptable to me."

Harry nodded. "Would you mind terribly if I waited until Saturday afternoon? I'm in a bit of a contest right now."

"A contest?"

"See if I can read all my textbooks as fast as Hermione Granger did."

"Granger," Draco echoed. His eyes narrowed. "The mudblood who thinks she's Merlin? If you're trying to show *her* up then all Slytherin wishes you the *very* best of luck, Potter, and I won't bother you 'til Saturday." Draco inclined his head in a gesture of measured respect, and wandered off, tailed by his minions.

Oh, this is going to be so *much fun to juggle, I can already tell.*

The classroom was filling up rapidly now with all four colors of trim: green, red, yellow, and blue. Draco and his two friends seemed to be in the midst of trying to acquire three contiguous front-row seats—already occupied, of course. Mr. Crabbe and Mr. Goyle were looming vigorously, but it didn't seem to be having much effect.

Harry bent over his Defense textbook and continued reading.

At 2:35PM, when most of the seats were taken and no one else seemed to be coming in, Professor Quirrell gave a sudden jerk in his chair and sat up straight, and his face appeared on all the flat, white rectangular objects that were propped up on the students' desks.

Harry was taken by surprise, both by the sudden appearance of Professor Quirrell's face and by the resemblance to Muggle television. There was something both nostalgic and sad about that, it seemed so much like a piece of home and yet it wasn't really...

"Good afternoon, my young apprentices," said Professor Quirrell. His voice seemed to come from the desk screen and to be speaking directly to Harry. "Welcome to your first class in Battle Magic, as the founders of Hogwarts would have put it; or, as it happens to be called in the late twentieth century, Defense Against the Dark Arts."

There was a certain amount of frantic scrabbling as students, taken by surprise, reached for their parchment or notebooks.

"No," Professor Quirrell said, "really, don't bother writing down what this class used to be called. No pointless question like that will ever appear on one of my tests. That is a promise."

Many students sat straight up at that, looking rather shocked.

Professor Quirrell was smiling thinly. "Those of you who have wasted your time by reading ahead in your useless first-year Defense textbooks—"

Someone made a choking sound. Harry wondered if it was Hermione.

"—may have gotten the impression that although this class is called Defense Against the Dark Arts, it is actually about how to defend against Nightmare Butterflies, which cause mildly bad dreams, or Acid Slugs, which can dissolve all the way through a two-inch wooden beam given most of a day."

Professor Quirrell stood up, shoving his chair back from the desk. The screen on Harry's desk followed his every move. Professor Quirrell strode toward the front of the classroom, and bellowed:

"The Hungarian Horntail is taller than a dozen men! It breathes fire so quickly and so accurately that it can melt a Snitch in midflight! One Killing Curse will bring it down!"

There were gasps from the students.

"The Mountain Troll is more dangerous than the Hungarian Horntail! It is slow, but strong enough to bite through steel! Its skin is tough enough to deflect Cutting Charms! Its sense of smell is so acute that it can tell from afar whether its prey is part of a pack, or alone and vulnerable! Most fearsome of all, the troll is unique among magical creatures in continuously maintaining a form of Transfiguration on itself—it is always transforming into its own body. If you somehow succeed in ripping off its arm it will grow another one within seconds! Fire and acid will produce scar tissue which can *temporarily* confuse a troll's regenerative powers—for an hour or two! They are smart enough to use clubs as tools! The mountain troll is the third most perfect killing machine in all Nature! One Killing Curse will bring it down."

The students were looking rather shocked.

Professor Quirrell was smiling rather grimly. "Your useless excuse for a third-year defense textbook will suggest to you that you expose the mountain troll to sunlight, which will freeze it in place. This, my young apprentices, is the sort of useless knowledge that you will never find on one of my exams. You do not encounter mountain trolls in open daylight! The idea that you should use sunlight to stop them is the result of foolish textbook authors trying to show off their mastery of minutia at the expense of practicality. Just because there is a ridiculously obscure way of dealing with mountain trolls does not mean you should actually try to use it! The Killing Curse is unblockable, unstoppable, and works

every single time on anything with a brain. If, as an adult wizard, you find yourself incapable of using the Killing Curse, then you can simply Apparate away! Likewise if you are facing the second most perfect killing machine, a Dementor. You just Apparate away!"

"Unless, of course," Professor Quirrell said, his voice now lower and harder, "you are under the influence of an anti-Apparition jinx. No, there is exactly one monster which can threaten you once you are fully grown. The single most dangerous monster in all the world, so dangerous that nothing else comes close. The adult wizard. That is the only thing that will still be able to threaten you."

Professor Quirrell's lips were set in a thin line. "I will reluctantly teach you enough trivia for a passing grade on the Ministry-mandated portions of your first-year finals. Since your exact grade on these sections will make no difference to your future life, anyone who wants more than a passing grade is welcome to waste their own time studying our pathetic excuse for a textbook. The title of this class is not Defense Against Minor Pests. You are here to learn how to defend yourselves against the Dark Arts. Which means, let us be very clear on this, defending yourselves against Dark Wizards. People with wands who want to hurt you and who will likely succeed in doing so unless you hurt them first! There is no defense without offense! There is no defense without fighting! This reality is deemed too harsh for eleven-year-olds by the fat, overpaid, Auror-guarded politicians who mandated your curriculum. To the abyss with those fools! You are here for the class that has been taught at Hogwarts for eight hundred years! Welcome to your first year of Battle Magic!"

Harry started applauding. He couldn't help himself, it was too inspiring.

Once Harry started clapping there was some scattered response from Gryffindor, and more from Slytherin, but most students simply seemed too stunned to react.

Professor Quirrell made a cutting gesture, and the applause died instantly. "Thank you very much," said Professor Quirrell. "Now to practicalities. I have combined all my first-year Battle classes into one, which allows me to offer you twice as much class time as Doubles sessions—"

There were gasps of horror.

"—an increased load which I will make up to you by not assigning any homework."

The gasps of horror cut off abruptly.

"Yes, you heard me correctly. I will teach you to fight, not to write twelve inches on fighting due Monday."

Harry desperately wished he had thought to sit next to Hermione so that he could see the look on her face right now, but on the other hand he was pretty sure he was imagining it accurately.

Also Harry was in love. It would be a three-way wedding: him, the Time-Turner, and Professor Quirrell.

"For those of you who *want* to spend more time on Battle Magic, I have arranged some after-school activities that I think you will find quite interesting as well as educational. Do you want to show the world your *own* abilities instead of watching fourteen other people play Quidditch? More than seven people can fight in an army."

Hot *damn.*

"These and other after-school activities will also earn you Quirrell points. What are Quirrell points, you ask? The House point system does not suit my needs, because it makes House points too rare. I like to let my students know how they are doing more frequently than that. And on the rare occasions I offer you a written test, it will grade itself as you go along, and if you get too many related questions wrong, your test will show the names of students who got those questions right, and those students will be able to earn Quirrell points by helping you."

...wow. Why didn't the other professors use a system like that?

"What good are Quirrell points, you wonder? For a start, ten Quirrell points will be worth one House point. But they will earn you other favors as well. Would you like to take your exam at an unusual time? Is there a particular session you would very much prefer to skip? You will find that I can be very flexible on behalf of students who have accumulated enough Quirrell points. Quirrell points will control the generalship of the armies. And for Christmas—just before the Christmas break—I will grant someone a wish. Any school-related feat that lies within my power, my influence, or above all, my ingenuity. Yes, I was

in Slytherin and I am offering to formulate a cunning plot on your behalf, if that is what it takes to accomplish your desire. This wish will go to whoever has earned the most Quirrell points within all seven years."

That would be Harry.

"Now leave your books and loose items at your desks—they will be safe, the screens will watch over them for you—and come down onto this platform. We're about to play a game called Who's the Most Dangerous Student in the Classroom."

Harry twisted his wand in his right hand and said "*Ma-ha-su!*"

There was another high-pitched "bing" from the floating blue sphere that Professor Quirrell had assigned to Harry as his target. That particular sound meant a perfect strike, which Harry had been gotten on nine out of his last ten attempts.

Somewhere Professor Quirrell had dug up a hex that was incredibly easy to pronounce, *and* had a ridiculously simple wand motion, *and* had a tendency to hit wherever you were currently looking at. Professor Quirrell had disdainfully proclaimed that real battle magic was far more difficult than this. That the hex was entirely useless in actual combat. That it was a barely ordered burst of magic whose only real content was the aiming, and that it would produce, when it hit, a pain briefly equivalent to being punched hard in the nose. That the sole purpose of this test was to see who was a fast learner, since Professor Quirrell was certain no one would have previously encountered this hex or anything like it.

Harry didn't care about any of that.

"*Ma-ha-su!*"

A *red bolt of energy* shot out of his wand and struck the target and the blue sphere once again made the bing which meant the spell had *actually worked for him.*

Harry was feeling like a real wizard for the first time since he'd come to Hogwarts. He wished the target would dodge like the little spheres

that Ben Kenobi had used for training Luke, but for some reason Professor Quirrell had instead lined up all the students and targets in neat orders which made sure they wouldn't fire on each other.

So Harry lowered his wand, skipped to the right, snapped up his wand and twisted and shouted "*Ma-ha-su!*"

There was a lower-pitched "dong" which meant he'd gotten it almost right.

Harry put his wand into his pocket, skipped back to the left and drew and fired another red bolt of energy.

The high-pitched bing which resulted was easily one of the most satisfying sounds he'd heard in his life. Harry wanted to scream in triumph at the top of his lungs. I CAN DO MAGIC! FEAR ME, LAWS OF PHYSICS, I'M COMING TO VIOLATE YOU!

"*Ma-ha-su!*" Harry's voice was coming out rather loud, but hardly noticeable over the steady chant of similar cries from around the classroom/platform.

"Enough," said Professor Quirrell's amplified voice. (It didn't sound loud. It sounded like normal volume, coming from just behind your left shoulder, no matter where you were standing relative to Professor Quirrell.) "I see that everyone's gotten it at least once now." The target-spheres all turned red and began to drift up toward the ceiling.

Professor Quirrell was standing on the raised dais in the center of the platform, leaning slightly on his teacher's desk with one hand.

"I told you," Professor Quirrell said, "that we would play a game called Who's the Most Dangerous Student in the Classroom. There is one student in this classroom who mastered the Sumerian Simple Strike Hex faster than anyone else—"

Oh blah blah blah.

"—and went on to help seven other students. For which she has earned the first seven Quirrell points awarded to your year. Hermione Granger, please come forward. It's time for the next stage of the game."

Hermione Granger began striding forward, a mixed look of triumph and apprehension on her face. The Ravenclaws looked on proudly, the Slytherins with glares, and Harry with frank annoyance. Harry had done fine this time. He was probably even in the upper half of the class,

now that everyone had been faced with an equally unfamiliar spell and Harry had read all the way through Adalbert Waffling's *Magical Theory*. And yet *Hermione was still doing better*.

Somewhere in the back of his mind was the fear that Hermione was simply smarter than him.

But for now Harry was going to pin his hopes on the known facts that (a) Hermione had read a lot more than the standard textbooks and (b) Adalbert Waffling was an uninspired sod who'd written *Magical Theory* to pander to a school board that didn't think much of eleven-year-olds.

Hermione reached the central dais and stepped up.

"Hermione Granger mastered a completely unfamiliar spell in two minutes, almost a full minute faster than the next runner-up." Professor Quirrell turned slowly in place to look at all the students watching them. "Could Miss Granger's intelligence make her the most dangerous student in the classroom? Well? What do you think?"

No one seemed to be thinking anything at the moment. Even Harry wasn't sure what to say.

"Let's find out, shall we?" said Professor Quirrell. He turned back to Hermione, and gestured toward the wider class. "Select any student you like and cast the Simple Strike Hex on them."

Hermione froze where she stood.

"Come now," Professor Quirrell said smoothly. "You have cast this spell perfectly over fifty times. It is not permanently harmful or even all that painful. It hurts around as much as a hard punch and lasts only a few seconds." Professor Quirrell's voice grew harder. "This is a direct order from your professor, Miss Granger. Choose a target and fire a Simple Strike Hex."

Hermione's face was screwed up in horror and her wand was trembling in her hand. Harry's own fingers were clenching his own wand hard in sympathy. Even though he could see what Professor Quirrell was trying to do. Even though he could see the point Professor Quirrell was trying to make.

"If you do *not* raise your wand and fire, Miss Granger, you will lose a Quirrell point."

Harry stared at Hermione, willing her to look in his direction. His right hand was softly tapping his own chest. *Pick me, I'm not afraid...*

Hermione's wand twitched in her hand, and then her face relaxed, and she lowered her wand to her side.

"No," said Hermione Granger.

Her voice was calm, and even though it wasn't loud, everyone heard it in the silence.

"Then I must deduct one point from you," said Professor Quirrell. "This is a test, and you have failed it."

That reached her. Harry could see it. But she kept her shoulders straight.

Professor Quirrell's voice was sympathetic and seemed to fill the whole room. "Knowing things isn't always enough, Miss Granger. If you cannot give and receive violence on the order of stubbing your toe, then you cannot defend yourself and you will not pass my Defense class. Please rejoin your classmates."

Hermione walked back toward the Ravenclaw cluster. Her face looked peaceful and Harry, for some odd reason, wanted to start clapping. Even though Professor Quirrell had been *right*.

"So," Professor Quirrell said. "It becomes clear that Hermione Granger is not the most dangerous student in the classroom. Who do you think might actually be the most dangerous person here?—besides me, of course."

Without even thinking about it, Harry's eyes turned toward the Slytherin contingent.

"Draco, of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Malfoy," said Professor Quirrell. "It seems that rather a lot of people are looking in your direction. Please come forward."

Draco did so, walking with a certain pride in his bearing. He stepped onto the dais and looked up at Professor Quirrell with a smile.

"Mr. Malfoy," Professor Quirrell said. "Fire."

Harry would have tried to stop it if there'd been time but in one smooth motion Draco spun on the Ravenclaw contingent and raised his wand and said "*Mahasu!*" like it was all one syllable and Hermione was saying "Ow!" and that was that.

"Well struck," said Professor Quirrell. "Two Quirrell points to you. But tell me, why did you target Miss Granger?"

There was a pause.

Finally Draco said, "Because she stood out the most."

Professor Quirrell's lips turned up in a thin smile. "And that is the true reason why Draco Malfoy is dangerous. If he had selected anyone else, that person would be more likely to resent being singled out, and Mr. Malfoy would be more likely to make an enemy. And while Mr. Malfoy might have given some other justification for selecting her, that would have served him no purpose but to alienate some of you, while others are already cheering him whether he says anything or not. In short, Mr. Malfoy is dangerous because he knows who to strike and who not to strike, how to make allies and avoid making enemies. Two more Quirrell points to you, Mr. Malfoy. And as you have demonstrated an exemplary virtue of Slytherin, I think that Salazar's House has earned a point as well. You may rejoin your friends."

Draco bowed slightly and walked back to the Slytherin contingent. Some clapping started from the green-trimmed robes, but Professor Quirrell made a cutting gesture and silence fell again.

"It might seem that our game is done," said Professor Quirrell. "And yet there is a single student in this classroom who is more dangerous than the scion of Malfoy."

And *now* for some reason there seemed to be an awful lot of people looking at...

"Harry Potter. Please come forward."

This did not bode well.

Harry reluctantly walked toward where Professor Quirrell stood on his raised dais, still leaning slightly against his desk.

The nervousness of being put into the spotlight seemed to be sharpening Harry's wits as he approached the dais, and his mind was ruffling through possibilities for what Professor Quirrell might think could demonstrate Harry's dangerousness. Would he be asked to cast a spell? To defeat a Dark Lord?

Demonstrate his supposed immunity to the Killing Curse? Surely Professor Quirrell was too smart for *that*...

Harry stopped well short of the dais, and Professor Quirrell didn't ask him to come any closer.

"The irony is," said Professor Quirrell, "you all looked at the right person for entirely the wrong reasons. You are thinking," Professor Quirrell's lips twisted, "that Harry Potter has defeated the Dark Lord, and so must be very dangerous. Bah. He was one year old. Whatever quirk of fate killed the Dark Lord likely had little to do with Mr. Potter's abilities as a fighter. But after I heard rumors of one Ravenclaw facing down five older Slytherins, I interviewed several eyewitnesses and came to the conclusion that Harry Potter would be my most dangerous student."

A jolt of adrenaline poured into Harry's system. He didn't know what conclusion Professor Quirrell had come to, but that couldn't be good.

"Ah, Professor Quirrell—" Harry started to say.

Professor Quirrell looked amused. "You're thinking that I've come up with a wrong answer, aren't you, Mr. Potter? You will learn to expect better of *me*." Professor Quirrell straightened from where he had leaned on the desk. "Mr. Potter, all things have their accustomed uses. Give me ten unaccustomed uses of objects in this room for combat!"

For a moment Harry was rendered speechless by the sheer, raw shock of having been understood.

And then the ideas started to pour out.

"There are desks which are heavy enough to be fatal if dropped from a great height. There are chairs with metal legs that could impale someone if driven hard enough. The air in this classroom would be deadly by its absence, since people die in vacuum, and it can serve as a carrier for poison gases."

Harry had to stop briefly for breath, and into that pause Professor Quirrell said:

"That's three. You need ten. The rest of the class thinks that you've already used up the whole contents of the classroom."

"*Ha!* The floor can be removed to create a spike pit to fall into, the ceiling can be collapsed on someone, the walls can serve as raw material for Transfiguration into any number of deadly things—knives, say."

"That's six. But surely you're scraping the bottom of the barrel now?"

"I haven't even started! Just look at all the people! Having a Gryffindor attack the enemy is an *ordinary* use, of course—"

"I wouldn't have let you count that one."

"—but their blood can also be used to drown someone. Ravenclaws are known for their brains, but their internal organs could be sold on the black market for enough money to hire an assassin. Slytherins aren't just useful as assassins, they can also be thrown at sufficient velocity to crush an enemy. And Hufflepuffs, in addition to being hard workers, also contain bones that can be removed, sharpened, and used to stab someone."

By now the rest of the class was staring at Harry in some horror. Even the Slytherins looked shocked.

"That's ten, though I'm being generous in counting the Ravenclaw one. Now, for extra credit, one point for each use of objects in this room which you have not already named." Professor Quirrell favored Harry with a companionable smile. "The rest of the class thinks you're in trouble now, since you've named everything except the targets and you have no idea what can be done with those."

"Bah! I've named all the people, but not my robes, which can be used to suffocate an enemy if wrapped around their head enough times, or Hermione Granger's robes, which can be torn into strips and tied into a rope and used to hang someone, or Draco Malfoy's robes, which can be used to start a fire—"

"Three points," said Professor Quirrell, "no more clothing now."

"My wand can be pushed into an enemy's brain through their eye socket" and someone made a horrified, strangling sound.

"Four points, no more wands."

"My wristwatch could suffocate someone if jammed down their throat—"

"Five points, and enough."

"Hmph," Harry said. "Ten Quirrell points to one House point, right? You should have let me just keep going until I won the House Cup, I haven't even started on the unaccustomed uses of everything I've

got in my pockets" or the mokeskin pouch itself and he couldn't talk about the Time-Turner or the invisibility cloak but there had to be *something* he could say about those red spheres...

"*Enough,* Mr. Potter. Well, do you all think you understand what makes Mr. Potter the most dangerous student in the classroom?"

There was a low murmur of assent.

"Say it out loud, please. Terry Boot, what makes your dorm-mate dangerous?"

"Ah... um... he's creative?"

"WRONG!" bellowed Professor Quirrell, and his fist came down sharply on his desk with an amplified sound that made everyone jump. "All of Mr. Potter's ideas were worse than useless!"

Harry started in surprise.

"Remove the floor to create a spike trap? Ridiculous! In combat you do not have that sort of preparation time and if you did there would be a hundred better uses! Transfigure material from the walls? Mr. Potter cannot perform Transfiguration! Mr. Potter had exactly one idea which he could use immediately, right now, without extensive preparation or a cooperative enemy or magic he does not know. That idea was to jam his wand through his enemy's eye socket. Which would be far more likely to break his wand than to kill his opponent! In short, Mr. Potter, I'm afraid that your suggestions were uniformly awful."

"What?" Harry said indignantly. "You *asked* for unusual ideas, not practical ones! I was thinking outside the box! How would *you* use something in this classroom to kill someone?"

Professor Quirrell's expression was disapproving, but there were smile crinkles around his eyes. "Mr. Potter, I never said you were to *kill.* There is a time and a place for taking your enemy alive, and inside a Hogwarts classroom is usually one of those places. But to answer your question, hit them on the neck with the edge of a chair."

There was some laughter from the Slytherins, but they were laughing with Harry, not at him.

Everyone else was looking rather horrified.

"But Mr. Potter has now demonstrated why he is the most dangerous student in the classroom. I asked for unaccustomed uses of items in this

room for combat. Mr. Potter could have suggested using a desk to block a curse, or using a chair to trip an oncoming enemy, or wrapping cloth around his arm to create an improvised shield. Instead, every single use that Mr. Potter named was offensive rather than defensive, and either fatal or potentially fatal."

What? Wait, that couldn't be true... Harry had a sudden sense of vertigo as he tried to remember what exactly he'd suggested, surely there had to be a counterexample...

"And that," Professor Quirrell said, "is why Mr. Potter's ideas were so strange and useless—because he had to reach far into the impractical in order to meet his standard of *killing the enemy.* To him, any idea which fell short of that was not worth considering. This reflects a quality that we might call *intent to kill*. I have it. Harry Potter has it, which is how he could stare down five older Slytherins. Draco Malfoy does not have it, not yet. Mr. Malfoy would hardly shrink from talk of ordinary murder, but even he was shocked—yes you were Mr. Malfoy, I was watching your face—when Mr. Potter described how to use his classmates' bodies as raw material. There are censors inside your mind which make you flinch away from thoughts like that. Mr. Potter thinks *purely* of killing the enemy, he will grasp at any means to do so, he does not flinch, his censors are off. Even though his youthful genius is so undisciplined and impractical as to be useless, his *intent to kill* makes Harry Potter the Most Dangerous Student in the Classroom. One final point to him—no, let us make that a point to Ravenclaw—for this indispensable requisite of a true fighting wizard."

Harry's mouth was gaping open in speechless shock as he searched frantically for something to say to this. *That is so completely not what I am about!*

But he could see that the other students were starting to believe it. Harry's mind was flipping through possible denials and not finding anything that could stand up against the authoritative voice of Professor Quirrell. The best Harry had come up with was "I'm not a psychopath, I'm just very creative" and that sounded kind of ominous. He needed to say something unexpected, something that would make people stop and reconsider—

"And now," Professor Quirrell said. "Mr. Potter. Fire."

Nothing happened, of course.

"Still in denial, I see," said Professor Quirrell. He sighed. "Ah, well. I suppose we all have to start somewhere. Mr. Potter, select any student you please for a Simple Strike Hex. You *will* do so before I dismiss class for the day. If you do not, I will begin deducting House points, and I will keep on deducting them until you do."

Harry carefully raised his wand. He had to do that much, or Professor Quirrell might start deducting House points right away.

Slowly, as though on a roasting platter, Harry turned to face the Slytherins.

And Harry's eyes met Draco's.

Draco didn't look the slightest bit afraid. He wasn't giving any visible sign of assent such as Harry had given Hermione, but then he could hardly be expected to do so. The other Slytherins would think that rather odd.

"Why the hesitation?" said Professor Quirrell. "Surely there's only one obvious choice."

"Yes," Harry said. "Only one *obvious* choice."

Harry twisted the wand and said "*Ma-ha-su!*"

There was complete silence in the classroom.

Harry shook his left arm, trying to get rid of the lingering sting.

There was more silence.

Finally Professor Quirrell sighed. "Yes, yes, very ingenious, but there was a lesson to be taught and you dodged it. One point from Ravenclaw for showing off your own cleverness at the expense of the actual goal. Class dismissed."

And before anyone else could say anything, Harry sang out:

"Just kidding! RAVENCLAW!"

There was silence for a brief moment after that, a sound of people thinking, and then the murmurs started and rapidly rose to a roar of conversation.

Harry turned toward Professor Quirrell, the two of them needed to talk—

Quirrell had slumped over and was trudging back to his chair.

No. Not acceptable. They *really* needed to talk. Screw the zombie act, Professor Quirrell would probably wake up if Harry poked him a couple of times. Harry started forward—

WRONG
DON'T
BAD IDEA

Harry swayed and stopped in his tracks, feeling dizzy.

And then a flock of Ravenclaws descended on him and the discussions began.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

LOCATING THE HYPOTHESIS

"You start to see the pattern, hear the rhythm of the world."

⁂

Thursday.

If you wanted to be specific, 7:24AM on Thursday morning.

Harry was sitting on his bed, a textbook lying limp in his motionless hands.

Harry had just had an idea for a *truly brilliant* experimental test.

It would mean waiting an extra hour for breakfast, but that was why he had meal bars. No, this idea absolutely positively had to be tested right away, immediately, now.

Harry set the textbook aside, leaped out of bed, raced around his bed, yanked out the cavern level of his trunk, ran down the stairs, and started moving boxes of books around. (He really needed to unpack and get bookcases at some point but he was in the middle of his textbook reading contest with Hermione and falling behind so he hadn't had time.)

Harry found the book he wanted and raced back upstairs.

The other boys were getting ready to go down to breakfast in the Great Hall and start the day.

"Excuse me can you do something for me?" said Harry. He was flipping through the book's index as he spoke, found the page with the first

ten thousand primes, flipped to that page, and thrust the book at Anthony Goldstein. "Pick two three-digit numbers from this list. Don't tell me what they are. Just multiply them together and tell me the product. Oh, and can you do the calculation twice to double-check? Please make really sure you've got the right answer, I'm not sure what's going to happen to me or the universe if you make a multiplication error."

It said a lot about what life in that dorm had been like over the past few days that Anthony didn't even bother saying anything like "Why'd you suddenly flip out?" or "That seems really weird, what are your reasons for asking?" or "What do you mean, you're not sure what's going to happen to the universe?"

Anthony wordlessly accepted the book and took out a parchment and quill. Harry spun around and shut his eyes, making sure not to see anything, dancing back and forth and bouncing up and down with impatience. He got a pad of paper and a mechanical pencil and got ready to write.

"Okay," Anthony said, "One hundred eighty-one thousand, four hundred twenty-nine."

Harry wrote down 181,429. He repeated what he'd just written down, and Anthony confirmed it.

Then Harry raced back down into the cavern level of his trunk, glanced at his watch (the watch said 4:28 which meant 7:28) and then shut his eyes.

Around thirty seconds later, Harry heard the sound of steps, followed by the sound of the cavern level of the trunk sliding shut. (Harry wasn't worried about suffocating. An automatic Air-Freshening Charm was part of what you got if you were willing to buy a really good trunk. Wasn't magic wonderful, it didn't have to worry about electric bills.)

And when Harry opened his eyes, he saw just what he'd been hoping to see, a folded piece of paper left on the floor, the gift of his future self.

Call that piece of paper "Paper-".

Harry tore a piece of paper off his pad.

Call that "Paper-". It was, of course, the same piece of paper. You could even see, if you looked closely, that the ragged edges matched.

Harry reviewed in his mind the algorithm that he would follow.

If Harry opened up Paper-and it was blank, then he would write "101 × 101" down on Paper-, fold it up, study for an hour, go back in time, drop off Paper-(which would thereby become Paper-), and head on up out of the cavern level to join his dorm mates for breakfast.

If Harry opened up Paper-and it had two numbers written on it, Harry would multiply those numbers together.

If their product equaled 181,429, Harry would write down those two numbers on Paper-and send Paper-back in time.

Otherwise Harry would add 2 to the number on the right and write down the new pair of numbers on Paper-. Unless that made the number on the right greater than 997, in which case Harry would add 2 to the number on the left and write down 101 on the right.

And if Paper-said 997×997, Harry would leave Paper-blank.

Which meant that the only possible *stable* time loop was the one in which Paper-contained the two prime factors of 181,429.

If this worked, Harry could use it to recover any sort of answer that was easy to check but hard to find. He wouldn't have *just* shown that P = NP once you had a Time-Turner, this trick was *more general* than that. Harry could use it to find the combinations on combination locks, or passwords of every sort. Maybe even find the entrance to Slytherin's Chamber of Secrets, if Harry could figure out some systematic way of describing all the locations in Hogwarts. It would be an awesome cheat even by Harry's standards of cheating.

Harry took Paper-in his trembling hand, and unfolded it.

Paper-said in slightly shaky handwriting:

DO NOT MESS WITH TIME

Harry wrote down "DO NOT MESS WITH TIME" on Paper-in slightly shaky handwriting, folded it neatly, and resolved not to do any more truly brilliant experiments on Time until he was at least fifteen years old.

To the best of Harry's knowledge, that had been the scariest experimental result in the entire history of science.

It had been somewhat difficult for Harry to focus on reading his textbook for the next hour.

That was how Harry's Thursday started.

⁂

Thursday.

If you wanted to be specific, 3:32PM on Thursday afternoon.

Harry and all the other boys in the first year were outside on a grassy field with Madam Hooch, standing next to the Hogwarts supply of broomsticks. The girls would be learning to fly separately. Apparently, for some reason, girls didn't want to learn how to fly on broomsticks in the presence of boys.

Harry had been a little wobbly all day long. He just couldn't seem to stop wondering how that *particular* stable time loop had been selected out of what was, in retrospect, a rather large space of possibilities.

Also: seriously, *broomsticks?* He was going to fly on, basically, a line segment? Wasn't that pretty much the single most unstable shape you could possibly find, short of attempting to hold on to a point marble? Who'd selected *that* design for a flying device, out of all the possibilities? Harry had been hoping that it was just a figure of speech, but no, they were standing in front of what looked for all the world like ordinary wooden kitchen broomsticks. Had someone just gotten stuck on the idea of broomsticks and failed to consider anything else? It had to be. There was no way that the *optimal* designs for cleaning kitchens and flying would happen to coincide if you worked them out from scratch.

It was a clear day with a bright blue sky and a brilliant sun that was just begging to get in your eyes and make it impossible to see, if you were trying to fly around the sky. The ground was nice and dry, smelling positively baked, and somehow felt very, very hard under Harry's shoes.

Harry kept reminding himself that the lowest common denominator of eleven-year-olds was expected to learn this and it couldn't be that hard.

"Stick out your right hand over the broom, or left hand if you're left-handed," called Madam Hooch. "And say, UP!"

"UP!" everyone shouted.

The broomstick leapt eagerly into Harry's hand.

Which put him at the head of the class, for once. Apparently saying "UP!" was a lot more difficult than it looked, and most of the broomsticks were rolling around on the ground or trying to inch away from their would-be riders.

(Of course Harry would have bet money that Hermione had done at least as well when it came her own turn to try, earlier in the day. There couldn't possibly be anything *he* could master on the first try which would baffle Hermione, and if there *was* and it turned out to be *broomstick riding* instead of anything intellectual, Harry would just die.)

It took a while for everyone to get a broomstick in front of them. Madam Hooch showed them how to mount and then walked around the field, correcting grips and stances. Apparently even among the few children who'd been allowed to fly at home, they hadn't been taught to do it correctly.

Madam Hooch surveyed the field of boys, and nodded. "Now, when I blow my whistle, you kick off from the ground, hard."

Harry swallowed hard, trying to quell the queasy feeling in his stomach.

"Keep your brooms steady, rise a few feet, and then come straight back down by leaning forward slightly. On my whistle—three—two—"

One of the brooms shot skyward, accompanied by a young boy's screams—of horror, not delight. The boy was spinning at an awful rate as he ascended, they only got glimpses of his white face—

As though in slow motion, Harry was leaping back off his own broomstick and scrabbling for his wand, though he didn't really know what he planned to do with it, he'd had exactly two sessions of Charms and the last one *had* been the Hover Charm but Harry had only been able to cast the spell successfully one time out of three and he certainly couldn't levitate whole people—

If there is any hidden power in me, let it reveal itself NOW!

"Come back, boy!" shouted Madam Hooch (which had to be the most unhelpful instruction imaginable for dealing with an out-of-control broomstick, from a *flying instructor*, and a fully automatic section of Harry's brain added Madam Hooch to his tally of fools).

And the boy was thrown off the broomstick.

He seemed to move very slowly through the air, at first.

"*Wingardium Leviosa!*" screamed Harry.

The spell failed. He could feel it fail.

There was a THUD and a distant cracking sound, and the boy lay face-down on the grass in a heap.

Harry sheathed his wand and raced forward at full speed. He arrived at the boy's side at the same time as Madam Hooch, and Harry reached into his pouch and tried to recall oh god what was the name never mind he'd just try "Healer's Pack!" and it popped up into his hand and—

"Broken wrist," Madam Hooch said. "Calm down, boy, he just has a broken wrist!"

There was a sort of mental lurch as Harry's mind snapped out of Panic Mode.

The Emergency Healing Pack Plus lay open in front of him, and there was a syringe of liquid fire in Harry's hand, which would have kept the boy's brain oxygenated if he'd managed to snap his neck.

"Ah..." Harry said in a rather wavering sort of voice. His heart was pounding so loudly that he almost couldn't hear himself panting for breath. "Broken bone... right... Setting String?"

"That's for emergencies only," snapped Madam Hooch. "Put it away, he's fine." She leaned over the boy, offering him a hand. "Come on, boy, it's all right, up you get!"

"You're not seriously going to make him ride the broomstick again?" Harry said in horror.

Madam Hooch sent Harry a glare. "Of course not!" She pulled the boy to his feet using his good arm—Harry saw with a shock that it was Neville Longbottom *again,* what was *with* him?—and she turned to all the watching children. "None of you is to move while I take this boy to the hospital wing! You leave those brooms where they are or you'll be out of Hogwarts before you can say 'Quidditch.' Come on, dear."

And Madam Hooch walked off with Neville, who was clutching his wrist and trying to control his sniffles.

When they were out of earshot, one of the Slytherins started giggling.

That set off the others.

Harry turned and looked at them. It seemed like a good time to memorize some faces.

And Harry saw that Draco was strolling toward him, accompanied by Mr. Crabbe and Mr. Goyle. Mr. Crabbe wasn't smiling. Mr. Goyle decidedly was. Draco himself was wearing a very controlled face that twitched occasionally, from which Harry inferred that Draco thought it was hilarious but saw no political advantage to be gained by laughing about it now instead of in the Slytherin dungeons afterward.

"Well, Potter," Draco said in a low voice that didn't carry, still with that very controlled face that was twitching occasionally, "Just wanted to say, when you take advantage of emergencies to demonstrate leadership, you want to look like you're in total control of the situation, rather than, say, going into a complete panic." Mr. Goyle giggled, and Draco shot him a quelling look. "But you probably scored a few points anyway. You need any help stowing that healer's kit?"

Harry turned to look at the Healing Pack, which got his own face turned away from Draco. "I think I'm fine," Harry said. He put the syringe back in its place, redid the latches, and stood up.

Ernie Macmillan arrived just as Harry was feeding the pack back into his mokeskin pouch.

"Thank you, Harry Potter, on behalf of Hufflepuff," Ernie Macmillan said formally. "It was a good try and a good thought."

"A good thought indeed," drawled Draco. "Why didn't anyone in Hufflepuff have their wands out? Maybe if you'd *all* helped instead of just Potter, you could've caught him. I thought Hufflepuffs were supposed to stick together?"

Ernie looked like he was torn between getting angry and wanting to die of shame. "We didn't think of it in time—"

"Ah," said Draco, "didn't *think* of it, I guess that's why it's better to have one Ravenclaw as a friend than all of Hufflepuff."

Oh, hell, how was Harry supposed to juggle this one... "You're not helping," Harry said in a mild tone. Hoping Draco would interpret that as *you're interfering with my plans, please shut up.*

"Hey, what's this?" said Mr. Goyle. He stooped to the grass and picked up something around the size of a large marble, a glass ball that

seemed to be filled with a swirling white mist.

Ernie blinked. "Neville's Remembrall!"

"What's a Remembrall?" asked Harry.

"It turns red if you've forgotten something," Ernie said. "It doesn't tell you what you forgot, though. Give it here, please, and I'll hand it back to Neville later." Ernie held out his hand.

A sudden grin flashed across Mr. Goyle's face and he spun around and raced away.

Ernie stood still for a moment in surprise, and then shouted "Hey!" and ran after Mr. Goyle.

And Mr. Goyle grabbed a broomstick, hopped on with one smooth motion and took to the air.

Harry's jaw dropped. Hadn't Madam Hooch said that would get him *expelled?*

"*That idiot!*" Draco hissed. He opened his mouth to shout—

"*Hey!*" shouted Ernie. "That's Neville's! *Give it back!*"

The Slytherins started cheering and hooting.

Draco's mouth snapped shut. Harry caught the sudden look of indecision on his face.

"Draco," Harry said in a low tone, "if you don't order that idiot back on the ground, the teacher's going to get back and—"

"*Come and get it, Hufflepuffle!*" shouted Mr. Goyle, and a great cheer went up from the Slytherins.

"I *can't!*" whispered Draco. "Everyone in Slytherin would think I'm *weak!*"

"And if Mr. Goyle gets expelled," hissed Harry, "your *father* is going to think you're a *moron!*"

Draco's face twisted in agony.

At that moment—

"Hey, *Slytherslime*," shouted Ernie, "didn't anyone ever tell you that Hufflepuffs stick together? *Wands out, Hufflepuff!*"

And there were suddenly a whole lot of wands pointed in Mr. Goyle's direction.

Three seconds later—

"*Wands out, Slytherin!*" said around five different Slytherins.

And there were a whole lot of wands pointed in Hufflepuff's direction.

Two seconds later—

"*Wands out, Gryffindor!*"

"*Do something, Potter!*" whispered Draco. "*I can't be the one to stop this it has to be you! I'll owe you a favor just think of something aren't you supposed to be brilliant?*"

In around five and a half seconds, realized Harry, someone was going to cast the Sumerian Simple Strike Hex and by the time it was over and the teachers were done expelling people the only boys left in his year would be Ravenclaws.

"*Wands out, Ravenclaw!*" shouted Michael Corner who was apparently feeling left out of the disaster.

"Gregory Goyle!" screamed Harry. *"I challenge you to a contest for possession of Neville's Remembrall!"*

There was a sudden pause.

"Oh, really?" said Draco in the loudest drawl Harry had ever heard. "That sounds interesting. What sort of contest, Potter?"

Er...

"Contest" had been as far as Harry's inspiration had gotten. What sort of contest, he couldn't say "chess" because Draco wouldn't be able to accept without it looking strange, he couldn't say "arm-wrestling" because Mr. Goyle would crush him—

"How about this?" Harry said loudly. "Gregory Goyle and I stand apart from each other, and no one else is allowed to come near either of us. We don't use our wands and neither does anyone else. I don't move from where I'm standing, and neither does he. And if I can get my hands on Neville's Remembrall, then Gregory Goyle relinquishes all claim to that Remembrall he's holding and gives it to me."

There was another pause as people's looks of relief transmuted to confusion.

"Hah, Potter!" said Draco loudly. "I'd like to see you do *that!* Mr. Goyle accepts!"

"It's on!" said Harry.

"Potter, *what?*" whispered Draco, which he somehow did without moving his lips.

Harry didn't know how to answer without moving his.

People were putting their wands away, and Mr. Goyle swooped gracefully to the ground, looking rather confused. Some Hufflepuffs started over toward Mr. Goyle, but Harry shot them a desperately pleading look and they backed off.

Harry moved forward toward Mr. Goyle and stopped when he was a few paces away, far enough apart that they couldn't reach each other.

Slowly, deliberately, Harry sheathed his wand.

Everyone else backed away.

Harry swallowed. He knew in broad outline what he *wanted* to do, but it had to be done in such a way that no one understood *what* he'd done—

"All right," Harry said loudly. "And now..." He took a deep breath and raised one hand, fingers ready to snap. There were gasps from anyone who'd heard about the pies, which was practically everyone. "*I call upon the insanity of Hogwarts! Happy happy boom boom swamp swamp swamp!*" And Harry snapped his fingers.

A lot of people flinched.

And nothing happened.

Harry let the silence stretch on for a while, developing, until...

"Um," someone said. "Is that it?"

Harry looked at the boy who'd spoken. "Look in front of you. You see that patch of ground that looks barren, without any grass on it?"

"Um, yeah," said the boy, a Gryffindor (Dean something?).

"Dig it up."

Now Harry was getting a lot of strange looks.

"Er, why?" said Dean something.

"Just do it," said Terry Boot in a weary voice. "No point asking why, trust me on this one."

Dean something kneeled down and began to scoop away dirt.

After a minute or so, Dean stood up again. "There's nothing there," Dean said.

Huh. Harry had been planning to go back in time and bury a treasure map that would lead to another treasure map that would lead to Neville's Remembrall which he would put there after getting it back from Mr. Goyle...

Then Harry realized there was a much simpler way which didn't threaten the secret of Time-Turners quite as much.

"Thanks, Dean!" Harry said loudly. "Ernie, would you look around on the ground where Neville fell and see if you can find Neville's Remembrall?"

People looked even more confused.

"Just do it," said Terry Boot. "He'll keep trying until something works, and the scary thing is that—"

"*Merlin!*" gasped Ernie. He was holding up Neville's Remembrall. "It's *here!* Right where he fell!"

"*What?*" cried Mr. Goyle. He looked down and saw...

...that he was still holding Neville's Remembrall.

There was a rather long pause.

"Er," said Dean something, "that's not possible, is it?"

"It's a plot hole," said Harry. "I made myself weird enough to distract the universe for a moment and it forgot that Goyle had already picked up the Remembrall."

"No, wait, I mean, that's *totally* not possible—"

"Excuse me, are we all standing around here waiting to go flying on broomsticks? Yes we are. So shut up. Anyway, once I get my hands on Neville's Remembrall, the contest is over and Gregory Goyle has to relinquish all claim to the Remembrall he's holding and give it to me. Those were the terms, remember?" Harry stretched out a hand and beckoned Ernie. "Just roll it over here, since no one's supposed to get close to me, okay?"

"Hold on!" shouted a Slytherin—Blaise Zabini, Harry wasn't likely to forget that name. "How do we know that's Neville's Remembrall? You could've just dropped *another* Remembrall there—"

"The Slytherin is strong with this one," Harry said, smiling. "But you have my word that the one Ernie's holding is Neville's. No comment about the one Gregory Goyle's holding."

Zabini spun to Draco. "*Malfoy!* You're not just going to let him get away with that—"

"Shut up, you," rumbled Mr. Crabbe, standing behind Draco. "Mister Malfoy doesn't need *you* to tell him what to do!"

Good minion.

"My bet was with Draco, of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Malfoy," Harry said. "Not with you, Zabini. I have done what Mr. Malfoy said he'd like to see me do, and as for the judgment of the bet, I leave that up to Mr. Malfoy." Harry inclined his head toward Draco and raised his eyebrows slightly. That ought to allow Draco to save enough face.

There was a pause.

"You promise that actually *is* Neville's Remembrall?" Draco said.

"Yes," Harry said. "That's the one that'll go back to Neville and it was his originally. And the one Gregory Goyle's holding goes to me."

Draco nodded, looking decisive. "I won't question the word of the Noble House of Potter, then, no matter how strange that all was. And the Noble and Most Ancient House of Malfoy keeps its word as well. Mr. Goyle, give that to Mr. Potter—"

"Hey!" Zabini said. "He hasn't won *yet*, he hasn't got his hands on—"

"Catch, Harry!" said Ernie, and he tossed the Remembrall.

Harry easily snapped the Remembrall out of the air, he'd always had good reflexes that way. "There," said Harry, "I win..."

Harry trailed off. All conversation stopped.

The Remembrall was glowing bright red in his hand, blazing like a miniature sun that cast shadows on the ground in broad daylight.

*

Thursday.

If you wanted to be specific, 5:09PM on Thursday afternoon, in Professor McGonagall's office, after flying classes. (With an extra hour for Harry slipped in between.)

Professor McGonagall sitting on her stool. Harry in the hot seat in front of her desk.

"Professor," Harry said tightly, "Slytherin was pointing their wands at Hufflepuff, Gryffindor was pointing their wands at Slytherin, some *idiot* called wands out in Ravenclaw, and I had maybe five seconds to keep the whole thing from blowing sky-high! It was all I could think of!"

Professor McGonagall's face was pinched and angry. "*You are not to use the Time-Turner in that fashion, Mr. Potter!* Is the concept of secrecy not something that you understand?"

"They don't *know* how I did it! They just think I can do really weird things by snapping my fingers! I've done other weird stuff that can't be done with Time-Turners even, and I'll do *more* stuff like that, and *this* case won't even stand out! I *had to do it,* Professor!"

"You did *not* have to do it!" snapped Professor McGonagall. "All you needed to do was get this *anonymous Slytherin* back on the ground and the wands put away! You could have challenged him to a game of Exploding Snap but no, you had to use the Time-Turner in a flagrant and unnecessary manner!"

"It was all I could think of! I don't even know what Exploding Snap *is,* they wouldn't have accepted a game of chess and if I'd picked arm-wresting I would have lost!"

"*Then you should have picked wrestling!*"

Harry blinked. "But then I'd have *lost*—"

Harry stopped.

Professor McGonagall was looking *very* angry.

"I'm sorry, Professor McGonagall," Harry said in a small voice. "I honestly didn't think of that, and you're right, I should have, it would have been brilliant if I had, but I just didn't think of that at all..."

Harry's voice trailed off. It was suddenly apparent to him that he'd had a *lot* of other options. He could have asked *Draco* to suggest something, he could have asked the crowd... his use of the Time-Turner *had* been flagrant and unnecessary. There had been a giant space of possibilities, why had he picked *that* one?

Because he'd seen a way to *win.* Win possession of an unimportant trinket that the teachers would've taken back from Mr. Goyle anyway.

Intent to win. That was what had gotten him.

"I'm sorry," Harry said again. "For my pride and my stupidity."

Professor McGonagall wiped a hand across her forehead. Some of her anger seemed to dissipate. But her voice still came out very hard. "One more display like that, Mr. Potter, and you will be returning that Time-Turner. Do I make myself very clear?"

"Yes," Harry said. "I understand and I'm sorry."

"Then, Mr. Potter, you will be allowed to retain the Time-Turner for now. And considering the size of the debacle you did, in fact, avert, I will not deduct any points from Ravenclaw."

Plus you couldn't explain why you'd deducted the points. But Harry wasn't dumb enough to say that out loud.

"More importantly, why did the Remembrall go off like that?" Harry said. "Does it mean I've been Obliviated?"

"That puzzles me as well," Professor McGonagall said slowly. "If it were that simple, I would think that the courts would use Remembralls, and they do not. I shall look into it, Mr. Potter." She sighed. "You can go now."

Harry started to get up from his chair, then halted. "Um, sorry, I did have something else I wanted to tell you—"

You could hardly see the flinch. "What is it, Mr. Potter?"

"It's about Professor Quirrell—"

"I'm sure, Mr. Potter, that it is nothing of importance." Professor McGonagall spoke the words in a great rush. "Surely you heard the Headmaster tell the students that you were not to bother us with any unimportant complaints about the Defense Professor?"

Harry was rather confused. "But this could *be* important, yesterday I got this sudden sense of doom when—"

"Mr. Potter! I have a sense of doom as well! And my sense of doom is suggesting that *you must not finish that sentence!*"

Harry's mouth gaped open. Professor McGonagall had succeeded; Harry was speechless.

"Mr. Potter," said Professor McGonagall, "if you have discovered anything that seems interesting about Professor Quirrell, please feel free not to share it with me or anyone else. Now I think you've taken up enough of my valuable time—"

"*This isn't like you!*" Harry burst out. "I'm sorry but that just seems *unbelievably* irresponsible! From what I've heard there's some kind of jinx on the Defense position, and if you already *know* something's going to go wrong, I'd think you'd all be on your toes—"

"Go *wrong*, Mr. Potter? *I certainly hope not.*" Professor McGonagall's face was expressionless. "After Professor Blake was caught in a closet with no fewer than three fifth-year Slytherins last February, and a year before that, Professor Summers failed so completely as an educator that her students thought a boggart was a kind of furniture, it would be *catastrophic* if some problem with the extraordinarily competent Professor Quirrell came to my attention now, and I daresay most of our students would fail their Defense O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s."

"I see," Harry said slowly, taking it all in. "So in other words, whatever's wrong with Professor Quirrell, you desperately don't want to know about it until the end of the school year. And since it's currently September, he could assassinate the Prime Minister on live television and get away with it so far as you're concerned."

Professor McGonagall gazed at him unblinkingly. "I am certain that I could never be heard endorsing such a statement, Mr. Potter. At Hogwarts we strive to be proactive with respect to *anything* that threatens the educational attainment of our students."

Such as first-year Ravenclaws who can't keep their mouths shut. "I believe I understand you completely, Professor McGonagall."

"Oh, I doubt that, Mr. Potter. I doubt that very much." Professor McGonagall leaned forward, her face tightening again. "Since you and I have already discussed matters far more sensitive than these, I shall speak frankly. You, and you alone, have reported this mysterious sense of doom. You, and you alone, are a chaos magnet the likes of which I have never seen. After our little shopping trip to Diagon Alley, and *then* the Sorting Hat, and then *today's* little episode, I can well foresee that I am fated to sit in the Headmaster's office and hear some hilarious tale about Professor Quirrell in which you and you alone play a starring role, after which there will be no choice but to fire him. I am already resigned to it, Mr. Potter. And if this sad event takes place any earlier than the Ides of May, I will string you up by the gates of Hogwarts with

your own intestines and pour fire beetles into your nose. *Now* do you understand me completely?"

Harry nodded, his eyes very wide. Then, after a second, "What do I get if I can make it happen on the last day of the school year?"

"*Get out of my office!*"

Thursday.

There must have been something about Thursdays in Hogwarts.

It was 5:32PM on Thursday afternoon, and Harry was standing next to Professor Flitwick, in front of the great stone gargoyle that guarded the entrance to the Headmaster's office.

No sooner had he made it back from Professor McGonagall's office to the Ravenclaw study rooms than one of the students told him to report to Professor Flitwick's office, and there Harry had learned that Dumbledore wanted to speak to him.

Harry, feeling rather apprehensive, had asked Professor Flitwick if the Headmaster had said what this was about.

Professor Flitwick had shrugged in a helpless sort of way.

Apparently Dumbledore had said that Harry was far too young to invoke the words of power and madness.

Happy happy boom boom swamp swamp swamp? Harry had thought but not said aloud.

"Please don't worry too much, Mr. Potter," squeaked Professor Flitwick from somewhere around Harry's shoulder level. (Harry was grateful for Professor Flitwick's gigantic puffy beard, it was hard getting used to a Professor who was not only shorter than him but spoke in a higher-pitched voice.) "Headmaster Dumbledore may seem a little odd, or a lot odd, or even extremely odd, but he has never hurt a student in the slightest, and I don't believe he ever will." Professor Flitwick gave Harry an encouraging smile. "Just keep that in mind at all times and you'll be sure not to panic!"

This was not helping.

"Good luck!" squeaked Professor Flitwick, and leaned over to the gargoyle and said something that Harry somehow failed to hear at all. (Of course, the password wouldn't be much good if you could hear someone saying it.) And the stone gargoyle walked aside with a very natural and ordinary movement that Harry found rather shocking, since the gargoyle still looked like solid, immovable stone the whole time.

Behind the gargoyle was a set of slowly revolving spiral stairs. There was something disturbingly hypnotic about it, and even more disturbing was that *revolving* the spiral ought not to take you anywhere.

"Up you go!" squeaked Flitwick.

Harry rather nervously stepped onto the spiral, and found himself, for some reason that his brain couldn't seem to visualize at all, moving upward.

The gargoyle thudded back into place behind him, and the spiral stairs kept turning and Harry kept being higher up, and after a rather dizzying time, Harry found himself in front of an oak door with a brass griffin knocker.

Harry reached out and turned the doorknob.

The door swung open.

And Harry saw the most interesting room he'd ever seen in his life.

There were tiny metal mechanisms that whirred or ticked or slowly changed shape or emitted little puffs of smoke. There were dozens of mysterious fluids in dozens of oddly shaped containers, all bubbling, boiling, oozing, changing color, or forming into interesting shapes that vanished half a second after you saw them. There were things that looked like clocks with many hands, inscribed with numbers or in unrecognizable languages. There was a bracelet bearing a lenticular crystal that sparkled with a thousand colors, and a bird perched atop a golden platform, and a wooden cup filled with what looked like blood, and a statue of a falcon encrusted in black enamel. The wall was all hung with pictures of people sleeping, and the Sorting Hat was casually poised on a hatrack that was also holding two umbrellas and three red slippers for left feet.

In the midst of all the chaos was a clean black oaken desk. Before the desk was an oaken stool. And behind the desk was a well-cushioned

throne containing Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, who was adorned with a long silver beard, a hat like a squashed giant mushroom, and what looked to Muggle eyes like three layers of bright pink pajamas.

Dumbledore was smiling, and his bright eyes twinkled with a mad intensity.

With some trepidation, Harry seated himself in front of the desk. The door swung shut behind him with a loud *thunk*.

"Hello, Harry," said Dumbledore.

"Hello, Headmaster," Harry replied. So they were on a first-name basis? Would Dumbledore now say to call him—

"Please, Harry!" said Dumbledore. "Headmaster sounds so formal. Just call me Heh for short."

"I'll be sure to, Heh," said Harry.

There was a slight pause.

"Do you know," said Dumbledore, "you're the first person who's ever taken me up on that?"

"Ah..." Harry said. He tried to control his voice despite the sudden sinking feeling in his stomach. "I'm sorry, I, ah, Headmaster, you told me to do it so I did—"

"Heh, please!" said Dumbledore cheerfully. "And there's no call to be so worried, I won't launch you out a window just because you make one mistake. I'll give you plenty of warnings first, if you're doing something wrong! Besides, what matters isn't how people talk to you, it's what they think of you."

He's never hurt a student, just keep remembering that and you'll be sure not to panic.

Dumbledore drew forth a small metal case and flipped it open, showing some small yellow lumps. "Lemon drop?" said the Headmaster.

"Er, no thank you, Heh," said Harry. *Does slipping a student LSD count as hurting them, or does that fall into the category of harmless fun?* "You, um, said something about my being too young to invoke the words of power and madness?"

"That you most certainly are!" Dumbledore said. "Thankfully the Words of Power and Madness were lost seven centuries ago and no one has the slightest idea what they are anymore. It was just a little remark."

"Ah..." Harry said. He was aware that his mouth was hanging open. "Why did you call me here, then?"

"*Why?*" Dumbledore repeated. "Ah, Harry, if I went around all day asking *why* I do things, I'd never have time to get a single thing done! I'm quite a busy person, you know."

Harry nodded, smiling. "Yes, it was a very impressive list. Headmaster of Hogwarts, Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, and Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards. Sorry to ask but I was wondering, is it possible to get more than six hours if you use more than one Time-Turner? Because it's pretty impressive if you're doing all that on just thirty hours a day."

There was another slight pause, during which Harry went on smiling. He was a little apprehensive, actually a lot apprehensive, but once it had become clear that Dumbledore was deliberately messing with him, something within him *absolutely refused* to sit and take it like a defenseless lump.

"I'm afraid Time doesn't like being stretched out too much," said Dumbledore after the slight pause, "and yet we ourselves seem to be a little too large for it, and so it's a constant struggle to fit our lives into Time."

"Indeed," Harry said with grave solemnity. "That's why it's best to come to our points quickly."

For a moment Harry wondered if he'd gone too far.

Then Dumbledore chuckled. "Straight to the point it shall be." The Headmaster leaned forward, tilting his squashed mushroom hat and brushing his beard against his desk. "Harry, this Monday you did something that should have been impossible even with a Time-Turner. Or rather, impossible with *only* a Time-Turner. Where did those two pies come from, I wonder?"

A jolt of adrenaline shot through Harry. He'd done that using the Cloak of Invisibility, the one that had been given him in a Christmas box along with a note, and that note had said: *If Dumbledore realized that you possessed one of the Deathly Hallows he would certainly never allow it out of his grasp...*

"A natural thought," Dumbledore went on, "is that since none of the first-years present were able to cast such a spell, someone else was present, and yet unseen. And if no one could see them, why, it would be easy enough for them to throw the pies. One might further suspect that since you had a Time-Turner, you were the invisible one; and that since the spell of Disillusionment is far beyond your current abilities, you had an invisibility cloak." Dumbledore smiled conspiratorily. "Am I on the right track so far, Harry?"

Harry was frozen. He had the feeling that an outright lie would not at all be wise, and possibly not the least bit helpful, and he couldn't think of anything else to say.

Dumbledore waved a friendly hand. "Don't worry, Harry, you haven't done anything wrong. Invisibility cloaks aren't against the rules—I suppose they're rare enough that no one ever got around to putting them on the list. But really I was wondering something else entirely."

"Oh?" Harry said in the most normal voice he could manage.

Dumbledore's eyes shone with enthusiasm. "You see, Harry, after you've been through a few adventures you tend to catch the hang of these things. You start to see the pattern, hear the rhythm of the world. You begin to harbor suspicions *before* the moment of revelation. You are the Boy-Who-Lived, and somehow an invisibility cloak made its way into your hands only four days after you discovered our magical Britain. Such cloaks are not for sale in Diagon Alley, but there is *one* which might find its own way to a destined wearer. And so I cannot help but wonder if by some strange chance you have found not just *an* invisibility cloak, but *the* Cloak of Invisibility, one of the three Deathly Hallows and reputed to hide the wearer from the gaze of Death himself." Dumbledore's gaze was bright and eager. "May I see it, Harry?"

Harry swallowed. There was a full flood of adrenaline in his system now and it was entirely useless, this was the most powerful wizard in the world and there was no way he could make it out the door and there was nowhere in Hogwarts for him to hide if he did, he was about to lose the Cloak that had been passed down through the Potters for who knew how long—

Slowly Dumbledore leaned back into his high chair. The bright light had gone out of his eyes, and he looked puzzled and a little sorrowful. "Harry," said Dumbledore, "if you don't want to, you can just say no."

"I can?" Harry croaked.

"Yes, Harry," said Dumbledore. His voice sounded sad now, and worried. "It seems that you're afraid of me, Harry. May I ask what I've done to earn your distrust?"

Harry swallowed. "Is there some way you can swear a binding magical oath that you won't take my cloak?"

Dumbledore shook his head slowly. "Unbreakable Vows are not to be used so lightly. And besides, Harry, if you did not already know the spell, you would have only my word that the spell was binding. Yet surely you realize that I do not *need* your permission to see the Cloak. I am powerful enough to draw it forth myself, mokeskin pouch or no." Dumbledore's face was very grave. "But this I will not do. The Cloak is yours, Harry. I will not seize it from you. Not even to look at for just a moment, unless you decide to show it to me. That is a promise and an oath. Should I need to prohibit you from using it on the school grounds, I will require you to go to your vault at Gringotts and store it there."

"Ah..." Harry said. He swallowed hard, trying to calm the flood of adrenaline and think reasonably. He took the mokeskin pouch off his belt. "If you really *don't* need my permission... then you have it." Harry held out the pouch to Dumbledore, and bit down hard on his lip, sending that signal to himself in case he was Obliviated afterward.

The old wizard reached into the pouch, and without saying any word of retrieval, drew forth the Cloak of Invisibility.

"Ah," breathed Dumbledore. "I was right..." He poured the shimmering black velvet mesh through his hand. "Centuries old, and still as perfect as the day it was made. We have lost much of our art over the years, and now I cannot make such a thing myself, no one can. I can feel the power of it like an echo in my mind, like a song forever being sung without anyone to hear it..." The wizard looked up from the Cloak. "Do not sell it," he said, "do not give it to anyone as a possession. Think twice before you show it to anyone, and ponder three times again before

you reveal it is a Deathly Hallow. Treat it with respect, for this is indeed a Thing of Power."

For a moment Dumbledore's face grew wistful...

...and then he handed the Cloak back to Harry.

Harry put it back in his pouch.

Dumbledore's face was grave once more. "May I ask again, Harry, how you came to distrust me so?"

Suddenly Harry felt rather ashamed.

"There was a note with the Cloak," Harry said in a small voice. "It said that you would try to take the Cloak from me, if you knew. I don't know who left the note, though, I really don't."

"I... see," Dumbledore said slowly. "Well, Harry, I won't impugn the motives of whoever left you that note. Who knows but that they themselves may have had the best of good intentions? They did give you the Cloak, after all."

Harry nodded, impressed by Dumbledore's charity, and abashed at the sharp contrast with his own attitude.

The old wizard went on. "But you and I are both gamepieces of the same color, I think. The boy who finally defeated Voldemort, and the old man who held him off long enough for you to save the day. I will not hold your caution against you, Harry, we must all do our best to be wise. I will only ask that you think twice and ponder three times again, the next time someone tells you to distrust me."

"I'm sorry," Harry said. He felt wretched at this point, he'd just told off Gandalf essentially, and Dumbledore's kindness was only making him feel worse. "I shouldn't have distrusted you."

"Alas, Harry, in this world..." The old wizard shook his head. "I cannot even say you were unwise. You did not know me. And in truth there are some at Hogwarts who you would do well not to trust. Perhaps even some you call friends."

Harry swallowed. That sounded rather ominous. "Like who?"

Dumbledore stood up from his chair, and began examining one of his instruments, a dial with eight hands of varying length.

After a few moments, the old wizard spoke again. "He probably seems to you quite charming," said Dumbledore. "Polite—to you at least.

Well-spoken, maybe even admiring. Always ready with a helping hand, a favor, a word of advice—"

"Oh, *Draco Malfoy!*" Harry said, feeling rather relieved that it wasn't Hermione or something. "Oh no, no no no, you've got it all wrong, he's not turning me, I'm turning him."

Dumbledore froze where he was peering at the dial. "You're *what?*"

"I'm going to turn Draco Malfoy from the Dark Side," Harry said. "You know, make him a good guy."

Dumbledore straightened and turned to Harry. He was wearing one of the most astonished expressions Harry had ever seen on anyone, let alone someone with a long silver beard. "Are you certain," said the old wizard after a moment, "that whatever goodness you think you see in him is not just wishful thinking, Harry? I fear that what you see is only the lure, the bait—"

"Er, not likely," Harry said. "I mean if he's trying to disguise himself as a good guy he's incredibly bad at it. This isn't a question of Draco coming up to me and being all charming and me deciding that he must have a hidden core of goodness deep down. I'm targeting him for redemption specifically because he's the heir to House Malfoy and if you had to pick one person to redeem, it would obviously be him."

Dumbledore's left eye twitched. "You're trying to plant the seeds of love and kindness in Draco's heart because you expect the heir of Malfoy to prove valuable to you?"

"Not just to *me!*" Harry said indignantly. "To all of magical Britain, if this works out! *And* he'll have a happier and mentally healthier life himself! Look, I don't have enough time to turn *everyone* away from the Dark Side and I've got to ask where the Light can gain the most advantage the fastest—"

Dumbledore started laughing. Laughing a lot harder than Harry would expect, almost howling. It seemed positively *undignified.* An ancient and powerful wizard ought to chuckle in deep booming tones, not laugh so hard he was gasping for breath. Harry had once literally fallen out of his chair while watching the Marx Brothers movie *Duck Soup,* and that was how hard Dumbledore was laughing now.

"It's not *that* funny," Harry said after a while. He was starting to worry about Dumbledore's sanity again.

Dumbledore got himself under control again with a visible effort. "Ah, Harry, one symptom of the disease called wisdom is that you begin laughing at things that no one else thinks is funny, because when you're wise, Harry, you start getting the jokes!" The old wizard wiped tears away from his eyes. "Ah, me. Ah, me. Oft evil will shall evil mar indeed, in very deed."

Harry's brain took a moment to place the familiar words... "Hey, that's a *Tolkien* quote! *Gandalf* says that!"

"Theoden, actually," said Dumbledore.

"You're *Muggleborn?*" Harry said in shock.

"I'm afraid not," said Dumbledore, smiling again. "I was born seventy years before that book was published, dear child. But it seems that my Muggleborn students tend to think alike in certain ways. I have accumulated no fewer than twenty copies of *The Lord of the Rings* and three sets of Tolkien's entire collected works, and I treasure every one of them." Dumbledore drew his wand and held it up and struck a pose. "*You cannot pass!* How does that look?"

"Ah," Harry said in something approaching complete brain shutdown, "I think you're missing a Balrog." And the pink pajamas and squashed mushroom hat were not helping in the slightest.

"I see." Dumbledore sighed and glumly sheathed the wand in his belt. "I fear there have been precious few Balrogs in my life of late. Nowadays it's all meetings of the Wizengamot where I must try desperately to prevent any work from getting done, and formal dinners where foreign politicians compete to see who can be the most obstinate fool. And being mysterious at people, knowing things I have no way of knowing, making cryptic statements which can only be understood in hindsight, and all the other small ways in which powerful wizards amuse themselves after they have left the part of the pattern that allows them to be heroes. Speaking of which, Harry, I have a certain something to give you, something which belonged to your father."

"You do?" said Harry. "Gosh, who would have figured."

"Yes indeed," said Dumbledore. "I suppose it is a little predictable, isn't it?" His face turned solemn. "Nonetheless..."

Dumbledore went back to his desk and sat down, pulling out one of the drawers as he did so. He reached in using both arms, and, straining slightly, pulled a rather large and heavy-looking object out of the drawer, which he then deposited on his oaken desk with a huge thunk.

"This," Dumbledore said, "was your father's rock."

Harry stared at it. It was light gray, discolored, irregularly shaped, sharp-edged, and very much a plain old ordinary large rock. Dumbledore had deposited it so that it rested on the widest available cross-section, but it still wobbled unstably on his desk.

Harry looked up. "This is a joke, right?"

"It is not," said Dumbledore, shaking his head and looking very serious. "I took this from the ruins of James and Lily's home in Godric's Hollow, where also I found you; and I have kept it from then until now, against the day when I could give it to you."

In the mixture of hypotheses that served as Harry's model of the world, Dumbledore's insanity was rapidly rising in probability. But there *was* still a substantial amount of probability allocated to other alternatives... "Um, is it a *magical* rock?"

"Not so far as I know," said Dumbledore. "But I advise you with the greatest possible stringency to keep it close about your person at all times."

All right. Dumbledore was *probably* insane but if he *wasn't*... well, it would be just too *embarrassing* to get in trouble from ignoring the advice of the inscrutable old wizard. That had to be like #4 on the list of the Top 100 Obvious Failure Modes.

Harry stepped forward and put his hands on the rock, trying to find some angle from which to lift it without cutting himself. "I'll put it in my pouch, then."

Dumbledore frowned. "That may not be close enough to your person. And what if your mokeskin pouch is lost, or stolen?"

"You think I should just carry a big rock everywhere I go?"

Dumbledore gave Harry a serious look. "That might prove wise."

"Ah..." Harry said. It looked rather heavy. "I'd think the other students would tend to ask me questions about that."

"Tell them I ordered you to do it," said Dumbledore. "No one will question that, since they all think I'm insane." His face was still perfectly serious.

"Er, to be honest if you go around ordering your students to carry large rocks I can kind of see why people would think that."

"Ah, Harry," said Dumbledore. The old wizard gestured, a sweep of one hand that seemed to take in all the mysterious instruments around the room. "When we are young we believe that we know everything, and so we believe that if we see no explanation for something, then no explanation exists. When we are older we realize that the whole universe works by a rhythm and a reason, even if we ourselves do not know it. It is only our own ignorance which appears to us as insanity."

"Reality is always lawful," said Harry, "even if we don't know the law."

"Precisely, Harry," said Dumbledore. "To understand this—and I see that you *do* understand it—is the essence of wisdom."

"So... *why* do I have to carry this rock exactly?"

"I can't think of a reason, actually," said Dumbledore.

"...you can't."

Dumbledore nodded. "But just because I can't think of a reason doesn't mean there *is* no reason."

The instruments ticked on.

"Okay," said Harry, "I'm not even sure if I should be saying this, but that is simply not the correct way to deal with our admitted ignorance of how the universe works."

"It isn't?" said the old wizard, looking surprised and disappointed.

Harry had the feeling this conversation was not going to work out in his favor, but he carried on regardless. "No. I don't even know if that fallacy has an official name, but if I had to make one up myself, it would be 'privileging the hypothesis' or something like that. How can I put this formally... um... suppose you had a million boxes, and only one of the boxes contained a diamond. And you had a box full of diamond-detectors, and each diamond-detector always went off in the presence

of a diamond, and went off half the time on boxes that didn't have a diamond. If you ran twenty detectors over all the boxes, you'd have, on average, one false candidate and one true candidate left. And then it would just take one or two more detectors before you were left with the one true candidate. The point being that when there are lots of possible answers, *most* of the evidence you need goes into just *locating* the true hypothesis out of millions of possibilities—bringing it to your attention in the first place. The amount of evidence you need to judge between two or three plausible candidates is much smaller by comparison. So if you just jump ahead without evidence and promote one particular possibility to the focus of your attention, you're skipping over most of the work. Like, you live in a city where there are a million people, and there's a murder, and a detective says, well, we've got no evidence at all, so have we considered the possibility that Mortimer Snodgrass did it?"

"Did he?" said Dumbledore.

"No," said Harry. "But later it turns out that the murderer had black hair, and Mortimer has black hair, so everyone's like, ah, looks like Mortimer did it after all. So it's unfair to Mortimer for the police to *promote him to their attention* without having good reasons already in hand to suspect him. When there are lots of possibilities, most of the work goes into just *locating* the true answer—starting to pay attention to it. You don't need *proof*, or the sort of official evidence that scientists or courts demand, but you need some sort of *hint*, and that hint has to discriminate that particular possibility from the millions of others. Otherwise you can't just pluck the right answer out of thin air. You can't even pluck a possibility worth thinking about out of thin air. And there's got to be a million other things I could do besides carrying around my father's rock. Just because I'm ignorant about the universe doesn't mean that I'm unsure about how I should reason in the presence of my uncertainty. The laws for thinking with probabilities are no less iron than the laws that govern old-fashioned logic, and what you just did is *not allowed.*" Harry paused. "*Unless*, of course, you have some *hint* you're not mentioning."

"Ah," said Dumbledore. He tapped his cheek, looking thoughtful. "An interesting argument, certainly, but doesn't it break down at the

point where you make an analogy between a million potential murderers only one of whom committed the murder, and taking one out of many possible courses of action, when many possible courses of action may all be wise? I do not say that carrying your father's rock is the one best possible course of action, only that it is wiser to do than not."

Dumbledore once again reached into the same desk drawer he had accessed earlier, this time seeming to root around inside—at least his arm seemed to be moving. "I will remark," Dumbledore said while Harry was still trying to sort out how to reply to this completely unexpected rejoinder, "that it is a common misconception of Ravenclaws that all the smart children are Sorted there, leaving none for other Houses. This is not so; being Sorted to Ravenclaw indicates that you are driven by your desire to know things, which is not at all the same quality as being intelligent." The wizard was smiling as he bent over the drawer. "Nonetheless, you *do* seem rather intelligent. Less like an ordinary young hero and more like a young mysterious ancient wizard. I think I may have been taking the wrong approach with you, Harry, and that you may be able to understand things that few others could grasp. So I shall be daring, and offer you a certain *other* heirloom."

"You don't mean..." gasped Harry. "My father... *owned another rock?*"

"Excuse me," said Dumbledore, "I *am* still older and more mysterious than you and if there are any revelations to be made then *I* will do the revealing, thank you... oh, where *is* that thing!" Dumbledore reached down further into the desk drawer, and still further. His head and shoulders and whole torso disappeared inside until only his hips and legs were sticking out, as though the desk drawer was eating him.

Harry couldn't help but wonder just how much stuff was in there and what the complete inventory would look like.

Finally Dumbledore rose back up out of the drawer, holding the objective of his search, which he set down on the desk alongside the rock.

It was a used, ragged-edged, worn-spined textbook: *Intermediate Potion Making* by Libatius Borage. There was a picture of a smoking vial on the cover.

"This," Dumbledore intoned, "was your mother's fifth-year Potions textbook."

"Which I am to carry with me at all times," said Harry.

"*Which holds a terrible secret*. A secret whose revelation could prove so disastrous that I must ask you to swear—and I do require you to swear it seriously, Harry, whatever you may think of all this—never to tell anyone or anything else."

Harry considered his mother's fifth-year Potions textbook, which, apparently, held a terrible secret.

The problem was that Harry *did* take that oaths like that very seriously. Any vow was an Unbreakable Vow if made by the right sort of person.

And...

"I'm feeling thirsty," Harry said, "and that is not at all a good sign."

Dumbledore entirely failed to ask any questions about this cryptic statement. "*Do* you swear, Harry?" said Dumbledore. His eyes gazed intently into Harry's. "Otherwise I cannot tell you."

"Yes," said Harry. "I swear." That was the trouble with being a Ravenclaw. You couldn't refuse an offer like that or your curiosity would eat you alive, and everyone else knew it.

"And I swear in turn," said Dumbledore, "that what I am about to tell you is the truth."

Dumbledore opened the book, seemingly at random, and Harry leaned in to see.

"Do you see these notes," Dumbledore said in a voice so low it was almost a whisper, "written in the margins of the book?"

Harry squinted slightly. The yellowing pages seemed to be describing something called a *potion of eagle's splendor,* many of the ingredients being items that Harry didn't recognize at all and whose names didn't appear to derive from English. Scrawled in the margin was a handwritten annotation saying, *I wonder what would happen if you used thestral blood here instead of blueberries?* and immediately beneath was a reply in different handwriting, *You'd get sick for weeks and maybe die.*

"I see them," said Harry. "What about them?"

Dumbledore pointed to the second scrawl. "The ones in this handwriting," he said, still in that low voice, "were written by your mother. And the ones in *this* handwriting," moving his finger to indicate the first scrawl, "were written by me. I would turn myself invisible and sneak into her dorm room while she was sleeping. Lily thought one of her friends was the one writing them and they had the most amazing fights."

That was the exact point at which Harry realized that the Headmaster of Hogwarts *was,* in fact, crazy.

Dumbledore was looking at him with a serious expression. "Do you understand the implications of what I have just told you, Harry?"

"Ehhh..." Harry said. His voice seemed to be stuck. "Sorry... I... not really..."

"Ah well," said Dumbledore, and sighed. "I suppose your intelligence has limits after all, then. It seems I was greatly premature in my enthusiasm. Shall we all just pretend I didn't say anything incriminating?"

Harry rose from his chair, wearing a fixed smile. "Of course," Harry said. "You know it's actually getting rather late in the day and I'm a bit hungry, so I should be going down to dinner, really" and Harry made a beeline for the door.

The doorknob entirely failed to turn.

"You wound me, Harry," said Dumbledore's voice in quiet tones that were coming from right behind him. "Do you not at least realize that what I have told you is a sign of trust?"

Harry slowly turned around.

In front of him was a very powerful and very insane wizard with a long silver beard, a hat like a squashed giant mushroom, and wearing what looked to Muggle eyes like three layers of bright pink pajamas.

Behind him was a door that didn't seem to be working at the moment.

Dumbledore was looking rather saddened and weary, like he wanted to lean on a wizard's staff he didn't have. "Really," said Dumbledore, "you try anything new instead of following the same pattern every time for a hundred and ten years, and people all start running away." The old wizard shook his head in sorrow. "I'd hoped for better from you, Harry

Potter. I'd heard that your own friends also think you mad. I know they are mistaken. Will you not believe the same of me?"

"Please open the door," Harry said, his voice trembling. "If you ever want me to trust you again, open the door."

There was the sound behind him of a door opening.

"There were more things I planned to say to you," Dumbledore said, "and if you leave now, you will not know what they were."

Sometimes Harry absolutely *hated* being a Ravenclaw.

He's never hurt a student, said Harry's Gryffindor side. *Just keep remembering that and you'll be sure not to panic. You're not going to run away just because things are getting interesting, are you?*

You can't just walk out on the Headmaster! said the Hufflepuff part. *What if he starts deducting House points? He could make your school life very difficult if he decides he doesn't like you!*

And a piece of himself which Harry didn't much like but couldn't quite manage to silence was pondering the potential advantages of being one of the few friends of this mad old wizard who also happened to be Headmaster, Chief Warlock, and Supreme Mugwump. And unfortunately his inner Slytherin seemed to be much better than Draco at turning people to the Dark Side, because it was saying things like *poor fellow, he looks like he needs someone to talk to, doesn't he?* and *you wouldn't want such a powerful man to end up trusting someone less virtuous, would you?* and *I wonder what sort of incredible secrets Dumbledore could tell you if, you know, you became friends with him* and even *I bet he's got a reaallly interesting book collection.*

You're all a bunch of lunatics, Harry thought at the entire assemblage, but he'd been unanimously outvoted by every component part of himself.

Harry turned, took a step toward the open door, reached out, and deliberately closed it again. It was a costless sacrifice given that he was staying anyway, Dumbledore could control his movements regardless, but maybe it would impress Dumbledore.

When Harry turned back around he saw that the powerful insane wizard was once more smiling and looking friendly. That was good, maybe.

"Please don't do that again," Harry said. "I don't like being trapped."

"I *am* sorry about that, Harry," said Dumbledore in what sounded like tones of sincere apology. "But it would have been terribly unwise to let you leave without your father's rock."

"Of course," Harry said. "It wasn't reasonable of me to expect the door to open before I put the quest items in my inventory."

Dumbledore smiled and nodded.

Harry went over to the desk, twisted his mokeskin pouch around to the front of his belt, and, with some effort, managed to heave up the rock in his eleven-year-old arms and feed it in.

He could actually feel the weight slowly diminishing as the Widening Lip charm ate the rock, and the burp which followed was rather noisy and had a distinctly complaining sound to it.

His mother's fifth-year Potions textbook (which held a secret that was in fact pretty terrible) followed shortly after.

And then Harry's inner Slytherin made a sly suggestion for ingratiating himself with the Headmaster, which, unfortunately, had been perfectly pitched in such a way as to gain the support of the majority Ravenclaw faction.

"So," Harry said. "Um. As long as I'm hanging around, I don't suppose you would like to give me a bit of a tour of your office? I'm a bit curious as to what some of these things are," and that was his understatement for the month of September.

Dumbledore gazed at him, and then nodded with a slight grin. "I'm flattered by your interest," said Dumbledore, "but I'm afraid there isn't much to say." Dumbledore took a step closer to the wall and pointed to a painting of a sleeping man. "These are portraits of past Headmasters of Hogwarts." He turned and pointed to his desk. "This is my desk." He pointed to his chair. "This is my chair—"

"Excuse me," Harry said, "actually I was wondering about those." Harry pointed to a small cube that was softly whispering "blorple... blorple... blorple".

"Oh, the little fiddly things?" said Dumbledore. "They came with the Headmaster's office and I have absolutely no idea what most of them do. Although *this* dial with the eight hands counts the number of, let's

call them sneezes, by left-handed witches within the borders of France, you would not believe how much work it took to nail that down. And *this* one with the golden wibblers is my own invention and Minerva is never, ever going to figure out what it's doing."

Dumbledore took a step over to the hatrack while Harry was still processing this. "Here of course we have the Sorting Hat, I believe the two of you have met. It told me that it was never again to be placed on your head under any circumstances. You're only the fourteenth student in history it's said that about, Baba Yaga was another one and I'll tell you about the other twelve when you're older. This is an umbrella. This is another umbrella." Dumbledore took another few steps and turned around, now smiling quite broadly. "And of course, most people who come to my office want to see Fawkes."

Dumbledore was standing next to the bird on the golden platform.

Harry came over, rather puzzled. "This is Fawkes?"

"Fawkes is a phoenix," said Dumbledore. "Very rare, very powerful magical creatures."

"Ah..." Harry said. He lowered his head and stared into the tiny, beady black eyes, which showed not the slightest sign of power or intelligence.

"Ahhh..." Harry said again.

He was pretty sure he recognized the shape of the bird. It was pretty hard to miss.

"Umm..."

Say something intelligent! Harry's mind roared at itself. *Don't just stand there sounding like a gibbering moron!*

Well what the heck am I supposed *to say?* Harry's mind fired back.

Anything!

You mean, anything besides "Fawkes is a chicken"—

Yes! Anything but that!

"So, ah, what sort of magic do phoenixes do, then?"

"Their tears have the power to heal," Dumbledore said. "They are creatures of fire, and move between all places as easily as fire may extinguish itself in one place and be kindled in another. The tremendous strain of their innate magic ages their bodies quickly, and yet they are

as close to undying as any creature that exists in this world, for whenever their bodies fail them they immolate themselves in a burst of fire and leave behind a hatchling, or sometimes an egg." Dumbledore came closer and inspected the chicken, frowning. "Hm... looking a little peaky there, I'd say."

By the time this statement registered fully in Harry's mind, the chicken was already on fire.

The chicken's beak opened, but it didn't have time for so much as a single caw before it began to wither and char. The blaze was brief, intense, and entirely self-contained; there was no smell of burning.

And then the fire died down only seconds after it had begun, leaving behind a tiny, pathetic heap of ashes on the golden platform.

"Don't look so horrified, Harry!" said Dumbledore. "Fawkes hasn't been hurt." Dumbledore's hand dipped into a pocket, and then the same hand sifted through the ashes and turned up a small yellowish egg. "Look, here's an egg!"

"Oh... wow... amazing..."

"But now we really should get on with things," Dumbledore said. Leaving the egg behind in the ashes of the chicken, he returned to his throne and seated himself. "It's almost time for dinner, after all, and we wouldn't want to have to use our Time-Turners."

There was a violent power struggle going on in Harry's government. Slytherin and Hufflepuff had switched sides after seeing the Headmaster of Hogwarts set fire to a chicken.

"Yes, things," said Harry's lips. "And then dinner."

You're sounding like a gibbering moron again observed Harry's Internal Critic.

"Well," Dumbledore said. "I fear I have a confession to make, Harry. A confession and an apology."

"Apologies are good" *that doesn't even make sense! What am I talking about?*

The old wizard sighed deeply. "You may not still think so after understanding what I have to say. I'm afraid, Harry, that I've been manipulating you your entire life. It was I who consigned you to the care of your wicked stepparents—"

"My stepparents aren't wicked!" blurted Harry. "My *parents,* I mean!"

"They aren't?" Dumbledore said, looking surprised and disappointed. "Not even a little wicked? That doesn't fit the pattern..."

Harry's inner Slytherin screamed at the top of its mental lungs, SHUT UP YOU IDIOT HE'LL TAKE YOU AWAY FROM THEM!

"No, no," said Harry, lips frozen in a ghastly grimace, "I was just trying to spare your feelings, they're actually very wicked..."

"They are?" Dumbledore leaned forward, gazing at him intently. "What do they do?"

Talk fast "they, ah, I have to do dishes and wash math problems and they don't let me read a lot of books and—"

"Ah, good, that's good to hear," said Dumbledore, leaning back again. He smiled in a sad sort of way. "I apologize for *that*, then. Now where was I? Ah, yes. I'm sorry to say, Harry, that I am responsible for virtually everything bad that has ever happened to you. I know that this will probably make you very angry."

"Yes, I'm very angry!" said Harry. "Grrr!"

Harry's Internal Critic promptly awarded him the All-Time Award for the Worst Acting in the History of Ever.

"And I just wanted you to know," Dumbledore said, "I wanted to tell you as early as possible, in case something happens to one of us later, that I am truly, truly sorry. For everything that has already happened, and everything that will."

Moisture glistened in the old wizard's eyes.

"And I'm very angry!" said Harry. "So angry that I want to leave right now unless you've got anything else to say!"

Just go before he sets you on fire! shrieked Slytherin, Hufflepuff, and Gryffindor.

"I understand," said Dumbledore. "One last thing then, Harry. You are *not* to attempt the forbidden door on the third-floor corridor. There's no possible way you could get through all the traps, and I wouldn't want to hear that you'd been hurt trying. Why, I doubt that you could so much as open the first door, since it's locked and you don't know the spell *Alohomora*—"

Harry spun around and bolted for the exit at top speed, the doorknob turned agreeably in his hand and then he was racing down the spiral stairs even as they turned, his feet almost stumbling over themselves, in just a moment he was at the bottom and the gargoyle was walking aside and Harry fired out of the stairwell like a cannonball.

Harry Potter.

There must have been something about Harry Potter.

It was Thursday for everyone, after all, and yet this sort of thing didn't seem to happen to anyone else.

It was 6:21 PM on Thursday afternoon when Harry Potter, firing out of the stairwell like a cannonball and accelerating at top speed, ran directly into Minerva McGonagall as she was turning a corner on her way to the Headmaster's office.

Thankfully neither of them were much hurt. As had been explained to Harry a little earlier in the day—back when he was refusing to go anywhere near a broomstick again—Quidditch needed solid iron Bludgers just to stand a decent chance of injuring the players, since wizards tended to be a lot more resistant than Muggles to physical damage.

Harry and Professor McGonagall did both end up on the floor, and the parchments she had been carrying went all over the corridor.

There was a terrible, terrible pause.

"Harry Potter," breathed Professor McGonagall from where she was lying on the floor right next to Harry. Her voice rose to nearly a shriek. "*What were you doing in the Headmaster's office?*"

"Nothing!" squeaked Harry.

"*Were you talking about Professor Quirrell?*"

"No! Dumbledore called me up there and he gave me this big rock and said it was my father's and I should carry it everywhere!"

There was another terrible pause.

"I see," said Professor McGonagall, her voice a little calmer. She stood up, brushed herself off, and glared at the scattered parchments,

which jumped into a neat stack and scurried back against the corridor wall as though to hide from her gaze. "My sympathies, Mr. Potter, and I apologize for doubting you."

"Professor McGonagall," Harry said. His voice was wavering. He pushed himself off the floor, stood, and looked up at her trustworthy, *sane* face. "Professor McGonagall..."

"Yes, Mr. Potter?"

"Do you think I should?" Harry said in a small voice. "Carry my father's rock everywhere?"

Professor McGonagall sighed. "That is between you and the Headmaster, I'm afraid." She hesitated. "I will say that ignoring the Headmaster completely is almost never wise. I *am* sorry to hear of your dilemma, Mr. Potter, and if there's any way I *can* help you with whatever you decide to do—"

"Um," Harry said. "Actually I was thinking that once I know how, I could Transfigure the rock into a ring and wear it on my finger. If you could teach me how to sustain a Transfiguration—"

"It is good that you asked me first," Professor McGonagall said, her face growing a bit stern. "If you lost control of the Transfiguration the reversal would cut off your finger and probably rip your hand in half. And at your age, even a ring is too large a target for you to sustain indefinitely without it being a serious drain on your magic. But I can have a ring forged for you with a setting for a jewel, a *small* jewel, in contact with your skin, and you can practice sustaining a safe subject, like a marshmallow. When you have kept it up successfully, even in your sleep, for a full month, I will allow you to Transfigure, ah, your father's rock..." Professor McGonagall's voice trailed off. "Did the Headmaster *really*—"

"Yes. Ah... um..."

Professor McGonagall sighed. "That's a bit strange even for him." She stooped and picked up the stack of parchments. "I'm sorry about this, Mr. Potter. I apologize again for mistrusting you. But now it's my own turn to see the Headmaster."

"Ah... good luck, I guess. Er..."

"Thank you, Mr. Potter."

"Um..."

Professor McGonagall walked over to the gargoyle, inaudibly spoke the password, and stepped through into the revolving spiral stairs. She began to rise out of sight, and the gargoyle started back—

"*Professor McGonagall the Headmaster set fire to a chicken!*"

"He *wha*—"

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

DOMINANCE HIERARCHIES

"That does sound like the sort of thing I would do, doesn't it?"

⁂

It was breakfast time on Friday morning. Harry took another huge bite out of his toast and then tried to remind his brain that scarfing his breakfast wouldn't actually get him into the dungeons any faster. Anyway they had a full hour of study time between breakfast and the start of Potions.

But dungeons! In Hogwarts! Harry's imagination was already sketching the chasms, narrow bridges, torchlit sconces, and patches of glowing moss. Would there be rats? Would there be *dragons?*

"Harry Potter," said a quiet voice from behind him.

Harry looked over his shoulder and found himself beholding Ernie Macmillan, smartly dressed in yellow-trimmed robes and looking a little worried.

"Neville thought I should warn you," Ernie said in a low voice. "I think he's right. Be careful of the Potions Master in our session today. The older Hufflepuffs told us that Professor Snape can be really nasty to people he doesn't like, and he doesn't like most people who aren't Slytherins. If you say anything smart to him it... it could be really bad for you, from what I've heard. Just keep your head down and don't give him any reason to notice you."

There was a pause as Harry processed this, and then he lifted his eyebrows. (Harry wished he could raise just one eyebrow, like Spock, but he'd never been able to manage.) "Thanks," Harry said. "You might've just saved me a lot of trouble."

Ernie nodded, and turned to go back to the Hufflepuff table.

Harry resumed eating his toast.

It was around four bites afterward that someone said "Pardon me," and Harry turned around to see an older Ravenclaw, looking a little worried—

Some time later, Harry was finishing up his third plate of rashers. (He'd learned to eat heavily at breakfast. He could always eat lightly at lunch if he didn't end up using the Time-Turner.) And there was yet another voice from behind him saying "Harry?"

"Yes," Harry said wearily, "I'll try not to draw Professor Snape's attention—"

"Oh, that's hopeless," said Fred.

"Completely hopeless," said George.

"So we had the house elves bake you a cake," said Fred.

"We're going to put one candle on it for every point you lose for Ravenclaw," said George.

"And have a party for you at the Gryffindor table during lunch," said Fred.

"We hope that'll cheer you up afterward," finished George.

Harry swallowed his last bite of rasher and turned around. "All right," said Harry. "I wasn't going to ask this after Professor Binns, I really wasn't, but if Professor Snape is *that* awful why hasn't he been fired?"

"Fired?" said Fred.

"You mean, let go?" said George.

"Yes," Harry said. "It's what you do to bad teachers. You fire them. Then you hire a better teacher instead. You don't have unions or tenure here, right?"

Fred and George were frowning in much the same way that hunter-gatherer tribal elders might frown if you tried to tell them about calculus.

"I don't know," said Fred after a while. "I never thought about that."

"Me neither," said George.

"Yeah," said Harry, "I get that a lot. See you at lunch, guys, and don't blame me if there aren't any candles on that cake."

Fred and George both laughed, as if Harry had said something funny, and bowed to him and headed back toward Gryffindor.

Harry turned back to the breakfast table and grabbed a cupcake. His stomach already felt full, but he had a feeling this morning might use a lot of calories.

As he ate his cupcake, Harry thought of the worst teacher he'd met so far, Professor Binns of History. Professor Binns was a ghost. From what Hermione had said about ghosts, it didn't seem likely that they were fully self-aware. There were no famous discoveries made by ghosts, or much of any original work, no matter who they'd been in life. Ghosts tended to have trouble remembering the current century. Hermione had said they were like accidental portraits, impressed into the surrounding matter by a burst of psychic energy accompanying a wizard's sudden death.

Harry had run into some stupid teachers during his abortive forays into standard Muggle education—his father had been a lot pickier when it came to selecting grad students as tutors, of course—but History class was the first time he'd encountered a teacher who literally wasn't sentient.

And it showed, too. Harry had given up after five minutes and started reading a textbook. When it became clear that "Professor Binns" wasn't going to object, Harry had also reached into his pouch and gotten earplugs.

Did ghosts not require a salary? Was that it? Or was it literally impossible to fire anyone in Hogwarts *even if they died?*

Now it seemed that Professor Snape was going about being absolutely awful to everyone who wasn't a Slytherin and it hadn't even *occurred* to anyone to terminate his contract.

And the Headmaster had set fire to a chicken.

"Excuse me," came a worried voice from behind him.

"I swear," Harry said without turning around, "this place is almost eight and a half percent as bad as what Dad says about Oxford."

Harry stamped down the stone corridors, looking affronted, annoyed, and infuriated all at once.

"Dungeons!" Harry hissed. "*Dungeons!* These are not dungeons! This is a basement! A *basement!*"

Some of the Ravenclaw girls gave him odd looks. The boys were all used to him by now.

It seemed that the level in which the Potions classroom was located was called the "dungeons" for no better reason than that it was below ground and slightly colder than the main castle.

In *Hogwarts!* In *Hogwarts!* Harry had been waiting his whole life and now he was *still* waiting and if there was anywhere *on the face of the Earth* that had decent dungeons it ought to be Hogwarts! Was Harry going to have to build his own castle if he wanted to see one little bottomless abyss?

A short time later they got to the actual Potions classroom and Harry cheered up considerably.

The Potions classroom had strange preserved creatures floating in huge jars on shelves that covered every centimeter of wall space between the closets. Harry had gotten far enough along in his reading now that he could actually identify some of the creatures, like the Zabriskan Fontema. Albeit the fifty-centimeter spider *looked* like an Acromantula but it was too small to *be* one. He'd tried asking Hermione, but she hadn't seemed very interested in looking anywhere near where he was pointing.

Harry was looking at a large dust ball with eyes and feet when the assassin swept into the room.

That was the first thought that crossed Harry's mind when he saw Professor Severus Snape. There was something quiet and deadly about the way the man stalked between the children's desks. His robes were unkempt, his hair spotted and greasy. There was something about him that seemed reminiscent of Lucius, although the two of them looked

nothing remotely alike, and you got the impression that where Lucius would kill you with flawless elegance, this man would simply kill you.

"Sit down," said Professor Severus Snape. "Now."

Harry and a few other children who had been standing around talking to each other scrambled for desks. Harry had planned on ending up next to Hermione but somehow he found himself sitting down in the nearest empty desk next to Justin Finch-Fletchley (it was a Doubles session, Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff) which put him two desks to the left of Hermione.

Severus seated himself behind the teacher's desk, and without the slightest transition or introduction, said, "Hannah Abbott."

"Here," said Hannah in a somewhat trembling voice.

"Susan Bones."

"Present."

And so it went, no one daring to say a word in edgewise, until:

"Ah, yes. Harry Potter. Our new... *celebrity.*"

"The celebrity is present, *sir*."

Half the class flinched, and some of the smarter ones suddenly looked like they wanted to run out the door while the classroom was still there.

Severus smiled in an anticipatory sort of way and called the next name on his list.

Harry gave a mental sigh. That had happened way too fast for him to do anything about it. Oh well. Clearly this man already didn't like him, for whatever reason. And when Harry thought about it, better by far that this Potions professor should pick on *him* rather than, say, Neville or Hermione. Harry was a lot better able to defend himself. Yep, probably all for the best.

When full attendance had been taken, Severus swept his gaze over the full class. His eyes were as empty as a night sky without stars.

"You are here," Severus said in a quiet voice which the students at back strained to hear, "to learn the subtle science and exact art of potionmaking. As there is little foolish wand-waving here, many of you will hardly believe this is magic. I don't expect you will really understand the beauty of the softly simmering cauldron with its shimmering fumes, the delicate power of liquids that creep through human veins,"

this in a rather caressing, gloating tone, "bewitching the mind, ensnaring the senses," this was just getting creepier and creepier. "I can teach you how to bottle fame, brew glory, even stopper death—if you aren't as great a pack of fools as I usually have to teach."

Severus somehow seemed to notice the look of skepticism on Harry's face, or at least his eyes suddenly jumped to where Harry was sitting.

"Potter!" snapped the Potions professor. "What would I get if I added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?"

Harry blinked. "Was that in *Magical Drafts and Potions*?" he said. "I just finished reading it, and I don't remember anything which used wormwood—"

Hermione's hand went up and Harry shot her a glare which caused her to raise her hand even higher.

"Tut, tut," Severus said silkily. "Fame clearly isn't everything."

"Really?" Harry said. "But you just told us you'd teach us how to bottle fame. Say, how *does* that work, exactly? You drink it and turn into a celebrity?"

Three-quarters of the class flinched.

Hermione's hand was dropping slowly back down. Well, that wasn't surprising. She might be his rival, but she wasn't the sort of girl who would play along after it became clear that the professor was deliberately trying to humiliate him.

Harry was trying hard to keep control of his temper. The first rejoinder that had crossed his mind was 'Abracadabra'.

"Let's try again," said Severus. "Potter, where would you look if I told you to find me a bezoar?"

"That's not in the textbook either," Harry said, "but in one Muggle book I read that a trichinobezoar is a mass of solidified hair found in a human stomach, and Muggles used to believe it would cure any poison—"

"Wrong," Severus said. "A bezoar is found in the stomach of a goat, it is not made of hair, and it will cure most poisons but not all."

"I didn't *say* it would, I said that was what I read in one Muggle book—"

"No one here is interested in your *pathetic* Muggle books. Final try. What is the difference, Potter, between monksblood and wolfsbane?"

That did it.

"You know," Harry said icily, "in one of my quite *fascinating* Muggle books, they describe a study in which people managed to make themselves look very smart by asking questions about random facts that only they knew. Apparently the onlookers only noticed that the askers knew and the answerers didn't, and failed to adjust for the unfairness of the underlying game. So, Professor, can you tell me how many electrons are in the outermost orbital of a carbon atom?"

Severus's smile widened. "Four," he said. "It is a useless fact which no one should bother writing down, however. And for your information, Potter, asphodel and wormwood make a sleeping potion so powerful it is known as the Draught of Living Death. As for monkshood and wolfsbane, they are the same plant, which also goes by the name of aconite, as you would know if you had read *One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi.* Thought you didn't need to open the book before coming, eh, Potter? All the rest of you should be copying that down so that you will not be as ignorant as him." Severus paused, looking quite pleased with himself. "And that will be... five points? No, let us make it an even ten points from Ravenclaw for backchat."

Hermione gasped, along with a number of others.

"Professor Severus Snape," Harry bit out. "I know of nothing which I have done to earn your enmity. If there is some problem you have with me which I do not know about, I suggest we—"

"Shut up, Potter. Ten more points from Ravenclaw. The rest of you, open your books to page 3."

There was only a slight, only a very faint burning sensation in the back of Harry's throat, and no moisture at all in his eyes. If crying was not an effective strategy for destroying this Potions professor then there was no point in crying.

Slowly, Harry sat up very straight. All his blood seemed to have been drained away and replaced with liquid nitrogen. He knew he'd been trying to keep his temper but he couldn't seem to remember why.

"Harry," whispered Hermione frantically from two desks over, "stop, please, it's all right, we won't count it—"

"Talking in class, Granger? Three—"

"So," said a voice colder than zero Kelvin, "how does one go about filing a formal complaint against an abusive professor? Does one talk to the Deputy Headmistress, write a letter to the Board of Governors... would you care to explain how it works?"

The class was utterly frozen.

"Detention for one month, Potter," Severus said, smiling even more broadly.

"I decline to recognize your authority as a teacher and I will not serve any detention you give."

People stopped breathing.

Severus's smile vanished. "Then you will be—" his voice stopped short.

"Expelled, were you about to say?" Harry, on the other hand, was now smiling thinly. "But then you seemed to doubt your ability to carry out the threat, or fear the consequences if you did. I, on the other hand, neither doubt nor fear the prospect of finding a school with less abusive professors. Or perhaps I should hire private tutors, as is my accustomed practice, and be taught at my full learning speed. I have enough money in my vault. Something about bounties on a Dark Lord I defeated. But there *are* teachers at Hogwarts who I rather like, so I think it will be easier if I find some way to get rid of you instead."

"Get rid of me?" Severus said, now also smiling thinly. "What an amusing conceit. How do you suppose you will do that, Potter?"

"I understand there have been a number of complaints about you from students and their parents," a guess but a safe one, "which leaves only the question of why you're not already gone. Is Hogwarts too financially strapped to afford a real Potions professor? I could chip in, if so. I'm sure they could find a better class of teacher if they offered double your current salary."

Two poles of ice radiated freezing winter across the classroom.

"You will find," Severus said softly, "that the Board of Governers is not the slightest bit sympathetic to your offer."

"Lucius..." Harry said. "*That's* why you're still here. Perhaps I should chat with Lucius about that. I believe he desires to meet with me. I wonder if I have anything he wants?"

Hermione frantically shook her head. Harry noticed out of the corner of his eye, but his attention was all on Severus.

"You are a very foolish boy," Severus said. He wasn't smiling at all, now. "You have nothing that Lucius values more than my friendship. And if you did, I have other allies." His voice grew hard. "And I find it increasingly unlikely that you were not Sorted into Slytherin. How was it that you managed to stay out of my House? Ah, yes, because the Sorting Hat claimed it was *joking*. For the first time in recorded history. What were you really *chatting* about with the Sorting Hat, Potter? Did you have something that it wanted?"

Harry stared into Severus's cold gaze and remembered that the Sorting Hat had warned him not to meet anyone's eyes while thinking about—Harry dropped his gaze to Severus's desk.

"You seem oddly reluctant to look me in the eyes, Potter!"

A shock of sudden understanding—"So it was *you* the Sorting Hat was warning me about!"

"What?" said Severus's voice, sounding genuinely surprised, though of course Harry didn't look at his face.

Harry got up out of his desk.

"Sit down, Potter," said an angry voice from somewhere he wasn't looking.

Harry ignored it, and looked around the classroom. "I have no intention of letting one unprofessional teacher ruin my time at Hogwarts," Harry said with deadly calm. "I think I'll take my leave of this class, and either hire a tutor to teach me Potions while I'm here, or if the Board is really that locked up, learn over the summer. If any of you decide that you don't care to be bullied by this man, my sessions will be open to you."

"*Sit down, Potter!*"

Harry strode across the room and grasped the doorknob.

It didn't turn.

Harry slowly turned around, and caught a glimpse of Severus smiling nastily before he remembered to look away.

"Open this door."

"No," said Severus.

"You are making me feel threatened," said a voice so icy it didn't sound like Harry's at all, "and that is a mistake."

Severus's voice laughed. "What do you intend to do about it, little boy?"

Harry took six long strides forward away from the door, until he was standing near the back row of desks.

Then Harry drew himself upright and raised his right hand in one terrible motion, fingers poised to snap.

Neville screamed and dived under his desk. Other children shrank back or instinctively raised their arms to shield themselves.

"*Harry don't!*" shrieked Hermione. "Whatever you were going to do to him, don't do it!"

"Have you all gone *mad?*" barked Severus's voice.

Slowly, Harry lowered his hand. "I wasn't going to hurt him, Hermione," Harry said, his voice a little lower. "I was just going to blow up the door."

Though now that Harry remembered it, you weren't supposed to Transfigure things that were to be burned, which meant that going back in time afterward and getting Fred or George to Transfigure some carefully measured amount of explosives might not actually have been such a good idea...

"*Silencio,*" said Severus's voice.

Harry tried to say "What?" and found that no sound was coming out.

"This has become ridiculous. I think you've been allowed to get yourself in enough trouble for one day, Potter. You are the most disruptive and unruly student I have ever seen, and I don't recall how many points Ravenclaw has right now, but I'm sure I can manage to wipe them all out. Ten points from Ravenclaw. Ten points from Ravenclaw. Ten points from Ravenclaw! Fifty points from Ravenclaw! Now sit down and watch the rest of the class take their lesson!"

Harry put his hand into his pouch and tried to say 'marker' but of course no words came out. For one brief moment that stopped him; and then it occurred to Harry to spell out M-A-R-K-E-R using finger motions, which worked. P-A-D and he had a pad of paper. Harry strode

over to an empty desk, not the one he'd originally sat down in, and scrawled a brief message. He tore off that sheet of paper, put away the marker and pad in a pocket of his robes for quicker access, and held up his message, not to Snape, but to the rest of the class.

I'M LEAVING
DOES ANYONE ELSE
NEED TO GET OUT?

"You're insane, Potter," Severus said with cold contempt.

Aside from that, no one spoke.

Harry swept an ironic bow to the teacher's desk, walked over to the wall, and with one smooth motion yanked open a closet door, stepped in, and slammed the door shut behind him.

There was the muffled sound of someone snapping his fingers, and then nothing.

In the classroom, students looked at each other in puzzlement and fear.

The Potions Master's face was now completely enraged. He crossed the room in terrible strides and yanked open the closet door.

The closet was empty.

One hour earlier, Harry listened from inside the closed closet. There was no sound from outside, and no point in taking risks either.

C-L-O-A-K, his fingers spelled out.

Once he was invisible, he very carefully and slowly cracked open the closet door and peeked out. No one seemed to be in the classroom.

The door wasn't locked.

It was when Harry was outside the dangerous place and inside the hallway, safely invisible, that some of the anger drained away and he realized what he'd just done.

What he'd just done.

Harry's invisible face was frozen in absolute horror.

He'd antagonized a teacher three orders of magnitude beyond anything he'd ever managed before. He'd threatened to walk out of Hogwarts and might have to follow through on it. He'd lost all the points Ravenclaw had and then he'd used the Time-Turner...

His imagination showed him his parents yelling at him after he was expelled, Professor McGonagall disappointed in him, and it was just too painful and he couldn't bear it and he *couldn't think of any way to save himself—*

The thought that Harry allowed himself to think was that if getting angry had gotten him into all this trouble, then maybe when he was angry he'd think of a way out, things seemed clearer somehow when he was angry.

And the thought that Harry didn't let himself think was that he just couldn't face this future if he wasn't angry.

So he cast his thoughts back and remembered the burning humiliation—

Tut, tut. Fame clearly isn't everything.

Ten points from Ravenclaw for backchat.

The calming cold washed back through his veins like a wave reflected and returning from some breaker, and Harry let out his breath.

Okay. Back to being sane now.

He was actually feeling a bit disappointed in his non-angry self for collapsing like that and wanting only to get out of trouble. Professor Severus Snape was *everyone's* problem. Normal-Harry had forgotten that and wished for a way to protect *himself.* And let all the other victims go hang? The question wasn't how to protect himself, the question was how to destroy this Potions professor.

So this is my dark side, is it? Bit of a prejudiced term that, my light side seems more selfish and cowardly, not to mention confused and panicky.

And now that he was thinking clearly, it was equally clear what to do next. He'd already given himself an extra hour to prepare, and could get up to five hours more if required...

Minerva McGonagall waited in the Headmaster's office.

Dumbledore sat in his padded throne behind his desk, dressed in four layers of formal lavender robes. Minerva sat in a chair before him, opposite Severus in another chair. Facing the three of them was an empty wooden stool.

They were waiting for Harry Potter.

Harry, Minerva thought despairingly, *you promised you wouldn't bite any teachers!*

And in her mind she could see very clearly the reply, Harry's angry face and his outraged response: *I said I wouldn't bite anyone who didn't bite me first!*

There was a knock at the door.

"Come in!" Dumbledore called.

The door swept open, and Harry Potter entered. Minerva almost gasped out loud. The boy looked cool, collected, and utterly in control of himself.

"Good mor—" Harry's voice suddenly cut off. His jaw dropped.

Minerva tracked Harry's gaze, and she saw that Harry was staring at Fawkes where the phoenix sat on its golden perch. Fawkes fluttered his bright red-golden wings like the flickering of a flame, and dipped his head in a measured nod to the boy.

Harry turned to stare at Dumbledore.

Dumbledore winked at him.

Minerva felt she was missing something.

Sudden uncertainty crossed Harry's face. His coolness wavered. Fear showed in his eyes, then anger, and then the boy was calm again.

A chill went down Minerva's spine. Something was not right here.

"Please sit down," said Dumbledore. His face was now serious once more.

Harry sat.

"So, Harry," said Dumbledore. "I've heard one report of this day from Professor Snape. Would you care to tell me what happened in your own words?"

Harry's gaze flicked dismissively to Severus. "It's not complicated," said the boy, smiling thinly. "He tried bullying me the way he's been

bullying every non-Slytherin in the school since the day Lucius foisted him off on you. As for the other details, I request a private conversation with you concerning them. A student who is reporting abusive behavior from a professor can hardly be expected to speak frankly in front of that same professor, after all."

This time Minerva couldn't stop herself from gasping out loud.

Severus simply laughed.

And the Headmaster's face grew grave. "Mr. Potter," the Headmaster said, "one does not speak of a Hogwarts professor in such terms. I fear that you labor under a terrible misapprehension. Professor Severus Snape has my fullest confidence, and serves Hogwarts at my own behest, not Lucius Malfoy's."

There was silence for a few moments.

When the boy spoke again his voice was icy. "Am I missing something here?"

"Quite a number of things, Mr. Potter," said the Headmaster. "You should understand, to start with, that the purpose of this meeting is to discuss how to discipline you for the events of this morning."

"This man has terrorized your school for years. I spoke to students and collected stories to make sure there would be enough for a newspaper campaign to rally the parents against him. Some of the younger students cried while they told me. I almost cried when I heard them! *You allowed this abuser to run free? You did this to your students? Why?*"

Minerva swallowed a lump in her throat. She'd—thought that, sometimes, but somehow she'd never quite—

"Mr. Potter," said the Headmaster, his voice now stern, "this meeting is not about Professor Snape. It is about you and your disregard for school discipline. Professor Snape has suggested, and I have agreed, that three full months of detention will be appropriate—"

"Declined," Harry said icily.

Minerva was speechless.

"This is not a request, Mr. Potter," the Headmaster said. The full, entire force of the wizard's gaze was turned on the boy. "This is your punishme—"

"You will explain to me why you allowed this man to hurt the children placed in your care, and if your explanation is not sufficient then I will begin my newspaper campaign with *you* as the target."

Minerva's body swayed with the force of that blow, with the sheer raw *lèse majesté*.

Even Severus looked shocked.

"That, Harry, would be most extremely unwise," Dumbledore said slowly. "I am the primary piece opposing Lucius on the gameboard. For you to do such a thing would strengthen him greatly, and I did not think that was your chosen side."

The boy was still for a long moment.

"This conversation grows private," Harry said. His hand flicked in Severus's direction. "Send him away."

Dumbledore shook his head. "Harry, did I not tell you that Severus Snape has my fullest confidence?"

The boy's face showed the shock of it. "This man's bullying makes you vulnerable! I am not the only one who could start a newspaper campaign against you! This is insane! Why are you doing this?"

Dumbledore sighed. "I'm sorry, Harry. It has to do with things that you are not, at this time, ready to hear."

The boy stared at Dumbledore. Then he turned to look at Severus. Then back to Dumbledore again.

"It *is* insanity," the boy said slowly. "You haven't reined him in because you think he's *part of the pattern*. That Hogwarts needs an evil Potions Master to be a proper magical school, just as it needs a ghost to teach History."

"That does sound like the sort of thing I would do, doesn't it?" said Dumbledore, smiling.

"Unacceptable," Harry said flatly. His gaze was now cold and dark. "I will not tolerate bullying or abuse. I had considered many possible ways of dealing with this problem, but I will make it simple. Either this man goes, or I do."

Minerva gasped again. Something strange flickered in Severus's eyes.

Now Dumbledore's gaze was also growing cold. "Expulsion, Mister Potter, is the final threat which may be used against a student. It is not

customarily used as a threat by students against the Headmaster. This is the best magical school in the entire world, and an education here is not an opportunity given to everyone. Are you under the impression that Hogwarts cannot get along without you?"

And Harry sat there, smiling thinly.

Sudden horror dawned on Minerva. Surely Harry wouldn't—

"You forget," Harry said, "that you're not the only one who can see patterns. *This grows private. Now send him*—" Harry flicked a hand at Severus again, and then stopped in mid-sentence and mid-gesture.

Minerva could see it on Harry's face, the moment when he remembered.

She'd told him, after all.

"Mr. Potter," said the Headmaster, "once again, Severus Snape has my fullest confidence."

"You told him," whispered the boy. "You utter fool."

Dumbledore didn't react to the insult. "Told him what?"

"That the Dark Lord is alive."

"*What in Merlin's name are you on about, Potter?*" cried Severus in tones of sheer astonishment and outrage.

Harry glanced briefly at him, smiling grimly. "Oh, so we *are* a Slytherin, then," Harry said. "I was starting to wonder."

And then there was silence.

Finally Dumbledore spoke. His voice was mild. "Harry, what *are* you talking about?"

"I'm sorry, Albus," Minerva whispered.

Severus and Dumbledore turned to look at her.

"Professor McGonagall didn't tell me," said Harry's voice, swiftly and less calm than it had been. "I guessed. I told you, I can see the patterns too. I guessed, and she controlled her reaction just as Severus did. But her control fell a shade short of perfection, and I could tell it was control, not genuine."

"And I told him," said Minerva, her voice trembling a little, "that you, and I, and Severus were the only ones who knew."

"Which she did as a concession to prevent me from simply going around asking questions, as I threatened to do if she didn't talk," Harry

said. The boy chuckled briefly. "I really should have gotten one of you alone and told you that she told me everything, to see if you let anything slip. Probably wouldn't have worked, but would have been worth a shot." The boy smiled again. "Threat's still on the table and I do expect to be briefed *fully* at some point."

Severus was giving her a look of utter contempt. Minerva raised her chin and bore it. She knew it was deserved.

Dumbledore leaned back in his padded throne. His eyes were as cold as anything Minerva had seen from him since the day his brother died. "And you threaten to abandon us to Voldemort if we do not comply with your wishes."

Harry's voice was razor-sharp. "I regret to inform you that you are not the center of the universe. I'm not threatening to walk out on magical Britain. I'm threatening to walk out on *you*. I am not a meek little Frodo. This is *my* quest and if you want in you will play by *my* rules."

Dumbledore's face was still cold. "I am beginning to doubt your suitability as the hero, Mr. Potter."

Harry's return gaze was equally icy. "I am beginning to doubt your suitability as my Gandalf, *Mr. Dumbledore*. Boromir was at least a plausible mistake. What is this *Nazgul* doing in my Fellowship?"

Minerva was completely lost. She looked at Severus, to see if he was following this, and she saw that Severus had turned his face away from Harry's field of vision and was smiling.

"I suppose," Dumbledore said slowly, "that from your perspective it is a reasonable question. So, Mr. Potter, if Professor Snape is to leave you alone henceforth, will that be the last time this issue arises, or will I find you here every week with a new demand?"

"Leave *me* alone?" Harry's voice was outraged. "I am not his only victim and certainly not the most vulnerable! *Have you forgotten how defenseless children are? How much they hurt?* Henceforth Severus will treat *every* student of Hogwarts with appropriate and professional courtesy, or you will find another Potions Master, or you will find another hero!"

Dumbledore started laughing—a full-throated, warm, humorous laughter, as if Harry had just performed a comic dance in front of him.

Minerva didn't dare move. Her eyes flickered and she saw that Severus was equally motionless.

Harry's visage grew even colder. "You mistake me, Headmaster, if you think that this is a joke. This is not a request. This is your punishment."

"Mr. Potter—" Minerva said. She didn't even know what she was going to say. She simply couldn't let that go by.

Harry made a shushing gesture at her and continued to speak to Dumbledore. "And if that seems impolite to you," Harry said, his voice now a little less hard, "it seemed no less impolite when you said it to me. You would not say such a thing to anyone who you considered a real human being instead of a subordinate child, and I will treat you with just the same courtesy as you treat me—"

"Oh, indeed, in very deed, this is my punishment if ever there was one! Of *course* you're in here blackmailing me to save your fellow students, not to save yourself! I can't imagine why I would have thought otherwise!" Dumbledore was now laughing even harder. He pounded his fist on the desk three times.

Harry's gaze grew uncertain. His face turned toward her, addressing her for the first time. "Excuse me," Harry said. His voice seemed to be wavering. "Does he need to take his medication or something?"

"Ah..." Minerva had no idea what she could possibly say.

"Well," said Dumbledore. He wiped away tears that had formed in his eyes. "Pardon me. I'm sorry for the interruption. Please continue with the blackmail."

Harry opened his mouth, then closed it again. He now seemed a little unsteady. "Ah... he's also to stop reading students' minds."

"Minerva," Severus said, his voice deadly, "you—"

"Sorting Hat warned me," said Harry.

"*What?*"

"Can't say anything else. Anyway I think that's it. I'm done."

Silence.

"Now what?" Minerva said, when it became apparent that no one else was going to say anything.

"Now what?" Dumbledore echoed. "Why, now the hero wins, of course."

"*What?*" said Severus, Minerva, and Harry.

"Well, he certainly seems to have backed us into a corner," Dumbledore said, smiling happily. "But Hogwarts *does* need an evil Potions Master, or it just wouldn't be a proper magical school, now would it? So how about if Professor Snape is only awful toward students in their fifth year and higher?"

"*What?*" said all three of them again.

"If it's the most vulnerable victims about whom you're concerned. Maybe you're right, Harry. Maybe I *have* forgotten over the decades what it's like to be a child. So let's compromise. Severus will continue to unfairly award points to Slytherin and impose lax discipline on his House, and he will be awful to non-Slytherin students in their fifth year and higher. To others he will be scary, but not abusive. He will promise to only read minds when the safety of a student requires it. Hogwarts will have its evil Potions Master, and the most vulnerable victims, as you put it, will be safe."

Minerva McGonagall was as shocked as she'd ever been in her life. She glanced uncertainly at Severus, whose face had been left completely neutral, as though he couldn't decide what sort of expression he ought to be wearing.

"I suppose that is acceptable," Harry said. His voice sounded a bit odd.

"You can't be serious," Severus said, his voice as expressionless as his face.

"I am very much in favor of this," Minerva said slowly. She was so much in favor that her heart was pounding wildly beneath her robes. "But what could we possibly tell the students? They might not have questioned this while Severus was... being awful to everyone, but—"

"Harry can tell the other students that he discovered a terrible secret of Severus's and did a bit of blackmail," said Dumbledore. "It's true, after all; he discovered that Severus was reading minds, and he certainly did blackmail us."

"This is insanity!" exploded Severus.

"Bwah ha ha!" said Dumbledore.

"Ah..." said Harry uncertainly. "And if anyone asks me why fifth years and above got shafted? I wouldn't blame them for being irate, and that part wasn't exactly my idea—"

"Tell them," said Dumbledore, "that it wasn't you who suggested the compromise, that it was all you could get. And then refuse to say anything more. That, too, is true. There's an art to it, you'll pick it up with practice."

Harry nodded slowly. "And the points he took from Ravenclaw?"

"They must not be given back."

It was Minerva who said it.

Harry looked at her.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Potter," she said. She *was* sorry, but it had to be done. "There *must* be some consequences for your misbehavior or this school will fall to pieces."

Harry shrugged. "Acceptable," he said flatly. "But in the future Severus will not strike at my House connections by taking points from me, nor will he waste my valuable time with detentions. Should he feel that my behavior requires correction, he may communicate his concerns to Professor McGonagall."

"Harry," Minerva said, "will you continue to submit to school discipline, or are you to be above the law now, as Severus was?"

Harry looked at her. Something warm touched his gaze, briefly before it was quashed. "I will continue to be an ordinary student to every member of the staff who is not insane or evil, provided that they do not come under pressure from others who are." Harry glanced briefly at Severus, then turned back to Dumbledore. "Leave Minerva alone, and I'll be a regular Hogwarts student in her presence. No special privileges or immunities."

"Beautiful," Dumbledore said sincerely. "Spoken like a true hero."

"And," she said, "Mr. Potter must publicly apologize for his actions of today."

Harry gave her another look. This one was a bit skeptical.

"The discipline of the school has been gravely injured by your actions, Mr. Potter," Minerva said. "It must be restored."

"I think, Professor McGonagall, that you considerably overestimate the importance of what you call school discipline, as compared to having History taught by a live teacher or not torturing your students. Maintaining the current status hierarchy and enforcing its rules seems ever so much more wise and moral and important when you are on the top and doing the enforcing than when you are on the bottom, and I can cite studies to this effect if required. I could go on for several hours about this point, but I will leave it at that."

Minerva shook her head. "Mr. Potter, you underestimate the importance of discipline because you are not in need of it yourself—" She paused. That hadn't come out right, and Severus, Dumbledore, and even Harry were giving her strange looks. "To learn, I mean. Not every child can learn in the absence of authority. And it is the other children who will be hurt, Mr. Potter, if they see your example as one to be followed."

Harry's lips curved into a twisted smile. "The first and last resort is the truth. The truth is that I shouldn't have gotten angry, I shouldn't have disrupted the class, I shouldn't have done what I did, and I set a bad example for everyone. The truth is also that Severus Snape behaved in a fashion unbecoming a Hogwarts professor, and that from now on he will be more mindful of the injured feelings of students in their fourth year and under. The two of us could both get up and speak the truth. I could live with that."

"In your dreams, Potter!" spat Severus.

"After all," said Harry, smiling grimly, "if the students see that rules are for *everyone*... for professors too, not just for poor helpless students who get nothing but suffering out of the system... why, the positive effects on school discipline should be *tremendous*."

There was a brief pause, and then Dumbledore chuckled. "Minerva is thinking that you're righter than you have any right to be."

Harry's gaze jerked away from Dumbledore, down to the floor. "Are *you* reading *her* mind?"

"Common sense is often mistaken for Legilimency," said Dumbledore. "I shall talk over this matter with Severus, and no apology will be required from you unless he apologizes as well. And now I declare this matter concluded, at least until lunchtime." He paused. "Although,

Harry, I'm afraid that Minerva wished to speak with you about an additional matter. And that is not the result of any pressure on my part. Minerva, if you would?"

Minerva rose from her chair and almost fell. There was too much adrenaline in her blood, her heart was beating too fast.

"Fawkes," said Dumbledore, "accompany her, please."

"I don't—" she started to say.

Dumbledore shot her a look, and she fell silent.

The phoenix soared across the room like a smooth tongue of flame leaping out, and landed on her shoulder. She felt the warmth through her robes, all through her body.

"Please follow me, Mr. Potter," she said, firmly now, and they left through the door.

They stood on the rotating stairs, descending in silence.

Minerva didn't know what to say. She didn't know this person who stood beside her.

And Fawkes began to croon.

It was tender, and soft, like a fireplace would sound if it had melody, and it washed over Minerva's mind, easing, soothing, gentling what it touched...

"*What* is *that*?" Harry whispered beside her. His voice was unstable, wobbling, changing pitch.

"The song of the phoenix," said Minerva, not really aware of what she was saying, her attention was all on that strange quiet music. "It, too, heals."

Harry turned his face from her, but she caught a glimpse of something agonized.

The descent seemed to take a very long time, or maybe it was only that the music seemed to take a very long time, and when they stepped out through the gap where a gargoyle had been, she was holding Harry's hand firmly in hers.

As the gargoyle stepped back into place, Fawkes left her shoulder, and swooped to hover in front of Harry.

Harry stared at Fawkes like someone hypnotized by the ever-changing light of a fire.

"What am I to do, Fawkes?" whispered Harry. "I couldn't have protected them if I hadn't been angry."

The phoenix's wings continued flapping, it continued hovering in place. There was no sound but the beating of the wings. Then there was a flash like a fire flaring up and going out, and Fawkes was gone.

Both of them blinked, like waking up from a dream, or maybe like falling asleep again.

Minerva looked down.

Harry Potter's bright young face looked up at her.

"Are phoenixes people?" said Harry. "I mean, are they smart enough to count as people? Could I talk with Fawkes if I knew how?"

Minerva blinked hard. Then she blinked again. "No," Minerva said, her voice wavering. "Phoenixes are creatures of powerful magic. That magic gives their existence a weight of meaning which no simple animal could possess. They are fire, light, healing, rebirth. But in the end, no."

"Where can I get one?"

Minerva leaned down and hugged him. She hadn't meant to, but she didn't seem to have much choice in the matter.

When she stood up she found it hard to speak. But she had to ask. "What happened today, Harry?"

"I don't know the answers to any of the important questions either. Aside from that I'd really rather not think about it for a while."

Minerva took his hand in hers again, and they walked the rest of the way in silence.

It was only a short trip, since naturally the office of the Deputy was close to the office of the Headmaster.

Minerva sat behind her desk.

Harry sat in front of her desk.

"So," Minerva whispered. She would have given almost anything not to do this, or not to be the one who had to do it, or for it to be any time

but right now. "There is a matter of school discipline. From which you are not exempt."

"Namely?" said Harry.

He didn't know. He hadn't figured it out yet. She felt her throat tighten. But there was work to be done and she would not shirk it.

"Mr. Potter," said Professor McGonagall, "I need to see your Time-Turner, please."

All the peace of the phoenix vanished from his face in an instant and Minerva felt like she had just stabbed him.

"*No!*" Harry said. His voice was panicked. "I need it, I won't be able to attend Hogwarts, I won't be able to sleep!"

"You'll be able to sleep," she said. "The Ministry has delivered the protective shell for your Time-Turner. I will enchant it to open only between the hours of 9pm and midnight."

Harry's face twisted. "But—but I—"

"Mr. Potter, how many times have you used the Time-Turner since Monday? How many hours?"

"I..." Harry said. "Hold on, let me add it up—" He glanced down at his watch.

Minerva felt a rush of sadness. She'd thought so. "It wasn't just two per day, then. I suspect that if I asked your dormmates, I would find that you were struggling to stay up long enough to go to sleep at a reasonable time, and waking up earlier and earlier every morning. Correct?"

Harry's face said everything she needed to know.

"Mr. Potter," she said gently, "there are students who cannot be entrusted with Time-Turners, because they become addicted to them. We give them a potion which lengthens their sleep cycle by the necessary amount, but they end up using the Time-Turner for more than just attending their classes. And so we must take them back. Mr. Potter, you have taken to using the Time-Turner as your solution to everything, often very foolishly so. You used it to get back a Remembrall. You vanished from a closet in a fashion apparent to other students, instead of going back after you were out and getting me or someone else to come and open the door."

From the look on Harry's face he hadn't thought of that.

"And more importantly," she said, "you should have simply sat in Professor Snape's class. And watched. And left at the end of class. As you would have done if you had not possessed a Time-Turner. There are some students who cannot be entrusted with Time-Turners, Mr. Potter. You are one of them. I am sorry."

"But I *need* it!" Harry blurted. "What if there are Slytherins threatening me and I have to escape? It keeps me *safe*—"

"Every other student in this castle runs the same risk, and I assure you that they survive. No student has died in this castle for fifty years. Mr. Potter, you will hand over your Time-Turner and do so now."

Harry's face twisted in agony, but he drew out the Time-Turner from under his robes and gave it to her.

From her desk, Minerva drew out one of the protective shells that had been sent to Hogwarts. She snapped the cover into place around the Time-Turner's turning hourglass, tapped her wand to lock it there, and then she laid her wand on the cover, casting a simple but permanent enchantment.

"*This isn't fair!*" Harry shrieked. "I saved half of Hogwarts from Professor Snape today, is it right that I be punished for it? I saw the look on your face, you *hated* what he was doing!"

Minerva didn't speak for a few moments. She was enchanting.

When she finished and looked up, she knew that her face was stern. Maybe it was the wrong thing to do. And then again maybe it was the right thing to do. There was an obstinate child in front of her, and that *didn't* mean the universe was broken.

"*Fair,* Mr. Potter?" she snapped. "I have had to file *two reports* with the Ministry on public use of a Time-Turner in *two successive days!* Be *extremely* grateful you were allowed to retain the Time-Turner even in restricted form! The Headmaster made a Floo call to plead with them personally and if you were not the Boy-Who-Lived even that would not have sufficed!"

Harry gaped at her.

She knew that he was seeing the angry face of Professor McGonagall.

Harry's eyes filled up with tears.

"I'm, sorry," he whispered, voice now choked and broken. "I'm sorry, to have, disappointed you..."

"I'm sorry too, Mr. Potter," she said sternly, and handed him the newly restricted Time-Turner. "You may go."

Harry turned and fled from her office, sobbing. She heard his feet pattering away down the hall, and then the sound cut off as the door swung closed.

"I'm sorry too, Harry," she whispered to the quiet room. "I'm sorry too."

⁂

Fifteen minutes into lunch hour.

No one was speaking to Harry. Some of the Ravenclaws were shooting him looks of anger, others of sympathy, a few of the youngest students even had looks of admiration, but no one was talking to him. Even Hermione hadn't tried to come over.

Fred and George had gingerly stepped near. They hadn't said anything. The offer was clear, and its optionality. Harry had told them that he would come over when dessert started, no earlier. They had nodded and quickly walked away.

It was probably the utterly expressionless look on Harry's face that was doing it.

The others probably thought he was controlling anger, or dismay. They knew, because they'd seen Flitwick come and get him, that he'd been called to the Headmaster's office.

Harry was trying not to smile, because if he smiled, he would start laughing, and if he started laughing, he wouldn't stop until the nice people in white jackets came to haul him away.

It was too much. It was just all too much. Harry had almost gone over to the Dark Side, his dark side had done things that seemed in retrospect insane, his dark side had won an impossible victory that might have been real and might have been a pure whim of a crazy Headmaster, his dark side had protected his friends. He just couldn't handle it any more. He needed Fawkes to sing to him again. He needed to use the

Time-Turner to go off and take a quiet hour to recover but that wasn't an option any more and the loss was like a hole in his existence but he couldn't think about that because then he might start laughing.

Twenty minutes. All the students who were going to eat lunch had arrived, almost none had departed.

The tapping of a spoon rang through the Great Hall.

"If I may have your attention please," Dumbledore said. "Harry Potter has something he would like to share with us."

Harry took a deep breath and got up. He walked over to the Head Table, with every eye staring at him.

Harry turned and looked out at the four tables.

It was becoming harder and harder not to smile, but Harry kept his face expressionless as he spoke his brief and memorized speech.

"The truth is sacred," Harry said tonelessly. "One of my most treasured possessions is a button which reads 'Speak the truth, even if your voice trembles'. This, then, is the truth. Remember that. I am not saying it because I am being forced to say it, I am saying it because it is true. What I did in Professor Snape's class was foolish, stupid, childish, and an inexcusable violation of the rules of Hogwarts. I disrupted the classroom and deprived my fellow students of their irreplaceable learning time. All because I failed to control my temper. I hope that not a single one of you will ever follow my example. I certainly intend to try never to follow it again."

Many of the students gazing at Harry now had solemn, unhappy looks upon their faces, such as one might see at a ceremony marking the loss of a fallen champion. At the younger parts of the Gryffindor table the look was almost universal.

Until Harry raised his hand.

He did not raise it high. That might have appeared preemptory. He certainly did not raise it toward Severus. Harry simply raised his hand to chest level, and softly snapped his fingers, a gesture that was seen more than heard. It was possible that most of the Head Table wouldn't see it at all.

This seeming gesture of defiance won sudden smiles from the younger students and Gryffindors, and coldly superior sneers from Slytherin,

and frowns and worried looks from all others.

Harry kept his face expressionless. "Thank you," he said. "That's all."

"Thank you, Mr. Potter," said the Headmaster. "And now Professor Snape has something to share with us as well."

Severus smoothly stood up from his place at the Head Table. "It has been brought to my attention," he said, "that my own actions played a part in provoking the admittedly inexcusable anger of Mr. Potter, and in the ensuing discussion I realized that I had forgotten how easily injured are the feelings of the young and immature. The Potions classroom is a dangerous place, and I still feel that strict discipline is necessary—"

There was the sound of many people emitting muffled chokes at the same time.

Severus continued as if he had not heard. "—but henceforth I will be more aware of the... emotional fragility... of students in their fourth year and younger. My deduction of points from Ravenclaw still stands, but I will revoke Mr. Potter's detention. Thank you."

There was a single clap from the direction of Gryffindor and faster than lightning Severus's wand was in his hand and "*Quietus!*" silenced the offender.

"I will still demand discipline and respect in *all* my classes," Severus said coldly, "and anyone who trifles with me will regret it."

He sat down.

"Thank you too!" Headmaster Dumbledore said cheerfully. "Carry on!"

And Harry, still expressionless, began to walk back to his seat in Ravenclaw.

There was an explosion of conversation. Two words were clearly identifiable in the beginning. The first was an initial "What—" beginning many different sentences such as "What just happened—" and "What the hell—" The second was "*Scourgify!*" as students cleaned up the dropped food and spit-out drinks from themselves, the tablecloth, and each other.

Some students were weeping openly. So was Professor Sprout.

At the Gryffindor table, where a cake waited with fifty-one unlit candles, Fred whispered, "I think we may be out of our league here,

George."

And from that day onward, no matter what Hermione tried to tell anyone, it would be an accepted legend of Hogwarts that Harry Potter could make absolutely anything happen by snapping his fingers.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

DELAYED GRATIFICATION

Draco had a stern expression on his face, and his green-trimmed robes somehow looked far more formal, serious, and well-turned-out than the same exact robes as worn by the two boys behind him.

"Talk," said Draco.

"Yeah! Talk!"

"You heard da boss! Talk!"

"You two, on the other hand, *shut up.*"

The last session of classes on Friday was about to start, in that vast auditorium where all four Houses learned Defense, er, Battle Magic.

The last session of classes on Friday.

Harry was hoping that this class would be non-stressful, and that the brilliant Professor Quirrell would realize this was perhaps not the best time to single out Harry for anything. Harry had recovered a little, but...

...but just in case, it was probably best to get in a bit of stress relief first.

Harry leaned back in his chair and bestowed a look of great solemnity upon Draco and his minions.

"You ask, what is our aim?" Harry declaimed. "I can answer in one word. It is victory. Victory at all costs—Victory in spite of all terrors—Victory, however long and hard the road may be, for without victory there is no—"

"*Talk about Snape,*" Draco hissed. "*What did you do?*"

Harry wiped away the fake solemnity and gave Draco a more serious look.

"You saw it," Harry said. "Everyone saw it. I snapped my fingers."

"*Harry! Stop teasing me!*"

So he'd been promoted to *Harry* now. Interesting. And in fact Harry was fairly sure that he was meant to notice that, and feel bad if he didn't respond somehow...

Harry tapped his ears and gave a significant glance at the minions.

"They won't talk," said Draco.

"Draco," Harry said, "I'm going to be one hundred percent honest here and say that yesterday I was not particularly impressed with Mr. Goyle's cunning."

Mr. Goyle winced.

"Me neither," said Draco. "I explained to him that I ended up owing you a favor because of it." (Mr. Goyle winced again.) "But there *is* a big difference between that sort of mistake and being indiscreet. That really is something they've been trained from childhood to understand."

"All right then," Harry said. He lowered his voice, even though the background noises had gone to blurs in Draco's presence. "I deduced one of Severus's secrets and did a bit of blackmail."

Draco's expression hardened. "Good, now tell me something you didn't tell in strict confidence to the idiots in Gryffindor, meaning that was the story you *wanted* to get all over the school."

Harry grinned involuntarily and he knew that Draco had caught it.

"What is Severus saying?" Harry said.

"That he hadn't realized how sensitive the feelings of young children were," Draco said. "Even in Slytherin! Even to *me!*"

"Are you sure," Harry said, "that you want to know something your Head of House would rather you not know?"

"Yes," Draco said without hesitation.

Interesting. "Then you really are going to send your minions away first, because I'm not sure I can believe everything you believe about them."

Draco nodded. "Okay."

Mr. Crabbe and Mr. Goyle looked *very* unhappy. "Boss—" said Mr. Crabbe.

"You've given Mr. Potter no reason to trust you," Draco said. "Go!"

They left.

"In particular," Harry said, lowering his voice even further, "I'm not *entirely* sure that they wouldn't just report what I said to Lucius."

"Father wouldn't *do* that!" Draco said, looking genuinely aghast. "They're *mine!*"

"I'm sorry, Draco," Harry said. "I'm just not sure I can believe everything you believe about your father. Imagine it was your secret and me telling you my father wouldn't do that."

Draco nodded slowly. "You're right. *I'm* sorry, Harry. It was wrong of me to ask it of you."

How did I get this *promoted? Shouldn't he hate me now?* Harry had the feeling he was looking at something exploitable... he just wished his brain wasn't so exhausted. Ordinarily he would have loved to try his hand at some complicated plotting.

"Anyway," Harry said. "Trade. I tell you a fact that isn't on the grapevine, and does not *go* on the grapevine, and in *particular* does not go to your father, and in return you tell me what you and Slytherin think about the whole business."

"Deal!"

Now to make this as vague as possible... something that wouldn't hurt much even if it did get out... "What I said was true. I did discover one of Severus's secrets, and I did do some blackmail. But Severus wasn't the only person involved."

"*I knew it!*" Draco said exultantly.

Harry's stomach sank. He had apparently said something very significant and he did not know why. This was not a good sign.

"All right," Draco said. He was grinning widely now. "So here's what the reaction was like in Slytherin. First, all the idiots were like, 'We hate Harry Potter! Let's go beat him up!'"

Harry choked. "What is *wrong* with the Sorting Hat? That's not Slytherin, it's *Gryffindor*—"

"Not all children are prodigies," Draco said, though he was smiling in a sort of nasty-conspiratorial way, as though to suggest that he privately agreed with Harry's opinion. "And it took around fifteen seconds for someone to explain to them why this might not be such a favor to Snape, so you're fine. Anyway, after that was the second wave of idiots, the ones

who were saying, 'Looks like Harry Potter was just another do-gooder after all.'"

"And then?" Harry said, smiling even though he had no idea why *that* was stupid.

"And then the actual smart people started talking. It's obvious that you found a way to put a *lot* of pressure on Snape. And while that could be more than one thing... the obvious *next* thought is that it has something to do with Snape's unknown hold over Dumbledore. Am I right?"

"No comment," Harry said. At least his brain was processing this part correctly. House Slytherin *had* wondered why Severus wasn't getting fired. And they'd concluded that Severus was blackmailing Dumbledore. Could that actually be true...? But Dumbledore hadn't seemed to act like it...

Draco went on talking. "And the *next* thing the smart people pointed out was that if you could put enough pressure on Snape to make him leave half of Hogwarts alone, that meant you probably had enough power to get rid of him entirely, if you wanted. What you did to him was a humiliation, just the same way he tried to humiliate you—but you left us our Head of House."

Harry made his smile wider.

"And then the *really* smart people," Draco said, his face now serious, "went off and had a little discussion by themselves, and someone pointed out that it would be a very stupid thing to leave an enemy around like that. If you could break his hold over Dumbledore, the obvious thing would be to just do it. Dumbledore would kick Snape out of Hogwarts and maybe even have him killed, he'd be *very* grateful to you, and you wouldn't have to worry about Snape sneaking into your dorm room at night with interesting potions."

Harry's face was now neutral. He had not thought of that and he really, really should have. "And from this you concluded...?"

"Snape's hold was some secret of Dumbledore's and *you've got the secret!*" Draco was looking exultant. "It can't be powerful enough to destroy Dumbledore entirely, or Snape would have used it by now. Snape refuses to use his hold for anything except staying king of Slytherin House in Hogwarts, and he doesn't always get what he wants even then,

so it must have limits. But it's *got* to be really good! Father's been trying to get Snape to tell him for *years!*"

"And," Harry said, "now Lucius thinks maybe *I* can tell him. Did you already get an owl—"

"I will tonight," Draco said, and laughed. "It will say," his voice took on a different, more formal cadence, "*My beloved son: I've already told you of Harry Potter's potential importance. As you have already realized, his importance has now become greater and more urgent. If you see any possible avenue of friendship or point of pressure with him, you must pursue it, and the full resources of Malfoy are at your disposal if needed.*"

Gosh. "Well," Harry said, "not commenting on whether or not your whole complicated edifice of theory is true, let me just say that we are not quite such good friends as yet."

"I know," Draco said. Then his face turned *very* serious, and his voice grew quiet even within the blur. "Harry, has it occurred to you that if you know something Dumbledore doesn't want known, Dumbledore might simply have you killed? And it would turn the Boy-Who-Lived from a potential competing leader into a valuable martyr, too."

"No comment," Harry said yet again. He hadn't thought of that last part, either. Didn't *seem* to be Dumbledore's style... but...

"Harry," Draco said, "you've obviously got *incredible* talent, but you've got no training and no mentors and you do stupid things sometimes and *you really need an advisor who knows how to do this or you're going to get hurt!*" Draco's face was fierce.

"Ah," Harry said. "An advisor like Lucius?"

"Like *me!*" said Draco. "I'll promise to keep your secrets from Father, from *everyone,* I'll just help you figure out whatever you want to do!"

Wow.

Harry saw that zombie-Quirrell was staggering in through the doors.

"Class is about to start," said Harry. "I'll think about what you said, there's lots of times I *do* wish I had all your training, it's just I don't know how I can trust you so quickly—"

"You shouldn't," Draco said, "it's too soon. See? I'll give you good advice even if it hurts me. But we should maybe *hurry up* and become closer friends."

"I'm open to that," said Harry, who was already trying to figure out how to exploit it.

"Another bit of advice," Draco said hurriedly as Quirrell slouched toward his desk, "right now everyone in Slytherin's wondering about you, so if you're courting us, which I think you are, you should do something that signals friendship to Slytherin. *Soon*, like today or tomorrow."

"Letting Severus go on awarding extra House points to Slytherin wasn't enough?" No reason Harry couldn't take credit for it.

Draco's eyes flickered with realization, then he said rapidly, "It's not the same, trust me, it's got to be something obvious. Push your mudblood rival Granger into a wall or something, everyone in Slytherin will know what that means—"

"That is *not* how it works in Ravenclaw, Draco! If you have to push someone into a wall it means your brain is too *weak* to beat them the right way and everyone in Ravenclaw *knows that*—"

The screen on Harry's desk flickered on, provoking a sudden wash of nostalgia for television and computers.

"Ahem," said Professor Quirrell's voice, seeming to speak personally to Harry out of the screen. "Please take your seats."

And the children were all seated and staring at the repeater screens on their desks, or looking down directly at the great white marble stage where Professor Quirrell stood, leaning on his desk atop the small dais of darker marble.

"Today," said Professor Quirrell, "I had planned to teach you your first defensive spell, a small shield that was the ancestor of today's *Protego*. But on second thought I have changed today's lesson plan in the light of recent events."

Professor Quirrell's gaze searched the rows of seats. Harry winced from where he was sitting, in the back row. He had a feeling he knew who was about to be called on.

"Draco, of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Malfoy," said Professor Quirrell.

Whew.

"Yes, Professor?" said Draco. His voice was amplified, seeming to come from the repeater screen on Harry's desk, which showed Draco's face as he spoke. Then the screen shifted back to Professor Quirrell, who said:

"Is it your ambition to become the next Dark Lord?"

"That's an odd question, Professor," said Draco. "I mean, who'd be dumb enough to admit it?"

A few students laughed, but not many.

"Indeed," said Professor Quirrell. "So while there's no point in asking any of you, it would not surprise me in the slightest if there were a student or two in my classes who harbored ambitions of being the next Dark Lord. After all, *I* wanted to be the next Dark Lord when *I* was a young Slytherin."

This time the laughter was much more widespread.

"Well, it *is* the House of the ambitious, after all," Professor Quirrell said, smiling. "I didn't realize until later that what I really enjoyed was Battle Magic, and that my true ambition was to become a great fighting wizard and someday teach at Hogwarts. In any case, when I was thirteen years old, I read through the historical sections of the Hogwarts library, scrutinizing the lives and fates of past Dark Lords, and I made a list of all the mistakes that *I* would never make when *I* was a Dark Lord—"

Harry giggled before he could stop himself.

"Yes, Mr. Potter, very amusing. So, Mr. Potter, can you guess what was the very first item on that list?"

Great. "Um... never use a complicated way of dealing with an enemy when you can just Abracadabra them?"

"The *term,* Mr. Potter, is *Avada Kedavra,*" Professor Quirrell's voice sounded a bit sharp for some reason, "and no, that was *not* on the list I made at age thirteen. Would you care to guess again?"

"Ah... never brag to anyone about your evil master plan?"

Professor Quirrell laughed. "Ah, now *that* was number two. My, Mr. Potter, have we been reading the same books?"

There was more laughter, with an undertone of nervousness. Harry clenched his jaw tightly shut and said nothing. A denial would accomplish nothing.

"But no. The *first* item was, 'I will not go around provoking strong, vicious enemies.' The history of the world would be very different if Mornelithe Falconsbane or Hitler had grasped that elementary point. Now *if,* Mr. Potter—just *if* by some chance you harbor an ambition similar to the one I held as a young Slytherin—even so, I hope it is not your ambition to become a *stupid* Dark Lord."

"Professor Quirrell," Harry said, gritting his teeth, "I am a *Ravenclaw* and it is not my ambition to be stupid, period. I know that what I did today was dumb. But it wasn't *Dark!* I was *not* the one who threw the first punch in that fight!"

"You, Mr. Potter, are an idiot. But then so was I at your age. Thus I anticipated your answer and altered today's lesson plan accordingly. Mr. Gregory Goyle, if you would come forward, please?"

There was a surprised pause in the classroom. Harry hadn't been expecting that.

Neither, from the looks of it, had Mr. Goyle, who looked rather uncertain and worried as he mounted the marble stage and approached the dais.

Professor Quirrell straightened from where he was leaning on the desk. He looked suddenly stronger, and his hands formed fists and he drew himself up into a clearly recognizable martial arts stance.

Harry's eyes widened at the sight, and he realized why Mr. Goyle had been called up.

"Most wizards," Professor Quirrell said, "do not bother much with what a Muggle would term martial arts. Is not a wand stronger than a fist? This attitude is stupid. Wands are held in fists. If you want to be a great fighting wizard you *must* learn martial arts to a level which would impress even a Muggle. I will now demonstrate a certain vitally important technique, which I learned in a *dojo,* a Muggle school of martial arts, of which I shall speak more shortly. For now..." Professor Quirrell took several steps forward, still in stance, advancing on where Mr. Goyle stood. "Mr. Goyle, I will ask you to attack me."

"Professor Quirrell," said Mr. Goyle, his voice now amplified as the professor's was, "can I ask what level—"

"Sixth *dan*. You will not be hurt and neither will I. And if you see an opening, please take it."

Mr. Goyle nodded, looking much relieved.

"Note," Professor Quirrell said, "that Mr. Goyle was afraid to attack someone who did not know martial arts to an acceptable level, for fear that I, or he, would be hurt. Mr. Goyle's attitude is exactly correct and he has earned three Quirrell points for it. Now, fight!"

The young boy blurred forward, fists flying, and the Professor blocked every blow, dancing backward, Quirrell kicked and Goyle blocked and spun and tried to trip Quirrell with a sweeping leg and Quirrell hopped over it and it was all happening too fast for Harry to make sense of what was going on and then Goyle was on his back with his legs pushing and Quirrell was actually *flying through the air* and then he hit the ground shoulder first and rolled.

"Stop!" cried Professor Quirrell from the ground, sounding a little panicked. "You win!"

Mr. Goyle pulled up so sharply he staggered, almost tripping and falling from the aborted momentum of his headlong charge toward Professor Quirrell. His face showed utter shock.

Professor Quirrell arched his back and bounced to his feet using a peculiar springing motion that made no use of his hands.

There was a silence in the classroom, a silence born of total confusion.

"Mr. Goyle," said Professor Quirrell, "what vitally important technique did I demonstrate?"

"How to fall correctly when someone throws you," said Mr. Goyle. "It's one of the very first lessons you learn—"

"That too," said Professor Quirrell.

There was a pause.

"The vitally important technique which I demonstrated," said Professor Quirrell, "was how to lose. You may go, Mr. Goyle, thank you."

Mr. Goyle walked off the platform, looking rather bewildered. Harry felt the same way.

Professor Quirrell walked back to his desk and resumed leaning on it. "Sometimes we forget the most basic things, since it has been too long since we learned them. I realized I had done the same with my own lesson plan. You do not teach students to throw until you have taught them to fall. And I must not teach you to fight if you do not understand how to lose."

Professor Quirrell's face hardened, and Harry thought he saw a hint of pain, a touch of sorrow, in those eyes. "I learned how to lose in a *dojo* in Asia, which, as any Muggle knows, is where all the good martial artists live. This *dojo* taught a style which had a reputation among fighting wizards as adapting well to magical dueling. The Master of that *dojo*—an old man by Muggle standards—was that style's greatest living teacher. He had no idea that magic existed, of course. I applied to study there, and was one of the few students accepted that year, from among many contenders. There might have been a tiny bit of special influence involved."

There was some laughter in the classroom. Harry didn't share it. That hadn't been right at all.

"In any case. During one of my first fights, after I had been beaten in a particularly humiliating fashion, I lost control and attacked my sparring partner—"

Yikes.

"—thankfully with my fists, rather than my magic. The Master, surprisingly, did not expel me on the spot. But he told me that there was a flaw in my temperament. He explained it to me, and I knew that he was right. And then he said that I would learn how to lose."

Professor Quirrell's face was expressionless.

"Upon his strict orders, all of the students of the *dojo* lined up. One by one, they approached me. I was *not* to defend myself. I was only to beg for mercy. One by one, they slapped me, or punched me, and pushed me to the ground. Some of them spat on me. They called me awful names in their language. And to each one, I had to say, 'I lose!' and similar such things, such as 'I beg you to stop!' and 'I admit you're better than me!'"

Harry was trying to imagine this and simply failing. There was no way something like that could have happened to the dignified Professor Quirrell.

"I was a prodigy of Battle Magic even then. With wandless magic alone I could have killed everyone in that dojo. I did not do so. I learned to lose. To this day I remember it as one of the most unpleasant hours of my life. And when I left that dojo eight months later—which was not nearly enough time, but was all I could afford to spend—the Master told me that he hoped I understood why that had been necessary. And I told him that it was one of the most valuable lessons I had ever learned. Which was, and is, true."

Professor Quirrell's face turned bitter. "You are wondering where this marvelous *dojo* is, and whether you can study there. You cannot. For not long afterward, another would-be student came to that hidden place, to that remote mountain. He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named."

There was the sound of many breaths being drawn in simultaneously. Harry felt sick to his stomach. He knew what was coming.

"The Dark Lord came to that school openly, without disguise, glowing red eyes and all. The students tried to bar his way and he simply Apparated through. There was terror there, but discipline, and the Master came forth. And the Dark Lord demanded—not asked, but demanded—to be taught."

Professor Quirrell's face was very hard. "Perhaps the Master had read too many books telling the lie that a true martial artist could defeat even demons. For whatever reason, the Master refused. The Dark Lord asked why he could not be a student. The Master told him he had no patience, and that was when the Dark Lord ripped his tongue out."

There was a collective gasp.

"You can guess what happened next. The students tried to rush the Dark Lord and fell over, stunned where they stood. And then..."

Professor Quirrell's voice faltered for a moment, then resumed.

"There is an Unforgiveable Curse, the Cruciatus Curse, which produces unbearable pain. If the Cruciatus is extended for longer than a few minutes it produces permanent insanity. One by one, the Dark Lord Crucioed the Master's students into insanity, and then finished them off

with the Killing Curse, while the Master was forced to watch. When all his students had died in this way, the Master followed. I learned this from the single surviving student, whom the Dark Lord had left alive to tell the tale, and who had been a friend of mine..."

Professor Quirrell turned away, and when he turned back a moment later, he once again seemed calm and composed.

"Dark Wizards cannot keep their tempers," Professor Quirrell said quietly. "It is a nearly universal flaw of the species, and anyone who makes a habit of fighting them soon learns to rely on it. Understand that the Dark Lord did *not* win that day. His goal was to learn martial arts, and yet he left without a single lesson. The Dark Lord was foolish to wish that story retold. It did not show his strength, but rather an exploitable weakness."

Professor Quirrell's gaze focused on a single child in the classroom.

"Harry Potter," Professor Quirrell said.

"Yes," Harry said, his voice hoarse.

"What *precisely* did you do wrong today, Mr. Potter?"

Harry felt like he was going to throw up. "I lost my temper."

"That is *not* precise," said Professor Quirrell. "I will describe it more exactly. There are many animals which have what are called dominance contests. They rush at each other with horns—trying to knock each other down, not gore each other. They fight with their paws—with claws sheathed. But why with their claws sheathed? Surely, if they used their claws, they would stand a better chance of winning? But then their enemy might unsheathe their claws as well, and instead of resolving the dominance contest with a winner and a loser, both of them might be severely hurt."

Professor Quirrell gaze seemed to come straight out at Harry from the repeater screen. "What you demonstrated today, Mr. Potter, is that—unlike those animals who keep their claws sheathed and accept the results—you do not know how to lose a dominance contest. When a *Hogwarts professor* challenged you, you did not back down. When it looked like you might lose, you unsheathed your claws, heedless of the danger. You *escalated,* and then you escalated *again.* It started with a slap at you from Professor Snape, who was obviously dominant over

you. Instead of losing, you slapped back and lost ten points from Ravenclaw. Soon you were talking about leaving Hogwarts. The fact that you escalated even further in some unknown direction, and somehow won at the end, does not change the fact that you are an idiot."

"I understand," Harry said. His throat was dry. That *had* been precise. *Frighteningly* precise. Now that Professor Quirrell had said it, Harry could see in hindsight that it was an *exactly* accurate description of what had happened. When someone's model of you was that good, you had to wonder whether they were right about other things too, like your intent to kill.

"The *next* time, Mr. Potter, that you choose to escalate a contest rather than lose, you may lose *all* the stakes you place on the table. I cannot guess what they were today. I can guess that they were far, far too high for the loss of ten House points."

Like the fate of magical Britain. That was what he'd done.

"You will protest that you were trying to help all of Hogwarts, a much more important goal worthy of great risks. That is a *lie.* If you had been—"

"I would have taken the slap, waited, and picked the best possible time to make my move," Harry said, his voice hoarse. "But that would have meant *losing.* Letting him be dominant over me. It was what the Dark Lord couldn't do with the Master he wanted to learn from."

Professor Quirrell nodded. "I see that you have understood perfectly. And so, Mr. Potter, today you are going to learn how to lose."

"I—"

"I will not hear any objections, Mr. Potter. It is evident both that you need this and that you are strong enough to take it. I assure you that your experience will not be so harsh as what I went through, though you may well remember it as the worst fifteen minutes of your young life."

Harry swallowed. "Professor Quirrell," he said in a small voice, "can we do this some other time?"

"No," Professor Quirrell said simply. "You are five days into your Hogwarts education and already this has happened. Today is Friday. Our *next* defense class is on Wednesday. Saturday, Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday... No, we do *not* have time to wait."

There were a few laughs at this, but very few.

"Please consider it an order from your professor, Mr. Potter. What I would like to say is that otherwise I will not teach you any offensive spells, because I would then hear that you had severely hurt or even killed someone. Unfortunately I am told that your fingers are already powerful weapons. Do not snap them at any time during this lesson."

More scattered laughter, sounding rather nervous.

Harry felt like he might cry. "Professor Quirrell, if you do anything like what you talked about, it's going to make me angry, and I really would rather not get angry again today—"

"The point is *not* to avoid getting angry," Professor Quirrell said, his face looking grave. "Anger is natural. You need to learn how to lose even when you are angry. Or at least *pretend* to lose so that you can *plan* your vengeance. As I did with Mr. Goyle today, unless of course any of you think he really *is* better—"

"I'm not!" shouted Mr. Goyle from his desk, sounding a little frantic. "I know you didn't really lose! Please don't plan any vengeances!"

Harry felt sick to his stomach. Professor Quirrell didn't know about his mysterious dark side. "Professor, we really need to talk about this after class—"

"We will," Professor Quirrell said in the tones of a promise. "After you learn how to lose." His face was serious. "It should go without saying that I will exclude anything which could injure you or even cause you significant pain. The pain will come from the difficulty of losing, instead of fighting back and escalating the battle until you win."

Harry's breath was coming in short, panicky pants. He was more frightened than he'd been after leaving the Potions classroom. "Professor Quirrell," he managed to say, "I don't want you to get fired over this—"

"I will not be," Professor Quirrell said, "if *you* tell them afterward that it was necessary. And this I trust you to do." For a moment Professor Quirrell's voice turned very dry. "Believe me, they have tolerated worse in their hallways. This case will be exceptional only in that it happens within a classroom."

"Professor Quirrell," Harry whispered, but he thought his voice was still being repeated everywhere, "do you really believe that if I don't do

this, I might hurt someone?"

"Yes," Professor Quirrell said simply.

"Then," Harry felt nauseous, "I'll do it."

Professor Quirrell turned to regard the Slytherins. "So... with the full approval of your teacher, and in such a fashion that Snape cannot be blamed for your actions... do any of you wish to show your dominance over the Boy-Who-Lived? Shove him around, push him to the ground, hear him beg for your mercy?"

Five hands went up.

"Everyone with your hand raised, you are an absolute idiot. What part of *pretending* to lose did you not understand? If Harry Potter does become the next Dark Lord he will hunt you down and kill you after he graduates."

The five hands dropped abruptly back to their desks.

"I won't," Harry said, his voice coming out rather weakly. "I swear never to take vengeance upon those who help me learn to lose. Professor Quirrell... would you *please... stop* that?"

Professor Quirrell sighed. "I *am* sorry, Mr. Potter. I realize that you must find this equally annoying whether you intend to become a Dark Lord or not. But those children *also* had an important life lesson to learn. Would it be acceptable if I awarded you a Quirrell point in apology?"

"Make it two," Harry said.

There was a current of surprised laughter, defusing some of the tension.

"Done," Professor Quirrell said.

"And after I graduate I'm going to hunt you down and *tickle* you."

There was more laughter, although Professor Quirrell didn't smile.

Harry felt like he was wrestling an anaconda, trying to force the conversation through the narrow course that would make people realize he wasn't a Dark Lord after all... *why* was Professor Quirrell so suspicious of him?

"Professor," said Draco's unamplified voice. "It is also not my own ambition to become a stupid Dark Lord."

There was a shocked silence in the classroom.

You don't have to do this! Harry almost blurted out loud, but checked himself in time; Draco might not wish it known that he was doing this out of friendship for Harry... or out of the desire to appear friendly...

Calling *that* a *desire to appear friendly* made Harry feel small, and mean. If Draco had intended to impress him, it was working perfectly.

Professor Quirrell was regarding Draco gravely. "*You* worry that you cannot pretend to lose, Mr. Malfoy? That this flaw which describes Mr. Potter also describes you? *Surely* your father taught you better."

"When it comes to talking, maybe," said Draco, now on the repeater screen. "Not when it comes to being shoved around and pushed to the ground. I want to be fully as strong as you, Professor Quirrell."

Professor Quirrell's eyebrows went up and stayed up. "I am afraid, Mr. Malfoy," he said after a time, "that the arrangements I made for Mr. Potter, involving some older Slytherins who will be told *afterward* how stupid they were, would not carry over onto you. But it is my professional opinion that you are already very strong. Should I hear that you have failed, as Mr. Potter failed today, I will make the appropriate arrangements and apologize to you and whomever you have hurt. I do not think this will be necessary, however."

"I understand, professor," said Draco.

Professor Quirrell looked over the class. "Does anyone else wish to become strong?"

Some students glanced around nervously. Some, Harry thought from his back row, looked like they were opening their mouths but not saying anything. In the end, no one spoke.

"Draco Malfoy will be one of the generals of your year's armies," said Professor Quirrell, "should he deign to engage in that after-school activity. And now, Mr. Potter, please come forward."

*

Yes, Professor Quirrell had said, *it must be in front of everyone, in front of your friends, because that is where Snape confronted you and that is where you must learn to lose.*

So now the first year watched. In magically enforced silence, and with requests from both Harry and the professor not to intervene. Hermione had her face turned away, but she hadn't spoken out or even given him any sort of significant look, maybe because she'd been there in Potions too.

Harry stood on a soft blue mat, such as might be found in a Muggle dojo, which Professor Quirrell had laid out upon the floor for when Harry was pushed down.

Harry was frightened of what he might do. If Professor Quirrell was right about his intent to kill...

Harry's wand lay on Professor Quirrell's desk, not because Harry knew any spells that could defend him, but because otherwise (Harry thought) he might have tried to jam it through someone's eye socket. His pouch lay there, now containing his protected but still potentially fragile Time-Turner.

Harry had pleaded with Professor Quirrell to Transfigure him some boxing gloves and lock them on his hands. Professor Quirrell had given him a look of silent understanding, and refused.

I will not go for their eyes, I will not go for their eyes, I will not go for their eyes, it would be the end of my life in Hogwarts, I'll be arrested, Harry chanted to himself, trying to hammer the thought into his brain, hoping it would stay there if his intent to kill took over.

Professor Quirrell returned, escorting thirteen older Slytherins of different years. Harry recognized one of them as the one he'd hit with a pie. Two others from that confrontation were also present. The one who'd said to stop, that they really shouldn't do this, was missing.

"I repeat," Professor Quirrell said, sounding very stern, "Potter is *not* to be really hurt. Any and all *accidents* will be treated as deliberate. Do you understand?"

The older Slytherins nodded, grinning.

"Then please feel free to take the Boy-Who-Lived down a few pegs," Professor Quirrell said, with a twisted smile that only the first-years understood.

By some form of mutual consent, the pie-target was at the front of the group.

"Potter," said Professor Quirrell, "meet Mr. Peregrine Derrick. He is better than you and he is about to show you that."

Derrick strode forward and Harry's brain screamed discordantly, he must not run away, he must not fight back—

Derrick stopped an arm's length away from Harry.

Harry wasn't angry yet, just frightened. And that meant he beheld a teenage boy fully half a meter taller than himself, with clearly defined muscles, facial hair, and a grin of terrible anticipation.

"Ask him not to hurt you," Professor Quirrell said. "Perhaps if he sees that you're pathetic enough, he'll decide that you're boring, and go away."

There was laughter from the watching older Slytherins.

"Please," Harry said, his voice faltering, "don't, hurt, me..."

"That didn't sound very sincere," said Professor Quirrell.

Derrick's smile widened. The clumsy imbecile was looking very superior and...

...Harry's blood temperature was dropping...

"Please don't hurt me," Harry tried again.

Professor Quirrell shook his head. "How in Merlin's name did you manage to make that sound like an insult, Potter? There is only one response you can possibly expect from Mr. Derrick."

Derrick stepped forward deliberately, and bumped into Harry.

Harry staggered back a few feet and, before he could stop himself, straightened up icily.

"Wrong," said Professor Quirrell, "wrong, wrong, wrong."

"You bumped into me, Potter," Derrick said. "Apologize."

"I'm sorry!"

"You don't *sound* sorry," said Derrick.

Harry's eyes widened in indignation, he *had* managed to make that sound pleading—

Derrick pushed him, hard, and Harry fell to the mat on his hands and knees.

The blue fabric seemed to waver in Harry's vision, not far away.

He was beginning to doubt Professor Quirrell's real motives in teaching this so-called *lesson.*

A foot rested on Harry's buttocks and a moment later Harry was pushed hard to the side, sending him sprawling on his back.

Derrick laughed. "This is *fun,*" he said.

All he had to do was say it was over. And report the whole thing to the Headmaster's office. That would be the end of this *Defense Professor* and his ill-fated stay at Hogwarts and... Professor McGonagall would be angry about that, but...

(An image of Professor McGonagall's face flashed before his eyes, she didn't look angry, just sad—)

"Now tell him that he's better than you, Potter," said Professor Quirrell's voice.

"You're, better, than, me."

Harry started to raise himself and Derrick put a foot on his chest and shoved him back down to the mat.

The world was becoming transparent as crystal. Lines of action and their consequences stretched out before him in utter clarity. The fool wouldn't be expecting him to strike back, a quick hit in the groin would stun him long enough for—

"Try again," said Professor Quirrell and with a sudden sharp motion Harry rolled and sprang to his feet and whirled on where stood his real enemy, the Defense Professor—

Professor Quirrell said, "You have no patience."

Harry faltered. His mind, well-honed in pessimism, drew a picture of a wizened old man with blood pouring from his mouth after Harry had ripped his tongue out—

A moment later, Derrick pushed Harry to the mat again and then sat down on him, sending Harry's breath whooshing out.

"Stop!" Harry screamed. "Please stop!"

"Better," said Professor Quirrell. "That even sounded sincere."

It *had* been. That was the horrible thing, the sickening thing, it *had* been sincere. Harry was panting rapidly, fear and cold anger both flushing through him—

"Lose," said Professor Quirrell.

"I, lose," Harry forced out.

"I like it," Derrick said from on top of him. "Lose some more."

Hands shoved Harry, sending him stumbling across the circle of older Slytherins to another set of hands that shoved him again. Harry had long since passed the point of trying not to cry, and was now just trying not to fall down.

"What are you, Potter?" said Derrick.

"A, l-loser, I lose, I give up, you win, you're b-better, than me, please stop—"

Harry tripped over a foot and went crashing to the ground, hands not quite able to catch himself. He was dazed for a moment, then began struggling to his feet again—

"*Enough!*" said Professor Quirrell's voice, sounding sharp enough to cut iron. "Step away from Mr. Potter!"

Harry saw the surprised looks on their faces. The chill in his blood, which had been flowing and ebbing, smiled in cold satisfaction.

Then Harry collapsed to the mat.

Professor Quirrell talked. There were gasps from the older Slytherins.

"And I believe the scion of Malfoy has something he wants to explain to you as well," finished Professor Quirrell.

Draco's voice started talking. His voice sounded almost as sharp as professor Quirrell's, it had acquired the same cadence Draco had used to imitate his father, and it was saying things like *could have put Slytherin House in jeopardy* and *who knows how many allies in this school alone* and *total lack of awareness, never mind cunning* and *dull thugs, useful for nothing but lackeys* and something in Harry's hindbrain, despite everything he knew, was designating Draco as an ally.

Harry ached all over, was probably bruised, his body felt cold, his mind utterly exhausted. He tried to think of Fawkes's song, but without the phoenix present he couldn't remember the melody and when he

tried to imagine it he couldn't seem to think of anything except a bird chirping.

Then Draco stopped talking and Professor Quirrell told the older Slytherins they were dismissed, and Harry opened his eyes and struggled to sit up, "Wait," Harry said, forcing the words out, "there's something, I want, to say, to them—"

"Wait on Mr. Potter," Professor Quirrell said coldly to the departing Slytherins.

Harry swayed to his feet. He was careful not to look in the direction of his classmates. He didn't want to see how they were looking at him now. He didn't want to see their pity.

So instead Harry looked at the older Slytherins, who still seemed to be in a state of shock. They stared back at him. Dread was on their faces.

His dark side, when it was in control, had held to the imagination of this moment, and went on pretending to lose.

Harry said, "No one will—"

"Stop," said Professor Quirrell. "If that's what I think it is, please wait until after they're gone. They'll hear about it later. We all have our lessons to learn, Mr. Potter."

"All right," Harry said.

"You. Go."

The older Slytherins fled and the door closed behind them.

"No one's to take any revenge on them," Harry said hoarsely. "That's a request to anyone who considers themselves my friend. I had my lesson to learn, they helped me learn it, they had their lesson to learn too, it's over. If you tell this story, make sure you tell that part too."

Harry turned to look at Professor Quirrell.

"You lost," said Professor Quirrell, his voice gentle for the first time. It sounded strange coming from the professor, like his voice shouldn't even be able to do that.

Harry *had* lost. There had been moments when the cold anger had faded entirely, replaced by fear, and during those moments he'd begged the older Slytherins and he'd meant it...

"Is the Sun still in the sky?" said Professor Quirrell, still with that strange gentleness. "Is it still shining? Are you still alive?"

Harry managed to nod.

"Not all losing is like this," said Professor Quirrell. "There are compromises and negotiated surrenders. There are other ways to placate bullies. There is a whole art form to manipulating others by letting them be dominant over you. But first, losing must be *thinkable*. Will you remember how you lost?"

"Yes."

"Will you be able to lose?"

"I... think so..."

"I think so too." Professor Quirrell bowed so low that his thin hair almost touched the floor. "Congratulations, Harry Potter, you win."

There was no single source, no first mover, the applause started all at once like a massive thunderclap.

Harry's couldn't keep the shock from his face. He risked a glance at his classmates, and he saw their faces showing not pity but awe. The applause was coming from Ravenclaw and Gryffindor and Hufflepuff and even Slytherin, probably because Draco Malfoy was applauding too. Some students were standing up from their chairs and half of Gryffindor was standing on their desks.

So Harry stood there, swaying, letting their respect wash over him, feeling stronger, and maybe even a little healed.

Professor Quirrell waited for the applause to die away. It took quite a while.

"Surprised, Mr. Potter?" Professor Quirrell said. His voice sounded amused. "You have just found out that the real world does not *always* work like your worst nightmares. Yes, if you had been some poor anonymous boy being abused, then they would probably have respected you less afterward, pitied you even as they comforted you from their loftier perches. That *is* human nature, I'm afraid. But *you* they already know for a figure of power. And they saw you confront your fear and keep confronting it, even though you could have walked away at any time. Did you think less of *me* when I told you that I had deliberately endured being spat upon?"

Harry felt a burning sensation in his throat and frantically clamped down. He didn't trust this miraculous respect enough to start crying

again in front of it.

"Your *extraordinary* achievement in my class deserves an extraordinary reward, Harry Potter. Please accept it with my compliments on behalf of my House, and remember from this day forward that not all Slytherins are alike. There are Slytherins, and then there are Slytherins." Professor Quirrell was smiling quite broadly as he said this. "Fifty-one points to Ravenclaw."

There was a shocked pause and then pandemonium broke out among the Ravenclaw students, howling and whistling and cheering.

(And in the same moment Harry felt something *wrong* about that, Professor McGonagall had been right, there *should* have been consequences, there should have been a cost and a price to be paid, you couldn't just put everything back the way it was like that—)

But Harry saw the elated faces in Ravenclaw and knew he couldn't possibly say no.

His brain made a suggestion. It was a good suggestion. Harry could not even believe his brain was still keeping him upright, let alone producing good suggestions.

"Professor Quirrell," Harry said, as clearly as he could through his burning throat. "You are everything a member of your House should be, and I think you must be just what Salazar Slytherin had in mind when he helped found Hogwarts. I thank you and your House," Draco was very slightly nodding and subtly turning his finger, *keep going*, "and I think this calls for three cheers for Slytherin. With me, everyone?" Harry paused. "*Huzzah!*" Only a few people managed to join in on the first try. "*Huzzah!*" This time most of Ravenclaw was in on it. "*Huzzah!*" That was almost all of Ravenclaw, a scattering of Hufflepuffs and around a quarter of Gryffindor.

Draco's hand moved into a small, quick, thumbs-up gesture.

Most of the Slytherins had expressions of sheer shock. A few were staring at Professor Quirrell in wonder. Blaise Zabini was looking at Harry with a calculating, intrigued expression.

Professor Quirrell bowed. "Thank *you*, Harry Potter," he said, still with that broad smile. He turned to the class. "Now, believe it or not, we still have half an hour left in this session, and that is enough to introduce

the Simple Shield. Mr. Potter, of course, is going off and taking a well-earned rest."

"I can—"

"Idiot," Professor Quirrell said fondly. The class was already laughing. "Your classmates can teach you afterward, or I'll tutor you privately if that's what it takes. But *right now*, you're going through the third door from the left in the back of the stage, where you will find a bed, an assortment of exceptionally tasty snacks, and some extremely light reading from the Hogwarts library. You may not take anything else with you, particularly not your textbooks. Now go."

Harry went.

CHAPTER TWENTY

BAYES'S THEOREM

Harry stared up at the gray ceiling of the small room, from where he lay on the portable yet soft bed that had been placed there. He'd eaten quite a lot of Professor Quirrell's snacks—intricate confections of chocolate and other substances, dusted with sparkling sprinkles and jeweled with tiny sugar gems, looking highly expensive and proving, in fact, to be quite tasty. Harry hadn't felt the least bit guilty about it either, *this* he had *earned*.

He hadn't tried to sleep. Harry had a feeling that he wouldn't like what happened when he closed his eyes.

He hadn't tried to read. He wouldn't have been able to focus.

Funny how Harry's brain just seemed to keep on running and running, never shutting down no matter how tired it got. It got stupider but it refused to *switch off*.

But there was, there really and truly was a feeling of triumph.

Anti-Dark-Lord-Harry program, +1 point didn't *begin* to cover it. Harry wondered what the Sorting Hat would say *now*, if he could put it on his head.

No *wonder* Professor Quirrell had accused Harry of heading down the path of a Dark Lord. Harry had been too slow on the uptake, he should have seen the parallel right away—

Understand that the Dark Lord did not win that day. His goal was to learn martial arts, and yet he left without a single lesson.

Harry had entered the Potions class with the intent to learn Potions. He'd left without a single lesson.

And Professor Quirrell had heard, and understood with frightening precision, and reached out and yanked Harry off that path, the path that led to his becoming a copy of You-Know-Who.

There was a knock at the door. "Classes are over," said Professor Quirrell's quiet voice.

Harry approached the door and found himself suddenly nervous. Then the tension diminished as he heard Professor Quirrell's footsteps moving away from the door.

What on Earth is that about? Is it what's going to get him fired eventually?

Harry opened the door, and saw that Professor Quirrell was now waiting several bodylengths away.

Does Professor Quirrell feel it too?

They walked across the now-deserted stage to Professor Quirrell's desk, which Professor Quirrell leaned on; and Harry, as before, stopped short of the dais.

"So," Professor Quirrell said. There was a friendly sense about him somehow, even though his face still kept its usual seriousness. "What was it you wanted to talk to me about, Mr. Potter?"

I have a mysterious dark side. But Harry couldn't just blurt it out like that.

"Professor Quirrell," Harry said, "am I off the path to becoming a Dark Lord, now?"

Professor Quirrell looked at Harry. "Mr. Potter," he said solemnly, with only a slight grin, "a word of advice. There is such a thing as a performance which is too perfect. Real people who have just been beaten and humiliated for fifteen minutes do not stand up and graciously forgive their enemies. It is the sort of thing you do when you're trying to *convince* everyone you're not Dark, not—"

"*I can't believe this! You can't have every possible observation confirm your theory!*"

"And that was a *trifle* too much indignation."

"*What on Earth do I have to do to convince you?*"

"To convince me that you harbor no ambitions of becoming a Dark Lord?" said Professor Quirrell, now looking outright amused. "I sup-

pose you could just raise your right hand."

"What?" Harry said blankly. "But I can raise my right hand whether or not I—" Harry stopped, feeling rather stupid.

"Indeed," said Professor Quirrell. "You can just as easily do it either way. There is nothing you can do to convince me because I would know that was exactly what you were trying to do. And if we are to be even more precise, then while I suppose it is barely possible that perfectly good people exist even though I have never met one, it is nonetheless *improbable* that someone would be beaten for fifteen minutes and then stand up and feel a great surge of kindly forgiveness for his attackers. On the other hand it is *less* improbable that a young child would imagine this as the *role to play* in order to convince his teacher and classmates that he is not the next Dark Lord. The import of an act lies not in what that act *resembles on the surface,* Mr. Potter, but in the states of mind which make that act more or less probable."

Harry blinked. He'd just had the dichotomy between the representativeness heuristic and the Bayesian definition of evidence explained to him by a wizard.

"But then again," said Professor Quirrell, "anyone can want to impress their friends. That need not be Dark. So without it being any kind of admission, Mr. Potter, tell me honestly. What thought was in your mind at the moment when you forbade any vengeance? Was that thought a true impulse to forgiveness? Or was it an awareness of how your classmates would see the act?"

Sometimes we make our own phoenix song.

But Harry didn't say it out loud. It was clear that Professor Quirrell wouldn't believe him, and would probably respect him less for trying to utter such a transparent lie.

After a few moments of silence, Professor Quirrell smiled with satisfaction. "Believe it or not, Mr. Potter," said the professor, "you need not fear me for having discovered your secret. I am *not* going to tell you to give up on becoming the next Dark Lord. If I could turn back the hands of time and somehow remove that ambition from the mind of my child self, the self of this present time would not benefit from the alteration. For as long as I thought that was my goal, it drove me to study and learn

and refine myself and become stronger. We become what we are meant to be by following our desires wherever they lead. That is the insight of Salazar. Ask me to show you to the library section which holds those same books I read as a thirteen-year-old, and I will happily lead the way."

"For the love of crap," Harry said, and sat down on the hard marble floor, and then lay back on the floor, staring up at the distant arches of the ceiling. It was as close as he could come to collapsing in despair without hurting himself.

"Still too much indignation," observed Professor Quirrell. Harry wasn't looking but he could hear the suppressed laughter in the voice.

Then Harry realized.

"Actually, I think I know what's confusing you here," Harry said. "That was what I wanted to talk to you about, in fact. Professor Quirrell, I think that what you're seeing is my mysterious dark side."

There was a pause.

"Your... dark side..."

Harry sat up. Professor Quirrell was regarding him with one of the strangest expressions Harry had seen on anyone's face, let alone anyone as dignified as Professor Quirrell.

"It happens when I get angry," Harry explained. "My blood runs cold, everything gets cold, everything seems perfectly clear... In retrospect it's been with me for a while—in my first year of Muggle school, someone tried to take away my ball during recess and I held it behind my back and kicked him in the solar plexus which I'd read was a weak point, and the other kids didn't bother me after that. And I bit a math teacher when she wouldn't accept my dominance. But it's only just recently that I've been under enough stress to notice that it's an actual, you know, mysterious dark side, and not just an anger management problem like the school psychologist said. And I don't have any super magical powers when it happens, that was one of the first things I checked."

Professor Quirrell rubbed his nose. "Let me think about this," he said.

Harry waited in silence for a full minute. He used that time to stand up, which was more difficult than he had expected.

"Well," Professor Quirrell said after a while. "I suppose there *was* something you could say that would convince me."

"I *have* already guessed that my dark side is really just another part of me and that the answer isn't to never become angry but to learn to stay in control by accepting it, I'm not dumb or anything and I've seen this story enough times to know where it's going, but it's hard and you seem like the person to help me."

"Well... yes... very perspicacious of you, Mr. Potter, I must say... that side of you is, as you seem to have already surmised, your intent to kill, which as you say is a part of you..."

"And needs to be trained," Harry said, completing the pattern.

"And needs to be trained, yes." That strange expression was still on Professor Quirrell's face. "Mr. Potter, if you truly do not wish to be the next Dark Lord, then what was the ambition which the Sorting Hat tried to convince you to abandon, the ambition for which you were Sorted into Slytherin?"

"I was Sorted into *Ravenclaw!*"

"Mr. Potter," said Professor Quirrell, now with a much more usual-looking dry smile, "I know you are accustomed to everyone around you being a fool, but please do not mistake me for one of them. The likelihood that the Sorting Hat would play its first prank in eight hundred years while it was upon your head is so small as to not be worth considering. I suppose it is barely possible that you snapped your fingers and invented some simple and clever way to defeat the anti-tampering spells upon the Hat, though I myself can think of no such method. But by far the most probable explanation is that Dumbledore decided he was not happy with the Hat's choice for the Boy-Who-Lived. This is evident to anyone with the tiniest smidgin of common sense, so your secret is safe at Hogwarts."

Harry opened his mouth, then closed it again with a feeling of complete helplessness. Professor Quirrell was wrong, but wrong in such a convincing way that Harry was starting to think that it simply *was* the rational judgment given the evidence available to Professor Quirrell. There were times, never *predictable* times but still sometimes, when you would get improbable evidence and the best knowable guess would be

wrong. If you had a medical test that was only wrong one time in a thousand, sometimes it would still be wrong anyway.

"Can I ask you never to repeat what I'm about to say?" said Harry.

"Absolutely," said Professor Quirrell. "Consider me asked."

Harry wasn't a fool either. "Can I consider you to have said yes?"

"Very good, Mr. Potter. You may indeed so consider."

"*Professor Quirrell—*"

"I won't repeat what you're about to say," Professor Quirrell said, smiling.

They both laughed, then Harry turned serious again. "The Sorting Hat did seem to think I was going to end up as a Dark Lord unless I went to Hufflepuff," Harry said. "But I don't *want* to be one."

"Mr. Potter..." said Professor Quirrell. "Don't take this the wrong way. I promise you will not be graded on the answer. I only want to know your own, honest reply. Why not?"

Harry had that *helpless* feeling again. *Thou shalt not become a Dark Lord* was such an obvious theorem in his moral system that it was hard to describe the actual proof steps. "Um, people would get hurt?"

"Surely you've wanted to hurt people," said Professor Quirrell. "You wanted to hurt those bullies today. Being a Dark Lord doesn't mean that people you *like* get hurt. It means that people you *want* to hurt get hurt."

Harry floundered for words and then decided to simply go with the obvious. "First of all, just because I want to hurt someone doesn't mean it's right—"

"What makes something right, if not your wanting it?"

"Ah," Harry said, "preference utilitarianism."

"Pardon me?" said Professor Quirrell.

"It's the ethical theory that the good is what satisfies the preferences of the most people—"

"No," Professor Quirrell said. His fingers rubbed the bridge of his nose. "I don't think that's quite what I was trying to say. Mr. Potter, in the end people all do what they want to do. Sometimes people give names like 'right' to things they want to do, but how could we possibly act on anything *but* our own desires?"

"Well, obviously," Harry said. "I couldn't *act* on moral considerations if they lacked the power to move me. But that doesn't mean my wanting to hurt those Slytherins has the power to move me *more* than moral considerations!"

Professor Quirrell blinked.

"Not to mention," Harry said, "being a Dark Lord would mean that a lot of innocent bystanders got hurt too!"

"Why does that matter to you?" Professor Quirrell said. "What have they done for you?"

Harry laughed. "Oh, now *that* was around as subtle as *Atlas Shrugged.*"

"Pardon me?" Professor Quirrell said again.

"It's a book that my parents wouldn't let me read because they thought it would corrupt me, so of course I read it anyway and I was offended they thought I would fall for any traps that obvious. Blah blah blah, appeal to my sense of superiority, other people are trying to keep me down, blah blah blah."

"So you're saying I need to make my traps less obvious?" said Professor Quirrell. He tapped a finger on his cheek, looking thoughtful. "I can work on that."

They both laughed.

"But to stay with the current question," said Professor Quirrell, "what *have* all these other people done for you?"

"Other people have done *huge* amounts for me!" Harry said. "My parents took me in when my parents died because they were *good people,* and to become a Dark Lord is to betray that!"

Professor Quirrell was silent for a time.

"I confess," said Professor Quirrell quietly, "when I was your age, that thought could not ever have come to me."

"I'm sorry," Harry said.

"Don't be," said Professor Quirrell. "It was long ago, and I resolved my parental issues to my own satisfaction. So you are held back by the thought of your parents' disapproval? Does that mean that if they died in an accident, there would be nothing left to stop you from—"

"No," Harry said. "Just no. It is their *impulse to kindness* which sheltered me. That impulse is not only in my parents. And that impulse is what would be betrayed."

"In any case, Mr. Potter, you have not answered my original question," said Professor Quirrell finally. "What *is* your ambition?"

"Oh," said Harry. "Um.." He organized his thoughts. "To understand everything important there is to know about the universe, apply that knowledge to become omnipotent, and use that power to rewrite reality because I have some objections to the way it works now."

There was a slight pause.

"Forgive me if this is a stupid question, Mr. Potter," said Professor Quirrell, "but are you *sure* you did not just confess to wanting to be a Dark Lord?"

"That's only if you use your power for evil," explained Harry. "If you use the power for good, you're a Light Lord."

"I see," Professor Quirrell said. He tapped his other cheek with a finger. "I suppose I can work with that. But Mr. Potter, while the scope of your ambition is worthy of Salazar himself, how exactly do you propose to go about it? Is step one to become a great fighting wizard, or Head Unspeakable, or Minister of Magic, or—"

"Step one is to become a scientist."

Professor Quirrell was looking at Harry as if he'd just turned into a cat.

"A scientist," Professor Quirrell said after a while.

Harry nodded.

"A *scientist?*" repeated Professor Quirrell.

"Yes," Harry said. "I shall achieve my objectives through the power... of *Science!*"

"A *scientist!*" said Professor Quirrell. There was genuine indignation on his face, and his voice had grown stronger and sharper. "You could be the best of all my students! The greatest fighting wizard to come out of Hogwarts in five decades! I cannot picture you wasting your days in a white lab coat doing pointless things to rats!"

"Hey!" said Harry. "There's more to science than that! Not that there's anything *wrong* with experimenting on rats, of course. But sci-

ence *is* how you go about understanding and controlling the universe—"

"Fool," said Professor Quirrell, in a voice of quiet, bitter intensity. "You're a fool, Harry Potter." He passed a hand over his face, and when that hand had passed, his face was calmer. "Or more likely you have not yet found your true ambition. May I strongly recommend that you try to become a Dark Lord instead? I will do anything I can to help as a matter of public service."

"You don't like science," Harry said slowly. "Why not?"

"Those fool Muggles will kill us all someday!" Professor Quirrell's voice had grown louder. "They will end it! End all of it!"

Harry was feeling a bit lost here. "What are we talking about here, nuclear weapons?"

"*Yes*, nuclear weapons!" Professor Quirrell was almost shouting now. "Even He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named never used those, perhaps because he didn't want to rule over a heap of ash! They never should have been made! And it will only get worse with time!" Professor Quirrell was standing up straight instead of leaning on his desk. "There are gates you do not open, there are seals you do not breach! The fools who can't resist meddling are killed by the lesser perils early on, and the survivors all know that there are secrets you *do not share* with anyone who lacks the intelligence and the discipline to discover them for themselves! Every powerful wizard knows that! Even the most terrible Dark Wizards know that! And those idiot Muggles can't seem to figure it out! The eager little fools who discovered the secret of nuclear weapons didn't keep it to themselves, they told their *fool* politicians and now *we* must live under the constant threat of annihilation!"

This was a rather different way of looking at things than Harry had grown up with. It had never occurred to him that nuclear physicists should have formed a conspiracy of silence to keep the secret of nuclear weapons from anyone not smart enough to be a nuclear physicist. The thought was intriguing, if nothing else. Would they have had secret passwords? Would they have had masks?

(Actually, for all Harry knew, there *were* all sorts of incredibly destructive secrets which physicists kept to themselves, and the secret of

nuclear weapons was the only one that had escaped into the wild. The world would look the same to him either way.)

"I'll have to think about that," Harry said to Professor Quirrell. "It's a new idea to me. And one of the *hidden* secrets of science, passed down from a few rare teachers to their grad students, is how to avoid flushing new ideas down the toilet the instant you hear one you don't like."

Professor Quirrell blinked again.

"Is there any sort of science you *do* approve of?" said Harry. "Medicine, maybe?"

"Space travel," said Professor Quirrell. "But the Muggles seem to be dragging their feet on the one project which might have let wizardkind escape this planet before they blow it up."

Harry nodded. "I'm a big fan of the space program too. At least we have that much in common."

Professor Quirrell looked at Harry. Something flickered in the professor's eyes. "I will have your word, your promise and your oath never to speak of what follows."

"You have it," Harry said immediately.

"See to it that you keep your oath or you will not like the results," said Professor Quirrell. "I will now cast a rare and powerful spell, not on you, but on the classroom around us. Stand still, so that you do not touch the boundaries of the spell once it has been cast. You must not interact with the magic which I am maintaining. Look only. Otherwise I will end the spell." Professor Quirrell paused. "And try not to fall over."

Harry nodded, puzzled and anticipatory.

Professor Quirrell raised his wand and said something that Harry's ears and mind couldn't grasp at all, words that bypassed awareness and vanished into oblivion.

The marble in a short radius around Harry's feet stayed constant. All the other marble of the floor vanished, the walls and ceilings vanished.

Harry stood on a small circle of white marble in the midst of an endless field of stars, burning terribly bright and unwavering. There was no Earth, no Moon, no Sun that Harry recognized. Professor Quirrell stood in the same place as before, floating in the midst of the starfield.

The Milky Way was already visible as a great wash of light and it grew brighter as Harry's vision adjusted to the darkness.

The sight wrenched at Harry's heart like nothing he had ever seen.

"Are we... in space...?"

"No," said Professor Quirrell. His voice was sad, and reverent. "But it is a true image."

Tears came into Harry's eyes. He wiped them away frantically, he would not miss this for some stupid water blurring his vision.

The stars were no longer tiny jewels set in a giant velvet dome, as they were in the night sky of Earth. Here there was no sky above, no surrounding sphere. Only points of perfect light against perfect blackness, an infinite and empty void with countless tiny holes through which shone the brilliance from some unimaginable realm beyond.

In space, the stars *looked* terribly, terribly, terribly far away.

Harry kept on wiping his eyes, over and over.

"Sometimes," Professor Quirrell said in a voice so quiet it almost wasn't there, "when this flawed world seems unusually hateful, I wonder whether there might be some other place, far away, where I should have been. I cannot seem to imagine what that place might be, and if I can't even imagine it then how can I believe it exists? And yet the universe is so very, very wide, and perhaps it might exist anyway? But the stars are so very, very far away. It would take a long, long time to get there, even if I knew the way. And I wonder what I would dream about, if I slept for a long, long time..."

Though it felt like sacrilege, Harry managed a whisper. "Please let me stay here awhile."

Professor Quirrell nodded, where he stood unsupported against the stars.

It was easy to forget the small circle of marble on which you stood, and your own body, and become a point of awareness which might have been still, or might have been moving. With all distances incalculable there was no way to tell.

There was a time of no time.

And then the stars vanished, and the classroom returned.

"I'm sorry," said Professor Quirrell, "but we're about to have company."

"It's fine," Harry whispered. "It was enough." He would never forget this day, and not because of the unimportant things that had happened earlier. He would learn how to cast that spell if it was the last thing he ever learned.

Then the heavy oaken doors of the classroom blasted off their hinges and skittered across the marble floor with a high-pitched shriek.

"QUIRINUS! HOW DARE YOU!"

Like a vast thundercloud, an ancient and powerful wizard blew into the room, a look of such incandescent rage upon his face that the stern look he had earlier turned upon Harry seemed like nothing.

There was a wrench of disorientation in Harry's mind as the part that wanted to run away screaming from the scariest thing it had ever seen ran away, rotating into place a part of him which could take the shock.

None of Harry's facets were happy about having their star-gazing interrupted. "Headmaster Albus Percival—" Harry started to say in icy tones.

WHAM. Professor Quirrell's hand came down hard upon his desk. "*Mr. Potter!*" barked Professor Quirrell. "This is the *Headmaster of Hogwarts* and you are a mere student! You will address him appropriately!"

Harry looked at Professor Quirrell.

Professor Quirrell was giving Harry a stern glare.

Neither of them smiled.

Dumbledore's long strides had come to a halt before where Harry stood in front of the dais and Professor Quirrell stood by his desk. The Headmaster stared in shock at both of them.

"I'm sorry," Harry said in meekly polite tones. "Headmaster, thank you for wanting to protect me, but Professor Quirrell did the right thing."

Slowly, Dumbledore's expression changed from something that would vaporize steel into something merely angry. "I heard students saying that this man had you abused by older Slytherins! That he forbade you to defend yourself!"

Harry nodded. "He knew exactly what was wrong with me and he showed me how to fix it."

"Harry, *what are you talking about?*"

"I was teaching him how to lose," Professor Quirrell said dryly. "It's an important life skill."

It was apparent that Dumbledore still didn't understand, but his voice had lowered in register. "Harry..." he said slowly. "If there's any threat the Defense Professor has offered you to prevent you from complaining—"

You lunatic, after today of all days do you really think I—

"Headmaster," Harry said, trying to look abashed, "what's wrong with me isn't that I keep quiet about abusive professors."

Professor Quirrell chuckled. "Not perfect, Mr. Potter, but good enough for your first day. Headmaster, did you stay long enough to hear about the fifty-one points for Ravenclaw, or did you storm out as soon as you heard the first part?"

A brief look of disconcertment crossed Dumbledore's face, followed by surprise. "Fifty-one points for Ravenclaw?"

Professor Quirrell nodded. "He wasn't expecting them, but it seemed appropriate. Tell Professor McGonagall that I think the story of what Mr. Potter went through to earn back the lost points will do just as well to make her point. No, Headmaster, Mr. Potter didn't tell me anything. It's easy to see which part of today's events are her work, just as I know that the final compromise was your own suggestion. Though I wonder how on Earth Mr. Potter was able to gain the upper hand over both Snape and you and then Professor McGonagall was able to gain the upper hand over him."

Somehow Harry managed to control his face. Was it *that* obvious to a real Slytherin?

Dumbledore came closer to Harry, scrutinizing. "Your color looks a little off, Harry," the old wizard said. He peered closely at Harry's face. "What did you have for lunch today?"

"What?" Harry said, his mind wobbling in sudden confusion. Why would Dumbledore be asking about deep-fried lamb and thin-sliced broccoli when that was just about the *last* probable cause of—

The old wizard straightened up. "Never mind, then. I think you're fine."

Professor Quirrell coughed, loudly and deliberately. Harry looked at the professor, and saw that Professor Quirrell was staring sharply at Dumbledore.

"*Ah-hem!*" Professor Quirrell said again.

Dumbledore and Professor Quirrell locked eyes, and something seemed to pass between them.

"If you don't tell him," Professor Quirrell said then, "I will, even if you fire me for it."

Dumbledore sighed and turned back to Harry. "I apologize for invading your mental privacy, Mr. Potter," the Headmaster said formally. "I had no purpose except to determine if Professor Quirrell had done the same."

What?

The confusion lasted just exactly as long as it took Harry to understand what had just happened.

"*You—!*"

"Gently, Mr. Potter," said Professor Quirrell. His face was hard, however, as he stared at Dumbledore.

"Legilimency is sometimes mistaken for common sense," said the Headmaster. "But it leaves traces which another skillful Legilimens can detect. That was all I looked for, Mr. Potter, and I asked you an irrelevant question to ensure you wouldn't think about anything important while I looked."

"*You should have asked first!*"

Professor Quirrell shook his head. "No, Mr. Potter, the Headmaster had some justification for his concerns, and had he asked for permission you would have thought of exactly those things you did not wish him to see." Professor Quirrell's voice grew sharper. "I am rather more concerned, Headmaster, that you saw no need to tell him afterward!"

"You have now made it more difficult to confirm his mental privacy on future occasions," Dumbledore said. He favored Professor Quirrell with a cold look. "Was that your intention, I wonder?"

Professor Quirrell's expression was implacable. "There are too many Legilimens in this school. I insist that Mr. Potter receive instruction in Occlumency. Will you permit me to be his tutor?"

"Absolutely not," Dumbledore said at once.

"I did not think so. Then since *you* have deprived him of my free services, *you* will pay for Mr. Potter's tutoring by a licensed Occlumency instructor."

"Such services do not come cheaply," Dumbledore said, looking at Professor Quirrell in some surprise. "Although I do have certain connections—"

Professor Quirrell shook his head firmly. "No. Mr. Potter will ask his account manager at Gringotts to recommend a neutral instructor. With respect, Headmaster Dumbledore, after the events of this morning I must protest you or your friends having access to Mr. Potter's mind. I must also insist that the instructor have taken an Unbreakable Vow to reveal nothing, and that he agree to be Obliviated of each session immediately afterward."

Dumbledore was frowning. "Such services are *extremely* expensive, as you well know, and I cannot help but wonder why *you* deem them necessary."

"If it's money that's the problem," Harry spoke up, "I have some ideas for making large amounts of money quickly—"

"Thank you Quirinus, your wisdom is now quite evident and I am sorry for disputing it. Your concern for Harry Potter does you credit, as well."

"You're welcome," said Professor Quirrell. "I hope you will not object if I go on making him a particular focus of my attentions." Professor Quirrell's face was now very serious, and very still.

Dumbledore looked at Harry.

"It is my own wish also," Harry said.

"So that's how it is to be..." the old wizard said slowly. Something strange passed across his face. "Harry... you must realize that if you choose this man as your teacher and your friend, your first mentor, then one way or another you will lose him, and the manner in which you lose him may or may not allow you to ever get him back."

That hadn't occurred to Harry. But there *was* that jinx on the Defense position... one which had apparently worked with perfect regularity for decades...

"Probably," said Professor Quirrell quietly, "but he will have the full use of me while I last."

Dumbledore sighed. "I suppose it is economical, at least, since as the Defense Professor you're *already* doomed in some unknown fashion."

Harry had to work hard to suppress his expression as he realized what Dumbledore had actually been implying.

"I will inform Madam Pince that Mr. Potter is allowed to obtain books on Occlumency," said Dumbledore.

"There is preliminary training which you must do on your own," said Professor Quirrell to Harry. "And I do suggest that you hurry up on it."

Harry nodded.

"I'll take my leave of you then," said Dumbledore. He nodded to both Harry and Professor Quirrell, and departed, walking a bit slowly.

"Can you cast the spell again?" Harry said the moment Dumbledore was gone.

"Not today," said Professor Quirrell quietly, "and not tomorrow either, I'm afraid. It takes a lot out of me to cast, though less to keep going, and so I usually prefer to maintain it as long as possible. This time I cast it on impulse. Had I thought, and realized we might be interrupted—"

Dumbledore was now Harry's least favorite person in the entire world.

They both sighed.

"Even if I only ever see it once," Harry said, "I will never stop being grateful to you."

Professor Quirrell nodded.

"Have you heard of the Pioneer program?" Harry said. "They were probes that would fly by different planets and take pictures. Two of the probes would end up on trajectories that took them out of the Solar System and into interstellar space. So they put a golden plaque on the probes, with a picture of a man, and a woman, and showing where to find our Sun in the galaxy."

Professor Quirrell was silent for a moment, then smiled. "Tell me, Mr. Potter, can you guess what thought went through my mind when I finished assembling the thirty-seven items on the list of things I would never do as a Dark Lord? Put yourself in my shoes—imagine yourself in my place—and guess."

Harry imagined himself looking over a list of thirty-seven things not to do once he became a Dark Lord.

"You decided that if you had to follow the *whole* list *all* the time, there wouldn't be much point in becoming a Dark Lord in the first place," Harry said.

"*Precisely*," said Professor Quirrell. He was grinning. "So I am going to violate rule two—which was simply 'don't brag'—and tell you about something I have done. I don't see how the knowledge could do any harm. And I strongly suspect you would have figured it out anyway, once we knew each other well enough. Nonetheless... I shall have your oath never to speak of what I am about to tell."

"You have it!" Harry had a feeling this was going to be *really* good.

"I subscribe to a Muggle bulletin which keeps me informed of progress on space travel. I didn't hear about Pioneer 10 until they reported its launch. But when I discovered that Pioneer 11 would also be leaving the Solar System forever," Professor Quirrell said, his grin the widest that Harry had yet seen from him, "I snuck into NASA, I did, and I cast a lovely little spell on that lovely golden plaque which will make it last a lot longer than it otherwise would."

...

...

...

"Yes," Professor Quirrell said, who now seemed to be standing around fifty feet taller, "I thought that was how you might react."

...

...

...

"Mr. Potter?"

"...I can't think of anything to say."

"'You win' seems appropriate," said Professor Quirrell.

"You win," Harry said immediately.

"See?" said Professor Quirrell. "We can only imagine what giant heap of trouble you would have gotten into if you had been unable to say that."

They both laughed.

A further thought occurred to Harry. "You didn't add any extra information to the plaque, did you?"

"Extra information?" said Professor Quirrell, sounding as if the idea had never occurred to him before and he was quite intrigued.

Which made Harry rather suspicious, considering that it'd taken less than a minute for *Harry* to think of it.

"Maybe you included a holographic message like in *Star Wars?*" said Harry. "Or... hm. A portrait seems to store a whole human brain's worth of information... you couldn't have added any extra mass to the probe, but maybe you could've turned an existing part into a portrait of yourself? Or you found a volunteer dying of a terminal illness, snuck them into NASA, and cast a spell to make sure their *ghost* ended up in the plaque—"

"Mr. Potter," Professor Quirrell said, his voice suddenly sharp, "a spell requiring a human death would certainly be classified by the Ministry as Dark Arts, regardless of circumstances. Students should not be heard talking about such things."

And the amazing thing about the way Professor Quirrell said it was how perfectly it maintained plausible deniability. It had been said in exactly the appropriate tone for someone who wasn't willing to discuss such things and thought students should steer away from them. Harry honestly *didn't know* whether Professor Quirrell was just waiting to talk about it until after Harry had learned to protect his mind.

"Got it," Harry said. "I won't talk with anyone else about that idea."

"Please be discreet about the whole matter, Mr. Potter," Professor Quirrell said. "I prefer to go through my life without attracting public notice. You will find nothing in the newspapers about Quirinus Quirrell until I decided it was time for me to teach Defense at Hogwarts."

That seemed a little sad, but Harry understood. Then Harry realized the implications. "So just how much awesome stuff *have* you done that

no one else knows about—"

"Oh, some," said Professor Quirrell. "But I think that's quite enough for today, Mr. Potter, I confess I am feeling a bit tired—"

"I understand. And *thank you.* For *everything*."

Professor Quirrell nodded, but he was leaning harder on his desk.

Harry quickly took his leave.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

RATIONALIZATION

Hermione Granger had worried she was turning Bad.

The difference between Good and Bad was usually easy to grasp, she'd never understood why other people had so much trouble. At Hogwarts, "Good" was Professor Flitwick and Professor McGonagall and Professor Sprout. "Bad" was Professor Snape and Professor Quirrell and Draco Malfoy. Harry Potter... was one of those unusual cases where you *couldn't* tell just by looking. She was still trying to figure out where he belonged.

But when it came to *herself*...

Hermione was having *too much fun* crushing Harry Potter.

She'd done better than him in every single class they'd taken. (Except for broomstick riding which was like gym class, it didn't count.) She'd gotten *real* House points almost every day of their first week, not for weird heroic things, but *smart* things like learning spells quickly and helping other students. She knew those kinds of House points were better, and the best part was, Harry Potter knew it too. She could see it in his eyes every time she won another *real* House point.

If you were Good, you weren't supposed to enjoy winning this much.

It had started on the day of the train ride, though it had taken a while for the whirlwind to sink in. It wasn't until later that night that Hermione had begun to realize just *how much* she'd let that boy walk all over her.

Before she'd met Harry Potter she hadn't had anyone she'd wanted to crush. If someone wasn't doing as well as her in class, it was her job to help them, not rub it in. That was what it meant to be Good.

And now...

...now she was *winning*, Harry Potter was flinching every time she got another House point, and it was *so much* fun, her parents had warned her against drugs and she suspected this was *more fun* than that.

She'd always liked the smiles that teachers gave her when she did something right. She'd always liked seeing the long row of check-marks on a perfectly answered test. But now when she did well in class she would casually glance around and catch a glimpse of Harry Potter gritting his teeth, and it made her want to burst into song like a Disney movie.

That was Bad, wasn't it?

Hermione had worried she was turning Bad.

And then a thought had come to her which wiped away all her fears.

She and Harry were getting into a Romance! Of course! Everyone knew what it meant when a boy and a girl started fighting all the time. They were *courting* one another! There was nothing Bad about *that.*

It couldn't be that she just *enjoyed* beating the living scholastic daylights out of the most famous student in the school, someone who was *in* books and *talked* like books, the boy who had somehow vanquished the Dark Lord and even smushed *Professor Snape* like a sad little bug, the boy who was, as Professor Quirrell would have put it, dominant, over everyone else in first-year Ravenclaw *except* for Hermione Granger who was utterly *squishing* the Boy-Who-Lived in all his classes besides broomstick riding.

Because that would have been Bad.

No. It was Romance. *That* was it. *That* was why they were fighting.

Hermione was glad she had figured this out in time for today, when Harry would lose their book-reading contest, which the *whole school* knew about, and she wanted to start *dancing* with the sheer overflowing joy of it.

It was 2:45PM on Saturday and Harry Potter had half of Bathilda Bagshot's *A History of Magic* left to read and she was staring at her pocket watch as it ticked with dreadful slowness toward 2:47PM.

And the entire Ravenclaw common room was watching.

It wasn't just the first-years, news had spread like spilled milk and fully half of Ravenclaw was crowded into the room, squeezed into sofas

and leaning on bookcases and sitting on the arms of chairs. All six prefects were there including the Head Girl of Hogwarts. Someone had needed to cast an Air-Freshening Charm just so that there would be enough oxygen. And the din of conversation had died into whispers which had now faded into utter silence.

2:46PM.

The tension was unbearable. If it had been anyone else, *anyone* else, his defeat would have been a foregone conclusion.

But this was Harry Potter, and you couldn't rule out the possibility that he would, sometime in the next few seconds, raise a hand and snap his fingers.

With sudden terror she realized how Harry Potter might be able to do exactly that. It would be *just like him* to have *already finished reading* the second half of the book earlier...

Hermione's vision began to swim. She tried to make herself breathe, and found that she simply couldn't.

Ten seconds left, and he still hadn't raised his hand.

Five seconds left.

2:47PM.

Harry Potter carefully placed a bookmark into his book, closed it, and laid it aside.

"I would like to note for the benefit of posterity," said the Boy-Who-Lived in a clear voice, "that I had only half a book left, and that I ran into a number of unexpected delays—"

"*You lost!*" shrieked Hermione. "You *did!* You *lost our contest!*"

There was a collective exhalation as everyone started breathing again.

Harry Potter shot her a Look of Flaming Fire, but she was floating in a halo of pure white happiness and nothing could touch her.

"*Do you realize what kind of week I've had?*" said Harry Potter. "Any lesser being would have been hard-pressed to read eight Dr. Seuss books!"

"*You* set the time limit."

Harry's Look of Flaming Fire grew even hotter. "I did not have any logical way of knowing I'd have to save the entire school from Professor Snape, or get beaten up in Defense class, and if I told you how I lost all

the time between 5PM and dinner on Thursday you would think I was insane—"

"Awww, it sounds like *someone* fell prey to the *planning fallacy.*"

Raw shock showed on Harry Potter's face.

"Oh that reminds me, I finished reading the first batch of books you lent me," Hermione said with her best innocent look. A couple of them had been *hard* books, too. She wondered how long it had taken *him* to finish reading them.

"Someday," said the Boy-Who-Lived, "when the distant descendants of *Homo sapiens* are looking back over the history of the galaxy and wondering how it all went so wrong, they will conclude that the original mistake was when someone taught Hermione Granger how to read."

"But you still lose," said Hermione. She held a hand to her chin and looked contemplative. "Now what exactly should you lose, I wonder?"

"*What?*"

"You lost the bet," Hermione explained, "so you have to pay a forfeit."

"I don't remember agreeing to this!"

"Really?" said Hermione Granger. She put a thoughtful look on her face. Then, as if the idea had only just then occurred to her, "We'll take a vote, then. Everyone in Ravenclaw who thinks Harry Potter has to pay up, raise your hand!"

"*What?*" shrieked Harry Potter again.

He spun around and saw that he was surrounded by a sea of raised hands.

And if Harry Potter had looked *more carefully*, he would have noticed that an awful lot of the onlookers seemed to be girls and that practically every female in the room had their hand raised.

"Stop!" wailed Harry Potter. "You don't know what she's going to ask! Don't you *realize* what she's doing? She's getting you to make an advance commitment now, and then the pressure of consistency will make you agree with whatever she says afterward!"

"Don't worry," said the prefect Penelope Clearwater. "If she asks for something unreasonable, we can just change our minds. Right, everyone?"

And there were eager nods from all the girls whom Penelope Clearwater had told about Hermione's plan.

A silent figure quietly slipped through the chilled halls of the Hogwarts dungeons. He was to be present in a certain room at 6:00PM to meet a certain someone, and if at all possible it was best to be early, to show respect.

But when his hand turned the doorknob and opened the door into that dark, silent, unused classroom, there was a silhouette already standing there amid the rows of dusty old desks. A silhouette which held a small green glowing rod, casting a pale light which hardly illuminated even he who held it, let alone the surrounding room.

The light of the hallway died as the door closed and shut behind him, and Draco's eyes began the process of adjusting to the dim glow.

The silhouette slowly turned to behold him, revealing a shadowed face only partially lit by the eerie green light.

Draco liked this meeting already. Keep the chill green light, make them both taller, give them hoods and masks, move them from a classroom to a graveyard, and it would be just like the start of half the stories his father's friends told about the Death Eaters.

"I want you to know, Draco Malfoy," said the silhouette in tones of deadly calm, "that I do not blame you for my recent defeat."

Draco opened his mouth in unthinking protest, there was no possible reason why he *should* be blamed—

"It was due, more than anything else, to my own stupidity," continued that shadowy figure. "There were many other things I could have done, at any step along the way. You did not ask me to do *exactly* what I did. You only asked for help. I was the one who unwisely chose that particular method. But the fact remains that I lost the contest by half a book. The actions of your pet idiot, and the favor you asked for, and, yes, my own foolishness in going about it, caused me to *lose time*. More time than you know. Time which, in the end, proved critical. The fact

remains, Draco Malfoy, that if you had not asked that favor, I *would* have won. And not... instead... *lost*."

Draco had already heard about Harry's loss, and the forfeit Granger had claimed from him. The news had spread faster than owls could have carried it.

"I understand," Draco said. "I'm sorry." There was nothing else he *could* say if he wanted Harry Potter to be friends with him.

"I am not asking for understanding or sorrow," said the dark silhouette, still with that deadly calm. "But I have just spent two full hours in the presence of Hermione Granger, dressed in such clothing as was provided me, visiting such fascinating places in Hogwarts as a tiny burbling waterfall of what looked to me like snot, accompanied by a number of other girls who insisted on such helpful activities as strewing our path with Transfigured rose petals. I have been on a date, scion of Malfoy. My *first* date. *And when I call that favor due, you will pay it.*"

Draco nodded solemnly. Before arriving he had taken the wise precaution of learning every available detail of Harry's date, so that he could get all of his hysterical laughing done before their appointed meeting time, and would not commit a *faux pas* by giggling continuously until he lost consciousness.

"Do you think," Draco said, "that something sad ought to happen to the Granger girl—"

"Spread the word in Slytherin that the Granger girl is *mine* and anyone who meddles in *my* affairs will have their remains scattered over an area wide enough to include twelve different spoken languages. And since I am not in Gryffindor and I use *cunning* rather than immediate frontal attacks, they should not panic if I am seen smiling at her."

"Or if you're seen on a second date?" Draco said, allowing just a tiny note of skepticism into his voice.

"*There will be no second date,*" said the green-lit silhouette in a voice so fearsome that it sounded, not only like a Death Eater, but like Amycus Carrow that one time just before Father told him to stop it, he wasn't the Dark Lord.

Of course it *was* still a young boy's high unbroken voice and when you combined that with the *actual words*, well, it just didn't work. If

Harry Potter *did* become the next Dark Lord someday, Draco would use a Pensieve to store a copy of this memory somewhere safe, and Harry Potter would never dare betray him.

"But let us talk of happier matters," said the green-shadowed figure. "Let us talk of knowledge and of power. Draco Malfoy, let us talk of Science."

"Yes," said Draco. "Let us speak."

Draco wondered how much of his own face could be seen, and how much was in shadow, in that eerie green light.

And though Draco kept his face serious, there was a smile in his heart.

He was *finally* having a real grownup conversation.

"I offer you power," said the shadowy figure, "and I will tell you of that power and its price. The power comes from knowing the shape of reality and so gaining control over it. What you understand, you can command, and that is power enough to walk upon the Moon. The price of that power is that you must learn to ask questions of Nature, and far more difficult, accept Nature's answers. You will do experiments, perform tests and see what happens. And you must accept the meaning of those results when they tell you that you are mistaken. You will have to *learn how to lose*, not to me, but to Nature. When you find yourself arguing with reality, you will have to let reality win. You will find this painful, Draco Malfoy, and I do not know if you are strong in that way. Knowing the price, is it still your wish to learn the human power?"

Draco took a deep breath. He'd thought about this. And it was hard to see how he could answer any other way. He'd been instructed to take every avenue of friendship with Harry Potter. It was just *learning*, he wasn't promising to *do* anything. He could always stop the lessons at any time...

There were certainly any number of things about the situation which made it look like a trap, but in all honesty, Draco didn't see how this could go wrong.

Plus Draco did kind of want to rule the world.

"Yes," said Draco.

"Excellent," said the shadowy figure. "I have had something of a *crowded week*, and it will take time to plan your curriculum—"

"I've got a lot of things I need to do myself to consolidate my power in Slytherin," said Draco, "not to mention homework. Maybe we should just start in October?"

"Sounds sensible," said the shadowy figure, "but what I meant to say is that to plan your curriculum, I need to know what I will be teaching you. Three thoughts come to me. The first is that I teach you of the human mind and brain. The second option is that I teach you of the physical universe, those arts which lie on the pathway to visiting the Moon. This involves a great deal of numbers, but to a certain kind of mind those numbers are more beautiful than anything else Science has to teach. Do you like numbers, Draco?"

Draco shook his head.

"Then so much for that. You will learn your mathematics eventually, but not right away, I think. The third option is that I teach you of genetics and evolution and inheritance, what you would call blood—"

"That one," said Draco.

The figure nodded. "I thought you might say as much. But I think it will be the most painful path for you, Draco. What if your family and friends, the blood purists, say one thing, and you find that the experimental test says another?"

"Then I'll figure out how to make the experimental test say the *right* answer!"

There was a pause, as the shadowy figure stood there with its mouth open for a short while.

"Um," said the shadowy figure. "It doesn't really work like that. That's what I was trying to warn you about here, Draco. You *can't* make the answer come out to be anything you like."

"You can *always* make the answer come out your way," said Draco. That had been practically the first thing his tutors had taught him. "It's just a matter of finding the right arguments."

"No," said the shadowy figure, voice rising in frustration, "no, no, no! Then you get the *wrong answer* and you can't go to the Moon that way! Nature isn't a person, you can't trick them into believing some-

thing else, if you try to tell the Moon it's made of cheese you can argue for days and it won't change the Moon! What you're talking about is *rationalization*, like starting with a sheet of paper, moving straight down to the bottom line, using ink to write 'and *therefore,* the Moon is made of cheese', and then moving back up to write all sorts of clever arguments above. But either the Moon is made of cheese or it isn't. The moment you wrote the bottom line, it was already true or already false. Whether or not the whole sheet of paper ends up with the right conclusion or the wrong conclusion is fixed the instant you write down the bottom line. If you're trying to pick between two expensive trunks, and you like the shiny one, it doesn't matter what clever arguments you come up with for buying it, the *real* rule you used to *choose which trunk to argue for* was 'pick the shiny one', and however effective that rule is at picking good trunks, that's the kind of trunk you'll get. Rationality *can't* be used to argue for a fixed side, its only possible use is *deciding which side to argue*. Science isn't for *convincing* anyone that the blood purists are right. That's *politics!* The power of science comes from *finding out the way Nature really is that can't be changed by arguing!* What science *can* do is tell us *how blood really works,* how wizards really inherit their powers from their parents, and whether Muggleborns are really weaker or stronger—"

"*Stronger!*" said Draco. He had been trying to follow this, a puzzled frown on his face, he could see how it *sort* of made sense but it certainly wasn't like anything he'd ever heard before. And then Harry Potter had said something Draco couldn't possibly let pass. "You think mudbloods are *stronger?*"

"I think nothing," said the shadowy figure. "I know nothing. I believe nothing. My bottom line is not yet written. I will figure out how to test the magical strength of Muggleborns, and the magical strength of purebloods. If my tests tell me that Muggleborns are weaker, I will believe they are weaker. If my tests tell me that Muggleborns are stronger, I will believe they are stronger. Knowing this and other truths, I will gain some measure of power—"

"And you expect *me* to believe whatever you say?" Draco demanded hotly.

"I expect you to perform the tests *personally*," said the shadowy figure quietly. "Are you afraid of what *you* will find?"

Draco stared at the shadowy figure for a while, his eyes narrowed. "Nice trap, Harry," he said. "I'll have to remember that one, it's new."

The shadowy figure shook his head. "It's not a trap, Draco. Remember—I *don't know* what we'll find. But you do not understand the universe by arguing with it or telling it to come back with a different answer next time. When you put on the robes of a scientist you must forget all your politics and arguments and factions and sides, silence the desperate clingings of your mind, and wish only to hear the answer of Nature." The shadowy figure paused. "Most people can't do it. That's why this is difficult. Are you sure you wouldn't rather just learn about the brain?"

"And if I tell you I'd rather learn about the brain," Draco said, his voice now hard, "you'll go around telling people that I was afraid of what I'd find."

"No," said the shadowy figure. "I will do no such thing."

"But you might do the same sort of tests yourself, and if you got the wrong answer, I wouldn't be there to say anything before you showed it to someone else." Draco's voice was still hard.

"I would still ask you first, Draco," the shadowy figure said quietly.

Draco paused. He hadn't been expecting that, he'd thought he saw the trap but... "You *would?*"

"Of course. How would *I* know who to blackmail or what we could ask from them? Draco, I say again that this is not a trap I set for you. At least not for you personally. If your politics were different, I would be saying, what if the test shows that purebloods are stronger."

"Really."

"*Yes!* That's the price *anyone* has to pay to become a scientist!"

Draco held up a hand. He had to think.

The shadowy, green-lit figure waited.

It didn't take long to think about, though. If you discarded all the confusing parts... then Harry Potter was planning to mess around with something that could cause a gigantic political explosion, and it would

be insane to just walk away and let him do it on his own. "We'll study blood," said Draco.

"*Excellent*," said the figure, and smiled. "Congratulations on being willing to ask the question."

"Thanks," Draco said, not quite managing to keep the irony out of his voice.

"Hey, did you think going to the Moon was *easy?* Be glad this just involves changing your mind sometimes, and not a human sacrifice!"

"Human sacrifice would be *way* easier!"

There was a slight pause, and then the figure nodded. "Fair point."

"Look, Harry," said Draco without much hope, "I thought the idea was to take all the things that Muggles know, combine them with things that wizards know, and become masters of both worlds. Wouldn't it be a lot easier to just study all the things that Muggles *already* found out, like the Moon stuff, and use *that* power—"

"*No,*" said the figure with a sharp shake of his head, sending green shadows moving around his nose and eyes. His voice had turned very grim. "If you cannot learn the scientist's art of accepting reality, then I *must not* tell you what that acceptance has discovered. It would be like a powerful wizard telling you of those gates which must not be opened, and those seals which must not be broken, before you had proven your intelligence and discipline by surviving the lesser perils."

A chill went down Draco's spine and he shuddered involuntarily. He knew it had been visible even in the dim light. "All right," said Draco. "I understand." Father had told him that many times. When a more powerful wizard told you that you weren't ready to know, you didn't pry any further if you wanted to live.

The figure inclined his head. "Indeed. But there is something else you should understand. The first scientists, being Muggles, lacked your traditions. In the beginning they simply did not comprehend the notion of dangerous knowledge, and thought that all things known should be spoken freely. When their searches turned dangerous, they told their politicians of things that should have stayed secret—don't look like that, Draco, it wasn't simple stupidity. They did have to be smart enough to uncover the secret in the first place. But they were Muggles, it was

the first time they'd found anything *really* dangerous, and they didn't *start out* with a tradition of secrecy. There was a war going on, and the scientists on one side worried that if they *didn't* talk, the scientists of the *enemy* country would tell *their* politicians first..." The voice trailed off significantly. "They didn't destroy the world. But it was close. And *we* are not going to repeat that mistake."

"Right," Draco said, his voice now very firm. "*We* won't. We're wizards, and studying science doesn't make us Muggles."

"As you say," said the green-lit silhouette. "We will establish our *own* Science, a magical Science, and that Science will have smarter traditions from the very start." The voice grew hard. "The knowledge I share with you will be taught alongside the disciplines of accepting truth, the level of this knowledge will be keyed to your progress in those disciplines, and you will share that knowledge with no one else who has not learned those disciplines. Do you accept this?"

"Yes," said Draco. What was he supposed to do, say no?

"Good. And what you discover for yourself, you will keep to yourself unless you think that other scientists are ready to know it. What we do share among ourselves, we will not tell the world unless we agree it is safe for the world to know. And whatever our own politics and allegiances, we will *all* punish *any* of our number who reveal dangerous magics or give away dangerous weapons, no matter what sort of war is going on. From this day onward, that will be the tradition and the law of science among wizards. Are we agreed on that?"

"Yes," said Draco. Actually this *was* starting to sound pretty attractive. The Death Eaters had tried to take power by being scarier than everyone else, and they hadn't actually won yet. Maybe it was time to try ruling using secrets instead. "And our group stays hidden for as long as possible, and everyone in it has to agree to our rules."

"Of course. Definitely."

There was a very short pause.

"We're going to need better robes," said the shadowy figure, "with hoods and so on—"

"I was *just thinking* that," said Draco. "We don't need whole new robes, though, just cowled cloaks to put on. I have a friend in Slytherin,

she'll take your measurements—"

"Don't tell her what it's *for*, though—"

"I'm not *stupid!*"

"And no masks for now, not when it's just you and I—" said the shadowy figure.

"Right! But later on we should have some sort of special mark that all our servants have, the Mark of Science, like a snake eating the Moon on their right arms—"

"It's called a PhD and wouldn't that make it too easy to identify our people?"

"Huh?"

"I mean, what if someone is like 'okay, now everyone pull up their robes over their right arms' and our guy is like 'whoops, sorry, looks like I'm a spy'—"

"Forget I said anything," said Draco, sweat suddenly springing out all over his body. He needed a distraction, *fast*—"And what do we call ourselves? The Science Eaters?"

"No," said the shadowy figure slowly. "That doesn't sound right..."

Draco wiped his robed arm across his forehead, wiping away beads of moisture. What had the Dark Lord been *thinking?* Father had said the Dark Lord was *smart!*

"I've got it!" said the shadowy figure suddenly. "You won't understand yet, but trust me, it fits."

Right now Draco would have accepted 'Malfoy Munchers' as long as it changed the subject. "What is it?"

And standing amid the dusty desks in an unused classroom in the dungeons of Hogwarts, the green-lit silhouette of Harry Potter spread his arms dramatically and said, "This day shall mark the dawn of... the *Bayesian Conspiracy*."

A silent figure trudged wearily through the halls of Hogwarts in the direction of Ravenclaw.

Harry had gone straight from the meeting with Draco to dinner, and stayed at dinner barely long enough to choke down a few fast gulps of food before going off to bed.

It wasn't even 7PM yet, but it was well past bedtime for Harry. He'd realized *last* night that he wouldn't be able to use the Time-Turner on Saturday until after the book-reading contest was already over. But he could still use the Time-Turner on *Friday* night, and gain time that way. So Harry had pushed himself to stay awake until 9PM on Friday, when the protective shell opened, and then used the four hours remaining on the Time-Turner to spin back to 5PM and collapse into sleep. He'd woken up around 2PM on Saturday morning, just as planned, and read for the next twelve hours straight... and it still hadn't been enough. And now Harry would be going to sleep rather early for the next few days, until his sleep cycle caught up again.

The portrait on the door asked Harry some dumb riddle meant for eleven-year-olds that he answered without the words even passing through his conscious mind, and then Harry staggered up the stairs to his dorm room, changed into his pajamas and collapsed into bed.

And found that his pillow seemed rather lumpy.

Harry groaned. He sat up reluctantly, twisted in bed, and lifted up his pillow.

This revealed a note, two golden Galleons, and a book titled *Occlumency: The Hidden Arte.*

Harry picked up the note and read:

My, you do get yourself into trouble and quickly. James himself was no match for you.

You have made a powerful enemy. Snape commands the loyalty, admiration, and fear of all House Slytherin. You cannot trust any of that House now, whether they come to you in friendly guise or fearsome.

From now on you must not meet Snape's eyes. He is a Legilimens and can read your mind if you do. I have enclosed a book which may help you learn to protect yourself, though there is only so far you can get without a tutor. Still you may hope to at least detect intrusion.

So that you may find some extra time in which to study Occlumency, I have enclosed 2 Galleons, which is the price of answer sheets and homework for the first-year History of Magic class (Professor Binns having given the same tests and same assignments every year since he died). Your newfound friends the Weasley twins should be able to sell you a copy. It goes without saying that you must not get caught with it in your possession.

Of Professor Quirrell I know little. He is a Slytherin and a Defense Professor, and that is two marks against him. Consider carefully any advice he gives you, and tell him nothing you do not wish known.

*Dumbledore only pretends to be insane. He is extremely intelligent, and if you continue to step into closets and vanish, he will certainly deduce your possession of an invisibility cloak if he has not done so already. Avoid him whenever possible, hide the Cloak of Invisibility somewhere safe (*NOT *your pouch) any time you cannot avoid him, and step with great care in his presence.*

Please be more careful in the future, Harry Potter.

—Santa Claus

Harry stared at the note.

It *did* seem to be pretty good advice. Of course Harry wasn't going to cheat in History class even if they gave him a dead monkey for a professor. But Severus's Legilimency... whoever'd sent this note knew a lot of important, secret things and was willing to tell Harry about them. The note was still warning him against Dumbledore stealing the Cloak but at this point Harry honestly had no clue if that was a bad sign, it could just be an understandable mistake.

There seemed to be some sort of intrigue going on inside Hogwarts. Maybe if Harry *compared stories* between Dumbledore and the note-sender, he could work out a *combined* picture that would be accurate? Like if they *both* agreed on something, then...

...whatever...

Harry stuffed everything into his pouch and turned up the Quieter and pulled the cover over his head and died.

It was Sunday morning and Harry was eating pancakes in the Great Hall, sharp quick bites, glancing nervously at his watch every few seconds.

It was 8:02AM, and in precisely two hours and one minute, it would be *exactly one week* since he'd seen the Weasleys and crossed over onto Platform Nine and Three-Quarters.

And the thought had occurred to him... Harry didn't know if this was a valid way to think about the universe, he didn't know anything any more, but it *seemed possible*...

That...

Not enough interesting things had happened to him over the last week.

When he was done eating breakfast, Harry planned to go straight up to his room and hide in the bottom level of his trunk and not talk to anyone until 10:03AM.

And that was when Harry saw the Weasley twins walking toward him. One of them was carrying something concealed behind his back.

He should scream and run away.

He should scream and run away.

Whatever this was... it could very well be...

...the *grand finale*...

He really should just scream and run away.

With a resigned feeling that the universe would come and get him *anyway*, Harry continued slicing at the pancake with his fork and knife. He couldn't muster the energy. That was the sad truth. Harry knew now how people felt when they were tired of running, tired of trying to escape fate, and they just fell to the ground and let the horrifically befanged and tentacled demons of the darkest abyss drag them off to their unspeakable destiny.

The Weasley twins drew closer.

And yet closer.

Harry ate another bite of pancake.

The Weasley twins arrived, grinning brightly.

"Hello, Fred," Harry said dully. One of the twins nodded. "Hello, George." The other twin nodded.

"You sound tired," said George.

"You should cheer up," said Fred.

"Look what *we* got you!"

And George took, from behind Fred's back—

A cake with twelve flaming candles.

There was a pause, as the Ravenclaw table stared at them.

"That's not right," said someone. "Harry Potter was born on the thirty-first of Jul—"

"He is coming," said a huge hollow voice that cut through all conversation like a sword of ice. "The one who will tear apart the very—"

Dumbledore had leapt out of his throne and run straight over the Head Table and seized hold of the woman speaking those awful words, Fawkes had appeared in a flash, and all three of them vanished in a crack of fire.

There was a shocked pause...

...followed by heads turning in the direction of Harry Potter.

"I didn't do it," Harry said in a tired voice.

"That was a *prophecy!*" someone at the table hissed. "And I bet it's about *you!*"

Harry sighed.

He stood up from his seat, raised his voice, and said very loudly over the conversations that were starting up, "*It's not about me! Obviously! I'm not coming here, I'm already here!*"

Harry sat back down again.

The people who had been looking at him turned away again.

Someone else at the table said, "Then who *is* it about?"

And with a dull, leaden sensation, Harry realized who *wasn't* already at Hogwarts.

Call it a wild guess, but Harry had a feeling the undead Dark Lord would be showing up one of these days.

The conversation continued on around him.

"Not to mention, tear apart the very *what?*"

"I thought I heard Trelawney start to say something with an 'S' just before the Headmaster grabbed her."

"Like... soul? Sun?"

"If someone's going to tear apart the Sun we're *really* in trouble!"

That seemed rather unlikely to Harry, unless the world contained scary things which had heard of David Criswell's ideas about star lifting.

"So," Harry said in tired tones, "this happens every Sunday breakfast, does it?"

"No," said a student who might have been in his seventh year, frowning grimly. "It doesn't."

Harry shrugged. "Whatever. Anyone want some birthday cake?"

"But it's *not* your birthday!" said the same student who'd objected last time.

That was the cue for Fred and George to start laughing, of course.

Even Harry managed a weary smile.

As the first slice was served to him, Harry said, "I've had a *really long week*."

And Harry was sitting in the cavern level of his trunk, slid shut and locked so no one could get in, a blanket pulled over his head, waiting for the week to be over.

10:01.

10:02.

10:03, but just to be sure...

10:04 and the first week was done.

Harry breathed a sigh of relief, and gingerly pulled the blanket off of his head.

A few moments later, he had emerged into the bright sunlit air of his dorm.

Shortly after, and he was in the Ravenclaw common room. A few people looked at him, but no one said anything or tried to talk to him.

Harry found a nice wide writing desk, pulled back a comfortable chair, and sat down. From his pouch he drew a sheet of paper and a pencil.

Mum and Dad had told Harry in no uncertain terms that while they understood his enthusiasm for leaving home and getting away from his parents, he was to write them *every week without fail*, just so that they knew he was alive, unharmed, and not in prison.

Harry stared down at the blank sheet of paper. *Let's see...*

After leaving his parents at the train station, he'd...

...gotten acquainted with a boy raised by Darth Vader, become friends with the three most infamous pranksters in Hogwarts, met Hermione, then there'd been the Incident with the Sorting Hat... Monday he'd been given a time machine to treat his sleep disorder, gotten a legendary invisibility cloak from an unknown benefactor, rescued seven Hufflepuffs by staring down five scary older boys one of whom had threatened to break his finger, realized that he possessed a mysterious dark side, learned to cast *Frigideiro* in Charms class, and gotten started on his rivalry with Hermione... Tuesday had introduced Astronomy taught by Professor Aurora Sinistra who was nice, and History of Magic taught by a ghost who ought to be exorcised and replaced with a tape recorder... Wednesday, he'd been pronounced the Most Dangerous Student in the Classroom... Thursday, let's not even think about Thursday... Friday, the Incident in Potions Class, followed by his blackmailing the Headmaster, followed by the Defense Professor having him beaten up in class, followed by the Defense Professor turning out to be the most awesome human being who still walked the face of the Earth... Saturday he'd lost a bet and gone on his first date and started redeeming Draco... and then this morning Professor Trelawney's unheard prophecy might or might not indicate that an immortal Dark Lord was about to attack Hogwarts.

Harry mentally organized his material, and started writing.

Dear Mum and Dad:

Hogwarts is lots of fun. I learned how to violate the Second Law of Thermodynamics in Charms class, and I met a girl named Hermione Granger who reads faster than I do.

I'd better leave it at that.
Your loving son
Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

THE SCIENTIFIC METHOD

A small study room, near but not in the Ravenclaw dorm, one of the many many unused rooms of Hogwarts. Gray stone the floors, red brick the walls, dark stained wood the ceiling, four glowing glass globes set into the four walls of the room. A circular table that looked like a wide slab of black marble set on thick black marble legs for columns, but which had proved to be very light (weight and mass both) and wasn't difficult to pick up and move around if necessary. Two comfortably cushioned chairs which had seemed at first to be locked to the floor in inconvenient places, but which would, the two of them had finally discovered, scoot around to where you stood as soon as you leaned over in a posture that looked like you were about to sit down.

There also seemed to be a number of bats flying around the room.

That was where, future historians would one day record—*if* the whole project ever actually amounted to anything—the scientific study of magic had begun, with two young first-year Hogwarts students.

Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres, theorist.

And Hermione Jean Granger, experimenter and test subject.

Harry was doing better in classes now, at least the classes he considered interesting. He'd read more books, and not books for eleven-year-olds either. He'd practiced Transfiguration over and over during one of his extra hours every day, taking the other hour for beginning Occlumency. He was taking the worthwhile classes *seriously,* not just turning in his homework every day, but using his free time to learn more than was required, to read other books beyond the given textbooks, looking to master the subject and not just memorize a few test answers, to excel. You didn't see that much outside Ravenclaw. And now even *within*

Ravenclaw, his only remaining competitors were Padma Patil (whose parents came from a non-English-speaking culture and thus had raised her with an actual work ethic), Anthony Goldstein (out of a certain tiny ethnic group that won 25% of the Nobel Prizes), and of course, striding far above everyone like a Titan strolling through a pack of puppies, Hermione Granger.

To run this particular experiment you needed the test subject to learn sixteen new spells, on their own, without help or correction. That meant the test subject was Hermione. Period.

It should be mentioned at this point that the bats flying around the room were *not* glowing.

Harry was having trouble accepting the implications of this.

"*Oogely boogely!*" Hermione said again.

Again, at the tip of Hermione's wand, there was the abrupt, transitionless appearance of a bat. One moment, empty air. The next moment, bat. Its wings seemed to be already moving in the instant when it appeared.

And it *still wasn't glowing.*

"Can I stop now?" said Hermione.

"Are you sure," Harry said through what seemed to be a block in his throat, "that maybe with a bit more practice you couldn't get it to glow?" He was violating the experimental procedure he'd written down beforehand, which was a sin, and he was violating it because he didn't like the results he was getting, which was a *mortal* sin, you could go to Science Hell for that, but it didn't seem to be mattering anyway.

"What did you change this time?" Hermione said, sounding a little weary.

"The durations of the *oo, eh,* and *ee* sounds. It's supposed to be 3 to 2 to 2, not 3 to 1 to 1."

"*Oogely boogely!*" said Hermione.

The bat materialized with only one wing and spun pathetically to the floor, flopping around in a circle on the gray stone.

"Now what is it really?" said Hermione.

"3 to 2 to 1."

"*Oogely boogely!*"

This time the bat didn't have any wings at all and fell with a plop like a dead mouse.

"3 to 1 to 2."

And lo the bat did materialize and it did fly up at once toward the ceiling, healthy and glowing a bright green.

Hermione nodded in satisfaction. "Okay, what next?"

There was a long pause.

"*Seriously?* You *seriously* have to say *Oogely boogely* with the duration of the *oo, eh,* and *ee* sounds having a ratio of 3 to 1 to 2, or the bat won't glow? *Why? Why? For the love of all that is sacred, why?*"

"Why not?"

"AAAAAAAAARRRRRRGHHHH!"

Thud. Thud. Thud.

Harry had thought about the nature of magic for a while, and then designed a series of experiments based on the premise that virtually everything wizards believed about magic was wrong.

You couldn't *really* need to say 'Wingardium Leviosa' in exactly the right way in order to levitate something, because, come on, 'Wingardium Leviosa'? The universe was going to check that you said 'Wingardium Leviosa' in exactly the right way and otherwise it wouldn't make the quill float?

No. Obviously no, once you thought about it seriously. Someone, quite possibly an actual preschool child, but at any rate some English-speaking magic user, who thought that 'Wingardium Leviosa' sounded all flyish and floaty, had originally spoken those words while casting the spell for the first time. And then told everyone else it was necessary.

But (Harry had reasoned) it didn't *have* to be that way, it wasn't built into the universe, it was built into *you*.

There was an old story passed down among scientists, a cautionary tale, the story of Blondlot and the N-Rays.

Shortly after the discovery of X-Rays, an eminent French physicist named Prosper-Rene Blondlot—who had been first to measure the speed of radio waves and show that they propagated at the speed of light—had announced the discovery of an amazing new phenomenon, N-Rays, which would induce a faint brightening of a screen. You had to look hard

to see it, but it was there. N-Rays had all sorts of interesting properties. They were bent by aluminum and could be focused by an aluminum prism into striking a treated thread of cadmium sulfide, which would then glow faintly in the dark...

Soon dozens of other scientists had confirmed Blondlot's results, especially in France.

But there were still other scientists, in England and Germany, who said they weren't quite sure they could see that faint glow.

Blondlot had said they were probably setting up the machinery wrong.

One day Blondlot had given a demonstration of N-Rays. The lights had turned out, and his assistant had called off the brightening and darkening as Blondlot performed his manipulations.

It had been a normal demonstration, all the results going as expected.

Even though an American scientist named Robert Wood had quietly stolen the aluminum prism from the center of Blondlot's mechanism.

And that had been the end of N-Rays.

Reality, Philip K. Dick had once said, *is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away.*

Blondlot's sin had been obvious in retrospect. He shouldn't have told his assistant what he was doing. Blondlot should have made sure the assistant *didn't* know what was being tried or when it was being tried, before asking him to describe the screen's brightness. It could have been that simple.

Nowadays it was called "blinding" and it was one of the things modern scientists took for granted. If you were doing a psychology experiment to see whether people got angrier when they were hit over the head with red truncheons than with green truncheons, you didn't get to look at the subjects yourself and decide how "angry" they were. You would snap photos of them after they'd been hit with the truncheon, and send the photos off to a panel of raters, who would rate on a scale of 1 to 10 how angry each person looked, obviously *without* knowing what color of truncheon they'd been hit with. Indeed there was no good reason to tell the raters what the experiment was about, at all. You *certainly* wouldn't tell the experimental subjects that *you thought* they ought to be

angrier when hit by red truncheons. You'd just offer them 20 pounds, lure them into a test room, hit them with a truncheon, color randomly assigned of course, and snap the photo. In fact the truncheon-hitting and photo-snapping would be done by an assistant who hadn't been told about the hypothesis, so he couldn't look expectant, hit harder, or snap the photo at just the right time.

Blondlot had destroyed his reputation with the sort of mistake that would get a failing grade and probably derisive laughter from the T.A. in a first-year undergraduate course on experimental design... in 1991.

But this had been a bit longer ago, in 1904, and so it had taken months before Robert Wood had formulated the obvious alternative hypothesis and figured out how to test it, and dozens of other scientists had been sucked in.

More than two centuries after science had gotten started. That late in scientific history, it still hadn't been obvious.

Which made it *entirely* plausible that in the tiny wizarding world, where science didn't seem much known at all, no one had ever tried the first, the simplest, the most obvious thing that any modern scientist would think to check.

The books were full of complicated instructions for all the things you had to do *exactly right* in order to cast a spell. And, Harry had hypothesized, the process of obeying those instructions, of checking that you were following them correctly, probably *did* do something. It *forced you to concentrate on the spell*. Being told to just wave your wand and wish probably *wouldn't* work as well. And once you believed the spell was supposed to work a certain way, once you had practiced it that way, you might not be able to convince yourself that it could work any *other* way...

...if you did the simple but wrong thing, and tried to test alternative forms *yourself.*

But what if you *didn't know* what the original spell had been like?

What if you gave Hermione a list of spells she hadn't studied yet, taken from a book of silly prank spells in the Hogwarts library, and some of those spells had the correct and original instructions, while others had one changed gesture, one changed word? What if you kept the

instructions constant, but told her that a spell supposed to create a red worm was supposed to create a blue worm instead?

Well, in that case, it had turned out...

...Harry was having trouble believing his results here...

...if you told Hermione to say "Oogely boogely" with the vowel durations in the ratio of 3 to 1 to 1, instead of the correct ratio of 3 to 1 to 2, you still got the bat but it wouldn't glow any more.

Not that belief was *irrelevant* here. Not that *only* the words and wand movements mattered.

If you gave Hermione completely incorrect information about what a spell was supposed to do, it would stop working.

If you didn't tell her at all what the spell was supposed to do, it would stop working.

If she knew in very vague terms what the spell was supposed to do, or she was only partially wrong, then the spell would work as originally described in the book, not the way she'd been told it should.

Harry was, at this moment, literally banging his head against the brick wall. Not hard. He didn't want to damage his precious brains. But if he didn't have some outlet for his frustration, he would spontaneously catch on fire.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

It seemed the universe actually *did* want you to say 'Wingardium Leviosa' and it wanted you to say it in a certain exact way and it didn't care what *you* thought the pronunciation should be any more than it cared how you felt about gravity.

WHYYYYYYYYYYYYYY?

The worst part of it was the smug, amused look on Hermione's face.

Hermione had *not* been okay with sitting around obediently following Harry's instructions without being told why.

So Harry had explained to her what they were testing.

Harry had explained why they were testing it.

Harry had explained why probably no wizard had tried it before them.

Harry had explained that he was actually fairly confident of his prediction.

Because, Harry had said, there was *no way* that the universe actually wanted you to say 'Wingardium Leviosa'.

Hermione had pointed out that this was not what her books said. Hermione had asked if Harry really thought he was smarter, at eleven years old and just over a month into his Hogwarts education, than all the other wizards in the world who disagreed with him.

Harry had said the following exact words:

"Of course."

Now Harry was staring at the red brick directly in front of him and contemplating how hard he would have to hit his head in order to give himself a concussion that would interfere with long-term memory formation and prevent him from remembering this later. Hermione wasn't laughing, but he could feel her *intent to laugh* radiating out from behind him like a dreadful pressure on his skin, sort of like knowing you were being stalked by a serial killer only *worse.*

"Say it," Harry said.

"I wasn't *going* to," said the kindly voice of Hermione Granger. "It didn't seem nice."

"Just get it over with," said Harry.

"Okay! So you gave me this *whole long lecture* about how hard it was to do basic science and how we might need to stay on the problem for *thirty-five years*, and then you went and expected us to make the greatest discovery in the history of magic in the first hour we were working together. You didn't just hope, you really expected it. You're silly."

"Thank you. Now—"

"I've read all the books you gave me and I still don't know what to call that. Overconfidence? Planning fallacy? Super duper Lake Wobegon effect? They'll have to name it after you. Harry Bias."

"All *right!*"

"But it *is* cute. It's such a boy thing to do."

"*Drop dead.*"

"Aw, you say the most romantic things."

Thud. Thud. Thud.

"So what's next?" said Hermione.

Harry rested his head against the bricks. His forehead was starting to hurt where he'd been banging it. "Nothing. I have to go back and design different experiments."

Over the last month, Harry had carefully worked out, in advance, a course of experimentation for them that would have lasted until December.

It would have been a *great* set of experiments if the *very first test* had not falsified the basic premise.

Harry could not believe he had been this dumb.

"Let me correct myself," said Harry. "I need to design *one* new experiment. I'll let you know when we've got it, and we'll do it, and then I'll design the next one. How does that sound?"

"It sounds like *someone* wasted a *whole lot of effort*."

Thud. Ow. He'd done that a bit harder than he'd planned.

"So," said Hermione. She was leaning back in her chair and the smug look was back on her face. "What did we discover today?"

"I discovered," said Harry through gritted teeth, "that when it comes to doing truly basic research on a genuinely confusing problem where you have no clue what's going on, my books on scientific methodology aren't worth crap—"

"Language, Mr. Potter! Some of us are innocent young girls!"

"Fine. But if my books were worth a *carp,* that's a kind of fish not anything bad, they would have given me the following important piece of advice: When there's a confusing problem and you're just starting out and you have a falsifiable hypothesis, go test it. Find some simple, easy way of doing a basic check and do it right away. Don't worry about designing an elaborate course of experiments that would make a grant proposal look impressive to a funding agency. Just check as fast as possible whether your ideas are false before you start investing huge amounts of effort in them. How does that sound for a moral?"

"Mmm... okay," said Hermione. "But I was also hoping for something like 'Hermione's books aren't worthless. They're written by wise old wizards who know way more about magic than I do. I should pay attention to what Hermione's books say.' Can we have that moral too?"

Harry's jaw seemed to be clenched too tightly to let any words out, so he just nodded.

"Great!" Hermione said. "I liked this experiment. We learned a lot from it and it only took me an hour or so."

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!"

In the dungeons of Slytherin.

An unused classroom lit with eerie green light, much brighter this time and coming from a small crystal globe with a temporary enchantment, but eerie green light nonetheless, casting strange shadows from the dusty desks.

Two boy-sized figures in cowled grey cloaks (no masks) had entered in silence, and sat down in two chairs opposite the same desk.

It was the second meeting of the Bayesian Conspiracy.

Draco Malfoy hadn't been sure if he should look forward to it or not.

Harry Potter, judging by the expression on his face, didn't seem to have any doubts on the appropriate mood.

Harry Potter looked like he was ready to kill someone.

"Hermione Granger," said Harry Potter, just as Draco was opening his mouth. "*Don't ask*."

He couldn't have gone on another date, could he? thought Draco, but that didn't make any sense.

"Harry," said Draco, "I'm sorry but I have to ask this anyway, did you *really* order the mudblood girl an expensive mokeskin pouch for her birthday?"

"Yes, I did. You've already worked out why, of course."

Draco reached up and raked fingers through his hair in frustration, his cowl brushing the back of his hand. He *hadn't* been quite sure why, but now he couldn't say so. And Slytherin *knew* he was courting Harry Potter, he'd made it obvious enough in Defense class. "Harry," said Draco, "people know I'm friends with you, they don't know about the

Conspiracy of course, but they know we're friends, and it makes *me* look bad when you do that sort of thing."

Harry Potter's face tightened. "Anyone in Slytherin who can't understand the concept of acting nice toward people you don't actually like should be ground up and fed to pet snakes."

"There are a lot of people in Slytherin who *don't,*" Draco said, his voice serious. "Most people are stupid, and you have to look good in front of them anyway." Harry Potter *had* to understand that if he ever wanted to get anywhere in life.

"What do *you* care what other people think? Are you really going to live your life needing to explain everything you do to the dumbest idiots in Slytherin, letting *them* judge *you?* I'm sorry, Draco, but I'm not lowering my cunning plots to the level of what the dumbest Slytherins can understand, just because it might make you look bad otherwise. Not even your friendship is worth that. It would *take all the fun out of life.* Tell me *you* haven't ever thought the same thing when someone in Slytherin is being too stupid to breathe, that it's beneath the dignity of a Malfoy to have to pander to them."

Draco genuinely hadn't. Ever. Pandering to idiots was like breathing, you did it without thinking about it.

"Harry," Draco said at last. "Just doing whatever you want, without worrying about how it looks, isn't smart. The *Dark Lord* worried about how he looked! He was feared and hated, and he knew *exactly* what sort of fear and hate he wanted to create. *Everyone* has to worry about what other people think."

The cowled figure shrugged. "Perhaps. Remind me sometime to tell you about something called Asch's Conformity Experiment, you might find it quite amusing. For now I'll just note that it's dangerous to worry about what other people think on *instinct,* because you *actually care,* not as a matter of cold-blooded calculation. Remember, I was beaten and bullied by older Slytherins for fifteen minutes, and afterward I stood up and graciously forgave them. Just like the good and virtuous Boy-Who-Lived ought to do. But my cold-blooded calculations, Draco, tell me that I have *no use* for the dumbest idiots in Slytherin, since *I don't own a pet snake.* So I have no reason to care what they think about how I

conduct my duel with Hermione Granger."

Draco did not clench his fists in frustration. "She's just some mudblood," Draco said, keeping his voice calm, rather than shouting. "If you don't like her, push her down the stairs."

"Ravenclaw would know—"

"Have Pansy Parkinson push her down the stairs! You wouldn't even have to manipulate her, offer her a Sickle and she'd do it!"

"*I* would know! Hermione beat me in a book-reading contest, she's getting better grades than me, I have to defeat her with my *brain* or it doesn't count!"

"*She's just a mudblood! Why do you respect her that much?*"

"*She's a power among Ravenclaws! Why do you care what some powerless idiot in Slytherin thinks?*"

"*It's called politics! And if you can't play it you can't have power!*"

"*Walking on the moon is power! Being a great wizard is power! There are kinds of power that don't require me to spend the rest of my life pandering to morons!*"

Both of them stopped, and, in almost perfect unison, began taking deep breaths to calm themselves.

"Sorry," Harry Potter said after a few moments, wiping sweat from his forehead. "Sorry, Draco. You've got a lot of political power and it makes sense for you to keep it. You *should* be calculating what Slytherin thinks. It's an important game and I shouldn't have insulted it. But you can't ask *me* to lower the level of my game in Ravenclaw, just so that you don't look bad by associating with me. Tell Slytherin you're gritting your teeth while you pretend to be my friend."

That was exactly what Draco *had* told Slytherin, and he still wasn't sure whether it was true.

"Anyway," Draco said. "Speaking of your image. I'm afraid I've got some bad news. Rita Skeeter heard some of the stories about you and she's been asking questions."

Harry Potter raised his eyebrows. "Who?"

"She writes for the *Daily Prophet,*" Draco said. He tried to keep the worry out of his voice. The *Daily Prophet* was one of Father's primary tools, he used it like a wizard's wand. "That's the newspaper people

actually pay attention to. Rita Skeeter writes about celebrities, and as she puts it, uses her quill to puncture their over-inflated reputations. If she can't find any rumors about you, she'll just make up her own."

"I *see,*" said Harry Potter. His green-lit face looked very thoughtful beneath the cowl.

Draco hesitated before saying what he had to say next. By now someone had certainly reported to Father that he was courting Harry Potter, and Father would also know that Draco hadn't written home about it, and Father would understand that Draco didn't think he could actually keep it a secret, which sent a clear message that Draco was practicing his own game now but still on Father's side, since if Draco had been tempted away, he would have been sending false reports.

It followed that Father had probably anticipated what Draco was about to say next.

Playing the game with Father for real was a rather unnerving sensation. Even if they were on the same side. It was, on the one hand, exhiliarating, but Draco also knew that in the end it would turn out that Father had played the game better. There was no other way it could possibly go.

"Harry," Draco finally said. "This isn't a suggestion. This isn't my advice. Just the way it is. My father could almost certainly quash that article. But it would cost you."

That Father had been expecting Draco to tell Harry Potter exactly that was not something Draco said out loud. Harry Potter would work it out on his own, or not.

But instead Harry Potter shook his head, smiling beneath the cowl. "I have no intention of trying to quash Rita Skeeter."

Draco didn't even try to keep the incredulity out of his voice. "You *can't* tell me you don't care what the *newspaper* says about you!"

"I care less than you might think," said Harry Potter. "But I have my own ways of dealing with the likes of Skeeter. I don't need Lucius's help."

A worried look came over Draco's face before he could stop it. Whatever Harry Potter was about to do next, it would be something Father

wasn't expecting, and Draco was feeling very nervous about where that might lead.

Draco also realized that his hair was getting sweaty underneath the cowl. He'd never actually worn one of those before, and hadn't realized that the Death Eaters' cloaks probably had things like Cooling Charms.

Harry Potter wiped some sweat from his forehead again, grimaced, took out his wand, pointed it upward, took a deep breath, and said "*Frigideiro!*"

Moments later Draco felt the cold draft.

"*Frigideiro! Frigideiro! Frigideiro! Frigideiro! Frigideiro!*"

Then Harry Potter lowered the wand, though his hand seemed a bit shaky, and put it back into his robes.

The whole room seemed perceptibly cooler. Draco could have done that too, but still, not bad.

"So," Draco said. "Science. You're going to tell me about blood."

"We're going to *find out* about blood," Harry Potter said. "By doing experiments."

"All right," Draco said. "What sort of experiments?"

Harry Potter smiled evilly beneath his cowl, and said, "You tell me."

Draco had heard of something called the Socratic Method, which was teaching by asking questions (named after an ancient philosopher who had been too smart to be a real Muggle and hence had been a disguised pureblood wizard). One of his tutors had used Socratic teaching a lot. It had been annoying but effective.

Then there was the Potter Method, which was insane.

To be fair, Draco had to admit that Harry Potter had tried the Socratic Method first and it hadn't been working too well.

Harry Potter had asked how Draco would go about *disproving* the blood purist hypothesis that wizards couldn't do the neat stuff now that they'd done eight centuries ago because they had interbred with Muggleborns and Squibs.

Draco had said that he did not understand how Harry Potter could sit there with a straight face and claim this was not a trap.

Harry Potter had replied, still with a straight face, that if it was a trap it would have been so pathetically obvious that *he* ought to be ground up and fed to pet snakes, but it was *not* a trap, it was simply a rule of how scientists operated that you had to try to disprove your own theories, and if you made an honest effort and failed, that was victory.

Draco had tried to point out the staggering stupidity of this by suggesting that the key to surviving a duel was to cast Avada Kedavra on your own foot and miss.

Harry Potter had *nodded*.

Draco had shaken his head.

Harry Potter had then presented the idea that scientists watched ideas fight to see which ones won, and you *couldn't fight without an opponent*, so Draco needed to figure out opponents for the blood purist hypothesis to fight so that blood purism could win, which Draco understood a little better even though Harry Potter had said it with a rather distasteful look. Like, it was clear that if blood purism was the way the world really was, then the sky just had to be blue, and if some other theory was true, the sky just had to be green; and nobody had seen the sky yet; and then you went outside and looked and the blood purists won; and after this had happened six times in a row, people would start noticing the trend.

Harry Potter had then proceeded to claim that all the opponents Draco was inventing were too weak, so blood purism wouldn't get credit for defeating them because the battle wouldn't be impressive enough. Draco had understood that too. *Wizards have gotten weaker because house elves are stealing our magic* hadn't sounded impressive to him either.

(Though Harry Potter *had* said that one at least was testable, in that they could try to check if house elves had gotten stronger over time, and even draw a picture representing the increasing strength of house elves and another picture representing the decreasing strength of wizards and if the two pictures matched that would point to the house elves, all said in such completely serious tones that Draco had felt an impulse to ask Dobby a few pointed questions under Veritaserum before snapping out of it.)

And Harry Potter had finally said that Draco *couldn't* fix the battle, scientists weren't dumb, it would be *obvious* if you fixed the battle, it had to be a *real fight,* between two different theories that might both *really* be true, with a test that only the *true* hypothesis would win, something that actually *would* come out different ways depending on which hypothesis was actually correct, and there would be experienced scientists watching to make sure that was exactly what happened. Harry Potter had claimed that he himself just wanted to know *how blood really worked* and for that he need to see blood purism *really win* and Draco wasn't going to fool *him* with theories that were just there to be knocked down.

Even having seen the point, Draco hadn't been able to invent any "plausible alternatives", as Harry Potter put it, to the idea that wizards were getting less powerful because they were mixing their blood with mud. It was too obviously true.

It was then that Harry Potter had said, rather frustrated, that he couldn't imagine Draco was *really* this bad at considering different viewpoints, *surely* there'd been Death Eaters who'd posed as enemies of blood purism and had come up with much more plausible-sounding arguments against their own side than Draco was offering. If Draco had been trying to pose as a member of Dumbledore's faction, and come up with the house elf hypothesis, he wouldn't have fooled anyone for a second.

Draco had been forced to admit this was a point.

Hence the Potter Method.

"Please, Dr. Malfoy," whined Harry Potter, "why won't you accept my paper?"

Harry Potter had needed to repeat the phrase "just pretend to be pretending to be a scientist" three times before Draco had understood.

In that moment Draco had realized that there was something deeply *wrong* with Harry Potter's brain, and anyone who tried Legilimency on it would probably never come back out again.

Harry Potter had then gone into further and considerable detail: Draco was to pretend to be a Death Eater who was posing as the editor of a scientific journal, Dr. Malfoy, who wanted to reject his enemy Dr. Potter's paper "On the Heritability of Magical Ability", and if the Death Eater didn't act like a real scientist would, he would be revealed

as a Death Eater and executed, while Dr. Malfoy was also being watched by his own rivals and needed to *appear* to reject Dr. Potter's paper for neutral scientific reasons or he would lose his position as journal editor.

It was a wonder the Sorting Hat wasn't gibbering madly in St. Mungo's.

It was also the most complicated thing anyone had *ever* asked Draco to pretend and there was no possible way he could have refused the challenge.

Right now they were, as Harry Potter had put it, getting in the mood.

"I'm afraid, Dr. Potter, that you wrote this in the wrong color of ink," Draco said. "Next!"

Dr. Potter's face did an excellent job of crumpling in despair, and Draco couldn't help but feel a flash of Dr. Malfoy's glee, even though the Death Eater was only pretending to be Dr. Malfoy.

This part was *fun.* He could have done this all day long.

Dr. Potter got up from the chair, slumped over in dismay, and trudged off, and turned into Harry Potter, who gave Draco a thumbs-up, and then turned back into Dr. Potter again, now approaching with an eager smile.

Dr. Potter sat down and presented Dr. Malfoy with a piece of parchment on which was written:

On the Heritability of Magical Ability
Dr. H. J. Potter-Evans-Verres, Institute for Sufficiently Advanced Science
My observation:
Today's wizards can't do things as impressive as
what wizards used to do 800 years ago.
My conclusion:
Wizardkind has become weaker by mixing
their blood with Muggleborns and Squibs.

"Dr. Malfoy," said Dr. Potter with a hopeful look, "I was wondering if the *Journal of Irreproducible Results* could consider for publication my paper entitled 'On the Heritability of Magical Ability'."

Draco looked at the parchment, smiling while he considered possible rejections. If he was a professor, he would have refused the essay as too short, so—

"It's too long, Dr. Potter," said Dr. Malfoy.

For a moment there was genuine incredulity on Dr. Potter's face.

"Ah..." said Dr. Potter. "How about if I get rid of the separate lines for observations and conclusions, and just put in a *therefore*—"

"Then it'll be too short. Next!"

Dr. Potter trudged off.

"All right," said Harry Potter, "you're getting *too* good at this. Two more times to practice, and then third time is for real, no interruptions between, I'll just come in straight at you and that time you'll reject the paper based on the actual content, remember, your scientific rivals are watching."

Dr. Potter's next paper was perfect in every way, a marvel of its kind, but unfortunately had to be rejected because Dr. Malfoy's journal was having trouble with the letter E. Dr. Potter offered to rewrite it without those words, and Dr. Malfoy explained that it was really more of a vowel problem.

The paper after that was rejected because it was Tuesday.

It was, in fact, Saturday.

Dr. Potter tried to point this out and was told "Next!"

(Draco was starting to understand why Snape had used his hold over Dumbledore just to get a position that let him be awful to students.)

And then—

Dr. Potter was approaching with a superior smirk on his face.

"This is my latest paper, *On the Heritability of Magical Ability,*" Dr. Potter stated confidently, and thrust out the parchment. "I have decided to allow your journal to publish it, and have prepared it in perfect accordance with your guidelines so that you may publish it quickly."

The Death Eater decided to track down and kill Dr. Potter after his mission was done. Dr. Malfoy kept a polite smile on his face, since his rivals were watching, and said...

(The pause stretched, with Dr. Potter looking at him impatiently.)

"...Let me look at that, please."

Dr. Malfoy took the parchment and perused it carefully.

The Death Eater was starting to get nervous about the fact that he wasn't a real scientist, and Draco was trying to remember how to talk like Harry Potter.

"You, ah, need to consider other possible explanations for your, um, observation, besides just this one—"

"Really?" interrupted Dr. Potter. "Like what, exactly? *House elves are stealing our magic?* My data admit of only one possible conclusion, Dr. Malfoy. There *are* no other plausible hypotheses."

Draco was trying furiously to order his brain to think, what would he say if he was posing as a member of Dumbledore's faction, what *did* they claim was the explanation for wizardkind's decline, Draco had never bothered to actually ask that...

"If you can't think of any other way to explain my data, you'll have to publish my paper, *Dr. Malfoy.*"

It was the sneer on Dr. Potter's face that did it.

"Oh yeah?" snapped Dr. Malfoy. "How do you know that magic itself isn't fading away?"

Time stopped.

Draco and Harry Potter exchanged looks of appalled horror.

Then Harry Potter spat something that was probably an extremely bad word if you'd been raised by Muggles. "*I didn't think of that!*" said Harry Potter. "And I should have. The magic goes away. *Damn, damn, damn!*"

The alarm in Harry Potter's voice was contagious. Without even thinking about it, Draco's hand went into his robes and clutched at his wand. He'd thought the House of Malfoy was *safe,* so long as you only married into families that could trace their bloodlines back four generations you were supposed to be *safe,* it had never occurred to him before that there might be nothing anyone could do to stop the end of magic. "Harry, what do we do?" Draco's voice was rising in panic. "*What do we do?*"

"*Let me think!*"

After a few moments, Harry grabbed from a nearby desk the same quill and roll of parchment he'd used to write his pretend paper, and

started scribbling something.

"We'll figure it out," Harry said, his voice tight, "if magic is fading out of the world we'll figure out how fast it's fading and how much time we have left to do something, and then we'll figure out why it's fading, and then we'll do something about it. Draco, have wizarding powers been declining at a steady rate, or have there been sudden drops?"

"I... I don't know..."

"You told me that no one had matched the four founders of Hogwarts. So it's been going on for at least eight centuries, then? You can't remember hearing anything about the problems suddenly appearing five centuries ago or anything like that?"

Draco was trying frantically to think. "I always heard that nobody was as good as Merlin and then after that nobody was as good as the Founders of Hogwarts."

"All right," Harry said. He was still scribbling. "Because three centuries ago is when Muggles started to not believe in magic, which I thought might have something to do with it. And about a century and a half ago was when Muggles began using a kind of technology that stops working around magic and I was wondering if it might also go the other way around."

Draco exploded out of his chair, so angry he could hardly even speak. "It's the *Muggles*—"

"*Damn it!*" roared Harry. "Weren't you even listening to *yourself*? It's been going on for eight centuries at least and the Muggles weren't doing anything interesting then! *We have to figure out the real truth!* The Muggles *might* have something to do with this but if they *don't* and you go blaming everything on them and that stops us from figuring out what's *really* going on then one day you're going to wake up in the morning and find out that your wand is just a stick of wood!"

Draco's breath stopped in his throat. His father often said *our wands will break in our hands* in his speeches but Draco had never really thought before about what that *meant*, it wasn't going to happen to *him* after all. And now suddenly it seemed very real. *Just a stick of wood.* Draco could imagine just what it would be like to take out his wand and try to cast a spell and find that nothing was happening...

That could happen to *everyone*.

There would be no more wizards, no more magic, ever. Just Muggles who had a few legends about what their ancestors had been able to do. Some of the Muggles would be called Malfoy, and that would be all that was left of the name.

For the first time in his life, Draco realized why there were Death Eaters.

He'd always taken for granted that becoming a Death Eater was something you did when you grew up. Now Draco *understood*, he knew why Father and Father's friends had sworn to give their lives to prevent the nightmare from coming to pass, there were things you couldn't just stand by and watch happen. But what if it was going to happen *anyway*, what if all the sacrifices, all the friends they'd lost to Dumbledore, the *family* they'd lost, what if it had all been for *nothing*...

"Magic *can't* be fading away," Draco said. His voice was breaking. "It wouldn't be *fair*."

Harry stopped scribbling and looked up. His face had an angry expression. "Your father never told you that life isn't fair?"

Father had said that every single time Draco used the word. "But, but, it's too awful to believe that—"

"Draco, let me introduce you to something I call the Litany of Tarski. It changes every time you use it. On this occasion it runs like so: *If magic is fading out of the world, I want to believe that magic is fading out of the world. If magic is not fading out of the world, I want not to believe that magic is fading out of the world. Let me not become attached to beliefs I may not want.* If we're living in a world where magic is fading, *that's what we have to believe,* we have to know what's coming, so we can stop it, or in the very worst case, be prepared to do what we can in the time we have left. Not believing it won't stop it from happening. So the *only* question we have to ask is whether magic is *actually* fading, and if that's the world we live in then that's what we want to believe. Litany of Gendlin: *What's true is already so, owning up to it doesn't make it worse.* Got that, Draco? I'm going to make you memorize it later. It's something you repeat to yourself any time you start wondering if it's a good idea to believe

something that isn't actually true. In fact I want you to say it right now. *What's true is already so, owning up to it doesn't make it worse.* Say it."

"What's true is already so," repeated Draco, his voice trembling, "owning up to it doesn't make it worse."

"If magic is fading, I want to believe that magic is fading. If magic is not fading, I want not to believe that magic is fading. Say it."

Draco repeated back the words, the sickness churning in his stomach.

"Good," Harry said, "remember, it might *not* be happening, and then you won't have to believe it, either. *First* we just want to know what's actually going on, which world we actually live in." Harry turned back to his work, scribbled some more, and then turned the parchment so Draco could see it. Draco leaned over the desk and Harry brought the green light closer.

Observation:

Wizardry isn't as powerful now as it was when Hogwarts was founded.

Hypotheses:

1. *Magic itself is fading.*
2. *Wizards are interbreeding with Muggles and Squibs.*
3. *Knowledge to cast powerful spells is being lost.*
4. *Wizards are eating the wrong foods as children, or something else besides blood is making them grow up weaker.*
5. *Muggle technology is interfering with magic. (Since 800 years ago?)*
6. *Stronger wizards are having fewer children. (Draco = only child? Check if 3 powerful wizards, Quirrell / Dumbledore / Dark Lord, had any children.)*

Tests:

"All right," Harry said. His breathing sounded a little calmer. "Now when you're dealing with a confusing problem and you have no idea what's going on, the smart thing to do is figure out some really simple

tests, things you can look at right away. We need fast tests that distinguish between these hypotheses. Observations that would come out a different way for at least one of them compared to all the other ones."

Draco stared at the list in shock. He was suddenly realizing that he knew an awful lot of purebloods who were only children. Himself, Vincent, Gregory, practically *everyone.* The two most powerful wizards everyone talked about were Dumbledore and the Dark Lord and neither had any children just like Harry had suspected...

"It's going to be really hard to distinguish between 2 and 6," Harry said, "it's in the blood either way, you'd have to try and track the decline of wizardry and compare that to how many kids different wizards were having and measure the abilities of Muggleborns compared to purebloods..." Harry's fingers were tapping nervously on the desk. "Let's just lump 6 in with 2 and call them the blood hypothesis for now. 4 is unlikely because then everyone would notice a sudden drop when the wizards switched to new foods, it's hard to see what would've changed steadily over 800 years. 5 is unlikely for the same reason, no sudden drop, Muggles weren't doing anything 800 years back. 4 looks like 2 and 5 looks like 1 anyway. So mainly we should be trying to distinguish between 1, 2, and 3." Harry turned the parchment to himself, drew an ellipse around those three numbers, turned it back. "Magic is fading, blood is weakening, knowledge is disappearing. What test comes out differently depending on which of those is true? What could we see that would mean any one of these was false?"

"*I* don't know!" blurted Draco. "Why are you asking me? You're the scientist!"

"Draco," Harry said, a note of pleading desperation in his voice, "I only know what Muggle scientists know! You grew up in the wizarding world, I didn't! You know more magic than I do and you know more *about* magic than I do and you thought of this whole idea in the first place, so start thinking like a scientist and solve this!"

Draco swallowed hard and stared at the paper.

Magic is fading... wizards are interbreeding with Muggles... knowledge is being lost...

"What does the world look like if magic is fading?" said Harry Potter.

"You know more about magic, you should be the one guessing not me! Imagine you're telling a story about it, what happens in the story?"

Draco imagined it. "Charms that used to work stop working." *Wizards wake up and find that their wands are sticks of wood...*

"What does the world look like if the wizarding blood gets weaker?"

"People can't do things their ancestors could do."

"What does the world look like if knowledge is being lost?"

"People don't know how to cast the Charms in the first place..." said Draco. He stopped, surprised at himself. "That's a test, isn't it?"

Harry nodded decisively. "That's one." He wrote it down on the parchment under *Tests:*

A. Are there spells we know but can't cast (1 or 2) or are the lost spells no longer known (3)?

"So that distinguishes between 1 and 2 on the one hand, and 3 on the other hand," said Harry. "Now we need some way to distinguish between 1 and 2. Magic fading, blood weakening, how could we tell the difference?"

"What kind of Charms did students used to cast in their first year at Hogwarts?" said Draco. "If they used to be able to cast much more powerful Charms, the blood was stronger—"

Harry Potter shook his head. "Or magic itself was stronger. We have to figure out some way of telling the *difference*." Harry stood up from his chair, began pacing nervously through the classroom. "No, wait, that might still work. Suppose different spells use up different amounts of magical energy. Then if the ambient magic weakened, the powerful spells would die first, but the spells everyone learns in their first year would stay the same..." Harry's nervous pacing sped up. "It's not a very good test, it's more about powerful wizardry being lost versus all wizardry being lost, someone's blood could be too weak for powerful wizardry but strong enough for easy spells... Draco, do you know if more powerful wizards within a *single* era, like powerful wizards from just this century, are more powerful as children? If the Dark Lord had cast the Cooling Charm when he was eleven, could he have frozen the whole room?"

Draco's face screwed up as he tried to recollect. "I can't remember hearing anything about the Dark Lord but I think Dumbledore's supposed to have done something amazing on his Transfiguration O.W.L.s in fifth year... I think other powerful wizards were good in Hogwarts too..."

Harry scowled, still pacing. "They could just be studying hard. Still, if first-year students learned the same spells and seemed about as powerful then as now, we could call that *weak* evidence favoring 1 over 2... wait, hold on." Harry stopped where he stood. "I have another test that might distinguish between 1 and 2. It would take a while to explain, it uses some things that scientists know about blood and inheritance, but it's an easy question to ask. And if we *combine* my test and your test and they both come out the same way, that's a strong hint at the answer." Harry almost ran back to the desk, took the parchment and wrote:

B. Did ancient first-year students cast the same sort of spells, with the same power, as now? (Weak evidence for 1 over 2, but blood could also be losing powerful wizardry only.)

C. Additional test that distinguishes 1 and 2 using scientific knowledge of blood, will explain later.

"Okay," said Harry, "we can at least try to tell the difference between 1 and 2 and 3, so let's go with this right away, we can figure out *more* tests after we do the ones we already have. Now it's going to look a little odd if Draco Malfoy and Harry Potter go around asking questions together, so here's my idea. You'll go through Hogwarts and find old portraits and ask them about what spells they learned to cast during their first years. They're portraits so they won't know there's anything odd about Draco Malfoy doing that. I'll ask recent portraits and living people about spells we know but can't cast, no one will notice anything unusual if Harry Potter asks weird questions. And I'll have to do complicated research about forgotten spells, so I want you to be the one to gather the data I need for my own scientific question. It's a simple question and you should be able to find the answer by asking portraits. You might want to write this down, ready?"

Draco sat down again and scrabbled in his bookbag for parchment and quill. When it was laid down on the desk, Draco looked up, face

determined. "Go ahead."

"Find portraits who knew a married Squib couple—don't make that face, Draco, it's important information. Just ask recent portraits who are Gryffindors or something. Find portraits who knew a married Squib couple well enough to know the names of all their children. Write down the name of each child and whether that child was a wizard, a Squib, or a Muggle. If they don't know whether the child was a Squib or a Muggle, write down 'non-wizard'. Write that down for *every* child the couple had, don't leave any out. If the portrait only knows the name of the wizarding children, not the names of *all* the children, then don't write down *any* data from that couple. It's very important that you only bring me data from someone who knows *all* the children a Squib couple had, well enough to know them all by name. Try to get at least forty names total, if you can, and if you have time for more, even better. Have you got all that?"

"Repeat it," Draco said, when he was done writing, and Harry repeated it.

"I've got it," Draco said, "but why—"

"It has to do with one of the secrets of blood that scientists already discovered. I'll explain when you get back. Let's split up and meet back here in an hour, 6:22PM that should be. Are we ready to go?"

Draco nodded decisively. It was all very rushed, but he'd long since been taught how to rush.

"Then *go!*" said Harry Potter and yanked off his cowled cloak and shoved it into his pouch, which began eating it, and, without even waiting for his pouch to finish, spun around and began striding rapidly toward the classroom door, bumping into a desk and almost falling over in his haste.

By the time Draco had managed to get his own cloak off and stow it in his bookbag, Harry Potter was gone.

Draco almost ran out the door.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

BELIEF IN BELIEF

"And then Janet was a Squib," said the portrait of a short young woman with a gold-trimmed hat.

Draco wrote it down. That was only twenty-eight but it was time to go back and meet Harry.

He'd needed to ask other portraits to help translating, English had changed a lot, but the oldest portraits had described first-year spells that sounded an awful lot like the ones they had now. Draco had recognized around half of them and the other half didn't sound any more powerful.

The sick feeling in his stomach had grown with each answer until finally, unable to take it any more, he'd gone off and asked other portraits Harry Potter's strange question about Squib marriages, instead. The first five portraits hadn't known anyone and finally he'd asked those portraits to ask *their* acquaintances to ask *their* acquaintances and so managed to find some people who'd actually admit to being friends with Squibs.

(The first-year Slytherin had explained he was working on an important project with a Ravenclaw and the Ravenclaw had told him they needed this information and then run off without saying why. This had garnered many sympathetic looks.)

Draco's feet were heavy as he walked through the corridors of Hogwarts. He should have been running but he couldn't seem to muster the energy. He kept on thinking that he didn't want to know about this, he didn't want to be involved in any of this, he didn't want this to be his responsibility, just let Harry Potter do it, if magic was fading let Harry Potter take care of it...

But Draco knew that wasn't right.

Chill the dungeons of Slytherin, gray the stone walls, Draco usually liked the atmosphere, but now it seemed too much like fading.

His hand on the doorknob, Harry Potter already inside and waiting, wearing his cowled cloak.

"The ancient first-year spells," Harry Potter said. "What did you find?"

"They're no more powerful than the spells we use now."

Harry Potter's fist struck a desk, hard. "Damn it. All right. My own experiment was a failure, Draco. There's something called the Interdict of Merlin—"

Draco hit himself on the forehead, realizing.

"—which stops anyone from getting knowledge of powerful spells out of books, even if you find and read a powerful wizard's notes they won't make sense to you, it has to go from one living mind to another. I couldn't find any powerful spells that we had the instructions for but couldn't cast. But if you can't get them out of old books, why would anyone bother passing them on by word of mouth after they stopped working? Did you get the data on the Squib couples?"

Draco started to hand the parchment over—

But Harry Potter held up a hand. "Law of science, Draco. First I tell you the theory and the prediction. Then you show me the data. That way you know I'm not just making up a theory to fit; you know that the theory actually predicted the data in *advance.* I have to explain this to you anyway, so I have to explain it *before* you show me the data. That's the rule. So put on your cloak and let's sit down."

Harry Potter sat down at a desk with torn scraps of paper arranged across its surface. Draco drew his cloak out of his bookbag, drew it on, and sat down across from Harry on the other side, giving the paper scraps a puzzled look. They were arranged in two rows and the rows were about twenty scraps long.

"The secret of blood," said Harry Potter, an intense look on his face, "is something called deoxyribose nucleic acid. You don't say that name in front of anyone who's not a scientist. Deoxyribose nucleic acid is the recipe that tells your body how to grow, two legs, two arms, short or tall, whether you have brown eyes or green. It's a material thing, you can *see*

it if you have microscopes, which are like telescopes only they look at things that are very small instead of very far away. And that recipe has two copies of everything, always, in case one copy is broken. Imagine two long rows of pieces of paper. At each place in the row, there are two pieces of paper, and when you have children, your body selects one piece of paper at random from each place in the row, and the mother's body will do the same, and so the child also gets two pieces of paper at each place in the row. Two copies of everything, one from your mother, one from your father, and when you have children they get one piece of paper from you at random in each place."

As Harry spoke, his fingers ranged over the paired scraps of paper, pointing to one part of the pair when he said "from your mother", the other when he said "from your father". And as Harry talked about picking a piece of paper at random, his hand pulled a Knut out of his robes and flipped it; Harry looked at the coin, and then pointed to the top piece of paper. All without a pause in the speech.

"Now when it comes to something like being short or tall, there's a *lot* of places in the recipe that make *little* differences. So if a tall father marries a short mother, the child gets some pieces of paper saying 'tall' and some pieces of paper saying 'short', and usually the child ends up middle-sized. But not always. By luck, the child might get a lot of pieces saying 'tall', and not many papers saying 'short', and grow up pretty tall. You could have a tall father with five papers saying 'tall' and a tall mother with five papers saying 'tall' and by amazing luck the child gets *all ten* papers saying 'tall' and ends up taller than both of them. You see? Blood isn't a perfect fluid, it doesn't mix perfectly. Deoxyribose nucleic acid is made up of lots of little pieces, like a glass of pebbles instead of a glass of water. That's why a child isn't always exactly in the middle of the parents."

Draco listened with his mouth open. How in Merlin's name had the Muggles figured all this out? They could *see* the recipe?

"Now," Harry Potter said, "suppose that, just like with tallness, there's lots of little places in the recipe where you can have a piece of paper that says 'magic' or 'not magic'. If you have enough pieces of paper saying 'magic' you're a wizard, if you have a *lot* of pieces of paper

you're a powerful wizard, if you have too few you're a Muggle, and in between you're a Squib. Then, when two Squibs marry, most of the time the children should also be Squibs, but once in a while a child will get lucky and get most of the father's magic papers *and* most of the mother's magic papers, and be strong enough to be a wizard. But probably not a very powerful one. If you started out with a lot of powerful wizards and they married only each other, they would stay powerful. But if they started marrying Muggleborns who were just barely magical, or Squibs... you see? The blood wouldn't mix perfectly, it would be a glass of pebbles, not a glass of water, because that's just the way blood works. There would still be powerful wizards now and then, when they got a lot of magic papers by luck. But they wouldn't be as powerful as the most powerful wizards from earlier."

Draco nodded slowly. He'd never heard it explained that way before. There was a surprising beauty to how exactly it fit.

"*But,*" Harry said. "That's only *one* hypothesis. Suppose that instead there's only a *single* place in the recipe that makes you a wizard. Only *one* place where a piece of paper can say 'magic' or 'not magic'. And there are two copies of everything, always. So then there are only three possibilities. Both copies can say 'magic'. One copy can say 'magic' and one copy can say 'not magic'. Or both copies can say 'not magic'. Wizards, Squibs, and Muggles. Muggleborns wouldn't really be born to Muggles, they would be born to two Squibs, two parents each with one magic copy who'd grown up in the Muggle world. Now imagine a witch marries a Squib. Each child will get one paper saying 'magic' from the mother, always, it doesn't matter which piece gets picked at random, both say 'magic'. But like flipping a coin, half the time the child will get a paper saying 'magic' from the father, and half the time the child will get the father's paper saying 'not magic'. When a witch marries a Squib, the result won't be a lot of weak wizarding children. Half the children will be wizards and witches just as powerful as their mother, and half the children will be Squibs. Because if there's just *one* place in the recipe that makes you a wizard, then magic isn't like a glass of pebbles that can mix. It's like a single magical pebble, a sorcerer's stone."

Harry arranged three pairs of papers side by side. On one pair he

wrote 'magic' and 'magic'. On another pair he wrote 'magic' on the top paper only. And the third pair he left blank.

"In which case," Harry said, "either you have two stones or you don't. Either you're a wizard or not. Powerful wizards would get that way by studying harder and practicing more. And if wizards get *inherently* less powerful, not because of spells being lost but because people can't cast them... then maybe they're eating the wrong foods or something. But if it's gotten steadily worse over eight hundred years, then that could mean magic itself is fading out of the world."

Harry arranged another two pairs of papers side by side, and took out a quill. Soon each pair had one piece of paper saying 'magic' and the other paper blank.

"And that brings me to the prediction," said Harry. "What happens when two Squibs marry. Flip a coin twice. It can come up heads and heads, heads and tails, tails and heads, or tails and tails. So one quarter of the time you'll get two heads, one quarter of the time you'll get two tails, and half the time you'll get one heads and one tail. Same thing if two Squibs marry. One quarter of the children would come up magic and magic, and be wizards. One quarter would come up not-magic and not-magic, and be Muggles. The other half would be Squibs. It's a very old and very classic pattern. It was discovered by Gregor Mendel who is not forgotten, and it was the first hint ever uncovered for how the recipe worked. Anyone who knows anything about blood science would recognize that pattern in an instant. It wouldn't be exact, any more than if you flip a coin twice forty times you'll always get exactly ten pairs of two heads. But if it's seven or thirteen wizards out of forty children that'll be a strong indicator. That's the test I had you do. Now let's see your data."

And before Draco could even think, Harry Potter had taken the parchment out of Draco's hand.

Draco's throat was very dry.

Twenty-eight children.

He wasn't sure of the exact number but he was pretty sure around a fourth had been wizards.

"Six wizards out of twenty-eight children," Harry Potter said after a moment. "Well, that's that, then. And first-years were casting the same spells at the same power level eight centuries ago, too. Your test and my test both came out the same way."

There was a long silence in the classroom.

"What now?" Draco whispered.

He'd never been so terrified.

"It's not definite yet," said Harry Potter. "My experiment failed, remember? I need you to design another test, Draco."

"I, I..." Draco said. His voice was breaking. "I can't do this Harry, it's too much for me."

Harry's look was fierce. "Yes you can, because you have to. I thought about it myself, too, after I found out about the Interdict of Merlin. Draco, is there any way of observing the strength of magic directly? Some way that doesn't have anything to do with wizards' blood or the spells we learn?"

Draco's mind was just blank.

"Anything that affects magic affects wizards," said Harry. "But then we can't tell if it's the wizards or the magic. What does magic affect that *isn't* a wizard?"

"Magical creatures, obviously," said Draco without even thinking about it.

Harry Potter slowly smiled. "Draco, that's *brilliant.*"

It's the sort of dumb question you'd only ask in the first place if you'd been raised by Muggles.

Then the sickness in Draco's stomach got even worse as he realized what it would mean if magical creatures *were* getting weaker. They would know for certain then that magic was fading, and there was a part of Draco that was already sure that was exactly what they would find. He didn't want to see this, he didn't want to know...

Harry Potter was already halfway to the door. "Come *on*, Draco! There's a portrait not far from here, we'll just ask them to go get someone old and find out right away! We're cloaked, if someone sees us we can just run away! Let's go!"

It didn't take long after that.

It was a wide portrait, but the three people in it were looking rather crowded. There was a middle-aged man from the twelfth century, dressed in black swathes of cloth; who spoke to a sad-looking young woman from the fourteenth century, with hair that seemed to constantly frizz about her head as if she'd been charged up by a static spell; and she spoke to a dignified, wizened old man from the seventeenth century with a solid gold bowtie; and him they could understand.

They had asked about Dementors.

They had asked about phoenixes.

They had asked about dragons and trolls and house elves.

Harry had frowned, pointed out that creatures which needed the most magic could just be dying out entirely, and had asked for the most powerful magical creatures known.

There wasn't anything unfamiliar on the list, except for a species of Dark creature called mind flayers which the translator noted had finally been exterminated by Harold Shea, and those didn't sound half as scary as Dementors.

Magical creatures were as powerful now as they'd ever been, apparently.

The sickness in Draco's stomach was easing, and now he just felt confused.

"Harry," Draco said in the middle of the old man translating a list of all eleven powers of a beholder's eyes, "what does this mean?"

Harry held up a finger and the old man finished the list.

Then Harry thanked all the portraits for helping—Draco, pretty much on automatic, did so as well and more graciously—and they headed back to the classroom.

And Harry brought out the original parchment with the hypotheses, and began scribbling.

Observation:

Wizardry isn't as powerful now as it was when Hogwarts was founded.

Hypotheses:

1. *Magic itself is fading.*
2. *Wizards are interbreeding with Muggles and Squibs.*
3. *Knowledge to cast powerful spells is being lost.*
4. *Wizards are eating the wrong foods as children, or something else besides blood is making them grow up weaker.*
5. *Muggle technology is interfering with magic. (Since 800 years ago?)*
6. *Stronger wizards are having fewer children. (Draco = only child? Check if 3 powerful wizards, Quirrell / Dumbledore / Dark Lord, had any children.)*

Tests:

A. *Are there spells we know but can't cast (1 or 2) or are the lost spells no longer known (3)?* Result: *Inconclusive due to Interdict of Merlin. No known uncastable spell, but could simply have not been passed on.*

B. *Did ancient first-year students cast the same sort of spells, with the same power, as now? (Weak evidence for 1 over 2, but blood could also be losing powerful wizardry only.)* Result: *Same level of first-year spells then as now.*

C. *Additional test that distinguishes 1 and 2 using scientific knowledge of blood, will explain later.* Result: *There's only one place in the recipe that makes you a wizard, and either you have two papers saying 'magic' or you don't.*

D. *Are magical creatures losing their powers? Distinguishes 1 from (2 or 3).* Result: *Magical creatures seem to be as strong as they ever were.*

"A failed," said Harry Potter. "B is weak evidence for 1 over 2. C falsifies 2. D falsifies 1. 4 was unlikely and B argues against 4 as well. 5 was unlikely and D argues against it. 6 is falsified along with 2. That

leaves 3. Interdict of Merlin or not, I didn't actually find any known spell that couldn't be cast. So when you add it all up, it looks like knowledge is being lost."

And the trap snapped shut.

As soon as the panic went away, as soon as Draco understood that magic *wasn't* fading out, it took all of five seconds to realize.

Draco shoved himself away from the desk and stood up so hard that his chair skittered with a scraping noise across the floor and fell over.

"So it was all just a stupid trick, then."

Harry Potter stared at him for a moment, still sitting. When he spoke, his voice was quiet. "It was a fair test, Draco. If it had come out a different way, I would have accepted it. That's not something I would ever cheat on. Ever. I didn't look at your data before I made my predictions. I told you up front when the Interdict of Merlin invalidated the first experiment—"

"Oh," Draco said, the anger starting to come out into his voice, "you didn't know how the whole thing was going to come out?"

"I didn't *know* anything you didn't know," Harry said, still quietly. "I admit that I suspected. Hermione Granger was too powerful, she should have been barely magical and she wasn't, how can a Muggleborn be the best spellcaster in Hogwarts? And she's getting the best grades on her essays too, it's too much coincidence for one girl to be the strongest magically *and* academically unless there's a single cause. Hermione Granger's existence pointed to there being only one thing that makes you a wizard, something you either have or you don't, and the power differences coming from how much we know and how much we practice. And there weren't different classes for purebloods and Muggleborns, and so on. There were too many ways the world didn't look the way it would look if you were right. But Draco, I didn't see anything you couldn't see too. I didn't perform any tests I didn't tell you about. I didn't cheat, Draco. I wanted us to work out the answer together. And I never thought that magic might be fading out of the world until you said it. It was a scary idea for me, too."

"Whatever," Draco said. He was working very hard to control his voice and not just start screaming at Harry. "You claim you're not going

to run off and tell anyone else about this."

"Not without consulting you first," Harry said. He opened his hands in a pleading gesture. "Draco, I'm being as nice as I can but *the world turned out to just not be that way*."

"Fine. Then you and I are through. I'm going to just walk away and forget any of this ever happened."

Draco spun around, feeling the burning sensation in his throat, the sense of betrayal, and that was when he realized he really *had* liked Harry Potter, and that thought didn't slow him down for a moment as he strode toward the classroom door.

And Harry Potter's voice came, now louder, and worried:

"Draco... you *can't* forget. Don't you understand? That was your sacrifice."

Draco stopped in midstride and turned around. "*What* are you talking about?"

But there was already a freezing coldness in Draco's spine.

He knew even before Harry Potter said it.

"To become a scientist. You questioned one of your beliefs, not just a small belief but something that had great significance to you. You did experiments, gathered data, and the outcome proved the belief was wrong. You saw the results and understood what they meant." Harry Potter's voice was faltering. "Remember, Draco, you can't sacrifice a *true* belief that way, because the experiments will confirm it instead of falsifying it. Your sacrifice to become a scientist was your *false* belief that wizard blood was mixing and getting weaker."

"*That's not true!*" said Draco. "I didn't sacrifice the belief. I still believe that!" His voice was getting louder, and the chill was getting worse.

Harry Potter shook his head. His voice came in a whisper. "Draco... I'm sorry, Draco, you *don't* believe it, not anymore." Harry's voice rose again. "I'll prove it to you. Imagine that someone tells you they're keeping a dragon in their house. You tell them you want to see it. They say it's an invisible dragon. You say fine, you'll listen to it move. They say it's an inaudible dragon. You say you'll throw some cooking flour into the air and see the outline of the dragon. They say the dragon is permeable to flour. And the telling thing is that they know, in *advance,*

exactly which experimental results they'll have to explain away. They *know* everything will come out the way it does if there's no dragon, they know in *advance* just which excuses they'll have to make. So maybe they *say* there's a dragon. Maybe they *believe* they believe there's a dragon, it's called belief-in-belief. But they don't actually believe it. You can be mistaken about what you believe, most people never realize there's a difference between believing something and thinking it's good to believe it." Harry Potter had risen from the desk now, and taken a few steps toward Draco. "And Draco, you don't believe any more in blood purism, I'll show you that you don't. If blood purism is true, then Hermione Granger doesn't make sense, so what could explain her? Maybe she's a wizarding orphan raised by Muggles, just like I was? I could go to Granger and ask to see pictures of her parents, to see if she looks like them. Would you expect her to look different? Should we go perform that test?"

"They would have put her with relatives," Draco said, his voice trembling. "They'll still look the same."

"You see. You already know what experimental result you'll have to excuse. If you still believed in blood purism you would say, sure, let's go take a look, I bet she won't look like her parents, she's too powerful to be a real Muggleborn—"

"They *would* have put her with relatives!"

"Scientists can do tests to check for sure if someone is the true child of a father. Granger would probably do it if I paid her family enough. *She* wouldn't be afraid of the results. So what do you expect that test to show? Tell me to run it and we will. But you already know what the test will say. You'll always know. You won't ever be able to forget. You might *wish* you believed in blood purism, but you'll always *expect to see happen* just exactly what would happen if there was only one thing that made you a wizard. That was your sacrifice to become a scientist."

Draco's breathing was ragged. "Do you realize *what you've done?*" Draco surged forward and he seized Harry by the collar of his robes. His voice rose to a scream, it sounded unbearably loud in the closed classroom and the silence. "*Do you realize what you've done?*"

Harry's voice was shaky. "You had a belief. The belief was false. I

helped you see that. What's true is already so, owning up to it doesn't make it worse—"

The fingers on Draco's right hand clenched into a fist and that hand dropped down and blasted up unstoppably and punched Harry Potter in the jaw so hard that his body went crashing back into a desk and then to the floor.

"*Idiot!*" screamed Draco. "*Idiot! Idiot!*"

"Draco," whispered Harry from the floor, "Draco, I'm sorry, I didn't think this would happen for months, I didn't expect you to awaken as a scientist this quickly, I thought I would have longer to prepare you, teach you the techniques that make it hurt less to admit you're wrong—"

"What about Father?" Draco said. His voice trembled with rage. "Were you going to prepare *him* or did you just not *care* what happened after this?"

"You can't tell *him!*" Harry said, his voice rising in alarm. "He's not a scientist! You promised, Draco!"

For a moment the thought of Father not knowing came as a relief.

And then the real anger started to rise.

"So you planned for me to lie to him and tell him I still believe," Draco said, voice shaking. "I'll always have to lie to him, and now when I grow up I can't be a Death Eater, and I won't even be able to tell him why not."

"If your father really loves you," whispered Harry from the floor, "he'll still love you even if you don't become a Death Eater, and it sounds like your father *does* really love you, Draco—"

"*Your* stepfather is a scientist," Draco said. The words coming out like biting knives. "If *you* weren't going to be a scientist, he would still love you. But you'd be a *little less special* to him."

Harry flinched. The boy opened his mouth, as if to say 'I'm sorry', and then closed his mouth, seeming to think better of it, which was either very smart of him or very lucky, because Draco might have tried to kill him.

"You should have warned me," Draco said. His voice rose. "*You should have warned me!*"

"I... I did... every time I told you about the power, I told you about the price. I said, you have to admit you're wrong. I said this would be the hardest path for you. That this was the sacrifice anyone had to make to become a scientist. I said, what if the experiment says one thing and your family and friends say another—"

"*You call that a warning?*" Draco was screaming now. "*You call that a warning? When we're doing a ritual that calls for a permanent sacrifice?*"

"I... I..." The boy on the floor swallowed. "I guess maybe it wasn't clear. I'm sorry. But that which can be destroyed by the truth should be."

Hitting him wasn't enough.

"You're wrong about one thing," Draco said, his voice deadly. "Granger isn't the strongest student in Hogwarts. She just gets the best grades in class. You're about to find out the difference."

Sudden shock showed in Harry's face, and he tried to roll quickly to his feet—

It was already too late for him.

"*Expelliarmus!*"

Harry's wand flew across the room.

"*Gom jabbar!*"

A pulse of inky blackness struck Harry's left hand.

"That's a torture spell," said Draco. "It's for getting information out of people. I'm just going to leave it on you and lock the door behind me when I go. Maybe I'll set the locking spell to wear off after a few hours. Maybe it won't wear off until you die in here. Have fun."

Draco moved smoothly backward, wand still on Harry. Draco's hand dipped down, picked up his bookbag, without his aim wavering.

The pain was already showing in Harry Potter's face as he spoke. "Malfoys are above the underage magic laws, I take it? It's not because your blood is stronger. It's because you already practiced. In the beginning you were as weak as any of us. Is my prediction wrong?"

Draco's hand whitened on his wand, but his aim stayed steady.

"Just so you know," Harry said through gritted teeth, "if you'd told me I was wrong I would have listened. *I* won't ever torture *you* when you show me that I'm wrong. And you *will*. Someday. You're awakened

as a scientist now, and even if you never learn to use your power, you'll always," Harry gasped, "be looking, for ways, to test, your beliefs—"

Draco's backing away was less smooth, now, a little faster, and he had to work to keep his wand on Harry as he reached back to open the door and stepped back out of the classroom.

Then Draco shut the door again.

He cast the most powerful locking Charm he knew.

Draco waited until he heard Harry's first scream before casting the *Quietus.*

And then he walked away.

"*Aaahhhhh! Finite Incantatem! Aaaahhh!*"

Harry's left hand had been put into a pot of boiling cooking oil and left there. He'd put everything he had into the *Finite Incantatem* and it still wasn't working.

Some hexes required specific counters or you couldn't undo them, or maybe it was just that Draco was that much stronger.

"*Aaaaahhhh!*"

Harry's hand was really starting to hurt, now, and that was interfering with his attempts to think creatively.

But a few screams later, Harry realized what he had to do.

His pouch, unfortunately, was on the wrong side of his body, and it took some twisting to reach into it, especially with his other arm flailing around in a reflex, unstoppable attempt to fling off the source of pain.

"Medical *ahhhhh* kit! Medical kit!"

On the floor, the green light was too dim to see by.

Harry couldn't stand. He couldn't crawl. He rolled across the floor to where he thought his wand was, and it wasn't there, and with one hand he managed to raise himself high enough to see his wand, and he rolled there, and got the wand, and rolled back to where the medical kit was opened. There was also a good deal of screaming, and a bit of throwing up.

It took eight tries before Harry could cast *Lumos.*

And then, well, the package wasn't designed to be opened one-handed, because all wizards were idiots, that was why. Harry had to use his teeth and so it took a while before Harry finally managed to wrap the Numbcloth over his left hand.

When all feeling in his left hand was finally gone, Harry let his mind come apart, and lay motionless on the floor, and cried for a while.

Well, Harry's mind said silently into itself, when it had recovered enough to think in words again. *Was it worth it?*

Slowly, Harry's functional hand reached up to a desk.

Harry pulled himself to his feet.

Took a deep breath.

Exhaled.

Smiled.

It wasn't much of a smile, but it was a smile nonetheless.

Thank you, Professor Quirrell, I couldn't have lost without you.

He hadn't redeemed Draco yet, not even close. Contrary to what Draco himself might now believe, Draco was still the child of a Death Eater, through and through. Still a boy who'd grown up thinking "rape" was something the cool older kids did. But it was one heck of a start.

Harry couldn't claim it had all gone just as planned. It had all gone just as completely made up on the spot. The *plan* hadn't called for this to happen until December or thereabouts, after Harry had taught Draco the techniques not to deny the evidence when he saw it.

But he'd seen the look of fear on Draco's face, realized that Draco was *already* taking an alternative hypothesis seriously, and seized the moment. One case of true curiosity had the same sort of redeeming power in rationality that one case of true love had in movies.

In retrospect, Harry had given himself hours to make the most important discovery in the history of magic, and months to break through the undeveloped mental barriers of an eleven-year-old boy. This could indicate that Harry had some sort of major cognitive deficit with respect to estimating task completion times.

Was Harry going to Science Hell for what he'd done? Harry wasn't sure. He'd contrived to keep Draco's mind on the possibility that magic

was fading, made sure Draco would carry out the part of the experiment that would seem at first to point in that direction. He'd waited until after explaining genetics to prompt Draco into realizing about magical creatures (though Harry had thought in terms of ancient artifacts like the Sorting Hat, which no one could duplicate anymore, but which continued to function). But Harry hadn't actually exaggerated any evidence, hadn't distorted the meaning of any results. When the Interdict of Merlin had invalidated the test that should have been definitive, he'd told Draco up front.

And then there was the part *after* that...

But he hadn't actually *lied* to Draco. Draco had believed it, and *that would make it true.*

The end, admittedly, had not been fun.

Harry turned, and staggered toward the door.

Time to test Draco's locking spell.

The first step was simply trying to turn the doorknob. Draco could have been bluffing.

Draco hadn't been bluffing.

"*Finite Incantatem.*" Harry's voice came out rather hoarse, and he could feel that the spell hadn't taken.

So Harry tried it again, and that time it felt true. But another twist at the doorknob showed it hadn't worked. No surprise there.

Time to bring out the big guns. Harry drew a deep breath. This spell was one of the most powerful he'd learned so far.

"*Alohomora!*"

Harry staggered a little after saying it.

And the classroom door still didn't open.

That shocked Harry. Harry hadn't been planning to go anywhere near Dumbledore's forbidden corridor, of course. But a spell to open magical locks had seemed like a useful sort of spell anyway, and so Harry had learned it. Was Dumbledore's forbidden corridor meant to lure people so stupid that they didn't notice the security was worse than what Draco Malfoy could put on it?

Fear was creeping back into Harry's system. The placard in the medical kit had said the Numbcloth could only safely be used for up to thirty

minutes. After that it would come off automatically, and not be reusable for 24 hours. Right now it was 6:51PM. He'd put on the Numbcloth about five minutes ago.

So Harry took a step back, and considered the door. It was a solid panel of dark oaken wood, interrupted only by the brass metal doorknob.

Harry didn't know any explosive or cutting or smashing spells, and Transfiguring explosive would have violated the rule against Transfiguring things to be burned. Acid was a liquid and would have made fumes...

But that was no obstacle to a *creative thinker.*

Harry laid his wand against one of the door's brass hinges, and concentrated on the form of cotton as a pure abstraction apart from any material cotton, and also on the pure material apart from the pattern that made it a brass hinge, and brought the two concepts together, imposing shape on substance. An hour of Transfiguration practice every day for a month had gotten Harry to the point where he could Transfigure a subject of five cubic centimeters in just under a minute.

After two minutes the hinge hadn't changed at all.

Whoever had designed Draco's locking spell, they'd thought of that, too. Or the door was part of Hogwarts and the castle was immune.

A glance showed the walls to be solid stone. So was the floor. So was the ceiling. You couldn't separately Transfigure a part of something that was a solid whole; Harry would have needed to try Transfiguring the whole wall, which would have taken hours or maybe days of continuous effort, if he could have done it at all, and if the wall wasn't contiguous with the rest of the whole castle...

Harry's Time-Turner wouldn't open until 9PM. After that he could go back to 6PM, before the door was locked.

How long would the torture spell last?

Harry swallowed hard. Tears were coming into his eyes again.

His brilliantly creative mind had just offered the ingenious suggestion that Harry could cut his hand off using the hacksaw in the toolset stored in his pouch, which would hurt, obviously, but might hurt a lot less than Draco's pain spell, since the nerves would be gone; and he had tourniquets in the healer's kit.

And that was obviously a hideously stupid idea that Harry would regret the rest of his entire life.

But Harry didn't know if he could hold out for two hours under torture.

He wanted *out* of this classroom, he wanted out of this classroom *now,* he didn't want to wait in here screaming for two hours until he could use the Time-Turner, he needed to *get out* and find someone to get the torture spell off his hand...

Think! Harry screamed at his brain. *Think! Think!*

The Slytherin dorm was mostly empty. People were at dinner. For some reason Draco himself wasn't feeling very hungry.

Draco closed the door to his private room, locked it, Charmed it shut, Quieted it, sat down on his bed, and started to cry.

It wasn't fair.

It wasn't fair.

It was the first time Draco had ever really *lost* before, Father had warned him that losing for real would hurt the first time it happened, but he'd lost *so much*, it wasn't fair, it wasn't fair for him to lose *everything* the very first time he lost.

Somewhere in the dungeons, a boy Draco had actually liked was screaming in pain. Draco had never hurt anyone he'd liked before. Punishing people who deserved it was supposed to be fun, but this just felt sick inside. Father hadn't warned him about that, and Draco wondered if it was a hard lesson everyone had to learn when they grew up, or if Draco was just weak.

Draco wished it were Pansy screaming. That would have felt better.

And the worst part was knowing that it might have been a mistake to hurt Harry Potter.

Who else was there for Draco now? Dumbledore? After what he'd done? Draco would sooner have been burned alive.

Draco would have to go back to Harry Potter because there was nowhere else for him to go. And if Harry Potter said he didn't want him, then Draco would be nothing, just a pathetic little boy who could never be a Death Eater, never join Dumbledore's faction, never learn science.

The trap had been perfectly set, perfectly executed. Father had warned Draco over and over that what you sacrificed to Dark rituals couldn't be regained. But Father hadn't known that the accursed Muggles had invented rituals that didn't need wands, rituals you could be tricked into doing without knowing it, and that was only one of the terrible secrets which scientists knew and which Harry Potter had brought with him.

Draco started crying harder, then.

He didn't want this, he *didn't want this* but there was no turning back. It was too late. He was already a scientist.

Draco knew he should go back and free Harry Potter and apologize. It would have been the smart thing to do.

Instead Draco stayed in his bed and sobbed.

He'd already hurt Harry Potter. It might be the only time Draco ever got to hurt him, and he would have to hold to that one memory for the rest of his life.

Let him keep screaming.

⁂

Harry dropped the remnants of his hacksaw to the ground. The brass hinges had proved impervious, not even scratched, and Harry was beginning to suspect that even the desperation act of trying to Transfigure acid or explosives would have failed to open this door. On the plus side, the attempt had destroyed the hacksaw.

His watch said it was 7:02PM, with less than fifteen minutes left, and Harry tried to remember if there were any other sharp things in his pouch that needed destroying, and felt another fit of tears welling up. If only, when his Time-Turner opened, he could go back and *prevent*—

And that was when Harry realized he was being *silly*.

It wasn't the first time he'd been locked in a room.

Professor McGonagall had already told him the correct way to do this.

...she'd also told him not to use the Time-Turner for this sort of thing.

Would Professor McGonagall realize that this occasion really *did* warrant a special exception? Or just take away the Time-Turner entirely?

Harry gathered up all his things, all the evidence, into his pouch. A *Scourgify* took care of the vomit on the floor, though not the sweat that had soaked his robes. He left the overturned desks overturned, it wasn't important enough to be worth doing with one hand.

When he was done, Harry glanced down at his watch. 7:04PM.

And then Harry waited. Seconds passed, feeling like years.

At 7:07PM, the door opened.

Professor Flitwick's puff-bearded face looked rather concerned. "Are you all right, Harry?" said the squeaky voice of Ravenclaw's Head of House. "I got a note saying you'd been locked in here—"

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

MACHIAVELLIAN INTELLIGENCE HYPOTHESIS

ACT 3:

Draco waited in a small windowed alcove he'd found near the Great Hall, stomach churning.

There would be a price, and it would not be small. Draco had known that as soon as he'd woken up and realized that he didn't dare enter the Great Hall for breakfast because he might see Harry Potter there and Draco didn't know what would happen after that.

Footsteps approached.

"Here ya go," said Vincent's voice. "Now da boss ain't in a good mood today, so ya'd better watch your step."

Draco was going to skin that idiot alive and send back the flayed body with a request for a more intelligent servant, like a dead gerbil.

One set of footsteps went off, and the other set of footsteps came closer.

The churning in Draco's stomach got worse.

Harry Potter came into sight. His face was carefully neutral, but his blue-trimmed robes looked oddly askew, as if they hadn't been put on quite right—

"*Your hand,*" Draco said without thinking about it at all.

Harry raised his left arm, as though to look at it himself.

The hand dangled limply from it, like something dead.

"Madam Pomfrey said it's not permanent," Harry said quietly. "She said it should mostly recover by the time classes start tomorrow."

For a single instant the news came as a relief.

And then Draco realized.

"You went to Madam Pomfrey," whispered Draco.

"Of course I did," said Harry Potter, as though stating the obvious. "My hand wasn't working."

It was slowly dawning on Draco what an *absolute* fool he'd been, far worse than the older Slytherins he'd chewed out.

He'd just taken for granted that no one would go to the authorities when a Malfoy did something to them. That no one would want Lucius Malfoy's eye on them, ever.

But Harry Potter wasn't a frightened little Hufflepuff trying to stay out of the game. He was already playing it, and Father's eye was already on him.

"What else did Madam Pomfrey say?" said Draco, his heart in his throat.

"Professor Flitwick said that the spell cast on my hand had been a Dark torture hex and extremely serious business, and that refusing to say who did it was absolutely unacceptable."

There was a long pause.

"And then?" Draco said in a shaking voice.

Harry Potter smiled slightly. "I apologized deeply, which made Professor Flitwick look *very* stern, and then I told Professor Flitwick that the whole thing was, indeed, extremely serious, secret, *delicate* business, and that I'd already informed the Headmaster about the project."

Draco gasped. "No! Flitwick isn't going to just accept that! He'll check with Dumbledore!"

"Indeed," said Harry Potter. "I was promptly hauled off to the Headmaster's office."

Draco was trembling now. If Dumbledore brought Harry Potter before the Wizengamot, willingly or otherwise, and had the Boy-Who-Lived testify under Veritaserum that Draco had tortured him... too many people loved Harry Potter, Father could *lose* that vote...

Father might be able to convince Dumbledore not to do that, but it would *cost.* Cost terribly. The game had rules now, you couldn't just threaten someone at random any more. But Draco had walked into Dumbledore's hands of his own free will. And Draco was a very valuable hostage.

Though since Draco couldn't be a Death Eater now, he wasn't as valuable as Father thought.

The thought tore at his heart like a Cutting Charm.

"Then what?" whispered Draco.

"Dumbledore deduced immediately that it was you. He knew we'd been associating."

The worst possible scenario. If Dumbledore hadn't guessed who did it, he might not have risked using Legilimency just to find out... but if Dumbledore *knew...*

"And?" Draco forced out the word.

"We had a little chat."

"And?"

Harry Potter grinned. "And I explained that it would be in his best interest not to do anything."

Draco's mind ran into a brick wall and splattered. He just stared at Harry Potter with his mouth hanging slack like a fool.

It took that long for Draco to remember.

Harry knew Dumbledore's mysterious secret, the one Snape used as his hold.

Draco could just see it now. Dumbledore looking all stern, concealing his eagerness as he explained to Harry what a terribly serious matter this was.

And Harry politely telling Dumbledore to keep his mouth shut if he knew what was good for him.

Father had warned Draco against people like this, people who could ruin you and still be so likable that it was hard to hate them properly.

"After which," Harry said, "the Headmaster told Professor Flitwick that this was, indeed, a secret and delicate matter of which he had already been informed, and that he did not think pressing it at this time would help me or anyone. Professor Flitwick started to say something about

the Headmaster's usual plotting going much too far, and I had to interrupt at that point and explain that it had been my *own* idea and not anything the Headmaster forced me into, so Professor Flitwick spun around and started lecturing *me*, and the Headmaster interrupted *him* and said that as the Boy-Who-Lived I was doomed to have weird and dangerous adventures so I was safer if I got into them on purpose instead of waiting for them to happen by accident, and that was when Professor Flitwick threw up his little hands and started shrieking in a high-pitched voice at *both* of us about how he didn't care what we were cooking up together, but this wasn't ever to happen again for as long as I was in Ravenclaw House or he would have me thrown out and I could go to Gryffindor which was where all this *Dumbledoring* belonged—"

Harry was making it *very* hard for Draco to hate him.

"Anyway," Harry said, "I didn't want to be thrown out of Ravenclaw, so I promised Professor Flitwick that nothing like this would happen again, and if it did, I would just tell him who did it."

Harry's eyes should have been cold. They weren't. The voice should have made it a deadly threat. It wasn't.

And Draco saw the question that should have been obvious, and it killed the mood in an instant.

"Why... didn't you?"

Harry walked over to the window, into the small beam of sunlight shining into the alcove, and turned his head outward, toward the green grounds of Hogwarts. The brightness shone on him, on his robes, on his face.

"Why didn't I?" Harry said. His voice caught. "I guess because I just couldn't get angry at you. I knew I'd hurt you first. I won't even call it fair, because what I did to you was worse than what you did to me."

It was like running into another brick wall. Harry could have been speaking archaic Greek for all Draco understood him then.

Draco's mind scrabbled for patterns and came up flat blank. The statement was a concession that hadn't been in Harry's best interests. It wasn't even what Harry should say to make Draco a more loyal servant, now that Harry held power over him. For that Harry should be emphasizing how kindly he'd been, not how much he'd hurt Draco.

"Even so," Harry said, and now his voice was lower, almost a whisper, "please don't do that again, Draco. It hurt, and I'm not sure I could forgive you a second time. I'm not sure I'd be able to want to."

Draco just didn't get it.

Was Harry trying to be *friends* with him?

There was no way Harry Potter could be dumb enough to believe that was still possible after what he'd done.

You could be someone's friend and ally, like Draco had tried to do with Harry, or you could destroy their life and leave them no other options. Not both.

But then Draco didn't understand what else Harry *could* be trying.

And a strange thought came to Draco then, something Harry had kept talking about yesterday.

And the thought was: *Test it.*

You're awakened as a scientist now, Harry had said, *and even if you never learn to use your power, you'll always, be looking, for ways, to test, your beliefs...* Those ominous words, spoken in gasps of agony, had kept running through Draco's mind.

If Harry *was* pretending to be the repentant friend who had accidentally hurt someone...

"You *planned* what you did to me!" Draco said, managing to put a note of accusation in his voice. "You didn't do it because you got angry, you did it because you *wanted* to!"

Fool, Harry Potter would say, *of course I planned it, and now you're mine—*

Harry turned back toward Draco. "What happened yesterday *wasn't* the plan," Harry said, his voice seeming stuck in his throat. "The *plan* was that I would teach you why you were always better off knowing the truth, and then we would try together to discover the truth about blood, and whatever the answer was we would accept it. Yesterday I... rushed things."

"Always better off knowing the truth," Draco said coldly. "Like you did me a *favor.*"

Harry nodded, blowing Draco's mind completely, and said, "What if Lucius comes up with the same idea I did, that the problem is stronger

wizards having fewer children? He might start a program to pay the strongest purebloods to have more children. In fact, if blood purism *were* right, that's just what Lucius *should* be doing—addressing the problem on *his* side, where he can make things happen right away. Right now, Draco, you're the only friend Lucius has who would try to stop him from wasting the effort, because you're the only one who knows the *real* truth and can predict the real results."

The thought came to Draco that Harry Potter had been raised in a place so strange that he was now effectively a magical creature rather than a wizard. Draco simply couldn't guess what Harry would say or do next.

"*Why?*" Draco said. Putting pain and betrayal into his voice wasn't hard at all. "Why did you *do* this to me? What *was* your plan?"

"Well," Harry said, "you're Lucius's heir, and believe it or not, Dumbledore thinks I belong to him. So we could grow up and fight their battles with each other. Or we could do something else."

Slowly, Draco's mind wrapped around this. "You want to provoke a fight to the finish between them, then seize power after they're both exhausted." Draco felt cold dread in his chest. He would *have* to try and stop that no matter the cost to himself—

But Harry shook his head. "Stars above, *no!*"

"No...?"

"You wouldn't go along with that and neither would I," said Harry. "This is *our* world, we don't want to break it. But imagine, say, Lucius thought the Conspiracy was your tool and you were on his side, Dumbledore thought the Conspiracy was my tool and I was on his side, Lucius thought that you'd turned me and Dumbledore believed the Conspiracy was mine, Dumbledore thought that I'd turned you and Lucius believed the Conspiracy was yours, and so they both helped us out but only in ways that the other one wouldn't notice."

Draco did not have to fake being speechless.

Father had once taken him to see a play called *The Tragedy of Light*, about this *incredibly* clever Slytherin named Light who'd set out to purify the world of evil using an ancient ring that could kill anyone whose name and face he knew, and who'd been opposed by another incredi-

bly clever Slytherin, a villain named Lawliet, who'd worn a disguise to conceal his true face; and Draco had shouted and cheered at all the right parts, especially in the middle; and then the play had ended sadly and Draco had been hugely disappointed and Father had gently pointed out that the word 'Tragedy' was right there in the title.

Afterward, Father had asked Draco if he understood why they had gone to see this play.

Draco had said it was to teach him to be as cunning as Light and Lawliet when he grew up.

Father had said that Draco couldn't possibly be more wrong, and pointed out that while Lawliet had cleverly concealed his face there had been no good reason for him to tell Light his *name*. Father had then gone on to demolish almost every part of the play, while Draco listened with his eyes growing wider and wider. And Father had finished by saying that plays like this were *always* unrealistic, because if the playwright had known what someone *actually* as smart as Light would *actually* do, the playwright would have tried to take over the world himself instead of just writing plays about it.

That was when Father had told Draco about the Rule of Three, which was that any plot which required more than three different things to happen would never work in real life.

Father had *further* explained that since only a fool would attempt a plot that was *as complicated as possible*, the real limit was two.

Draco couldn't even find words to describe the sheer gargantuan unworkability of Harry's master plan.

But it was *just* the sort of mistake you would make if you didn't have any mentors and thought you were clever and had learned about plotting by watching plays.

"So," said Harry, "what do you think of the plan?"

"It's clever..." Draco said slowly. Shouting *brilliant!* and gasping in awe would have looked too suspicious. "Harry, can I ask a question?"

"Sure," said Harry.

"Why did you buy Granger an expensive pouch?"

"To show no hard feelings," said Harry at once. "Though I expect she'll also feel awkward if she refuses any small requests I make over the

next couple of months."

And that was when Draco realized that Harry actually *was* trying to be his friend.

Harry's move against Granger *had* been smart, maybe even brilliant. Make your enemy not suspect you, *and* put them into your debt in a friendly way so that you could maneuver them into position *just by asking them*. Draco couldn't have gotten away with that, his target would have been too suspicious, but the Boy-Who-Lived *could.* So the first step of Harry's plot was to give his enemy an expensive present, Draco wouldn't have thought of that, but it could *work*...

If you were Harry's enemy, his plots might be hard to see through at first, they might even be stupid, but his reasoning would make *sense* once you understood it, you would comprehend that he was trying to hurt you.

The way Harry was acting toward Draco right now did *not* make sense.

Because if you were Harry's *friend,* then he tried to be friends with you in the alien, incomprehensible way he'd been raised by Muggles to do, even if it meant destroying your entire life.

The silence stretched.

"I know that I've abused our friendship terribly," Harry said finally. "But please realize, Draco, that in the end, I just wanted the two of us to find the truth together. Is that something you can forgive?"

A fork with two paths, but with only one path easy to go back on later if Draco changed his mind...

"I guess I understand what you were trying to do," Draco lied, "so yes."

Harry's eyes lit up. "I'm glad to hear that, Draco," he said softly.

The two students stood in that alcove, Harry still dipped in the lone sunbeam, Draco in shadow.

And Draco realized with a note of horror and despair, that although it was a terrifying fate indeed to be Harry's friend, Harry now had so many different avenues for threatening Draco that being his enemy would be even *worse*.

Probably.

Maybe.

Well, he could always switch to being enemies later...

He was doomed.

"So," Draco said. "Now what?"

"We study again next Saturday?"

"It better not go like the last one—"

"Don't worry, it won't," said Harry. "A few more Saturdays like *that* and you'd be ahead of *me.*"

Harry laughed. Draco didn't.

"Oh, and before you go," Harry said, and grinned sheepishly. "I know this is a bad time, but I wanted to ask you for advice about something, actually."

"Okay," Draco said, still a bit distracted by that last statement.

Harry's eyes grew intent. "Buying that pouch for Granger used up most of the gold I managed to steal from my Gringotts vault—"

What.

"—and McGonagall has the vault key, or Dumbledore does now, maybe. And I was just about to launch a plot that might take some money, so I was wondering if you know how I can get access—"

"I'll loan you the money," said Draco's mouth in sheer existential reflex.

Harry looked taken aback, but in a pleased way. "Draco, you don't have to—"

"How much?"

Harry named the amount and Draco couldn't quite keep the shock from showing on his face. That was almost all the spending money Father had given Draco to last out the whole year, Draco would be left with just a few Galleons—

Then Draco mentally kicked himself. All he had to do was write Father and explain that the money was gone because he had managed to *loan it to Harry Potter,* and Father would send him a special congratulatory note written in golden ink, a giant Chocolate Frog that would take two weeks to eat, and ten times as many Galleons just in case Harry Potter needed another loan.

"It's way too much, isn't it," said Harry. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have asked—"

"Excuse me, I *am* a Malfoy, you know," said Draco. "I was just surprised you *wanted* that much."

"Don't worry," Harry Potter said cheerfully. "It's nothing that threatens your family's interests, just me being evil."

Draco nodded. "No problem, then. You want to go get it right now?"

"Sure," said Harry.

As they left the alcove and started heading toward the dungeons, Draco couldn't help but ask, "So *can* you tell me which plot this is for?"

"Rita Skeeter."

Draco thought some very bad words to himself, but it was far too late to say no.

By the time they'd reached the dungeons, Draco had started pulling together his thoughts again.

He *was* having trouble hating Harry Potter. Harry *had* been trying to be friendly, he was just insane.

And that wasn't going to stop Draco's revenge or even slow it down.

"So," Draco said, after looking around to make certain no one was nearby. Their voices would both be Blurred, of course, but it never hurt to be extra sure. "I've been thinking. When we bring new recruits into the Conspiracy, they're going to have to *think* we're equals. Otherwise it would only take *one* of them to blow the plot to Father. You already worked that out, right?"

"Naturally," said Harry.

"*Will* we be equals?" said Draco.

"I'm afraid not," Harry said. It was clear that he was trying to sound gentle, and also clear that he was trying to suppress a good deal of condescension and not quite succeeding. "I'm sorry, Draco, but you don't even know what the word *Bayesian* in *Bayesian Conspiracy* means right

now. You're going to have to study for months before we take anyone else in, just so you can put up a *good front*."

"Because I don't know enough science," Draco said, carefully keeping his voice neutral.

Harry shook his head at that. "The problem isn't that you're ignorant of specific science things like deoxyribose nucleic acid. *That* wouldn't stop you from being my equal. The problem is that you aren't trained in the methods of rationality, the *deeper* secret knowledge behind how all those discoveries got made in the first place. I'll *try* to teach you those, but they're a lot harder to learn. Think of what we did yesterday, Draco. Yes, you did some of the work. But I was the only one in control. You answered some of the questions. I asked all of them. You helped push. I did the steering by myself. And without the methods of rationality, Draco, you can't possibly steer the Conspiracy where it needs to go."

"I see," said Draco, his voice sounding disappointed.

Harry's voice tried to gentle itself even more. "I'll try to respect your expertise, Draco, about things like people stuff. But you need to respect my expertise too, and there's just no *way* you could be my equal when it comes to steering the Conspiracy. You've only been a scientist for *one day*, you know *one* secret about deoxyribose nucleic acid, and you aren't trained in *any* of the methods of rationality."

"I understand," said Draco.

And he did.

People stuff, Harry had said. Seizing control of the Conspiracy probably wouldn't even be difficult. And afterward, he would kill Harry Potter just to be sure—

The memory rose up in Draco of how sick inside it had felt last night, knowing Harry was screaming.

Draco thought some more bad words.

Fine. He *wouldn't* kill Harry. Harry had been raised by Muggles, it wasn't his fault he was insane.

Instead, Harry would live on, just so that Draco could tell him that it had all been for Harry's own good, really, he ought to be grateful—

And with a sudden twitch of surprised pleasure, Draco realized that it actually *was* for Harry's own good. If Harry tried to carry out his plan of playing Dumbledore and Father for fools, he would *die.*

That made it *perfect.*

Draco would take all of Harry's dreams away from him, just as Harry had done to him.

Draco would tell Harry that it had been for his own good, and it would be absolutely true.

Draco would wield the Conspiracy and the power of science to purify the wizarding world, and Father would be as proud of him as if he'd been a Death Eater.

Harry Potter's evil plots would be foiled, and the forces of right would prevail.

The perfect revenge.

Unless...

Just pretend to be pretending to be a scientist, Harry had told him.

Draco didn't have words to describe exactly what was wrong with Harry's mind—

(since Draco had never heard the term *depth of recursion*)

—but he could guess what sort of plots it implied.

...unless all that was exactly what Harry *wanted* Draco to do as part of some even *larger* plot which Draco would play *right into* by trying to foil this one, Harry might even *know* that his plan was unworkable, it might have no purpose *except* luring Draco to thwart it—

No. That way lay *madness.* There *had* to be a limit. The Dark Lord himself hadn't been *that* twisty. That sort of thing didn't happen in real life, only in Father's silly bedtime stories about foolish gargoyles who always ended up furthering the hero's plans every time they tried to stop him.

*

And beside Draco, Harry walked along with a smile on his face, thinking about the evolutionary origins of human intelligence.

In the beginning, before people had quite understood how evolution worked, they'd gone around thinking crazy ideas like *human intelligence evolved so that we could invent better tools.*

The reason why this was crazy was that only one person in the tribe had to invent a tool, and then everyone else would use it, and it would spread to other tribes, and still be used by their descendants a hundred years later. That was great from the perspective of scientific progress, but in evolutionary terms, it meant that the person who invented something didn't have much of a fitness *advantage*, didn't have all that many *more* children than everyone else. Only *relative* fitness advantages could increase the relative frequency of a gene in the population, and drive some lonely mutation to the point where it was universal and everyone had it. And brilliant inventions just weren't common enough to provide the sort of consistent selection pressure it took to promote a mutation. It was a natural guess, if you looked at humans with their guns and tanks and nuclear weapons and compared them to chimpanzees, that the intelligence was there to make the technology. A natural guess, but wrong.

Before people had quite understood how evolution worked, they'd gone around thinking crazy ideas like *the climate changed, and tribes had to migrate, and people had to become smarter in order to solve all the novel problems.*

But human beings had four times the brain size of a chimpanzee. 20% of a human's metabolic energy went into feeding the brain. Humans were *ridiculously* smarter than any other species. That sort of thing didn't happen because the environment stepped up the difficulty of its problems a little. Then the organisms would just get a little smarter to solve them. Ending up with that gigantic outsized brain must have taken some sort of *runaway* evolutionary process, something that would push and push without limits.

And today's scientists had a pretty good guess at what that runaway evolutionary process had been.

Harry had once read a famous book called *Chimpanzee Politics.* The book had described how an adult chimpanzee named Luit had confronted the aging alpha, Yeroen, with the help of a young, recently matured chimpanzee named Nikkie. Nikkie had not intervened directly in

the fights between Luit and Yeroen, but had prevented Yeroen's other supporters in the tribe from coming to his aid, distracting them whenever a confrontation developed between Luit and Yeroen. And in time Luit had won, and become the new alpha, with Nikkie as the second most powerful...

...though it hadn't taken very long after that for Nikkie to form an alliance with the defeated Yeroen, overthrow Luit, and become the *new* new alpha.

It really made you appreciate what millions of years of hominids trying to outwit *each other*—an evolutionary arms race without limit—had led to in the way of increased mental capacity.

'Cause, y'know, a human would have totally seen that one coming.

And beside Harry, Draco walked along, suppressing his smile as he thought about his revenge.

Someday, maybe in years but someday, Harry Potter would learn just what it meant to underestimate a Malfoy.

Draco had awakened as a scientist in a single day. Harry had said that wasn't supposed to happen for months.

But of course if you were a Malfoy, you would be a more powerful scientist than anyone who wasn't.

So Draco would learn all of Harry Potter's methods of rationality, and then when the time was ripe—

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

HOLD OFF ON PROPOSING SOLUTIONS

ACT 2:

(The sun shone brilliantly into the Great Hall from the enchanted sky-ceiling above, illuminating the students as though they sat beneath the naked sky, gleaming from their plates and bowls, as, refreshed by a night's sleep, they inhaled breakfast in preparation for whatever plans they'd made for their Sunday.)

So. There was only one thing that made you a wizard.

That wasn't surprising, when you thought about it. What DNA mostly did was tell ribosomes how to chain amino acids together into proteins. Conventional physics seemed quite capable of describing amino acids, and no matter how many amino acids you chained together, conventional physics said you would never, ever get magic out of it.

And yet magic seemed to be hereditary, following DNA.

Then that probably *wasn't* because the DNA was chaining together nonmagical amino acids into magical proteins.

Rather the key DNA sequence did not, of itself, give you your magic at all.

Magic came from somewhere else.

(At the Ravenclaw table there was one boy who was staring off into space, as his right hand automatically spooned some unimportant food into his mouth from whatever was in front of him. You probably could have substituted a pile of dirt and he wouldn't have noticed.)

And for some reason the Source of Magic was paying attention to a particular DNA marker among individuals who were ordinary ape-descended humans in every other way.

(Actually there were quite a lot of boys and girls staring off into space. It was the *Ravenclaw* table, after all.)

There were other lines of logic leading to the same conclusion. *Complex* machinery was always universal within a sexually reproducing species. If gene B relied on gene A, then A had to be useful on its own, and rise to near-universality in the gene pool on its own, before B would be useful often enough to confer a fitness advantage. Then once B was universal you would get a variant A* that relied on B, and then C that relied on A* and B, then B* that relied on C, until the whole machine would fall apart if you removed a single piece. But it all had to happen *incrementally*—evolution never looked ahead, evolution would never start promoting B in *preparation* for A becoming universal later. Evolution was the simple historical fact that, whichever organisms did in fact have the most children, their genes would in fact be more frequent in the next generation. So each piece of a complex machine had to become nearly universal before other pieces in the machine would evolve to depend on its presence.

So *complex, interdependent* machinery, the powerful sophisticated protein machines that drove life, was always *universal* within a sexually reproducing species—except for a small handful of *non*-interdependent *variants* that were being selected on at any given time, as further complexity was slowly laid down. It was why all human beings had the same underlying brain design, the same emotions, the same facial expressions wired up to those emotions; those adaptations were complex, so they *had* to be universal.

If magic had been like that, a big complex adaptation with lots of necessary genes, then a wizard mating with a Muggle would have resulted in a child with only half those parts and half the machine wouldn't do much. And so there would have been no Muggleborns, ever. Even if all the pieces had individually gotten into the Muggle gene pool, they'd never reassemble all in one place to form a wizard.

There hadn't been some genetically isolated valley of humans that

had stumbled onto an evolutionary pathway leading to sophisticated magical sections of the brain. That complex genetic machinery, if wizards interbred with Muggles, would never have reassembled into Muggleborns.

So however your genes made you a wizard, it *wasn't* by containing the blueprints for complicated machinery.

That was the other reason Harry had guessed the Mendelian pattern would be there. If magical genes weren't complicated, why would there be more than one?

And yet magic itself seemed pretty complicated. A door-locking spell would prevent the door from opening *and* prevent you from Transfiguring the hinges *and* resist *Finite Incantatem* and *Alohomora*. Many elements all pointing in the same direction: you could call that goal-orientation, or in simpler language, purposefulness.

There were only two known causes of purposeful complexity. Natural selection, which produced things like butterflies. And intelligent engineering, which produced things like cars.

Magic didn't seem like something that had self-replicated into existence. Spells were purposefully complicated, but not, like a butterfly, complicated for the purpose of making copies of themselves. Spells were complicated for the purpose of serving their user, like a car.

Some intelligent engineer, then, had created the Source of Magic, and told it to pay attention to a particular DNA marker.

The obvious next thought was that this had something to do with "Atlantis".

Harry had asked Hermione about that earlier—on the train to Hogwarts, after hearing Draco say it—and so far as she knew, nothing more was known than the word itself.

It might have been pure legend. But it was also plausible enough that a civilization of magic-users, especially one from *before* the Interdict of Merlin, would have managed to blow itself up.

The line of reasoning continued: Atlantis had been an isolated civilization that had somehow brought into being the Source of Magic, and told it to serve only people with the Atlantean genetic marker, the blood of Atlantis.

And by similar logic: The words a wizard spoke, the wand movements, those weren't complicated enough of themselves to build up the spell effects from scratch—not the way that the three billion base pairs of human DNA actually *were* complicated enough to build a human body from scratch, not the way that computer programs took up thousands of bytes of data.

So the words and wand movements were just triggers, levers pulled on some hidden and more complex machine. Buttons, not blueprints.

And just like a computer program wouldn't compile if you made a single spelling error, the Source of Magic wouldn't respond to you unless you cast your spells in exactly the right way.

The chain of logic was inexorable.

And it led inevitably toward a single final conclusion.

The ancient forebears of the wizards, thousands of years earlier, had told the Source of Magic to only levitate things if you said...

'Wingardium Leviosa.'

Harry slumped over at the breakfast table, resting his forehead wearily on his right hand.

There was a story from the dawn days of Artificial Intelligence—back when they were just starting out and no one had yet realized the problem would be difficult—about a professor who had delegated one of his grad students to solve the problem of computer vision.

Harry was beginning to understand how that grad student must have felt.

This could take a while.

Why did it take more effort to cast the Alohomora spell, if it was just like pressing a button?

Who'd been silly enough to build in a spell for *Avada Kedavra* that could only be cast using hatred?

Why did wordless Transfiguration require you to make a complete mental separation between the concept of form and concept of material?

Harry might not be done with this problem by the time he graduated Hogwarts. He could still be working on this problem when he was *thirty years old.* Hermione had been right, Harry *hadn't* realized that on a gut level before. He'd just given an inspiring speech about determination.

Harry's mind briefly considered whether to get on a gut level that he might never solve the problem at all, then decided that would be taking things much too far.

Besides, so long as he could get as far as immortality in the first few decades, he'd be fine.

What method had the Dark Lord used? Come to think, the fact that the Dark Lord had somehow managed to survive the death of his first body was almost *infinitely* more important than the fact that he'd tried to take over magical Britain—

"Excuse me," said an expected voice from behind him in very unexpected tones. "At your convenience, Mr. Malfoy requests the favor of a conversation."

Harry did not choke on his breakfast cereal. Instead he turned around and beheld Mr. Crabbe.

"Excuse *me,*" said Harry. "Don't you mean 'Da boss wants ta talk wid youse?'"

Mr. Crabbe didn't look happy. "Mr. Malfoy instructed me to speak properly."

"I can't hear you," Harry said. "You're not speaking properly." He turned back to his bowl of tiny blue crystal snowflakes and deliberately ate another spoonful.

"Da boss wants to talk with youse," came a threatening voice from behind him. "Ya'd better come see him if ya know what's good for ya."

There. *Now* everything was going according to plan.

Act 1:

"A *reason?*" said the old wizard. He restrained the fury from his face. The boy before him had been the victim, and certainly did not need to be frightened any further. "There is *nothing* that can excuse—"

"What I did to him was worse."

The old wizard stiffened in sudden horror. "Harry, *what have you done?*"

"I tricked Draco into believing that I'd tricked him into participating in a ritual that sacrificed his belief in blood purism. And that meant

he couldn't be a Death Eater when he grew up. He'd lost everything, Headmaster."

There was a long quiet in the office, broken only by the tiny puffs and whistles of the fiddly things, which after enough time had come to seem like silence.

"Dear me," said the old wizard, "I *do* feel silly. And *here* I was expecting you might try to redeem the heir of Malfoy by, say, *showing him true friendship and kindness*."

"*Ha!* Yeah, like *that* would have worked."

The old wizard sighed. This was taking it too far. "Tell me, Harry. Did it even *occur* to you that there was something *incongruous* about setting out to redeem someone through lies and trickery?"

"I did it without telling any direct lies, and since we're talking about Draco Malfoy here, I think the word you're looking for is *congruous*." The boy looked rather smug.

The old wizard shook his head in despair. "And *this* is the hero. We're all doomed."

Act 5:

The long, narrow tunnel of rough stone, unlit except by a child's wand, seemed to stretch on for miles.

The reason for this was simple: It *did* stretch on for miles.

The time was three in the morning, and Fred and George were starting the long way down the secret passage that led from a statue of a one-eyed witch in Hogwarts, to the cellar of the Honeydukes candyshop in Hogsmeade.

"How's it doing?" said Fred in a low voice.

(Not that there'd be anyone listening, but there was something odd about talking in a normal voice when you were going through a secret passage.)

"Still on the fritz," said George.

"Both, or—"

"Intermittent one fixed itself again. Other one's same as ever."

The Map was an extraordinarily powerful artifact, capable of tracking every sentient being on the school grounds, in real time, by name. Almost certainly, it had been created during the original raising of Hogwarts. It was *not good* that errors were starting to pop up. Chances were that no one except Dumbledore could fix it if it was broken.

And the Weasley twins weren't about to turn the Map over to Dumbledore. It would have been an unforgivable insult to the Marauders—the four unknowns who'd managed to steal part of the *Hogwarts security system*, something probably forged by Salazar Slytherin himself, and twist it into *a tool for student pranking*.

Some might have considered it disrespectful.

Some might have considered it criminal.

The Weasley twins firmly believed that if Godric Gryffindor had been around to see it, he would have approved.

The brothers walked on and on and on, mostly in silence. The Weasley twins talked to each other when they were thinking through new pranks, or when one of them knew something the other didn't. Otherwise there wasn't much point. If they already knew the same information, they tended to think the same thoughts and make the same decisions.

(Back in the old days, whenever magical identical twins were born, it had been the custom to kill one of them after birth.)

In time, Fred and George clambered out into a dusty cellar, strewn with barrels and racks of strange ingredients.

Fred and George waited. It wouldn't have been polite to do anything else.

Before too long a thin old man in black pajamas clambered down the steps that led into the cellar, yawning. "Hello, boys," said Ambrosius Flume. "I wasn't expecting you tonight. Out of stock already?"

Fred and George decided that Fred would speak.

"Not exactly, Mr. Flume," said Fred. "We were hoping you could help us with something considerably more... interesting."

"Now, boys," said Flume, sounding severe, "I hope you didn't wake me up just so I could tell you again that I'm not selling you any mer-

chandise that could get you into real trouble. Not until you're sixteen, anyways—"

George drew forth an item from his robes, and wordlessly passed it to Flume. "Have you seen this?" said Fred.

Flume looked at yesterday's edition of the *Daily Prophet* and nodded, scowling. The headline on the paper read THE NEXT DARK LORD? and showed a young boy which some student's camera had managed to catch in an uncharacteristically cold and grim expression.

"I can't believe that Malfoy," Flume snapped. "Going after the boy when he's only eleven! The man ought to be ground up and used to make chocolates!"

Fred and George blinked in unison. *Malfoy* was behind Rita Skeeter? Harry Potter hadn't warned them about that... which surely meant that Harry didn't know. He never would have brought them in if he did...

Fred and George exchanged glances. Well, Harry didn't *need* to know until after the job was done.

"Mr. Flume," Fred said quietly, "the Boy-Who-Lived needs your help."

Flume looked at them both.

Then he let out his breath with a sigh.

"All right," said Flume, "what do you want?"

ACT 6:

When Rita Skeeter was intent on a tasty prey, she didn't tend to notice the scurrying ants who constituted the rest of the universe, which was how she almost bumped into the balding young man who'd stepped into her pathway.

"Miss Skeeter," said the man, sounding rather severe and cold for someone whose face looked that young. "Fancy running into you here."

"Out of my way, buster!" snapped Rita, and tried to step around him.

The man in her pathway matched the movement so perfectly that it was like neither of them had moved at all, just stood still while the street shifted around them.

Rita's eyes narrowed. "Who do you think you are?"

"How very foolish," the man said dryly. "It would have been wise to memorize the face of the disguised Death Eater training Harry Potter to be the next Dark Lord. After all," a thin smile, "*that* certainly sounds like someone you wouldn't want to run into on the street, especially after doing a hatchet job on him in the newspaper."

Rita took a moment to place the reference. *This* was Quirinus Quirrell? He looked too young and too old at the same time; his face, if it relaxed from its severe and condescending pose, would belong to someone in his late thirties. And his hair was already falling out? Couldn't he afford a healer?

No, that wasn't important, she had a time and a place and a beetle to be. She'd just received an anonymous tip about Madam Bones making time with one of her younger assistants. That would be worth quite a bonus if she could manage to verify it, Bones was high on the hit list. The tipster had said that Bones and her young assistant were due to eat lunch in a special room at Mary's Place, a very popular room for certain purposes; a room which, she'd found, was secure against all listening devices, but not proof against a beautiful blue beetle nestled up against one wall...

"Out of my *way!*" Rita said, and tried to push Quirrell from her path. Quirrell's arm brushed her own, deflecting, and Rita staggered as the thrust went into the thin air.

Quirrell pulled up the sleeve of his left robe, showing his left arm. "Observe," said Quirrell, "no Dark Mark. I would like your paper to publish a retraction."

Rita let out an incredulous laugh. Of course the man wasn't a real Death Eater. The paper wouldn't have published it if he was. "Forget it, buster. Now take a hike."

Quirrell stared at her for a moment.

Then he smiled.

"Miss Skeeter," said Quirrell, "I had hoped to find some lever that would prove persuasive. Yet I find that I cannot deny myself the pleasure of simply crushing you."

"It's been tried. Now get out of my way, buster, or I'll find some Aurors and have you arrested for obstruction of journalism."

Quirrell swept her a small bow, and then walked past. "Goodbye, Rita Skeeter," said his voice from behind her.

As Rita bulled on ahead, she noted in the back of her mind that the man was whistling a tune as he walked away.

Like *that* would scare her.

Act 4:

"Sorry, count me out," said Lee Jordan. "I'm more the giant spider type."

The Boy-Who-Lived had said that he had *important* work for the Order of Chaos, something serious and secret, more significant and difficult than their usual run of pranks.

And then Harry Potter had launched into a speech that was inspiring, yet vague. A speech to the effect that Fred and George and Lee had tremendous potential if they could just learn to be *weirder.* To make people's lives *surreal,* instead of just surprising them with the equivalents of buckets of water propped above doors. (Fred and George had exchanged interested looks, they'd never thought of that one.) Harry Potter had invoked a picture of the prank they'd pulled on Neville—which, Harry had mentioned with some remorse, the Sorting Hat had chewed him out on—but which must have made Neville *doubt his own sanity.* For Neville it would have felt like being suddenly transported into an alternate universe. The same way everyone else had felt when they'd seen Snape apologize. That was the *true power of pranking.*

Are you with me? Harry Potter had cried, and Lee Jordan had answered no.

"Count us *in*," said Fred, or possibly George, for there was no doubt that Godric Gryffindor would have said yes.

Lee Jordan gave a regretful grin, and stood up, and left the deserted and Quieted corridor where the four members of the Order of Chaos had met and sat down in a conspiratorial circle.

The three members of the Order of Chaos got down to business.

(It wasn't *that* sad. Fred and George would still work with Lee on giant spider pranks, same as ever. They'd only started calling it the Order of Chaos in order to recruit Harry Potter, after Ron had told them about Harry being weird and evil, and Fred and George had decided to save Harry by showing him true friendship and kindness. Thankfully this no longer seemed necessary—although they weren't *quite* sure about that...)

"So," said one of the twins, "what's this about?"

"Rita Skeeter," said Harry. "Do you know who she is?"

Fred and George nodded, frowning.

"She's been asking questions about me."

That wasn't good news.

"Can you guess what I want you to do?"

Fred and George looked at each other, a bit puzzled. "You want us to slip her some of our more interesting candies?"

"No," said Harry. "No, no, *no!* That's giant-spider thinking! Come on, what would *you* do if you heard that Rita Skeeter was looking for rumors about *you*?"

That made it obvious.

Grins slowly started on the faces of Fred and George.

"Start rumors about ourselves," they replied.

"*Exactly,*" said Harry, grinning widely. "But these can't be just *any* rumors. I want to teach people never to believe what the newspaper says about Harry Potter, any more than Muggles believe what the newspaper says about Elvis. At first I just thought about flooding Rita Skeeter with so many rumors that she wouldn't know what to believe, but then she'll just cherry-pick the ones that sound plausible and bad. So what I want you to do is create a fake story about me, and get Rita Skeeter to believe it somehow. But it has to be something that, afterward, everyone will *know* was fake. We want to fool Rita Skeeter and her editors, and *afterward* have the proof come out that it was false. And of course—given that those are the requirements—the story has to be as *ridiculous* as it can possibly be, and still get printed. Do you understand what I want you to do?"

"Not exactly..." Fred or George said slowly. "You want us to *invent* the story?"

"I want you to do *all* of it," Harry Potter said. "I'm sort of busy right now, plus I want to be able to say truthfully that I had no idea what was coming. Surprise me."

For a moment there was a very evil grin on the faces of Fred and George.

Then they turned serious. "But Harry, we don't really know how to do anything like that—"

"So figure it out," Harry said. "I have confidence in you. Not *total* confidence, but if you *can't* do it, *tell* me that, and I'll try someone else, or do it myself. If you have a really good idea—for both the ridiculous story, and how to convince Rita Skeeter and her editors to print it—then you can go ahead and do it. But don't go with something mediocre. If you can't come up with something *awesome*, just say so."

Fred and George exchanged worried glances.

"I can't think of anything," said George.

"Neither can I," said Fred. "Sorry."

Harry stared at them.

And then Harry began to explain how you went about thinking of things.

It had been known to take longer than two seconds, said Harry.

You *never* called *any* question impossible, said Harry, until you had taken an actual clock and thought about it for five minutes, by the motion of the minute hand. Not five minutes metaphorically, five minutes by a physical clock.

And *furthermore,* Harry said, his voice emphatic and his right hand thumping hard on the floor, you did *not* start out immediately looking for solutions.

Harry then launched into an explanation of a test done by someone named Norman Maier, who was something called an organizational psychologist, and who'd asked two different sets of problem-solving groups to tackle a problem.

The problem, Harry said, had involved three employees doing three jobs. The junior employee wanted to just do the easiest job. The se-

nior employee wanted to rotate between jobs, to avoid boredom. An efficiency expert had recommended giving the junior person the easiest job and the senior person the hardest job, which would be 20% more productive.

One set of problem-solving groups had been given the instruction "Do not propose solutions until the problem has been discussed as thoroughly as possible without suggesting any."

The other set of problem-solving groups had been given no instructions. And those people had done the natural thing, and reacted to the presence of a problem by proposing solutions. And people had gotten attached to those solutions, and started fighting about them, and arguing about the relative importance of freedom versus efficiency and so on.

The first set of problem-solving groups, the ones given instructions to *discuss* the problem first and *then* solve it, had been far more likely to hit upon the solution of letting the junior employee keep the easiest job and rotating the other two people between the other two jobs, for what the expert's data said would be a 19% improvement.

Starting out by looking for solutions was taking things *entirely out of order.* Like starting a meal with dessert, only *bad.*

(Harry also quoted someone named Robyn Dawes as saying that the harder a problem was, the more likely people were to try to solve it immediately.)

So Harry was going to leave this problem to Fred and George, and they would discuss all the aspects of it and brainstorm anything they thought might be remotely relevant. And they shouldn't try to come up with an actual solution until they'd finished doing that, unless of course they *did* happen to randomly think of something awesome, in which case they could write it down for afterward and then go back to thinking. And he didn't want to hear back from them about any so-called *failures to think of anything* for at least a week. Some people spent *decades* trying to think of things.

"Any questions?" said Harry.

Fred and George stared at each other.

"I can't think of any."

"Neither can I."

Harry coughed gently. "You didn't ask about your budget."

Budget? they thought.

"I could just tell you the amount," Harry said. "But I think *this* will be more *inspiring*."

Harry's hands dipped into his robe, and brought forth—

Fred and George almost fell over, even though they were sitting down.

"Don't spend it for the sake of spending it," Harry said. On the stone floor in front of them gleamed an absolutely ridiculous amount of money. "Only spend it if awesomeness requires; and what awesomeness does require, don't hesitate to spend. If there's anything left over, just return it afterward, I trust you. Oh, and you get ten percent of what's there, regardless of how much you end up spending—"

"We *can't!*" blurted one of the twins. "We don't accept money for that sort of thing!"

(The twins never took money for doing anything illegal. Unknown to Ambrosius Flume, they were selling all of his merchandise at zero percent markup. Fred and George wanted to be able to testify—under Veritaserum if necessary—that they had not been profiteering criminals, just providing a public service.)

Harry frowned at them. "But I'm asking you to put in some real work here. A grownup would get paid for doing something like this, and it would *still* count as a favor for a friend. You can't just hire people for this sort of thing."

Fred and George shook their heads.

"Fine," Harry said. "I'll just get you expensive Christmas presents, and if you try returning them to me I'll burn them. Now you don't even *know* how much I'm going to spend on you, except, obviously, that it's going to be more than if you'd just taken the money. And I'm going to buy you those presents *anyway,* so think about *that* before you tell me *you can't think of anything awesome*."

Harry stood up, smiling, and turned to go while Fred and George were still gaping in shock. He strode a few steps away, and then turned back.

"Oh, one last thing," Harry said. "Leave Professor Quirrell out of whatever you do. He doesn't like publicity. I know it'd be easier to get people to believe weird things about the Defense Professor than anyone else, and I'm sorry to have to get in your way like that, but please, leave Professor Quirrell out of it."

And Harry turned again and took a few more steps—

Looked back one last time, and said, softly, "Thank you."

And left.

There was a long pause after he'd departed.

"So," said one.

"So," said the other.

"The Defense Professor doesn't like publicity, does he."

"Harry doesn't know us very well, does he."

"No, he doesn't."

"But we won't use his money for that, of course."

"Of course not, that wouldn't be right. We'll do the Defense Professor separately."

"We'll get some Gryffindors to write Skeeter, and say..."

"...his sleeve lifted up one time in Defense class, and they saw the Dark Mark..."

"...and he's probably teaching Harry Potter all sorts of dreadful things..."

"...and he's the worst Defense Professor anyone remembers even in Hogwarts, he's not just *failing* to teach us, he's getting everything wrong, the complete opposite of what it should be..."

"...like when he claimed that you could only cast the Killing Curse using love, which made it pretty much useless."

"I like that one."

"Thanks."

"I bet the Defense Professor likes it too."

"He does have a sense of humor. He wouldn't have called us what he did if he didn't have a sense of humor."

"But are we really going to be able to do Harry's job?"

"Harry said to discuss the problem before trying to solve it, so let's do that."

The Weasley twins decided that George would be the enthusiastic one while Fred doubted.

"It all seems sort of contradictory," said Fred. "He wants it to be ridiculous enough that everyone laughs at Skeeter and knows it's wrong, and he wants Skeeter to believe it. We can't do both things at the same time."

"We'll have to fake up some evidence to convince Skeeter," said George.

"Was that a solution?" said Fred.

They considered this.

"Maybe," said George, "but I don't think we should be all *that* strict about it, do you?"

The twins shrugged helplessly.

"So then the fake evidence has to be good enough to convince Skeeter," said Fred. "Can we really do that on our own?"

"We don't have to do it on our own," said George, and pointed to the pile of money. "We can hire other people to help us."

The twins got a thoughtful look on their face.

"That could use up Harry's budget pretty fast," said Fred. "This is a lot of money for us, but it's not a lot of money for someone like Flume."

"Maybe people will give discounts if they know it's for Harry," said George. "But most importantly of all, whatever we do, it has to be *impossible*."

Fred blinked. "What do you mean, *impossible?*"

"So impossible that we don't get in trouble, because no one believes we could have done it. So impossible that even Harry starts wondering. It has to be surreal, it has to make people doubt their own sanity, it has to be... *better than Harry.*"

Fred's eyes were wide in astonishment. This happened sometimes, between them, but not often. "But why?"

"They were pranks. They were *all* pranks. The pie was a prank. The Remembrall was a prank. Kevin Entwhistle's cat was a prank. *Snape* was a prank. *We're* the best pranksters in Hogwarts, are we going to roll over and give up without a fight?"

"He's the Boy-Who-Lived," said Fred.

"And *we're* the Weasley twins! He's *challenging* us. He said we could do what he does. But I bet he doesn't think we'll ever be as good as *him*."

"He's right," said Fred, feeling rather nervous. The Weasley twins did *sometimes* disagree even when they had all the same information, but every time they did it seemed unnatural, like at least one of them must be doing something wrong. "This is *Harry Potter* we're talking about. He can do the impossible. We can't."

"Yes we can," said George. "And we have to be *more* impossible than him."

"But—" said Fred.

"It's what Godric Gryffindor would do," said George.

That settled it, and the twins snapped back into... whatever it was that was normal for them.

"All right, then—"

"—let's think about it."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

NOTICING CONFUSION

Professor Quirrell's office hours consisted of 11:40 to 11:55AM on Thursday. That was for all of his students in all years. It cost a Quirrell point just to knock on the door, and if he didn't think your reason was worth his time, you would lose another fifty.

Harry knocked on the door.

There was a pause. Then a biting voice said, "I suppose you may as well come in, Mr. Potter."

And before Harry could touch the doorknob, the door slammed open, hitting the wall with a sharp crack that sounded like something might have broken in the wood, or the stone, or both.

Professor Quirrell was leaning back in his chair and reading a suspiciously old-looking book, bound in night-blue leather with silver runes on the spine. His eyes had not moved from the pages. "I am not in a good mood, Mr. Potter. And when I am not a good mood, I am not a pleasant person to be around. For your own sake, conduct your business quickly and depart."

A cold chill seeped from the room, as though it contained something that cast darkness the way lamps cast light, and which hadn't been fully shaded.

Harry was a bit taken aback. *Not in a good mood* didn't quite seem to cover it. What could be bothering Professor Quirrell this much...?

Well, you didn't just walk out on friends when they were feeling down. Harry cautiously advanced into the room. "Is there anything I can do to help—"

"No," said Professor Quirrell, still not looking up from the book.

"I mean, if you've been dealing with idiots and want someone sane to talk to..."

There was a surprisingly long pause.

Professor Quirrell slammed the book shut and it vanished with a small whispering sound. He looked up, then, and Harry flinched.

"I suppose an intelligent conversation would be pleasant for *me* at this point," said Professor Quirrell in the same biting tone that had invited Harry to enter. "*You* are not likely to find it so, be warned."

Harry drew a deep breath. "I promise I won't mind if you snap at me. What happened?"

The cold in the room seemed to deepen. "A sixth-year Gryffindor cast a curse at one of my more promising students, a sixth-year Slytherin."

Harry swallowed. "What... sort of curse?"

And the fury on Professor Quirrell's face was no longer contained. "Why bother to ask an unimportant question like that, Mr. Potter? Our friend the sixth-year Gryffindor did not think it was important!"

"Are you *serious?*" Harry said before he could stop himself.

"No, I'm in a terrible mood today for no particular reason. *Yes I'm serious, you fool!* He didn't know. He *actually didn't know.* I didn't believe it until the Aurors confirmed it under Veritaserum. He is in his *sixth year at Hogwarts* and he cast a high-level Dark curse *without knowing what it did.*"

"You don't mean," Harry said, "that he was *mistaken* about what it did, that he somehow read the wrong spell description—"

"All he knew was that it was meant to be directed at an enemy. He *knew* that was all he knew."

And that had been enough to cast the spell. "I do not understand how anything with that small a brain could walk upright."

"Indeed, Mr. Potter," said Professor Quirrell.

There was a pause. Professor Quirrell leaned forward and picked up the silver inkwell from his desk, turning it around in his hands, staring at it as though wondering how he could go about torturing an inkwell to death.

"Was the sixth-year Slytherin seriously hurt?" said Harry.

"Yes."

"Was the sixth-year Gryffindor raised by Muggles?"

"*Yes.*"

"Is Dumbledore refusing to expel him because the poor boy didn't know?"

Professor Quirrell's hands whitened on the inkwell. "*Do you have a point, Mr. Potter, or are you just stating the obvious?*"

"Professor Quirrell," said Harry gravely, "all the Muggle-raised students in Hogwarts need a safety lecture in which they are told the things so ridiculously obvious that no wizardborn would ever think to mention them. Don't cast curses if you don't know what they do, if you discover something dangerous don't tell the world about it, don't brew high-level potions without supervision in a bathroom, the reason why there are underage magic laws, all the basics."

"Why?" said Professor Quirrell. "Let the stupid ones die before they breed."

"If you don't mind losing a few sixth-year Slytherins along with them."

The inkwell caught fire in Professor Quirrell's hands and burned with a terrible slowness, hideous black-orange flames tearing at the metal and seeming to take tiny bites from it, the silver twisting as it melted, as though it were trying and failing to escape. There was a tinny shrieking sound, as though the metal were screaming.

"I suppose you are right," Professor Quirrell said with a resigned smile. "I shall design a lecture to ensure that Muggleborns who are too stupid to live do not take anyone valuable with them as they depart."

The inkwell went on screaming and burning in Professor Quirrell's hands, tiny droplets of metal, still on fire, now dripping to the desk, as though the inkwell were crying.

"You're not running away," observed Professor Quirrell.

Harry opened his mouth—

"If you're about to say you're not scared of me," said Professor Quirrell, "*don't.*"

"You are the scariest person I know," Harry said, "and one of the top reasons for that is your control. I simply can't imagine hearing that

you'd hurt someone you had not made a deliberate decision to hurt."

The fire in Professor Quirrell's hands winked out, and he carefully placed the ruined inkwell on his desk. "You say the nicest things, Mr. Potter. Have you been taking lessons in flattery? From, perhaps, Mr. Malfoy?"

Harry kept his expression blank, and realized one second too late that it might as well have been a signed confession. Professor Quirrell didn't care what your expression looked like, he cared which states of mind made it likely.

"I see," said Professor Quirrell. "Mr. Malfoy is a useful friend to have, Mr. Potter, and there is much he can teach you, but I hope you have not made the mistake of trusting him with too many confidences."

"He knows nothing which I fear becoming known," said Harry.

"Well done," said Professor Quirrell, smiling slightly. "So what was your original business here?"

"I think I'm done with the preliminary exercises in Occlumency and ready for the tutor."

Professor Quirrell nodded. "I shall conduct you to Gringotts this Sunday." He paused, looking at Harry, and smiled. "And we might even make it a little outing, if you like. I've just had a pleasant thought."

Harry nodded, smiling back.

As Harry left the office, he heard Professor Quirrell humming a small tune.

Harry was glad he'd been been able to cheer him up.

That Sunday there seemed to be a rather large number of people whispering in the hallways, at least when Harry Potter walked past them.

And a lot of pointed fingers.

And a great deal of female giggling.

It had started at breakfast, when someone had asked Harry if he'd heard the news, and Harry had quickly interrupted and said that if the

news was written by Rita Skeeter then he didn't want to *hear* about it, he wanted to read it in the paper himself.

It had then developed that not many students at Hogwarts got copies of the *Daily Prophet,* and that the copies which had not already been bought up from their owners were being passed around in some sort of complicated order and nobody really knew who had one at the moment...

So Harry had used a Quieting Charm and gone on to eat his breakfast, trusting to his seat-mates to wave off the many, many questioners, and doing his best to ignore the incredulity, the laughter, the congratulatory smiles, the pitying looks, the fearful glances, and the dropped plates as new people came down for breakfast and heard.

Harry was feeling *rather* curious, but it *really* wouldn't have done to spoil the artistry by hearing it secondhand.

He'd done homework in the safety of his trunk for the next couple of hours, after telling his dormmates to come get him if anyone found him an original newspaper.

Harry was still ignorant at 10AM, when he'd left Hogwarts in a carriage with Professor Quirrell, who was in the front right, and currently slumped over in zombie-mode. Harry was sitting diagonally across, as far away as the carriage allowed, in the back left. Even so, Harry had a constant feeling of doom as the carriage rattled over a small path through a section of non-forbidden forest. It made it a bit hard to read, especially since the material was difficult, and Harry suddenly wished he was reading one of his childhood science fiction books instead—

"We're outside the wards, Mr. Potter," said Professor Quirrell's voice from the front. "Time to go."

Professor Quirrell carefully disembarked from the carriage, bracing himself as he stepped down. Harry, on his own side, jumped off.

Harry was wondering exactly how they'd get there when Professor Quirrell said "Catch!" and threw a bronze Knut at him, and Harry caught it without thinking.

A giant intangible hook caught at Harry's abdomen and yanked him back, hard, only without any sense of acceleration, and an instant later Harry was standing in the middle of Diagon Alley.

(*Excuse me, what?* said his brain.)

(*We just teleported,* explained Harry.)

(*That didn't used to happen in the ancestral environment,* Harry's brain complained, and disoriented him.)

Harry staggered as his feet adjusted to the brick of the street instead of the dirt of the forest corridor they had been traversing. He straightened, still dizzy, with the bustling witches and wizards seeming to sway slightly, and the cries of the shopkeepers seeming to move around in his hearing, as his brain tried to place a world to be located in.

Moments later, there was a sort of sucking-popping sound from a few paces behind Harry, and when Harry turned to look Professor Quirrell was there.

"Do you mind—" said Harry, at the same time as Professor Quirrell said, "I'm afraid I—"

Harry stopped, Professor Quirrell didn't.

"—need to go off and set something in motion, Mr. Potter. As it has been thoroughly explained to me that I am responsible for anything whatsoever that happens to you, I'll be leaving you with—"

"Newsstand," Harry said.

"Pardon?"

"Or anywhere I can buy a copy of the *Daily Prophet.* Put me there and I'll be happy."

Shortly after, Harry had been delivered into a bookstore, accompanied by several quietly spoken, ambiguous threats. And the shopkeeper had gotten *less* ambiguous threats, judging by the way he had cringed, and how his eyes now kept darting between Harry and the entrance.

If the bookstore burned down, Harry was going to stick around in the middle of the fire until Professor Quirrell got back.

Meanwhile—

Harry took a quick glance around.

The bookstore seemed rather small and shoddy, with only four rows of bookcases visible, and the nearest shelf Harry's eyes had jumped to seemed to deal with narrow, cheaply bound books with grim titles like *The Massacre of Albania in the Fifteenth Century.*

First things first. Harry stepped over to the seller's counter.

"Pardon me," said Harry, "One copy of the *Daily Prophet,* please."

"Five Sickles," said the shopkeeper. "Sorry, kid, I've only got three left."

Five Sickles dropped onto the counter. Harry had the feeling he could have bargained him down a couple of points, but at this point he didn't really care.

The shopkeeper's eyes widened and he seemed to really notice Harry for the first time. "*You!*"

"*Me!*"

"Is it *true?* Are you *really*—"

"*Shut up!* Sorry, I've been waiting *all day* to read this in the original newspaper instead of hearing about it secondhand, so please just *hand it over*, all right?"

The shopkeeper stared at Harry for a moment, then wordlessly reached under the counter and passed over one folded copy of the *Daily Prophet*.

The headline read:

HARRY POTTER
SECRETLY BETROTHED
TO GINEVRA WEASLEY

Harry stared.

He lifted the newspaper off the counter, softly, reverently, like he was handling an original Escher painting, and unbent it to read...

...about the evidence that had convinced Rita Skeeter.

...and some interesting further details.

...and yet more evidence.

Fred and George had cleared it with their sister first, surely? Yes, of course they had. There was a picture of Ginevra Weasley sighing longingly over what Harry could see, looking closely, was a photo of himself. That had to have been staged.

But *how* on *Earth...?*

Harry was sitting in a cheap folding chair, rereading the newspaper for the fourth time, when the door whispered softly and Professor Quirrell came back into the shop.

"My apologies for—*what* in Merlin's name are you reading?"

"It would seem," said Harry, awe in his voice, "that one Mr. Arthur Weasley was placed under the Imperius Curse by a Death Eater whom my father killed, thus creating a debt to the Noble House of Potter, which my father demanded be repaid by the hand in marriage of the recently born Ginevra Weasley. Do people actually do that sort of thing around here?"

"How could Miss Skeeter *possibly* be fool enough to believe—"

And Professor Quirrell's voice cut off.

Harry had been reading the newspaper held vertically and unfolded, which meant that Professor Quirrell, from where he was standing, could see the text underneath the headline.

The look of shock on Professor Quirrell's face was a work of art almost on par with the newspaper itself.

"Don't worry," said Harry cheerfully, "it's all fake."

From elsewhere in the store, he heard the shopkeeper gasp. There was the sound of a stack of books falling over.

"Mr. Potter..." Professor Quirrell said slowly, "are you *sure* of that?"

"Quite sure. Shall we go?"

Professor Quirrell nodded, looking rather abstracted, and Harry folded the newspaper back up, and followed him out of the door.

For some reason Harry didn't seem to be hearing any street noises now.

They walked in silence for thirty seconds before Professor Quirrell spoke. "Miss Skeeter viewed the original proceedings of the restricted Wizengamot session."

"Yes."

"The *original proceedings of the Wizengamot.*"

"Yes."

"*I* would have trouble doing that."

"Really?" said Harry. "Because if my suspicions are correct, this was done by a Hogwarts student."

"That is beyond impossible," Professor Quirrell said flatly. "Mr. Potter... I regret to say that this young lady expects to marry you."

"But *that* is improbable," said Harry. "To quote Douglas Adams, the impossible often has a kind of integrity which the merely improbable lacks."

"I see your point," Professor Quirrell said slowly. "But... no, Mr. Potter. It may be impossible, but I can *imagine* tampering with the Wizengamot proceedings. It is *unimaginable* that the Grand Manager of Gringotts should affix the seal of his office in witness to a false betrothal contract, and Miss Skeeter personally verified that seal."

"Indeed," said Harry, "you would expect the Grand Manager of Gringotts to get involved with that much money changing hands. It seems Mr. Weasley was greatly in debt, and so demanded an additional payment of ten thousand Galleons—"

"*Ten thousand* Galleons for a *Weasley?* You could buy the daughter of a Noble House for that!"

"Excuse me," Harry said. "I really have to ask at this point, do people actually do that sort of thing around here—"

"Rarely," said Professor Quirrell, with a frown on his face. "And not at all, I suspect, since the Dark Lord departed. I suppose that according to the newspaper, your father just paid it?"

"He didn't have any choice," said Harry. "Not if he wanted to fulfill the conditions of the prophecy."

"*Give me that,*" said Professor Quirrell, and the newspaper leaped out of Harry's hand so fast that he got a paper cut.

Harry automatically put the finger in his mouth to suck on, feeling rather shocked, and turned to remonstrate with Professor Quirrell—

Professor Quirrell had stopped short in the middle of the street, and his eyes were flickering rapidly back and forth as an invisible force held the newspaper suspended before him.

Harry watched, gaping in open awe, as the newspaper opened to reveal pages two and three. And not much long after, four and five. It was like the man had cast off a pretense of mortality.

And after a troublingly short time, the paper neatly folded itself up again. Professor Quirrell plucked it from the air and tossed it to Harry,

who caught it in sheer reflex; and then Professor Quirrell started walking again, and Harry automatically trudged after.

"No," said Professor Quirrell, "that prophecy didn't sound quite right to me either."

Harry nodded, still stunned.

"The centaurs could have been put under an *Imperius*," Professor Quirrell said, frowning, "*that* seems understandable. A goblin would be immune to that and all other mental influence, but what magic can make, magic can corrupt, and it is not unthinkable that the Great Seal of Gringotts could be twisted to another's hand. The Unspeakable could have been impersonated with Polyjuice, likewise the Bavarian seer. And with *enough* effort it might be possible to tamper with the proceedings of the Wizengamot. Do you have any idea how that was done?"

"I do not have one single plausible hypothesis," said Harry. "I do know it was done on a total budget of forty Galleons."

Professor Quirrell stopped short and whirled on Harry. His expression was now completely incredulous. "Forty Galleons will pay a competent ward-breaker to open a path into a home you wish to burglarize! Forty *thousand* Galleons *might* pay a team of the greatest professional criminals in the world to tamper with the proceedings of the Wizengamot!"

Harry shrugged helplessly. "I'll remember that the next time I want to save thirty-nine thousand, nine hundred and sixty Galleons by finding the right contractor."

"I do not say this often," said Professor Quirrell. "I am impressed."

"Likewise," said Harry.

"And who is this incredible Hogwarts student?"

"I'm afraid I couldn't say."

Somewhat to Harry's surprise, Professor Quirrell made no objection to this.

They walked in the direction of the Gringotts building, thinking, for they were neither of them the sort of person who would give up on the problem without considering it for at least five minutes.

"I have a feeling," Harry said finally, "that we're coming at this from the wrong angle. There's a tale I once heard about some students who

came into a physics class, and the teacher showed them a large metal plate near a fire. She ordered them to feel the metal plate, and they felt that the metal nearer the fire was cooler, and the metal further away was warmer. And she said, write down your guess for why this happens. So some students wrote down 'because of how the metal conducts heat', and some students wrote down 'because of how the air moves', and no one said 'this just seems impossible', and the real answer was that before the students came into the room, the teacher turned the plate around."

"Interesting," said Professor Quirrell. "That does sound similar. Is there a moral?"

"That your strength as a rationalist is your ability to be more confused by fiction than by reality," said Harry. "If you're equally good at explaining any outcome, you have zero knowledge. The students thought they could use words like 'because of heat conduction' to explain anything, even a metal plate being cooler on the side nearer the fire. So they didn't notice how confused they were, and that meant they couldn't be more confused by falsehood than by truth. If you tell me that the centaurs were under the *Imperius* Curse, I still have the feeling of something being not quite right. I notice that I'm still confused even after hearing your explanation."

"Hm," said Professor Quirrell.

They walked on further.

"I don't suppose," said Harry, "that it's possible to *actually* swap people into alternate universes? Like, this isn't our own Rita Skeeter, or they temporarily sent her somewhere else?"

"If *that* was possible," Professor Quirrell said, his voice rather dry, "would I still be *here*?"

And just as they were almost to the huge white front of the Gringotts building, Professor Quirrell said:

"Ah. Of *course.* I see it now. Let me guess, the Weasley twins?"

"*What?*" said Harry, his voice going up another octave in pitch. "*How?*"

"I'm afraid I couldn't say."

"...That is *not* fair."

"I think it is extremely fair," said Professor Quirrell, and they entered through the bronze doors.

The time was just before noon, and Harry and Professor Quirrell were seated at the foot and head of a wide, long, flat table, in a sumptuously appointed private room with thoroughly cushioned couches and chairs along the walls, and soft curtains hanging everywhere.

They were about to eat lunch in Mary's Place, which Professor Quirrell had said was known to him as one of the best restaurants in Diagon Alley, especially for—his voice had dropped meaningfully—*certain purposes.*

It was the nicest restaurant that Harry had ever been in, and it was really eating away at Harry that Professor Quirrell was treating *him* to the meal.

The first part of the mission, to find an Occlumency instructor, had been a success. Professor Quirrell, smiling evilly, had told Griphook to recommend the best he knew, and not worry about the expense, since Dumbledore was paying it; and the goblin had smiled in return. There might have been a certain amount of smiling on Harry's part as well.

The second part of the plan had been a complete failure.

Harry was not allowed to take money out of his vault without Headmaster Dumbledore or some other school official present, and Professor Quirrell had not been given the vault key. Harry's Muggle parents could not authorize it because they were Muggles, and Muggles had around the same legal standing as children or kittens: they were cute, so if you tortured them in public you could get arrested, but they weren't *people*. Some reluctant provision had been made for recognizing the parents of Muggleborns as human in a limited sense, but Harry's adoptive parents did not fall into that legal category.

It seemed that Harry was effectively an orphan in the eyes of the wizarding world. As such, the Headmaster of Hogwarts, or his designees *within* the school system, were Harry's guardians until he gradu-

ated. Harry *could* breathe without Dumbledore's permission, but only so long as the Headmaster did not specifically prohibit it.

Harry had then asked if he could simply *tell* Griphook how to diversify his investments beyond stacks of gold coins sitting in his vault.

Griphook had stared blankly and asked what 'diversify' meant.

Banks, it seemed, did not make investments. Banks stored your gold coins in secure vaults for an annual fee.

The wizarding world did not have a concept of stock. Or equity. Or corporations. Businesses were run by families out of their personal vaults.

Loans were made by rich people, not banks. Though Gringotts would witness the contract, for a fee, and enforce its collection, for a much larger fee.

Good rich people let their friends borrow money and pay it back whenever. *Bad* rich people charged you *interest.*

There was no secondary market in loans.

Evil rich people charged you annual interest rates of at least 20%.

Harry had stood up, turned away, and rested his head against the wall.

Harry had asked if he needed the Headmaster's permission before he could start a bank.

Professor Quirrell had interrupted at this point, saying that it was time for lunch, and swiftly conducted a fuming Harry out of the bronze doors of Gringotts, through Diagon Alley, and to a fine restaurant called Mary's Place, where a room had been reserved for them. The owner had looked shocked at seeing Professor Quirrell accompanied by Harry Potter, but had conducted them to the room without complaint.

And Professor Quirrell had quite deliberately announced that he would pay the bill, seeming to rather enjoy the look on Harry's face.

"No," said Professor Quirrell to the waitress, "we will not require menus. I will have the daily special accompanied by a bottle of Chianti, and Mr. Potter will have the Diracawl soup to start, followed by a plate of Roopo balls, and treacle pudding for dessert."

The waitress, clad in robes that still looked severe and formal while being rather shorter than usual, bowed respectfully and departed, shut-

ting the door behind her.

Professor Quirrell waved a hand in the direction of the door, and a bolt slid shut. "Note the bolt on the inside. This room, Mr. Potter, is known as Mary's Room. It happens to be proof against all scrying, and I do mean *all;* Dumbledore himself could detect nothing of what happens here. Mary's Room is used by two kinds of people. The first sort are engaged in illicit dalliances. And the second sort lead interesting lives."

"*Really,*" said Harry.

Professor Quirrell nodded.

Harry's lips were parted in anticipation. "It would be a waste to just sit here and eat lunch, then, without doing anything special."

Professor Quirrell grinned, then took out his wand and flicked it in the direction of the door. "Of course," he said, "people who lead interesting lives take precautions more *thorough* than the dalliers. I have just sealed us in. Nothing will now pass in or out of this room—through the crack under the door, for example. And..."

Professor Quirrell then spoke no fewer than four different Charms, none of which Harry recognized.

"Even that does not *really* suffice," said Professor Quirrell. "If we were doing anything of truly great import, it would be necessary to perform another twenty-three checks besides those. If, say, Rita Skeeter knew or guessed that we would come here, it is possible that she could be in this room wearing the true Cloak of Invisibility. Or she could be an Animagus with a tiny form, perhaps. There are tests to rule out such rare possibilities, but to perform all of them would be arduous. Still, I wonder if I should do them anyway, just so as not to teach you bad habits?" And Professor Quirrell tapped a finger on his cheek, looking abstracted.

"It's fine," Harry said, "I understand, and I'll remember." Though he was a little disappointed that they weren't doing anything of truly great import.

"Very well," Professor Quirrell said. He leaned back in his chair, smiling broadly. "You wrought quite well today, Mr. Potter. The basic notion was yours, I'm sure, even if you delegated the execution. I don't think we'll be hearing much more from Rita Skeeter after this. Lucius

Malfoy will not be pleased with her failure. If she's smart, she'll flee the country the instant she realizes she's been fooled."

A sinking sensation began to dawn in Harry's stomach. "Lucius was behind Rita Skeeter...?"

"Oh, you didn't realize that?" said Professor Quirrell.

Harry hadn't thought about what would happen to Rita Skeeter afterward.

At all.

Not in the slightest.

But she would get fired from her job, *of course* she would be fired, she might have children going through Hogwarts for all Harry knew, and now it was worse, much worse—

"Is Lucius going to have her killed?" Harry said in a barely audible voice. Somewhere in his head, the Sorting Hat was screaming at him.

Professor Quirrell smiled dryly. "If you have not dealt with journalists before, take it from me that the world gets a little brighter every time one dies."

Harry jumped out of his chair with a convulsive movement, he had to find Rita Skeeter and warn her before it was too late—

"*Sit down*," Professor Quirrell said sharply. "*No*, Lucius won't kill her. But Lucius makes life *extremely* unpleasant for those who serve him ill. Miss Skeeter will flee and start her life over with a new name. *Sit down,* Mr. Potter; there is nothing you can do at this point, and you have a lesson to learn."

Harry sat down, slowly. There was a disappointed, annoyed look on Professor Quirrell's face that was doing more to stop him than the words.

"There are times," Professor Quirrell said, his voice cutting, "when I worry that your brilliant Slytherin mind is simply wasted on you. Repeat after me. Rita Skeeter was a vile, disgusting woman."

"Rita Skeeter was a vile, disgusting woman," Harry said. He wasn't comfortable saying it, but there didn't seem to be any other possible actions, none at all.

"Rita Skeeter tried to destroy my reputation, but I executed an ingenious plan and destroyed *her* reputation first."

"Rita Skeeter challenged me. She lost the game, and I won."

"Rita Skeeter was an obstacle to my future plans. I had no choice but to deal with her if I wanted those plans to succeed."

"Rita Skeeter was my enemy."

"I cannot possibly get anything done in life if I am not willing to defeat my enemies."

"I have defeated one of my enemies today."

"I am a good boy."

"I deserve a special reward."

"Ah," said Professor Quirrell, who had been grinning a benevolent smile for the last few lines, "I see I have succeeded in catching your attention."

That was true. And while Harry felt like he was being railroaded into something—no, that wasn't just a feeling, he *had* been railroaded—he couldn't deny that saying those things, and seeing Professor Quirrell's smile, *did* make him feel better.

Professor Quirrell reached into his robes, the gesture slow and deliberately significant, and drew forth...

...a *book*.

It was different from any book Harry had ever seen, the edges and corners visibly misshapen; *rough-hewn* was the phrase that came to mind, like it had been hacked out of a book mine.

"What is it?" breathed Harry.

"A diary," said Professor Quirrell.

"Whose?"

"That of a famous person." Professor Quirrell was smiling broadly.

"Okay..."

Professor Quirrell's expression became more serious. "Mr. Potter, one of the requisites for becoming a powerful wizard is an excellent memory. The key to a puzzle is often something you read twenty years ago in an old scroll, or a peculiar ring you saw on the finger of a man you met only once. I mention this to explain how I managed to remember this item, and the placard attached to it, after meeting you a good deal later. You see, Mr. Potter, over the course of my life, I have viewed a

number of private collections held by individuals who are, perhaps, not quite deserving of all that they have—"

"You *stole* it?" Harry said incredulously.

"That is correct," said Professor Quirrell. "Very recently, in fact. I think you will appreciate this particular item much more than the vile little man who held it for no other purpose than impressing his equally vile friends with its rarity."

Harry was simply gaping now.

"But if you feel that my actions were incorrect, Mr. Potter, I suppose you needn't accept your special present. Though of course I shan't go to the trouble of stealing it *back*. So which is it to be?"

Professor Quirrell tossed the book from one hand to another, causing Harry to reach out involuntarily with a look of dismay.

"Oh," said Professor Quirrell, "don't worry about a little rough handling. You could toss this diary in a fireplace and it would emerge unscathed. In any case, I await your decision."

Professor Quirrell casually threw the book up into the air and caught it again, grinning.

No, said Gryffindor and Hufflepuff.

Yes, said Ravenclaw. *What part of the word 'book' did you two not understand?*

The theft part, said Hufflepuff.

Oh, come on, said Ravenclaw, *you can't seriously ask us to say no and spend the rest of our life wondering what it was.*

It sounds like a net positive from a utilitarian standpoint, said Slytherin. *Think of it as an economic transaction which generates gains from trade, only without the trade part. Plus,* we *didn't steal it and it won't help anyone to have Professor Quirrell keep it.*

He's trying to turn you Dark! shrieked Gryffindor, and Hufflepuff nodded firmly.

Don't be a naive little boy, said Slytherin, *he's trying to teach you Slytherin.*

Yeah, said Ravenclaw. *Whoever owned the book originally was probably a Death Eater or something. It belongs with us.*

Harry's mouth opened, then halted that way, an agonized look on his face.

Professor Quirrell seemed to be quite enjoying himself. He had balanced the book on its corner, on one finger, and was keeping it upright while humming a little tune.

There came a knock at the door.

The book vanished back into Professor Quirrell's robes, and he rose up from his chair. Professor Quirrell started to walk over to the door—

—and staggered, suddenly lurching into the wall.

"It's all right," said Professor Quirrell's voice, which suddenly sounded a lot weaker than usual. "Sit down, Mr. Potter, it's just a dizzy spell. Sit down."

Harry's fingers gripped the edge of his chair, uncertain as to what he should do, what he *could* do. Harry couldn't even get too close to Professor Quirrell, not unless he wanted to defy that sense of Doom—

Professor Quirrell straightened, then, his breathing seeming a bit heavy, and opened the door.

The waitress came in, then, bearing a platter of food; and as she distributed the plates, Professor Quirrell walked slowly back to the table.

But by the time the waitress had bowed her way out, Professor Quirrell was sitting upright and smiling again.

Still, the brief episode of whatever-it-was had decided Harry. He couldn't say no, not after Professor Quirrell had gone to that much trouble.

"Yes," Harry said.

Professor Quirrell held up a cautioning finger, then took out his wand again, locked the door again, and repeated three of the same Charms from earlier.

Then Professor Quirrell took the book back out of his robes and tossed it to Harry, who almost dropped it into his soup.

Harry shot Professor Quirrell a look of helpless indignation. You weren't supposed to *do* that with books, enchanted or not.

Harry opened the book with ingrained, instinctive care. The pages seemed too thick, with a texture unlike either Muggle paper or wizarding parchment. And the contents were...

...blank?

"Am I supposed to be seeing—"

"Look nearer the beginning," said Professor Quirrell, and Harry (again with that helpless, ingrained care) turned a block of pages back.

The lettering was obviously handwritten, and very hard to read, but Harry thought the words might be Latin.

"What *is* this?" said Harry.

"That," said Professor Quirrell, "is a record of the magical researches of a Muggleborn who never came to Hogwarts. He refused his letter, and conducted his own small investigations, which never did get very far without a wand. From the description on the placard, I expect that his name bears rather more significance to you than to me. That, Harry Potter, is the diary of Roger Bacon."

Harry almost fainted.

Nestled up against the wall, where Professor Quirrell had stumbled, glistened the crushed remains of a beautiful blue beetle.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

EMPATHY

It wasn't every day you got to see Harry Potter beg.

"*Pleeaaase,*" whined Harry Potter.

Fred and George shook their heads again, smiling.

There was an agonized look on Harry Potter's face. "But I *told* you how I did the one with Kevin Entwhistle's cat, and Hermione and the vanishing soda, and I *can't* tell you about the Sorting Hat or the Rembrall or Professor Snape..."

Fred and George shrugged and turned to leave.

"If you ever do figure it out," said the Weasley twins, "be sure to let us know."

"*You're evil! You're both evil!*"

Fred and George firmly closed the door to the empty classroom behind them, and made sure to keep the grin on their faces for a while, just in case Harry Potter could see through doors.

Then they turned a corner and their faces sagged.

"I don't suppose Harry's guesses—"

"—gave you any ideas?" they said to each other at the same time, and then their shoulders slumped further.

Their last relevant memory was of Flume refusing to help them, though they couldn't remember *what* they'd asked him to do...

...but they must have looked elsewhere and found *someone* to help them do *something* illegal, or they wouldn't have agreed to be Obliviated afterward.

How had they *possibly* been able to get all that done on just forty Galleons?

At first they'd worried that they'd forged evidence so good that Harry actually *would* end up married to Ginny... but they'd thought of that too, it seemed. The Wizengamot proceedings had been tampered with *again* to put them back the way they'd been originally, the fake betrothal contract had vanished from its dragon-guarded vault in Gringotts, and so on. It was pretty scary, actually. Most people now thought the *Daily Prophet* had just made the whole thing up for unguessable reasons, and the *Quibbler* had helpfully twisted the knife deeper with the next day's headline,

HARRY POTTER SECRETLY BETROTHED TO LUNA LOVEGOOD.

Whoever they'd hired would tell them after the statute of limitations expired, they desperately hoped. But meanwhile it was awful, they'd pulled their greatest prank ever, maybe the greatest prank in the history of pranking, and they *couldn't remember how.* It was crazy, they'd been able to think of a way the *first* time, so why couldn't they see it now after *knowing* everything they'd done?

Their only consolation was that Harry didn't know they didn't know.

Not even Mum had questioned them about it, despite the obvious Weasley connection. Whatever had been done, it was far out of the reach of any Hogwarts student... except possibly *one*, who, if certain rumors were true, might have done it by snapping his fingers. *Harry* had been questioned under Veritaserum, he'd told them... with Dumbledore present and giving the Aurors scary looks. The Aurors had asked just enough to determine that Harry hadn't pulled the prank himself or disappeared anyone, and then gotten the heck out of Hogwarts.

Fred and George had wondered whether to feel insulted about Harry Potter being questioned by the Aurors for *their* prank, but the look on *Harry's* face, probably for exactly the same reason, made everything worth it.

Unsurprisingly, Rita Skeeter and the editor of the *Daily Prophet* had both vanished and were probably in another country by now. They *would've* liked to be able to tell their family about that part. Dad would

have congratulated them, they thought, after Mum had finished killing them and Ginny had burned the remains.

But everything was still all right, they'd tell Dad someday, and meanwhile...

...meanwhile Dumbledore had happened to sneeze while passing them in the hallway, and a small package had accidentally dropped out of his pockets, and inside had been two matched wardbreaker's monocles of *incredible* quality. The Weasley twins had tested their new monocles on the "forbidden" third-floor corridor, making a quick trip to the magic mirror and back, and they hadn't been able to see *all* the detection webs clearly, but the monocles had shown a *lot* more than they'd seen the first time.

Of course they would have to be very careful never to get caught with the monocles in their possession, or they would end up in the Headmaster's office getting a stern lecture and maybe even threats of expulsion.

It was good to know that not everyone who got Sorted into Gryffindor grew up to be Professor McGonagall.

⁂

Harry was in a white room, windowless, featureless, sitting before a desk, facing an expressionless man in formal robes of solid black.

The room was screened against detection, and the man had performed exactly twenty-seven spells before saying so much as "Hello, Mr. Potter."

It was oddly appropriate that the man in black was about to try reading Harry's mind.

"Prepare yourself," the man said tonelessly.

A human mind, Harry's Occlumency book had said, was only exposed to a Legilimens along certain *surfaces*. If you failed to defend your surfaces, the Legilimens would go *through* and be able to access any part of you which their own mind was able to comprehend...

...which tended not to be much. Human minds, it seemed, were hard for humans to understand on any level but the shallowest. Harry

had wondered if knowing lots of cognitive science could make him an incredibly powerful Legilimens, but repeated experience had *finally* driven into him the lesson that he needed to get a little less excited in his anticipations about this sort of thing. It wasn't as if any cognitive scientist understood humans well enough to make one.

To learn the counter, Occlumency, the first step was to imagine yourself to be a different person, pretending it as thoroughly as you could, immersing yourself entirely in that alternate persona. You wouldn't always have to do that, but in the beginning, it was how you learned where your surfaces were. The Legilimens would try to read you, and you would feel it happening if you paid close enough attention, you would sense them trying to enter. And your job was to make sure that they always touched your imaginary persona and not the real one.

When you were good enough at that, you could imagine being a very *simple* sort of person, pretend to be a rock, and make a habit of leaving the pretense in place where all your surfaces were. That was a standard Occlumency barrier. Pretending to be a rock was hard to learn, but easy to do afterward, and the exposed surface of a mind was much shallower than its interior, so with enough practice you could keep it up as a background habit.

Or if you were a *perfect Occlumens*, you could race *ahead* of any probes, answering queries as fast as they were asked, so that the Legilimens would enter through your surfaces and see a mind indistinguishable from whoever you were pretending to be.

Even the best Legilimens could be fooled that way. If a perfect Occlumens claimed they were dropping their Occlumency barriers, there was no way to know if they were lying. Worse, you might not know you were dealing with a perfect Occlumens. They were rare, but the fact that they existed meant you couldn't trust Legilimency on *anyone.*

It was a sad commentary on how little human beings understood each other, how little any wizard comprehended the depths lying beneath the mind's surface, that you could fool the best human telepaths by pretending to be someone else.

But then human beings only understood each other in the first place by pretending. You didn't make predictions about people by modeling

the hundred trillion synapses in their brain as separate objects. Ask the best social manipulator on Earth to build you an Artificial Intelligence from scratch, and they'd just give you a dumb look. You predicted people by telling *your* brain to act like theirs. You *put yourself in their place*. If you wanted to know what an angry person would do, you activated your own brain's anger circuitry, and whatever that circuitry output, that was your prediction. What did the neural circuitry for anger actually look like inside? Who knew? The best social manipulator on Earth might not know what neurons *were*, and neither might the best Legilimens.

Anything a Legilimens could *understand*, an Occlumens could *pretend* to be. It was the same trick either way—probably implemented by the same neural circuitry in both cases, a single set of control circuits for reconfiguring your own brain to act as a model of someone else's.

And so the race between telepathic offense and telepathic defense had been a decisive win for defense. Otherwise the entire magical world, maybe even the whole Earth, would have been a very different place...

Harry took a deep breath, and concentrated. There was a slight smile on his face.

For *once,* just *once,* Harry hadn't gotten shortchanged in the mysterious powers department.

After almost a month of work, and more on a whim than any real hunch, Harry had decided to make himself coldly angry and then try the book's Occlumency exercises again. At that point he'd mostly given up hope on that sort of thing, but it had still seemed worth a quick try—

He'd run through all the book's hardest exercises in two hours, and the next day he'd gone and told Professor Quirrell he was ready.

His dark side, it had turned out, was very, *very* good at pretending to be other people.

Harry thought of his standard trigger, from the first time he'd gone over entirely to his dark side...

Severus paused, looking quite pleased with himself. "And that will be... five points? No, let us make it an even ten points from Ravenclaw for backchat."

Harry's smile grew chillier, and he regarded the black-robed man who thought he was going to read Harry's mind.

And then Harry turned into someone else entirely, someone who had seemed appropriate to the occasion.

...in a white room, windowless, featureless, sitting before a desk, facing an expressionless man in formal robes of solid black.

Kimball Kinnison regarded the black-robed man who thought he was going to read the mind of a Second-Stage Lensman of the Galactic Patrol.

To say that Kimball Kinnison was confident of the outcome would be an understatement. He had been trained by Mentor of Arisia, the most powerful mind known to this or any other universe, and the mere wizard sitting across from him would see precisely what the Gray Lensman wanted him to see...

...the mind of the boy he was currently disguised as, an innocent child named Harry Potter.

"I'm ready," said Kimball Kinnison in nervous tones that were exactly appropriate for an eleven-year-old boy.

"*Legilimens,*" said the black-robed wizard.

There was a pause.

The black-robed wizard blinked, as if he'd seen something so shocking that it had been enough to make even *his* eyelids move. His voice wasn't quite toneless as he said, "The Boy-Who-Lived has a *mysterious dark side?*"

The heat slowly crept up into Harry's cheeks.

"Well," the man said. His face had now settled back into perfect calm. "Excuse me. Mr. Potter, it is good to know your advantages, but that is not the same as being wildly overconfident in them. You may indeed be able to learn Occlumency at eleven years of age. This astounds me. I had thought Mr. Dumbledore was pretending to be insane again. Your dissociative talent is so strong that I am surprised to find no other signs of childhood abuse, and you may become a perfect Occlumens in time. But there is a considerable difference between that and expecting to put up a successful Occlumency barrier on your first attempt. That is merely ridiculous. Did you feel anything as I read your mind?"

Harry shook his head, now blushing furiously.

"Then pay closer attention next time. The goal is not to create a perfect image on your first day of lessons. The goal is to learn where your surfaces are. Prepare yourself."

Harry tried to pretend to be Kimball Kinnison again, tried to pay more attention, but his thoughts were a little scattered and he was suddenly aware of all the things he shouldn't be thinking about...

Oh, this was going to suck.

Harry gritted his teeth. At least the instructor would be Obliviated afterward.

"*Legilimens.*"

There was a pause—

⁂

...in a white room, windowless, featureless, sitting before a desk, facing an expressionless man in formal robes of solid black.

It was their fourth day, on a Sunday evening. When you paid this much, you got your sessions any darned time you wanted, never mind the concept of weekends.

"Hello, Mr. Potter," the telepath said tonelessly, having cast the full suite of privacy spells.

"Hello, Mr. Bester," Harry said wearily. "Let's just get the initial shock out of the way, shall we?"

"You managed to surprise me?" the man said, now sounding slightly interested. "Well then." He pointed his wand and stared into Harry's eyes. "*Legilimens.*"

There was a pause, and then the black-robed wizard jerked as if someone had touched him with a cattle prod.

"The Dark Lord is *alive?*" he choked. His eyes were suddenly wild. "*Dumbledore turns himself invisible and sneaks into girls' dorm rooms?*"

Harry sighed and looked down at his watch. In about another three seconds...

"So," the man said. He hadn't quite recovered his tonelessness. "You genuinely believe you're going to discover the secret rules of magic and become all-powerful."

"That's right," Harry said evenly, still looking at his watch. "I'm *that* overconfident."

"I wonder. It seems the Sorting Hat thinks you'll be the next Dark Lord."

"And *you* know I'm trying pretty hard *not* to be, and you saw that we already had a long discussion about whether you were willing to teach me Occlumency, and in the end you decided to do it, so can we just get this over with?"

"All right," said the man exactly six seconds later, same as last time. "Prepare yourself." He paused, and then said, his voice rather wistful, "Though I *do* wish I could remember that trick with the gold and silver."

Harry was finding himself very disturbed by how reproducible human thoughts were when you reset people back to the same initial conditions and exposed them to the same stimuli. It was dispelling illusions that a good reductionist wasn't supposed to have in the first place.

Harry was in a rather bad mood as he stomped out of his Herbology class the next Monday morning.

Hermione was seething alongside him.

The other children were still inside, a bit slow to assemble their things because they were gibbering excitedly to each other about Ravenclaw winning the year's second Quidditch match.

It seemed that last night after dinner, a girl had flown around on a broomstick for thirty minutes and then caught some sort of giant mosquito. There were other facts about what had happened during this match, but they were irrelevant.

Harry had missed this exciting sports event due to his Occlumency lesson, and also having a life.

He had then avoided all conversations in the Ravenclaw dorm, weren't Quieting Charms and magical trunks wonderful. He had eaten breakfast at the Gryffindor table.

But Harry couldn't avoid Herbology, and the Ravenclaws had talked about it before class, and after class, and *during class,* until Harry had looked up from the baby furcot whose diaper he was changing, and announced loudly that some of them were trying to learn about *plants* and Snitches didn't grow on anything so could they all *please* shut up about Quidditch. Everyone else present had given him shocked looks, except Hermione, who'd looked like she wanted to applaud, and Professor Sprout, who had awarded him a point for Ravenclaw.

A point for Ravenclaw.

One point.

The seven idiots on their idiot brooms playing their idiot game had earned *one hundred and ninety points* for Ravenclaw.

It seemed that Quidditch scores *added directly onto the House points total.*

In other words, catching a golden mosquito was worth 150 House points.

Harry couldn't even *imagine* what he would have to do to earn one hundred and fifty House points.

Besides, y'know, rescuing *a hundred and fifty Hufflepuffs,* or coming up with *fifteen ideas as good as putting protective shells on time machines,* or inventing *one thousand five hundred creative ways to kill people,* or being Hermione Granger for the *entire year*.

"We should kill them," Harry said to Hermione, who was walking beside him with an equally offended air.

"Who?" said Hermione. "The Quidditch team?"

"I was thinking of everyone involved in any way with Quidditch anywhere, but the Ravenclaw team would be a start, yes."

Hermione's lips were pursed disapprovingly. "You *do* know that killing people is wrong, Harry?"

"Yes," Harry said.

"Okay, just checking," Hermione said. "Let's get the Seeker first. I've read some Agatha Christie mysteries, do you know how we can get her onto a train?"

"Two students plotting murder," said a dry voice. "How shocking."

From around a nearby corner strolled a man in lightly spotted robes, his greasy hair falling long and unkempt about his shoulders. Deadly danger seemed to radiate out from him, filling the hallway with improperly mixed potions and accidental falls and people dying in bed of what the Aurors would rule to be natural causes.

Without thinking about it at all, Harry stepped in front of Hermione.

There was an intake of breath from behind him, and then a moment later Hermione brushed past and stepped in front of *him.* "Run, Harry!" she said. "Boys shouldn't have to be in danger."

Severus Snape smiled mirthlessly. "Amusing. I request a moment of your time, Potter, if you can tear yourself away from your flirtations with Miss Granger."

Suddenly there was a very worried look on Hermione's face. She turned to Harry and opened her mouth, then paused, looking distressed.

"Oh, don't worry, Miss Granger," said Severus's silky voice. "I promise to return your beau unmaimed." His smile vanished. "Now Potter and I are about to go off and have a private conversation, just by ourselves. I hope it is clear that you are not invited, but just in case, consider that an order from a Hogwarts professor. I'm sure a good little girl like you won't disobey."

And Severus turned and walked back around the corner. "Coming, Potter?" his voice said.

"Um," Harry said to Hermione. "Can I just sort of go off and follow him and let *you* work out what I should say to make sure you're not all worried and offended?"

"No," Hermione said, her voice trembling.

Severus's laughter echoed from around the corner.

Harry bowed his head. "Sorry," he said lowly, "really," and he went off after the Potions Master.

*

"So," Harry said. There were no other sounds now but two pairs of legs, the long and the short, padding across a random stone corridor. The

Potions Master was striding quickly but not too fast for Harry to keep up, and insofar as Harry could apply the concept of directionality to Hogwarts, they were moving away from the frequented areas. "What's this about?"

"I don't suppose you could explain," Severus said dryly, "why the two of you were plotting to murder Cho Chang?"

"I don't suppose *you* could explain," Harry said dryly, "in your capacity as an official of the Hogwarts school system, why catching a golden mosquito is deemed an academic accomplishment worthy of a hundred and fifty House points?"

A smile crossed Severus's lips. "Dear me, and I thought you were supposed to be perceptive. Are you truly so incapable of understanding your classmates, Potter, or do you dislike them too much to try? If Quidditch scores did not count toward the House Cup then none of them would care about House points at all. It would merely be an obscure contest for students like you and Miss Granger."

It was a shockingly good answer.

And that shock brought Harry's mind fully awake.

In retrospect it shouldn't have been surprising that Severus understood his students, understood them very well indeed.

He had been reading their minds.

And...

...the book said that a successful Legilimens was extremely rare, rarer than a perfect Occlumens, because almost no one had enough mental discipline.

Mental discipline?

Harry had collected stories about a man who routinely lost his temper in class and blew up at young children.

...but this same man, when Harry had spoken of the Dark Lord still being alive, had responded instantly and perfectly—reacting in precisely the way that someone completely ignorant would react.

The man stalked about Hogwarts with the air of an assassin, radiating danger...

...which was exactly *not* what a real assassin should do. Real assassins should look like meek little accountants until they killed you.

He was the Head of House for proud and aristocratic Slytherin, and he wore a robe with spotted stains from bits of potions and ingredients, which two minutes of magic could have removed.

Harry noticed that he was confused.

And his threat estimate of the *Head of House Slytherin* shot up astronomically.

Dumbledore had seemed to think Severus was his, and there'd been nothing to contradict that; the Potions Master had been "scary but not abusive", as promised. So, Harry had reasoned earlier, this was Fellowship business. If Severus had been planning harm, surely he wouldn't have come to get Harry in front of Hermione, a witness, when he could have simply waited for some time when Harry was alone...

Harry quietly bit his lip.

"I once knew a boy who truly adored Quidditch," said Severus Snape. "He was an utter pillock. Just as you and I would expect, we two."

"What *is* this?" Harry said slowly.

"Patience, Potter."

Severus turned his head, and then glided with his assassin's bearing into a nearby opening in the corridor walls, a smaller and narrower hallway leading off.

Harry followed him, wondering if it would be smarter to simply run away.

They turned and made another turn, and came to a dead end, a simple blank wall. If Hogwarts had actually been built, rather than conjured or summoned or birthed or whatever, Harry would have had some sharp words for the architect about paying people to build hallways that didn't go anywhere.

"*Quietus,*" said Severus, and a few other things as well.

Harry leaned back, folded his arms across his chest, and watched Severus's face.

"Looking me in the eyes, Potter?" said Severus Snape. "Your Occlumency lessons cannot have progressed far enough for you to block Legilimency. But then perhaps they have progressed far enough for you to detect it. Since I cannot know otherwise, I will not risk trying." The

man smiled thinly. "And the same will hold for Dumbledore, I think. Which is why we are *now* having this little talk."

Harry's eyes widened involuntarily.

"To begin with," Severus said, eyes glittering, "I should like you to promise not to speak of our conversations to *anyone*. So far as the school is concerned, we are discussing your Potions homework. Whether or not they believe that is unimportant. So far as Dumbledore and McGonagall are concerned, I am violating Draco Malfoy's confidences in me, and neither of us think it proper to speak further of the particulars."

Harry's brain tried to calculate the ramifications and implications of this and ran out of swap space.

"Well?" said the Potions Master.

"All right," Harry said slowly. It was hard to see how having a conversation and being unable to tell anyone could be more constraining than *not* having it, in which case you *also* couldn't tell anyone the contents. "I promise."

Severus was watching Harry intently. "You said once in the Headmaster's office that you would not tolerate bullying or abuse. And so I wonder, Harry Potter. Just how much do you resemble your father?"

"Unless we're talking about Michael Verres-Evans," Harry said, "the answer is that I know very little about James Potter."

Severus nodded, as though to himself. "There is a fifth-year Slytherin. A boy named Lesath Lestrange. He is being bullied by Gryffindors. I am... constrained, in my ability to deal with such situations. *You* could help him, perhaps. If you wished. I am not asking you for a favor, and will not owe you one. It is simply an opportunity to do as you will."

Harry stared at Severus, thinking.

"Wondering if it's a trap?" said Severus, a faint smile crossing his lips. "It is not. It *is* a test. Call it curiosity on my part. But Lesath's troubles are real, as are my own difficulties in intervening."

That was the trouble with other people knowing you were a good guy. Even if you knew they knew, you still couldn't ignore the bait.

And if his father had protected students from bullies too... it didn't matter if Harry knew why Severus had told him. It still made him feel

warm inside, and proud, and made it impossible to walk away.

"Fine," Harry said. "Tell me about Lesath. Why is he being bullied?"

Severus's face lost the faint smile. "You think there are *reasons*, Potter?"

"Perhaps not," Harry said quietly. "But the thought had occurred to me that he might have pushed some unimportant mudblood girl down the stairs."

"Lesath Lestrange," Severus said, his voice now cold, "is the son of Bellatrix Black, the most fanatic and evil servant of the Dark Lord. Lesath is the acknowledged bastard of Rastaban Lestrange. Shortly after the Dark Lord's death, Bellatrix and Rastaban and Rastaban's brother Rodolphus were captured while torturing Alice and Frank Longbottom. All three are in Azkaban for life. The Longbottoms were driven insane by repeated Cruciatus and remain in St. Mungo's incurable ward. Is any of that a good reason to bully him, Potter?"

"It is no reason at all," Harry said, still quietly. "And Lesath himself has done no wrong that you know?"

The faint smile crossed Severus's lips again. "He is no more a saint than anyone else. But he has pushed no mudblood girls down the stairs, not that I ever heard."

"Or saw in his mind," said Harry.

Severus's expression was chill. "I did not invade his privacy, Potter. I looked within the Gryffindors, rather. He is simply a convenient target for their little satisfactions."

A cold wash of anger ran down Harry's spine, and he had to remind himself that Severus might not be a trustworthy source of information.

"And you think," Harry said, "that an intervention by Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived, might prove effective."

"Indeed," said Severus Snape, and told Harry when and where the Gryffindors were planning their next little game.

There is a main hallway running through the middle of Hogwarts's second floor on the north-south axis, and near the center of this hallway there is an opening into a short corridor which goes a dozen paces back before turning at a right angle, making an L-shape, and then goes a dozen paces more before it ends at a bright, wide window, looking out from three stories above upon the light drizzle falling over the east grounds of Hogwarts. Standing by the window you can hear nothing of the main hallway, and no one in the hallway would hear what went on by the window. If you think there is anything odd about this, you haven't been in Hogwarts very long.

Four boys in red-trimmed robes are laughing, and a boy in green-trimmed robes is screaming and grabbing frantically onto the edges of the opened window with his hands, as the four boys make as though to push him out. It's just a joke, of course, and besides, a fall from that height wouldn't kill a wizard. All good fun. If you think there is anything odd about this—

"*What are you doing?*" says a sixth boy's voice.

The four boys in red-trimmed robes spin around with sudden starts, and the boy in green-trimmed robes frantically pushes himself away from the window and falls to the floor, face streaked with tears.

"Oh," says the most handsome of the boys in red-trimmed robes, sounding relieved, "it's *you*. Hey, Lessy, you know who this is?"

There isn't any answer from the boy on the floor, who's trying to get his sniffling under control, and the boy in the red-trimmed robes draws back his leg for a kick—

"*Stop it!*" shouts the sixth boy.

The boy in the red-trimmed robes wobbles as he aborts the kick. "Um," he says, "do *you* know who this is?"

The sixth boy's breathing sounds strange. "Lesath Lestrange," he says, his breath coming in short pants, "and *he* didn't do anything to my parents, he was five years old."

Neville Longbottom stared at the four huge fifth-year bullies in front of him, trying very hard to control his trembling.

He should have just told Harry Potter no.

"Why are *you* defending him?" said the handsome one, slowly, sounding puzzled with the first hints of offense. "He's a *Slytherin.* And a *Lestrange.*"

"He's a boy who lost his parents," said Neville Longbottom. "I know how that is." He didn't know where the words had come from. It sounded too cool, like something Harry Potter would say.

The trembling went on, though.

"*Who* do you think you *are*?" said the handsome one, starting to sound angry.

I am Neville, the last scion of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Longbottom—

Neville couldn't say it.

"I think he's a *traitor*," said one of the other Gryffindors, and there was a sudden sinking sensation in Neville's stomach.

He'd known it, he'd just known it. Harry Potter had been wrong after all. Bullies wouldn't stop only because Neville Longbottom told them to stop.

The handsome one took a step forward, and the three others followed.

"So that's how it is for you," Neville said, amazed at how steady his voice was. "It doesn't matter to you if it's Lesath Lestrange or Neville Longbottom."

Lesath Lestrange let out a sudden gasp, from where he was lying on the floor.

"Evil is evil," snarled the same boy who'd spoken before, "and if you're friends with evil, you're evil too."

The four took another step forward.

Lesath rose, wobbling, to his feet. His face was gray, and he took a few steps forward, and leaned against the wall, and didn't say anything. His eyes were fixed on the turn in the hallway, the way out.

"Friends," Neville said. Now his voice was going up a bit in pitch. "Yes, I have friends. One of them is the Boy-Who-Lived."

A couple of the Gryffindors looked suddenly worried. The handsome one didn't flinch. "Harry Potter isn't here," he said, his voice hard, "and if he was, I don't think he'd like to see a Longbottom defending a Lestrange."

And the Gryffindors took another long step forward, and behind them, Lesath crept along the wall, waiting for his chance.

Neville swallowed, and raised his right hand with his thumb and forefinger pressed together.

He shut his eyes, because Harry Potter had made him promise not to peek.

If this didn't work, he was never trusting anyone again.

His voice came out surprisingly clear, considering.

"Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres. Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres. Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres. By the debt that you owe me and the power of your true name I summon you, I open the way for you, I call upon you to manifest yourself before me."

Neville snapped his fingers.

And then Neville opened his eyes.

Lesath Lestrange was staring at him.

The four Gryffindors were staring at him.

The handsome one started to chuckle, and that set off the other three.

"Was Harry Potter supposed to step around the corner or something?" said the handsome one. "Aw. Looks like you've been stood up."

The handsome one took a menacing step forward toward Neville.

The other three followed in lockstep.

"Ahem," said Harry Potter from behind them, leaning against the wall by the window, in the dead end of the hallway, where nobody could possibly have gotten to without being seen.

If watching people scream always felt this good, Neville could sort of understand why people became bullies.

Harry Potter stalked forward, placing himself between Lesath Lestrange and the others. He swept his icy gaze across the boys in red-trimmed robes, and then his eyes came to rest on the handsome one, the

ringleader. "Mr. Carl Sloper," said Harry Potter. "I believe I have comprehended this situation fully. If Lesath Lestrange has ever committed a single evil himself, rather than being born to the wrong parents, the fact is not known to *you.* If I am mistaken in this, Mr. Sloper, I suggest you inform me at once."

Neville saw the fear and awe on the other boys' faces. He was feeling it himself. Harry had *claimed* it would all be a trick, but how could it be?

"But he's a *Lestrange*," said the ringleader.

"He's a boy who *lost his parents*," Harry Potter said, his voice growing even colder.

This time all three of the other Gryffindors flinched.

"So," said Harry Potter. "You saw that Neville didn't want you tormenting an innocent boy on behalf of the Longbottoms. This failed to move you. If I tell you that the Boy-Who-Lived *also* thinks you are in the wrong, that what you did today was a terrible mistake, does that make a difference?"

The ringleader took a step toward Harry.

The others did *not* follow him.

"Carl," one of them said, swallowing. "Maybe we should go."

"They say you're going to be the next Dark Lord," the ringleader said, staring at Harry.

A grin crossed Harry Potter's face. "They also say I'm secretly betrothed to Ginevra Weasley and there's a prophecy about us conquering France." The smile faded. "Since you're determined to force the issue, Mr. Carl Sloper, let me make things clear. *Leave Lesath alone.* I will know if you don't."

"So Lessy snarked to you," said the ringleader coldly.

"Sure," said Harry Potter dryly, "and he also told me what you did today after you left Charms class, in a private secluded place where no one could see you, with a certain Hufflepuff girl wearing a white ribbon in her hair—"

The ringleader's jaw dropped in shock.

"Eep," said one of the other Gryffindors in a high-pitched voice, and spun on his heels and ran around the corner. His footsteps rapidly pat-

tered away and faded.

And then there were six.

"Ah," said Harry Potter, "there goes a slightly intelligent young man. The rest of you could stand to learn from Bertram Kirke's example, before you get into, shall we say, trouble."

"Are you threatening to snark on us?" said the handsome Gryffindor, his voice trying to be angry, and rather wavering. "Bad things happen to snarkers."

The other two Gryffindors started slowly moving back.

Harry Potter started laughing. "Oh, you did not just say that. Are you *really* trying to intimidate me? *Me?* Now honestly, do you think you're scarier than Peregrine Derrick, Severus Snape or for that matter You-Know-Who?"

Even the ringleader flinched at that.

Harry Potter raised his hand, fingers poised, and all three of the Gryffindors leaped backward, and one of them blurted "Don't—!"

"See," said Harry Potter, "this is where I snap my fingers and you become part of a hilariously amusing story that will be told with much nervous laughter at dinner tonight. But the thing is, people I trust keep telling me not to do that. Professor McGonagall told me I was taking the easy way out of everything and Professor Quirrell says I need to learn how to lose. So you remember that story where I let myself get beaten up by some older Slytherins? We could do that. You could bully me for a while and I could let you. Only you remember that part at the end where I tell my many, many friends inside this school not to do anything about it? This time we'll skip that part. So go ahead. Bully me."

Harry Potter stepped forward, his arms opened wide in invitation.

The three Gryffindors broke and ran, and Neville had to sidestep quickly to avoid getting run over.

There was silence, as their footsteps faded, and then more silence after that.

And then there were three.

Harry Potter drew a deep breath, then exhaled. "Whew," he said. "How are you doing, Neville?"

Neville's voice came out in a high-pitched squeak. "Okay, *that* was really cool."

A grin flashed across Harry Potter's face. "*You* were pretty cool too, you know."

Neville knew that Harry Potter was just saying that, trying to make him feel good, and it still started a warm glow inside his chest.

Harry turned toward Lesath Lestrange—

"Are you okay, Lestrange?" said Neville before Harry could open his mouth.

Now there was something you didn't expect to find yourself saying, ever.

Lesath Lestrange turned slowly, and stared at Neville, his face tight, no longer crying, tears glistening as they dried.

"You think you know how it is?" said Lesath, his voice high and shaking. "*You think you know?* My parents are in *Azkaban,* I try not to think about it and they always remind me, they think it's *great* that Mother is there in the cold and the dark with the Dementors sucking away her life, I wish I was like Harry Potter, at least his parents aren't hurting, my parents are always hurting, every second of every day, I wish I was like you, at least you can see your parents sometimes, at least you know they loved you, if Mother ever loved me the Dementors will have eaten that thought by now—"

Neville's eyes were wide with shock. He hadn't expected this.

Lesath turned to Harry Potter, whose eyes were full of horror.

Lesath flung himself on the floor in front of Harry Potter, touched his forehead to the ground, and whispered, "Help me, Lord."

There was an awful silence. Neville couldn't think of a single thing to say, and from the naked shock on Harry's face, he couldn't think of anything either.

"They say you can do anything, please, please my Lord, get my parents out of Azkaban, I'll be your loyal servant forever, my life will be yours and my death as well, only please—"

"Lesath," Harry said, his voice breaking, "Lesath, I can't, I can't really do things like that, it's all just stupid tricks."

"It's *not!*" said Lesath, his voice high and desperate. "I *saw* it, the stories are true, you *can!*"

Harry swallowed. "Lesath, I set the whole thing up with Neville, we planned it all out in advance, ask him!"

They had, though Harry hadn't said *how* he was going to do any of it...

When Lesath looked up from the floor his face was ghastly, and his voice came out in a shriek that hurt Neville's ears. "*You son of a mud-blood! You could get her out, you just won't! I got down on my knees and begged you and you still won't help! I should have known, you're the Boy-Who-Lived, you think she belongs there!*"

"I *can't!*" Harry said, his voice as desperate as Lesath's. "It's not a question of what I want, I don't have the *power!*"

Lesath rose to his feet, and spat on the floor in front of Harry, and then turned and walked away. When he was around the corner the sound of his feet sped up, and as they faded Neville thought he heard a single sob.

And then there were two.

Neville looked at Harry.

Harry looked at Neville.

"Wow," Neville said quietly. "He didn't seem very grateful for being rescued."

"He thought I could help him," Harry said, his voice hoarse. "He had hope for the first time in years."

Neville swallowed, and said it. "I'm sorry."

"Wha?" said Harry, sounding totally confused.

"I wasn't grateful when you helped me—"

"Every single thing you said before was completely right," said the Boy-Who-Lived.

"No," Neville said, "it wasn't."

They simultaneously gave brief sad smiles, each condescending to the other.

"I know this wasn't real," said Neville, "I know I couldn't have done anything if you hadn't been here, but thanks for letting me pretend."

"Give me a break," said Harry.

Harry had turned from Neville, and was staring out the window at the gloomy clouds.

A completely ridiculous thought came to Neville. "Are you feeling guilty because you can't get Lesath's parents out of Azkaban?"

"No," said Harry.

A few seconds went by.

"Yes," said Harry.

"You're silly," said Neville.

"I am aware of this," said Harry.

"Do you have to do literally *anything* anyone asks you?"

The Boy-Who-Lived turned back and looked at Neville again. "*Do?* No. Feel guilty about not doing? Yes."

Neville was having trouble finding words. "Once the Dark Lord died, Bellatrix Black was literally the most evil person in the entire world and that was *before* she went to Azkaban. She tortured my mother and father into insanity because she wanted to find out what happened to the Dark Lord—"

"I know," Harry said quietly. "I get that, but—"

"No! You *don't!* She had a *reason* for doing that, and my parents were both Aurors! It's not even *close* to the worst thing she's ever done!" Neville's voice was shaking.

"Even so," said the Boy-Who-Lived, his eyes distant as they stared off into somewhere else, some other place that Neville couldn't imagine. "There might be some incredibly clever solution that makes it possible to save everyone and let them all live happily ever after, and if only I was smart enough I would have thought of it by now—"

"You have problems," said Neville. "You think you ought to be what Lesath Lestrange thinks you are."

"Yeah," said the Boy-Who-Lived, "that pretty much nails it. Every time someone cries out in prayer and I can't answer, I feel guilty about not being God."

Neville didn't quite understand that, but... "That doesn't sound good."

Harry sighed. "I understand that I have a problem, and I know what I need to do to solve it, all right? I'm working on it."

Harry watched Neville leave.

Of course Harry hadn't said what the solution was.

The solution, obviously, was to hurry up and become God.

Neville's footsteps moved off, and soon could no longer be heard.

And then there was one.

"Ahem," said Severus Snape's voice from directly behind him.

Harry let out a small scream and instantly hated himself.

Slowly, Harry turned around.

The tall greasy man in the spotted robes was leaning against the wall in the same position Harry had occupied.

"A fine invisibility cloak, Potter," drawled the Potions Master. "Much is explained."

Oh, bloody crap.

"And perhaps I have been in Dumbledore's company too long," said Severus, "but I cannot help but wonder if that is *the* Cloak of Invisibility."

Harry immediately turned into someone who'd never heard of the Cloak of Invisibility and who was *exactly* as smart as Harry thought Severus thought Harry was.

"Oh, possibly," said Harry. "I trust you realize the implications, if it is?"

Severus's voice was condescending. "You have no idea what I'm talking about, do you, Potter? A rather clumsy try at fishing."

(Professor Quirrell had remarked over their lunch that Harry really needed to conceal his state of mind better than putting on a blank face when someone discussed a dangerous topic, and had explained about one-level deceptions, two-level deceptions, and so on. So either Severus *was* in fact modeling Harry as a one-level player, which made Severus himself two-level, and Harry's three-level move had been successful; or

Severus was a four-level player and wanted Harry to *think* the deception had been successful. Harry, smiling, had asked Professor Quirrell what level *he* played at, and Professor Quirrell, also smiling, had responded, *One level higher than you*.)

"So you were watching this whole time," said Harry. "Disillusionment, I think it's called."

A thin smile. "It would have been foolish of me to take the slightest risk that you came to harm."

"And you wanted to see the results of your test firsthand," said Harry. "So. Am I like my father?"

A strange sad expression came over the man, one that looked foreign to his face. "I should sooner say, Harry Potter, that you resemble—"

Severus stopped short.

He stared at Harry.

"Lestrange called you a son of a mudblood," Severus said slowly. "It didn't seem to bother you much."

Harry furrowed his eyebrows. "Not under those circumstances, no."

"You'd just helped him," Severus said. His eyes were intent on Harry. "And he threw it back in your face. Surely that isn't something you'd just forgive?"

"He'd just been through a pretty harrowing experience," Harry said. "And I don't think being rescued by first-years helped his pride much, either."

"I suppose it was easy enough to forgive," Severus said, and his voice was odd, "since Lestrange means nothing to you. Just some strange Slytherin. If it was a friend, perhaps, you would have felt far more injured by what he said."

"If he were a friend," Harry said, "all the more reason to forgive him."

There was a long silence. Harry felt, and he couldn't have said why or from where, that the air was filling up with a dreadful tension, like water rising, and rising, and rising.

Then Severus smiled, looking suddenly relaxed once more, and all the tension vanished.

"You are a very forgiving person," Severus said, still smiling. "I suppose your stepfather, Michael Verres-Evans, was the one who taught it to you."

"More like Dad's science fiction and fantasy collection," said Harry. "Sort of my fifth parent, really. I've lived the lives of all the characters in all my books, and all their mighty wisdom thunders in my head. Somewhere in there was someone like Lesath, I expect, though I couldn't say who. It wasn't hard to put myself in his shoes. And it was my books that told me what to do about it, too. The good guys forgive."

Severus gave a light, amused laugh. "I'm afraid I wouldn't know much about what good people do."

Harry looked at him. That was kind of sad, actually. "I'll lend you some novels with good people in them, if you like."

"I should like to ask your advice about something," Severus said, his voice casual. "I know of another fifth-year Slytherin who was being bullied by Gryffindors. He was wooing a beautiful Muggleborn girl, who came across him being bullied, and tried to rescue him. And he called her a mudblood, and that was the end for them. He apologized, many times, but she never forgave him. Have you any thoughts for what he could have said or done, to win from her the forgiveness you gave Lestrange?"

"Erm," Harry said, "based on only that information, I'm not sure *he* was the main one who had a problem. I'd have told him not to date someone that incapable of forgiveness. Suppose they'd gotten married, can you imagine life in that household?"

There was a pause.

"Oh, but she *could* forgive," Severus said with amusement in his voice. "Why, afterward, she went off and became the girlfriend of the bully. Tell me, why would she forgive the bully, and not the bullied?"

Harry shrugged. "At a wild guess, because the bully had hurt someone *else* very badly, and the bullied had hurt *her* just a little, and to her that just felt far more unforgivable somehow. Or, not to put too fine a point on it, was the bully handsome? Or for that matter, rich?"

There was another pause.

"Yes to both," said Severus.

"And there you have it," said Harry. "Not that I've ever been through high school myself, but my books give me to understand that there's a certain kind of teenage girl who'll be outraged by a single insult if the boy is plain or poor, yet who can somehow find room in her heart to forgive a rich and handsome boy his bullying. She was shallow, in other words. Tell whoever it was that she wasn't worthy of him and he needs to get over it and move on and next time date girls who are deep instead of pretty."

Severus stared at Harry in silence, his eyes glittering. The smile had faded, and though Severus's face twitched, it did not return.

Harry was starting to feel a bit nervous. "Um, not that I've got any experience in the area myself, obviously, but I think that's what a wise adviser from my books would say."

There was more silence and more glittering.

It was probably a good time to change the subject.

"So," Harry said. "Did I pass your test, whatever it was?"

"I think," Severus said, "that there should be no more conversations between us, Potter, and you would be exceedingly wise never to speak of this one."

Harry blinked. "Would you mind telling me what I did wrong?"

"You offended me," said Severus. "And I no longer trust your cunning."

Harry stared at Severus, taken rather aback.

"But you have given me well-meant advice," said Severus Snape, "and so I will give you true advice in return." His voice was almost perfectly steady. Like a string stretched almost perfectly horizontal, despite the massive weight hanging from its middle, by a million tons of tension pulling at either end. "You almost died today, Potter. In the future, never share your wisdom with anyone unless you know exactly what you are both talking about."

Harry's mind finally made the connection.

"*You* were that—"

Harry's mouth snapped shut as the *almost died* part sank in, two seconds too late.

"Yes," said Severus, "I was."

And the terrible tension flooded back into the room like water pressurized at the bottom of the ocean.

Harry couldn't breathe.

Lose. Now.

"I didn't know," Harry whispered. "I'm s—"

"No," said Severus. Just that one word.

Harry stood there in silence, his mind frantically searching for options. Severus stood between him and the window, which was a real pity, because a fall from that height wouldn't kill a wizard.

"Your books betrayed you, Potter," said Severus, still in that voice stretched tight by a million tons of pull. "They did not tell you the one thing you needed to know. You cannot learn from stories what it is like to lose the one you love. That is something you could never understand without feeling it yourself."

"My father," Harry whispered. It was his best guess, the one thing that might save him. "My father tried to protect you from the bullies."

A ghastly smile stretched across Severus's face, and the man moved toward Harry.

And past him.

"Goodbye, Potter," said Severus, not looking back on his way out. "We shall have little to say to each other from today on."

And at the corner, the man stopped, and without turning, spoke one final time.

"Your father was the bully," said Severus Snape, "and what your mother saw in him was something I never did understand until this day."

He left.

Harry turned and walked toward the window. His shaking hands went onto the ledge.

Never give anyone wise advice unless you know exactly what you're both talking about. Got it.

Harry stared out at the clouds and the light drizzle for a while. The window looked out on the east grounds, and it was afternoon, so if the sun was visible through the clouds at all, Harry couldn't see it.

His hands had stopped shaking, but there was a tight feeling in Harry's chest, like it was being compressed by metal bands.

So his father had been a bully.

And his mother had been shallow.

Maybe they'd grown up later. Good people like Professor McGonagall did seem to think the world of them, and it might not be *only* because they were heroic martyrs.

Of course, that was scant consolation when you were eleven and about to turn into a teenager, and wondering what sort of teenager you might become.

So very terrible.

So very sad.

Such an awful life Harry led.

Learning that his genetic parents hadn't been perfect, why, he ought to spend awhile moping about that, feeling sorry for himself.

Maybe he could complain to Lesath Lestrange.

Harry had read about Dementors. Cold and darkness surrounded them, and fear, they sucked away all your happy thoughts and in that absence all your worst memories rose to the surface.

He could imagine himself in Lesath's shoes, knowing that his parents were in Azkaban for life, that place from which no one had ever escaped.

And Lesath would be imagining himself in his mother's place, in the cold and the darkness and the fear, alone with all of her worst memories, even in her dreams, every second of every day.

For an instant Harry imagined his own Mum and Dad in Azkaban with the Dementors sucking out their life, draining away the happy memories of their love for him. Just for an instant, before his imagination blew a fuse and called an emergency shutdown and told him never to imagine that again.

Was it right to do that to anyone, even the second most evil person in the world?

No, said the wisdom of Harry's books, *not if there's any other way, any other way at all.*

And unless the wizarding justice system was as perfect as their prisons—and that sounded rather improbable, all things considered—somewhere in Azkaban was a person who was entirely innocent, and probably more than one.

There was a burning sensation in Harry's throat, and moisture gathering in his eyes, and he wanted to teleport all of Azkaban's prisoners to safety and call down fire from the sky and blast that terrible place down to bedrock. But he couldn't, because he wasn't God.

And Harry remembered what Professor Quirrell had said beneath the starlight: *Sometimes, when this flawed world seems unusually hateful, I wonder whether there might be some other place, far away, where I should have been... But the stars are so very, very far away... And I wonder what I would dream about, if I slept for a long, long time.*

Right now this flawed world seemed unusually hateful.

And Harry couldn't understand Professor Quirrell's words, it might have been an alien that had spoken, or an Artificial Intelligence, something built along such different lines from Harry that his brain couldn't be forced to operate in that mode.

You couldn't leave your home planet while it still contained a place like Azkaban.

You had to stay and fight.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

REDUCTIONISM

"Okay," Harry said, swallowing. "Okay, Hermione, it's enough, you can stop." The white sugar pill in front of Hermione still hadn't changed shape or color at all, even though she was concentrating harder than Harry had ever seen, her eyes squeezed shut, beads of sweat on her forehead, hand trembling as it gripped the wand—

"Hermione, *stop!* It's not going to work, Hermione, I don't think we can make things that don't exist yet!"

Slowly, Hermione's hand relaxed its grasp on the wand.

"I thought I felt it," she said in a bare whisper. "I thought I felt it start to Transfigure, just for a second."

There was a lump in Harry's throat. "You were probably imagining it. Hoping too hard."

"I probably was," she said. She looked like she wanted to cry.

Slowly, Harry took his mechanical pencil in his hand, and reached over to the sheet of paper with all the items crossed out, and drew a line through the item that said 'Alzheimer's cure'.

They couldn't have fed anyone a Transfigured pill. But Transfiguration, at least the kind they could do, didn't enchant the targets—it wouldn't Transfigure a regular broomstick into a flying one. So if Hermione had been able to make a pill at all, it would have been a *nonmagical* pill, one that worked for ordinary material reasons. They could have secretly made pills for a Muggle science lab, let them *study* the pills and try to reverse-engineer them before the Transfiguration wore off... no one in either world would need to know that magic had been involved, it would just be another scientific breakthrough...

It hadn't been the sort of thing a wizard would think of, either. They didn't respect mere *patterns of atoms* that much, they didn't think of unenchanted *material* things as objects of power. If it wasn't magical, it wasn't interesting.

Earlier, Harry had *very* secretly—he hadn't even told Hermione—tried to Transfigure nanotechnology à la Eric Drexler. (He'd tried to produce a desktop nanofactory, of course, not tiny self-replicating assemblers, Harry wasn't insane.) It would have been godhood in a single shot if it'd worked.

"That was it for today, right?" said Hermione. She was slumped back in her chair, leaning her head against the back; and her face showed her tiredness, which was very unusual for Hermione. She liked to pretend she was limitless, at least when Harry was around.

"One more," Harry said cautiously, "but that one's small, plus it might actually work. I saved it for last because I was hoping we could end on an up note. It's real stuff, not like lightsabers. They've already made it in the laboratory, not like the Alzheimer's cure. And it's a generic substance, not specific like the lost books you tried to Transfigure copies of. I made a diagram of the molecular structure to show you. We just want to make it *longer* than it's ever been made before, and with all the tubes aligned, and the endpoints embedded in diamond." Harry produced a sheet of graph paper.

Hermione sat back up, took it, and studied it, frowning. "These are *all* carbon atoms? And Harry, what's the name? I can't Transfigure it if I don't know what it's called."

Harry made a disgusted face. He was still having trouble getting used to that sort of thing, it shouldn't matter what something was *named* if you knew what it *was.* "They're called buckytubes, or carbon nanotubes. It's a kind of fullerene that was discovered just this year. It's about a hundred times stronger than steel and a sixth of the weight."

Hermione looked up from the graph paper, her face surprised. "That's *real?*"

"Yeah," Harry said, "just hard to make the Muggle way. If we could get enough of the stuff, we could use it to build a space elevator all the way up to geosynchronous orbit or higher, and in terms of delta-v that's

halfway to anywhere in the Solar System. Plus we could throw out solar power satellites like confetti."

Hermione was frowning again. "Is this stuff *safe*?"

"I don't see why it wouldn't be," Harry said. "A buckytube is just a graphite sheet wrapped into a circular tube, basically, and graphite is the same stuff used in pencils—"

"I *know* what graphite is, Harry," Hermione said. She brushed her hair back absentmindedly, her eyebrows furrowed as she stared at the sheet of paper.

Harry reached into a pocket of his robes, and produced a white thread tied to two small gray plastic rings at either end. He'd added drops of superglue where the thread met either ring, to make it all a single object that could be Transfigured as a whole. Cyanoacrylate, if Harry remembered correctly, worked by covalent bonds, and that was as close to being a "solid object" as you ever got in a world ultimately composed of tiny little individual atoms. "When you're ready," Harry said, "try to Transfigure this into a set of aligned buckytube fibers embedded in two solid diamond rings."

"All right..." Hermione said slowly. "Harry, I feel like I just missed something."

Harry shrugged helplessly. *Maybe you're just tired.* He knew better than to say it out loud, though.

Hermione laid her wand against one plastic ring, and stared for a while.

Two small circles of glittering diamond lay on the table, connected by a long black thread.

"It changed," said Hermione. She sounded like she was trying to be enthusiastic but had run out of energy. "Now what?"

Harry felt a bit deflated by his research partner's lack of passion, but did his best not to show it; maybe the same process would work in reverse to cheer her up. "Now I test it to see if it holds weight."

There was an A-frame Harry had rigged up to do an earlier experiment with diamond rods—you could make solid diamond objects easily, using Transfiguration, they just wouldn't last. The earlier experiment had measured whether Transfiguring a long diamond rod into a shorter

diamond rod would allow it to lift a suspended heavy weight as it contracted, i.e., could you Transfigure against tension, which you in fact could.

Harry carefully looped one circle of glittering diamond over the thick metal hook at the top of the rig, then attached a thick metal hanger to the bottom ring, and then started attaching weights to the hanger.

(Harry had asked the Weasley twins to Transfigure the apparatus for him, and the Weasley twins had given him an incredulous look, like they couldn't figure out what sort of prank he could *possibly* want that for, but they hadn't asked any questions. And their Transfigurations, according to them, lasted for around three hours, so Harry and Hermione had a while left yet.)

"One hundred kilograms," Harry said about a minute later. "I don't think a steel thread this thin would hold that. It should go up much higher, but that's all the weight I've got."

There was a further silence.

Harry straightened up, and went back to their table, and sat down in his chair, and ceremoniously made a check mark next to 'Buckytubes'. "There," Harry said. "*That* one worked."

"But it's not really *useful*, Harry, is it?" Hermione said from where she was sitting with her head resting in her hands. "I mean, even if we gave it to a scientist they couldn't learn how to make lots of buckytubes from studying ours."

"They might be able to learn *something,*" Harry said. "Hermione, *look* at it, that little tiny thread holding up all that weight, we just made something that no Muggle laboratory could make—"

"But any other witch could make it," Hermione said. Her exhaustion was coming into her voice, now. "Harry, I don't think this is working out."

"You mean our relationship?" Harry said. "Great! Let's break up."

That got a slight grin out of her. "I mean our research."

"Oh, Hermione, how *could* you?"

"You're sweet when you're mean," she said. "But Harry, this is nuts, I'm twelve, you're eleven, it's *silly* to think we're going to discover anything that no one's ever figured out before."

"Are you really saying we should give up on unraveling the secrets of magic after trying for less than one *month*?" Harry said, trying to put a note of challenge into his voice. Honestly he was feeling some of the same fatigue as Hermione. None of the *good* ideas ever worked. He'd made just one discovery worth mentioning, the Mendelian pattern, and he couldn't tell Hermione about it without breaking his promise to Draco.

"No," Hermione said. Her young face was looking very serious and adult. "I'm saying right now we should be *studying* all the magic that wizards already know, so we can do this sort of thing after we graduate from Hogwarts."

"Um..." Harry said. "Hermione, I hate to put it this way, but imagine we'd decided to hold off on research until later, and the first thing we tried after we graduated was Transfiguring an Alzheimer's cure, and it *worked.* We'd feel... I don't think the word *stupid* would adequately describe how we'd feel. What if there's something else like that and it does work?"

"That's not *fair,* Harry!" Hermione said. Her voice was trembling like she was on the verge of breaking out crying. "You can't *put* that on people! It's not our *job* to do that sort of thing, we're *kids!*"

For a moment Harry wondered what would happen if someone told Hermione she had to fight an immortal Dark Lord, if she would turn into one of the whiny self-pitying heroes that Harry could never stand reading about in his books.

"Anyway," Hermione said. Her voice shook. "I don't want to keep doing this. I don't believe children can do things that grownups can't, that's only in stories."

There was silence in the classroom.

Hermione started to look a little scared, and Harry knew that his own expression had gotten colder.

It might not have hurt so much if the same thought hadn't already come to Harry—that, while thirty might be old for a scientific revolutionary and twenty about right, while there were people who got doctorates when they were seventeen and fourteen-year-old heirs who'd been

great kings or generals, there wasn't really anyone who'd made the history books at eleven.

"All right," Harry said. "Figure out how to do something a grownup can't. Is that your challenge?"

"I didn't mean it like that," Hermione said, her voice coming out in a frightened whisper.

With an effort, Harry wrenched his gaze away from Hermione. "I'm not angry at *you*," Harry said. His voice was cold, despite his best efforts. "I'm angry at, I don't know, everything. But I'm not willing to lose, Hermione. Losing isn't always the right thing to do. I'll figure out how to do something a grown wizard can't do, and then I'll get back to you. How's that?"

There was more silence.

"Okay," said Hermione, her voice wavering a little. She pushed herself up out of her chair, and went over to the door of the abandoned classroom they'd been working in. Her hand went onto the doorknob. "We're still friends, right? And if you can't figure out anything—"

Her voice halted.

"Then we'll study together," Harry said. His voice was even colder now.

"Um, bye for now, then," Hermione said, and she quickly went out of the room and shut the door behind her.

Sometimes Harry hated having a dark side, even when he was inside it.

And the part of him that had thought exactly the same thing as Hermione, that no, children *couldn't* do what grownups couldn't, was saying all the things that Hermione had been too frightened to say, like, *That's one hell of a difficult challenge you just grabbed for yourself* and *boy are you going to end up with egg on your face this time* and *at least this way you'll know you've failed.*

And the part of him that didn't enjoy losing replied, in a very cold voice, *Fine, you can shut up and watch.*

It was almost lunchtime, and Harry didn't care. He hadn't even bothered grabbing a snack bar from his pouch. His stomach could stand a little starving.

The wizarding world was tiny, they didn't think like scientists, they didn't know science, they didn't question what they'd grown up with, they hadn't put protective shells on their time machines, they played Quidditch, all of magical Britain was smaller than a small Muggle city, the greatest wizarding school only educated up to the age of seventeen, *silly* wasn't challenging that at eleven, *silly* was *assuming* wizards knew what they were doing and had already exhausted all the low-hanging fruit a scientific polymath would see.

Step One had been to make a list of every magical constraint Harry could remember, all the things you supposedly couldn't do.

Step Two, mark the constraints that seemed to make the *least* sense from a scientific perspective.

Step Three, prioritize constraints that a wizard would be unlikely to question if they *didn't* know science.

Step Four, come up with avenues for attacking them.

⁂

Hermione still felt a little shaky as she sat down next to Mandy at the Ravenclaw table. Hermione's lunch had two fruits (tomato slices and peeled tangerines), three vegetables (carrots, carrots, and more carrots), one meat (fried Diricawl drumsticks whose unhealthy coating she would carefully remove), and one little piece of chocolate cake that she would earn by eating the other parts.

It hadn't been as bad as Potions class, sometimes she still had *nightmares* about that. But this time *she* had made it happen and *she'd felt like its target.* Just for a moment, before the terrible cold darkness looked away and said it wasn't angry with her, because it hadn't wanted to scare her.

And she still had that feeling like she'd missed something earlier, something really important.

But they hadn't violated any of the rules of Transfiguration... had they? They hadn't made any liquids, any gases, they hadn't taken orders from the Defense Professor...

The *pill!* That had been something to be eaten!

...well, no, nobody would just eat a pill lying around, it hadn't *worked* actually, they could have just *Finite Incantatemed* it if it had, but she would still have to tell Harry about that and make sure they didn't mention it in front of Professor McGonagall, in case they were never allowed to study Transfiguration again...

Hermione was starting to get a really sick feeling in her stomach. She pushed back her plate from the table, she couldn't eat lunch like this.

And she closed her eyes and began to mentally recite the rules of Transfiguration.

"I will never Transfigure anything into liquid or gas."

"I will never Transfigure anything that looks like food or anything else that goes inside a human body."

No, they really *shouldn't* have tried to Transfigure the pill, or they should've at least *realized*... she'd been so caught up in Harry's brilliant idea that she hadn't *thought*...

The sick feeling in Hermione's stomach was getting worse. There was a feeling in her mind of something hovering just on the edge of recognition, a perception about to invert itself, a young woman about to become a crone, a vase about to become two faces...

And she went on remembering the rules of Transfiguration.

Harry's knuckles had gone white on his wand by the time he stopped trying to Transfigure the air in front of his wand into a paperclip. It wouldn't have been safe to Transfigure the paperclip into gas, of course, but Harry didn't see any reason why it would be unsafe the other way around. It just wasn't supposed to be *possible*. But why not? Air was as real a substance as anything else...

Well, maybe that limitation *did* make sense. Air was disorganized, all the molecules constantly changing their relation to each other. Maybe you couldn't impose a new form on substance unless the substance was staying still long enough for you to master it, even though the atoms in solids were also constantly vibrating all the time...

The more Harry failed, the colder he felt, the clearer everything seemed to become.

All right. Next on the list.

You could only Transfigure whole objects as wholes. You couldn't Transfigure *half* a match into a needle, you had to Transfigure the *whole thing.* Back when Harry had been trapped in that classroom by Draco, it had been the reason he couldn't just Transfigure a thin cylindrical cross-section of the walls into sponge, and punch out a chunk of stone large enough for him to fit through the hole. He would have needed to impose a new form on the whole wall, and maybe a whole section of Hogwarts, just in order to change that little cross-section.

And that was *ridiculous*.

Things were made of atoms. Lots of little tiny dots. There *was* no contiguity, there *was* no solidity, just electromagnetic forces holding the little dots related to each other...

⁂

Mandy Brocklehurst paused with her fork on her way to her mouth. "Huh," she said to Su Li, sitting across from the now-empty space beside her, "what got into Hermione?"

⁂

Harry wanted to kill his eraser.

He'd been trying to change a single spot on the pink rectangle into steel, apart from the rest of the rubber, and the eraser wasn't cooperating.

It *had* to be a conceptual limitation, not a real one. *Had* to be.

Things were made of atoms, and every atom was a tiny separate thing. Atoms were held together by a quantum mist of shared electrons, for covalent bonds, or sometimes just magnetism at close ranges, for ionic bonds or van der Waals forces.

If it came down to that, the protons and neutrons inside the nuclei were tiny separate things. The quarks inside the protons and neutrons were tiny separate things! There simply *wasn't* anything in reality, the world-out-there, that corresponded to people's conceit of solid objects. It was all just little dots.

And free Transfiguration was all in the mind to begin with, wasn't it? No words, no gestures. Only the pure concept of form, kept strictly separate from substance, imposed on the substance, conceived of apart from its form. That and the wand and whatever made you a wizard.

The wizards couldn't transform parts of things, could only transform what their minds perceived as wholes, because they didn't *know in their bones* that it was all just atoms deep down.

Harry had focused on that knowledge as hard as he could, the *true fact* that the eraser was just a collection of atoms, everything was just collections of atoms, and the atoms of the little patch he was trying to Transfigure formed *just as valid* a collection as any other collection he cared to think about.

And Harry still hadn't been able to change that single part of the eraser, the Transfiguration wasn't going anywhere.

This. Was. Ridiculous.

Harry's knuckles were whitening on his wand again. He was *sick* of getting experimental results that *didn't make sense.*

Maybe the fact that *some* part of his mind was still thinking in terms of objects was stopping the Transfiguration from going through. He had thought of a collection of atoms that was an *eraser.* He had thought of a collection that was a *little patch.*

Time to kick it up a notch.

Harry pressed his wand harder against that tiny section of eraser, and tried to see through the illusion that nonscientists thought was reality, the world of desks and chairs, air and erasers and people.

When you walked through a park, the immersive world that surrounded you was something that existed inside your own brain as a pattern of neurons firing. The sensation of a bright blue sky wasn't something high above you, it was something in your visual cortex, and your visual cortex was in the back of your brain. All the sensations of that bright world were really happening in that quiet cave of bone you called your skull, the place where *you* lived and never, ever left. If you really wanted to say hello to someone, to the *actual person,* you wouldn't shake their hand, you'd knock gently on their skull and say "How are you doing in there?" That was what people were, that was where they really lived. And the *picture* of the park that you thought you were *walking through* was something that was visualized inside your brain as it processed the signals sent down from your eyes and retina.

It wasn't a *lie* like the Buddhists thought, there wasn't something terribly mystical and unexpected behind the veil of Maya, what lay beyond the illusion of the park was just the *actual park*, but it was all still *illusion*.

Harry wasn't sitting inside the classroom.

He wasn't looking at the eraser.

Harry was inside Harry's skull.

He was experiencing a processed picture his brain had decoded from the signals sent down by his retina.

The real eraser was somewhere else, somewhere that wasn't the picture.

And the real eraser wasn't like the picture Harry's brain had of it. The idea of the eraser as a *solid object* was something that existed only inside his own brain, inside the parietal cortex that processed his sense of shape and space. The real eraser was a collection of atoms held together by electromagnetic forces and shared covalent electrons, while nearby, air molecules bounced off each other and bounced off the eraser-molecules.

The real eraser was far away, and Harry, inside his skull, could never quite touch it, could only imagine ideas about it. But *his wand had the power,* it could change things out there in *reality*, it was only Harry's own preconceptions that were *limiting* it. Somewhere beyond the veil of Maya, the *truth* behind Harry's concept of "my wand" was touching

the collection of atoms that Harry's mind thought of as "a patch on the eraser", and if that wand could change the collection of atoms that Harry considered "the whole eraser", there was absolutely no reason why it couldn't change the other collection too...

The Transfiguration still wasn't going through.

Harry's teeth clenched together, and he kicked it up *another* notch.

The concept Harry's mind had of the eraser as a single object was *obvious nonsense.*

It was a map that didn't and *couldn't* match the territory.

Human beings modeled the world using stratified levels of organization, they had *separate thoughts* about how countries worked, how people worked, how organs worked, how cells worked, how molecules worked, how quarks worked.

When Harry's brain needed to think about the eraser, it would think about the rules that governed erasers, like "erasers can get rid of pencil-marks". Only if Harry's brain needed to predict what would happen on the lower chemical level, only then would Harry's brain start thinking—as though it were a separate fact—about rubber molecules.

But that was all in the *mind.*

Harry's mind might have separate *beliefs* about rules that governed erasers, but there was no *separate law of physics* that governed erasers.

Harry's mind modeled reality using multiple levels of organization, with different beliefs about each level. But that was all in the *map,* the true territory wasn't like that, *reality itself* had only a *single* level of organization, the quarks, it was a unified low-level process obeying mathematically simple rules.

Or at least that was what Harry had believed before he'd found out about magic, but the eraser wasn't magical.

And even if the eraser *had* been magical, the idea that there could *really exist* a single solid eraser was *impossible.* Things like erasers *couldn't* be basic elements of reality, they were too big and complicated to be atoms, they *had* to be made of parts. You couldn't have things that were *fundamentally complicated.* The implicit belief that Harry's brain had in the eraser as a single object wasn't just *wrong,* it was a map-territory

confusion, the eraser only existed as a separate concept in Harry's multi-level *model* of the world, not as a separate element of single-level reality.

...the Transfiguration *still wasn't happening.*

Harry was breathing heavily, failed Transfiguration was almost as tiring as successful Transfiguration, but *damned* if he'd give up now.

All right, screw this nineteenth-century garbage.

Reality wasn't atoms, it wasn't a set of tiny billiard balls bopping around. That was just another lie. The notion of atoms as little dots was just another convenient hallucination that people clung to because they didn't want to confront the inhumanly alien shape of the underlying reality. No wonder, then, that his attempts to Transfigure based on that hadn't worked. If he wanted power, he had to abandon his humanity, and force his thoughts to conform to the true math of quantum mechanics.

There *were no particles,* there were just *clouds of amplitude* in a *multiparticle configuration space* and what his brain fondly imagined to be an eraser was nothing except a gigantic *factor* in a wavefunction that *happened to factorize*, it didn't have a separate existence any more than there was a particular solid factor of 3 hidden inside the number 6, if his wand was capable of *altering factors in an approximately factorizable wavefunction* then it should damn well be able to alter the slightly *smaller* factor that Harry's brain visualized as a patch of material on the eraser—

Hermione tore through the hallways, shoes pounding hard on the stone, breath coming in pants, the shock of adrenaline still racing through her blood.

Like a picture of a young woman turning into an old crone, like the cup becoming two faces.

What had they been doing?

What had they been doing?

She came to the classroom and her fingers slipped on the doorknob at first, too sweaty, she grabbed harder and the door opened—

—in a single flash of perception she saw Harry staring at a small pink rectangle on the table in front of him—

—as a few paces away the tiny black thread, almost invisible from this distance, supported all that weight—

"Harry get out of the classroom!"

Pure shock crossed Harry's face, and he stood up so fast he almost fell over, stopping only to grab the small pink rectangle from the table, and he tore out of the door, she'd already stepped aside, her wand was already in her hand coming up pointing at the thread—

"*Finite Incantatem!*"

And Hermione slammed the door shut again, just as the gigantic crash of a hundred kilograms of falling metal came from inside.

She was panting, gasping for air, she'd run all the way here without stopping, she was soaked in sweat and her legs and thighs burned like living flames, she couldn't have answered Harry's questions for all the Galleons in the world.

Hermione blinked, and realized that she had started to fall, and Harry had caught her, and was lowering her gently to sit on the floor.

"...healthy..." she managed to whisper.

"*What?*" said Harry, looking paler than she'd ever seen him.

"...are you, feeling, healthy..."

Harry started looking even more frightened as the question sank in. "I, I don't think I have any symptoms—"

Hermione closed her eyes for a moment. "Good," she whispered. "Catch, breath."

That took a while. Harry was still looking scared. That was good too, maybe it would teach him a lesson.

Hermione reached into the pouch Harry had bought her, whispered "water" through her parched throat, took out the bottle and drank in great huge gulps.

And then it was still a while before she could talk again.

"We broke the rules, Harry," she said in a hoarse voice. "We broke the rules."

"I..." Harry swallowed. "I still don't see how, I've been *thinking* but—"

"I asked if the Transfiguration was safe and *you answered me!*"

There was a pause.

"That's it?" Harry said.

She could have screamed.

"Harry, don't you get it?" she said. "It's made out of tiny fibers, what if it *unraveled,* who *knows* what could go wrong, *we didn't ask Professor McGonagall!* Don't you see what we were doing? We were experimenting with Transfiguration. We were *experimenting* with *Transfiguration!*"

There was another pause.

"Right..." Harry said slowly. "That's probably one of those things they don't even bother telling you *not* to do because it's too obvious. Don't test brilliant new ideas for Transfiguration by yourselves in an unused classroom without consulting any professors."

"You could have gotten us killed, Harry!" Hermione knew it wasn't fair, she'd made the mistake too, but she still felt angry at him, he always sounded so confident and that had dragged her unthinkingly along in his wake. "We could have *spoiled Professor McGonagall's perfect record!*"

"Yes," said Harry, "let's not tell her about this, shall we?"

"We have to stop," Hermione said. "We have to stop this or we're going to get hurt. We're too young, Harry, we can't do this, not yet."

A weak grin crossed Harry's face. "Um, you're sort of wrong about that."

And he held out a small pink rectangle, a rubber eraser with a bright metal patch on it.

Hermione stared at it, puzzled.

"Quantum mechanics wasn't enough," Harry said. "I had to go all the way down to timeless physics before it took. Had to see the wand as enforcing a *relation* between separate past and future realities, instead of *changing* anything over time—but I did it, Hermione, I saw past the illusion of objects, and I bet there's not a single other wizard in the world who could have. Even if some Muggleborn knew about timeless formulations of quantum mechanics, it would just be a weird belief about strange distant quantum stuff, they wouldn't *see* that it was *reality*, accept that the world they knew was just a hallucination. I Transfigured *part* of the eraser without changing the *whole thing.*"

Hermione raised her wand again, pointed it at the eraser.

For a moment anger crossed Harry's face, but he didn't make any move to stop her.

"*Finite Incantatem*," said Hermione. "Check with Professor McGonagall before you try it again."

Harry nodded, though his face was still a bit tight.

"And we still have to stop," said Hermione.

"*Why?*" said Harry. "Don't you see what this *means*, Hermione? Wizards *don't* know everything! There's too few of them, even fewer who know any science, they haven't exhausted the low-hanging fruit—"

"It's not *safe*," Hermione said. "If we *can* find out new things it's even *less* safe! We're *too young!* We made one big mistake already, next time we could just *die!*"

Then Hermione flinched.

Harry looked away from her, and started taking slow, deep breaths.

"Please don't try to do it alone, Harry," Hermione said, her voice trembling. "Please."

Please don't make me have to decide whether to tell Professor Flitwick.

There was a long pause.

"So you want us to study," Harry said. She could tell he was trying to keep the anger out of his voice. "Just study."

Hermione wasn't sure if she should say anything, but... "Like you studied, um, timeless physics, right?"

Harry looked back at her.

"That thing you did," Hermione said, her voice tentative, "it wasn't because of *our* experiments, right? You could do it because you'd read lots of books."

Harry opened his mouth, and then he shut it again. There was a frustrated look on his face.

"All right," Harry said. "How about this. We study, and if I think of anything that seems *really* worth trying, we'll try it after I ask a professor."

"Okay," Hermione said. She didn't fall over with relief, but only because she was already sitting down.

"Shall we get lunch?" Harry said cautiously.

Hermione nodded. Yes. Lunch sounded good. For real, this time.

She carefully began to push herself off the stone floor, wincing as her body screamed at her—

Harry pointed his wand at her and said "*Wingardium Leviosa.*"

Hermione blinked as the huge weight on her legs diminished to something bearable.

A smile quirked across Harry's face. "You can *lift* something without being able to Hover it completely," he said. "Remember that experiment?"

Hermione smiled back helplessly, although she thought she ought to still be angry.

And she started walking back toward the Great Hall, feeling remarkably and wonderfully light on her feet, as Harry carefully kept his wand trained on her.

He only managed to keep it up for five minutes, but it was the thought that counted.

Minerva looked at Dumbledore.

Dumbledore gazed back inquiringly at her. "Did you understand any of that?" the Headmaster said, sounding bemused.

It had been the most complete and utter gibberish that Minerva could ever remember hearing. She was feeling a bit embarrassed about having summoned the Headmaster to hear it, but she'd been given explicit instructions.

"I'm afraid not," Professor McGonagall said primly.

"So," Dumbledore said. The silver beard swung away from her, the old wizard's twinkling gaze looked elsewhere once more. "You suspect you might be able to do something that other wizards can't do, something we think is impossible."

The three of them stood within the Headmaster's private Transfiguration workroom, where the shining phoenix of Dumbledore's Patronus had told her to bring Harry, moments after her own Patronus

had reached him. Light shone down through the skylights and illuminated the great seven-pointed alchemical diagram drawn in the center of the circular room, showing it to be a little dusty, which saddened Minerva. Transfiguration research was one of Dumbledore's great enjoyments, and she'd known how pressed for time he'd been lately, but not that he was *this* pressed.

And now Harry Potter was going to waste even more of the Headmaster's time. But she certainly couldn't blame *Harry* for that. He'd done the proper thing in coming to her to say that he'd had an idea for doing something in Transfiguration that was currently believed to be impossible, and she herself had done exactly what she'd been told to do: she'd ordered Harry to be quiet and not discuss anything with her until she had consulted the Headmaster and they'd finished moving to a secure location.

If Harry had started out by saying what *specifically* he thought he could do, she wouldn't have bothered.

"Look, I know it's hard to explain," Harry said, sounding a little embarrassed. "What it adds up to is that what you believe conflicts with what scientists believe, in a case where I'd genuinely expect scientists to know more than wizards."

Minerva would have sighed out loud, if Dumbledore hadn't seemed to be taking the whole thing very seriously.

Harry's idea stemmed from simple ignorance, nothing more. If you changed half of a metal ball into glass, the *whole ball* had a different Form. To change the part *was* to change the whole, and that meant removing the whole Form and replacing it with a different one. What would it even *mean* to Transfigure only half of a metal ball? That the metal ball *as a whole* had the same Form as before, but *half* that ball now had a different Form?

"Mr. Potter," said Professor McGonagall, "what you want to do isn't just impossible, it's *illogical.* If you change half of something, you *did* change the whole."

"Indeed," said Dumbledore. "But Harry is the hero, so he may be able to do things that are logically impossible."

Minerva would have rolled her eyes, if she hadn't gone numb a long time ago.

"Supposing it *was* possible," said Dumbledore, "can you think of any reason why the results would differ in any way from ordinary Transfiguration?"

Minerva frowned. The fact that the concept was literally unimaginable was presenting her with some difficulty, but she tried to take it at face value. A Transfiguration imposed on only half of a metal ball...

"Strange things happening at the interface?" said Minerva. "But that should be no different than Transfiguring the object as a whole, into a Form with two different parts..."

Dumbledore nodded. "That is my own thought as well. And Harry, if your theory is correct, it implies that what you want to do is *exactly* like any other Transfiguration, only applied to a part of the subject rather than the whole? No changes *at all?*"

"Yes," Harry said firmly. "That's the whole point."

Dumbledore looked at her again. "Minerva, can you think of any reason whatsoever why that would be dangerous?"

"No," said Minerva, after she had finished searching through her memory.

"Likewise myself," said the Headmaster. "All right, then, since this ought to be exactly analogous to ordinary Transfiguration in all respects, and since we cannot think of any reason whatsoever why it would be dangerous, I think that the second degree of caution will suffice."

Minerva was surprised, but she didn't object. Dumbledore was by far her senior in Transfiguration, and he had tried literally thousands of new Transfigurations without ever choosing a degree of caution that was too low. He had used Transfiguration *in combat* and he was *still alive.* If the Headmaster thought the second degree was enough, it was enough.

That Harry was certainly going to fail was, of course, completely irrelevant.

The two of them started setting up the wards and detection webs. The most important web was the one that checked to make sure no Transfigured material had entered the air. Harry would be enclosed in a separate shell of force with its own air supply just to be certain, only his

wand allowed to leave the shield, and the interface tight. They were inside Hogwarts so they couldn't automatically Apparate out any material that showed signs of spontaneous combustion, but they could launch it out a skylight almost as fast, the windows all folded outward for exactly that reason. Harry himself would go out a different skylight at the first sign of trouble.

Harry watched them working, his face looking a little frightened.

"Don't worry," said Professor McGonagall in the middle of her running description, "this almost certainly won't be necessary, Mr. Potter. If we *expected* anything to go wrong you would not be allowed to try. It's just ordinary precautions for any Transfiguration no one has ever tried before."

Harry swallowed and nodded.

And a few minutes later, Harry was strapped into the safety chair and resting his wand against a metal ball—one that, based on his current test scores, should have been too large for him to Transfigure in less than thirty minutes.

And a few minutes after *that,* Minerva was leaning against the wall, feeling faint.

There was a small patch of glass on the ball where Harry's wand had rested.

Harry didn't say *I told you so,* but the smug look on his sweating face said it for him.

Dumbledore was casting analytic Charms on the ball, looking more and more intrigued by the moment. Thirty years had melted off his face.

"Fascinating," said Dumbledore. "It's exactly as he claimed. He simply Transfigured a part of the subject without Transfiguring the whole. You say it's really just a conceptual limitation, Harry?"

"Yes," Harry said, "but a deep one, just knowing it had to be a conceptual limitation wasn't enough. I had to suppress the part of my mind that was making the error and think instead about the underlying reality that scientists figured out."

"Truly fascinating," Dumbledore said. "I take it that for any other wizard to do the same would require months of study if they could do it at all? And may I ask you to partially Transfigure some other subjects?"

"Probably yes and of course," Harry said.

Half an hour later, Minerva was feeling equally bewildered, but considerably reassured about the safety issues.

It *was* the same, aside from being logically impossible.

"I believe that's enough, Headmaster," Minerva said finally. "I suspect partial Transfiguration is more tiring than the ordinary sort."

"Getting less so with practice," said the exhausted and pale boy, voice unsteady, "but yeah, you've got that right."

The process of extracting Harry from the wards took another minute, and then Minerva escorted him to a much more comfortable chair, and Dumbledore produced an ice-cream soda.

"*Congratulations*, Mr. Potter!" said Professor McGonagall, and meant it. She would have bet almost anything against that working.

"Congratulations indeed," said Dumbledore. "Even I did not make any original discoveries in Transfiguration before the age of fourteen. Not since the day of Dorotea Senjak has any genius flowered so early."

"Thanks," Harry said, sounding a little surprised.

"Nonetheless," Dumbledore said thoughtfully, "I think it would be most wise to keep this happy event a secret, at least for now. Harry, did you discuss your idea with any other person before you spoke to Professor McGonagall?"

There was silence.

"Um..." Harry said. "I don't want to turn anyone over to the Inquisition, but I did tell one other student—"

The word almost exploded from Professor McGonagall's lips. "*What?* You discussed a completely novel form of Transfiguration with a *student* before consulting a recognized authority? Do you have any idea how *irresponsible* that was?"

"I'm sorry," said Harry. "I didn't realize."

The boy looked appropriately frightened, and Minerva felt something inside her relax. At least Harry understood how foolish he'd been.

"You must swear Miss Granger to secrecy," Dumbledore said gravely. "And do not tell anyone else unless there is an extremely good reason for it, and they too have sworn."

"Ah... why?" Harry said.

Minerva was wondering the same thing. Once again the Headmaster was thinking too far ahead for her to keep up.

"Because you can do something that no one else will believe you can do," Dumbledore said. "Something completely unexpected. It may prove to be your critical advantage, Harry, and we must preserve it. Please, trust me in this."

Professor McGonagall nodded, her firm face showing nothing of her inner confusion. "Please do, Mr. Potter," she said.

"All right..." Harry said slowly.

"Once we have finished examining your materials," Dumbledore added, "you may practice partial Transfiguration, on glass to steel and steel to glass *only*, with Miss Granger to act as your spotter. Naturally, if either of you suspect any symptom of any form of Transfiguration sickness, inform a professor at once."

Just before Harry left the workroom, with his hand on the doorhandle, the boy turned back and said, "As long as we're here, have either of you noticed anything different about Professor Snape?"

"Different?" said the Headmaster.

Minerva didn't let her wry smile show on her face. Of course the boy was apprehensive about the 'evil Potions Master', since he had no way of knowing why Severus was to be trusted. It would have been odd to say the least, explaining to Harry that Severus was still in love with his mother.

"I mean, has his behavior changed recently in any way?" said Harry.

"Not that I have seen..." the Headmaster said slowly. "Why do you ask?"

Harry shook his head. "I don't want to prejudice your own observations by saying. Just keep an eye out, maybe?"

That sent a quiver of unease through Minerva in a way that no outright accusation of Severus could have.

Harry bowed to both of them respectfully, and took his leave.

"Albus," Minerva said after the boy had gone, "how did you *know* to take Harry seriously? I would have thought his idea merely impossible!"

The old wizard's face turned grave. "The same reason it must be kept secret, Minerva. The same reason I told you to come to me, if Harry made any such claim. Because it is a power that Voldemort knows not."

The words took a few seconds to sink in.

And then the cold shiver went down her spine, as it always did when she remembered.

It had started out as an ordinary job interview, Sybill Trelawney applying for the position of Professor of Divination.

> The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches,
> Born to those who have thrice defied him,
> Born as the seventh month dies,
> And the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal,
> But he will have power the Dark Lord knows not,
> And either must destroy all but a remnant of the other,
> For those two different spirits cannot exist in the same world.

Those dreadful words, spoken in that terrible booming voice, didn't seem to fit something like partial Transfiguration.

"Perhaps not, then," Dumbledore said after Minerva tried to explain. "I confess I had been hoping for something that would help in finding Voldemort's horcrux, wherever he may have hidden it. But..." The old wizard shrugged. "Prophecies are tricky things, Minerva, and it is best to take no chances. The smallest thing may prove decisive if it remains unexpected."

"And what do you suppose he meant about *Severus*?" said Minerva.

"There I have no idea," sighed Dumbledore. "Unless Harry is making a move against Severus, and thought that an open question might be taken seriously where a direct allegation would be dismissed. And if that was indeed what happened, Harry correctly reasoned that I would not trust that it was so. Let us simply keep watch, without prejudice, as he asks."

AFTERMATH, 1:

"Um, Hermione?" Harry said in a very small voice. "I think I owe you a really, really, really big apology."

AFTERMATH, 2:

Alissa Cornfoot's eyes were slightly glazed as she gazed upon the Potions Master giving her class a stern lecture, holding up a tiny bronze bean and saying something about screaming puddles of human flesh. Ever since the start of this year she'd been having trouble listening in Potions. She kept staring at their awful, mean, greasy professor and fantasizing about special detentions. There was probably something really *wrong* with her but she just couldn't seem to stop doing it—

"Ow!" Alissa said then.

Snape had just flicked the bronze bean unerringly at Alissa's forehead.

"Miss Cornfoot," said the Potions Master, his voice cutting, "this is a delicate potion and if you cannot pay attention you will hurt your classmates, not just yourself. See me after class."

The last four words didn't help her any, but she tried harder, and managed to get through the day without melting anyone.

After class, Alissa approached the desk. Part of her wanted to stand there meekly with her face abashed and her hands clasped penitently behind her back, just in case, but some quiet instinct told her this might be a *bad idea*. So instead she just stood there with her face neutral, in a posture that was very proper for a young lady, and said, "Professor?"

"Miss Cornfoot," Snape said without looking up from the sheets he was grading, "I do not return your affections, I begin to find your stares disturbing, and you will restrain your eyes henceforth. Is that quite clear?"

"Yes," said Alissa in a strangled squeak, and Snape dismissed her, and she fled the classroom with her cheeks flaming like molten lava.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

EGOCENTRIC BIAS

There'd been a sinking feeling in Hermione's stomach lately, every time she heard the other students talking about her and Harry. She'd been in a shower stall this morning when she'd overheard a conversation between Morag and Padma that had been the last straw piled on top of quite a lot of other straws.

She was starting to think that getting involved in a rivalry with Harry Potter had been a terrible mistake.

If she'd just *stayed away* from Harry Potter, she could have been Hermione Granger, the brightest academic star of Hogwarts, who was earning more points for Ravenclaw than anyone. She wouldn't have been *as* famous as the Boy-Who-Lived, but she would have been famous for *herself*.

Instead the Boy-Who-Lived had an academic rival, and her name happened to be Hermione Granger.

And worse, she had gone on a date with him.

The idea of getting into a Romance with Harry had seemed like an appealing idea at first. She'd read books like that, and if there was anyone in Hogwarts who was a candidate for the heroine's love interest it was obviously Harry Potter. Bright, funny, famous, sometimes scary...

So she'd forced Harry into going on a date with her.

And now *she* was *his* love interest.

Or worse, one of the options on his dinner menu.

She'd been in a shower stall that morning and just about to turn on the water, when she'd heard giggles coming from outside. And she'd heard Morag talking about how that Muggleborn girl probably wouldn't

fight hard enough to win against Ginevra Weasley, and Padma speculating that Harry Potter might decide he wanted *both*.

It was like they didn't understand that GIRLS had options on their dinner menu and BOYS fought over them.

But that wasn't even the part that hurt, really. It was that when she scored 98 on one of Professor McGonagall's tests, the news wasn't that Hermione Granger had scored the highest in the class, the news was that Harry Potter's rival had scored seven more points than him.

If you got too close to the Boy-Who-Lived, you became part of his story.

You didn't get your own.

And the thought had come to Hermione that she should just walk away, but that would've been too sad.

But she did want to get *back* what she'd accidentally given away by letting herself become known as Harry's rival. She wanted to be a separate person again instead of Harry's third leg, was that too much to ask?

It was a hard trap to climb out of once you fell in. No matter how high you scored in class, even if you did something that deserved a special dinnertime announcement, it just meant you were rivaling Harry Potter again.

But she thought she'd come up with a way.

Something to do that *wouldn't* be seen as pushing up on the opposite end of Harry Potter's seesaw.

It would be hard.

It would go against her nature.

She would have to fight someone very evil.

And she would need to ask someone even *more* evil for help.

Hermione raised her hand to knock upon that terrible door.

She hesitated.

Hermione realized she was being *silly*, and raised her hand a bit higher.

She tried to knock again.

Her hand quite failed to touch the door.

And then the door swung open anyway.

"Dear me," said the spider, sitting in its web. "Was it really that hard to lose a single Quirrell point, Miss Granger?"

Hermione stood there with her hand raised, her cheeks growing pink. It *had* been.

"Well, Miss Granger, I shall be merciful," said the evil Professor Quirrell. "Consider it already lost. There, I have taken a hard choice from you. Are you are not grateful?"

"Professor Quirrell," Hermione managed to say in a voice that squeaked a little. "I have a lot of Quirrell points, don't I?"

"You do indeed," said Professor Quirrell. "Though one less than you had before. Terrible, isn't it? Just think, if I don't like your reason for coming here, you could lose another fifty. Maybe I'd take them away one... by one... by one..."

Hermione's cheeks were going even redder. "You're really evil, did anyone ever tell you that?"

"Miss Granger," Professor Quirrell said gravely, "it can be dangerous to give people compliments like that when they have not been truly earned. The recipient might feel bashful and undeserving and want to do something worthy of your praise. Now what was it you wanted to talk to me about, Miss Granger?"

It was after lunch on Thursday afternoon, and Hermione and Harry were ensconced in a little library nook, with a *Quietus* field up so they could talk. Harry was lying stomach-down on the ground with his elbows resting on the floor and his head in his hands and his feet kicking up casually behind him. Hermione was occupying a stuffed chair much too large for her, like she was the Hermione center of a candy shell.

Harry had suggested that they could, as a first pass, read just the *titles* of all the books in the library, and then Hermione could read all the tables of contents.

Hermione had thought this was a brilliant idea. She'd never done that with a library before.

Unfortunately there was a slight flaw in this plan.

Namely, they were both Ravenclaws.

Hermione was reading a book called *Magical Mnemonics.*

Harry was reading a book called *The Skeptical Wizard.*

Each had thought it was just one special exception they would make only this one time, and neither had yet realized it was impossible for either of them to ever finish reading all the book titles no matter how hard they tried.

The quiet of their little nook was broken by two words.

"Oh, *no*," Harry suddenly said out loud, sounding like the words had been torn out of him, and like he was trying very hard not to laugh.

There was a bit more quiet.

"He *didn't*," Harry said, in the same voice.

Then she heard Harry start giggling helplessly.

Hermione looked up from her book.

"All right," she said, "what *is* it?"

"I just found out why you never ask the Weasleys about the family rat," Harry said. "It's *really* awful and I shouldn't be laughing and I'm a terrible person."

"Yes," Hermione said primly, "you are. Tell me too."

"Okay, first the background. There's a whole chapter in this book about Sirius Black conspiracy theories. You remember who that is, right?"

"Of course," said Hermione. Sirius Black was a traitor, a friend of James Potter who'd betrayed the location of Harry's parents to Voldemort.

"So it turns out there were a number of, shall we say, *irregularities*, associated with Black going to Azkaban. He didn't get a trial, and the Junior Minister in charge when the Aurors arrested Black was none other than Cornelius Fudge, who became our current Minister of Magic."

That sounded a little suspicious to Hermione too, and she said as much.

Harry made a shrugging motion with his shoulders, as he lay on the floor looking at his book. "Suspicious things happen all the time, and if you're a conspiracy theorist you can always find *something*."

"But *no trial?*" said Hermione.

"It was right after the Dark Lord's defeat," Harry said, his voice serious as he said it. "Things were incredibly chaotic, and when the Aurors tracked down Black he was standing there laughing in a street ankle-deep in blood, with twenty eyewitnesses to recount how he'd killed a friend of my father's named Peter Pettigrew plus twelve bystanders. I'm not saying I approve of Black not getting a trial. But these are wizards we're talking about here, so it's not really any more suspicious than, I don't know, the sort of thing people point to when they want to argue over who shot John F. Kennedy. So anyway, Sirius Black is the wizarding Lee Harvey Oswald. There's all sorts of conspiracy theories about who *really* betrayed my parents instead of him, and one of the favorites is Peter Pettigrew, and this is where it starts getting complicated."

Hermione listened, fascinated. "But how do you go from there to the Weasleys' *pet rat*—"

"Hold on," said Harry, "I'm getting there. Now, after Pettigrew's death it came out that he'd been a spy for the Light—not a double agent, just someone who snuck around and found things out. He'd been good at that since he was a teenager, even in Hogwarts he had a reputation for finding out all sorts of secrets. So the conspiracy theory is that Pettigrew became an unregistered Animagus while he was still in Hogwarts, an Animagus of something small that could scurry around and listen to conversations. The main problem being that successful Animagi are rare and doing it as a teenager would be really unlikely, so of course the conspiracy theory says that my father and Black were unregistered Animagi too. And in that conspiracy theory, Pettigrew himself killed the twelve bystanders, turned into his small Animagus form, and ran. So Michael Shermer says there are four additional problems with this. One, Black was the only one who knew where my parents were." (Harry's voice was a little hard as he said that.) "Two, Black was a more likely suspect to start with than Pettigrew, there's a rumor Black deliberately tried to get a student killed during his time at Hogwarts, and he was from this really nasty pureblood family, Bellatrix Black was literally his cousin. Three, Black was twenty times the fighting wizard that Pettigrew was, even if he wasn't as smart. The duel between them would have been like

Professor Quirrell versus Professor Sprout. Pettigrew probably didn't even get a chance to draw his wand, let alone fake all the evidence the conspiracy theory requires. And four, Black was standing in the street *laughing.*"

"But the *rat*—" said Hermione.

"Right," Harry said. "Well, to make a long story short, Bill Weasley decided that his little brother Percy's pet rat was Pettigrew's Animagus form—"

Hermione's jaw dropped.

"Yes," Harry said, "you wouldn't exactly expect Evil Pettigrew to be living a sad and furtive life as the pet rat of an enemy wizarding family, he'd either be with the Malfoys or, more likely, off in the Carribean after a bit of plastic surgery. Anyway, Bill knocks out his little brother Percy, stuns and grabs the rat, sends out all these emergency owl messages—"

"Oh, *no!*" Hermione said, the words torn out of her.

"—and somehow manages to gather Dumbledore, the Minister of Magic, and the Head Auror—"

"He *didn't!*" said Hermione.

"And of course when they get there they think he's crazy, but they use *Veritas Oculum* on the rat anyway, just to be sure, and what do they discover?"

She would've *died*. "A rat."

"You win a cookie! So they dragged poor Bill Weasley off to St. Mungo's and it turned out to be a pretty standard schizophrenic break, it just happens to some people, especially young men around what we'd consider college age. Guy was convinced he was ninety-seven years old and had died and gone back in time to his younger self via train station. And he responded perfectly well to antipsychotics and is back to normal and everything's fine now, except people don't talk as much anymore about Sirius Black conspiracy theories, and you don't ever ask the Weasleys about the family rat."

Hermione was giggling helplessly. It was really awful and she shouldn't be laughing and she was a terrible person.

"The thing I *don't* understand," Harry said, after their giggles had died down, "is *why* Black would hunt down Pettigrew instead of running

as fast as he could. He had to know the Aurors would be after him. I wonder if they got the reason out of Black before they took him to Azkaban? See, this is why people who are absolutely positively guilty still go through the legal system and get trials."

Hermione had to agree with that.

Soon Harry was done with his book while Hermione was only halfway through hers—hers was a much more difficult book than Harry's, but she still felt embarrassed about that. And then she had to put *Magical Mnemonics* back on the shelf and drag herself away, because it was time for her to face the most dreaded class in Hogwarts, BROOMSTICK RIDING.

Harry tagged along as she walked there, even though his own class wasn't until an hour and a half later, like a fighter jet escorting a sad little propeller plane on its way to its own funeral.

The boy wished her goodbye in a quiet, sympathetic voice, and she walked onto the grassy fields of Doom.

And there was much shrieking and almost falling and horrible brushes with death and the ground in completely the *wrong place* and the sun getting in her eyes and Morag buzzing her and Mandy thinking she was being *subtle* about always being near enough to catch her if she fell and she *knew* the other students were laughing at both of them but she never said anything to Mandy because she didn't actually want to die.

After ten million years the class ended, and she was back on the ground where she belonged until next Thursday. Sometimes she had nightmares about it always being Thursday.

Why everyone had to learn this, when they were just going to Apparate or Floo or portkey everywhere once they grew up, was a complete and utter mystery to Hermione. Nobody actually needed to ride broomsticks as an adult, it was like being forced to play dodgeball in P.E.

At least Harry had the decency to be ashamed of being good at it.

It was a couple of hours later, and she was in a Hufflepuff study hall with Hannah, Susan, Leanne, and Megan. Professor Flitwick, surprisingly diffident for a teacher, had asked if she might possibly maybe help those four with their Charms homework for a while, even though they weren't Ravenclaws, and Hermione had felt so proud she'd almost *burst*.

Hermione took a piece of parchment, spilled a little bit of ink on it, tore it into four pieces, crumpled them, and tossed the pieces on the table.

She could have gotten it just from crumpling it, but doing all that made it more like garbage, and that helped when someone was first practicing the Disposal Charm.

Hermione sharpened her ears and eyes, and said, "Okay, try it."

"*Everto.*"

"*Everto.*"

"*Everto.*"

"*Everto.*"

Hermione didn't think she'd quite caught all the problems. "Can you all try it again?"

An hour later Hermione had concluded that (1), Leanne and Megan were sort of sloppy, but if you asked them to keep practicing something, they would, (2) Hannah and Susan were focused and driven to the point where you had to keep telling them to *slow down* and *relax* and *think* about things instead of *trying* so hard—it was odd to think that those two would soon be *hers*—and (3) she liked helping Hufflepuffs, the whole study hall had a very cheerful atmosphere.

When she left for dinner, she found the Boy-Who-Lived reading a book while he waited to escort her. It made her feel flattered, and also a little worried because Harry didn't seem to really talk to *anyone* besides her.

"Did you know there's a fourth-year girl in Hufflepuff who's a Metamorphmagus?" said Hermione as they headed toward the Great Hall. "She makes her hair really red, like stopsign red not Weasley red, and when she spilled hot tea on herself she turned into a black-haired boy until she got it under control again."

"Really? Cool," said Harry, sounding a bit distracted. "Um, Hermione, just to check, you know tomorrow is the last day to sign up for Professor Quirrell's armies, right?"

"Yes," Hermione said. "The armies of the evil Professor Quirrell." Her voice was a little angry, though Harry didn't know why, of course.

"Hermione," Harry said, his voice exasperated, "he's not evil. He's a little bit Dark and a whole lot Slytherin. It's not the same as being *evil*."

Harry Potter had too many words for things, that was his problem. He would have been better off if he'd just divided the universe into Good and Bad. "Professor Quirrell called me up in front of the whole class and told me to *shoot someone!*"

"He was right," Harry said, his face sober. "I'm sorry, Hermione, but he was. You should have shot *me,* I wouldn't have minded. You can't learn Battle Magic if you can't practice against real opponents using real spells. And now you're doing okay in sparring, aren't you?"

Hermione was only twelve, and so she knew, but she couldn't put it into words, she couldn't find the thing to say that would convince Harry.

Professor Quirrell had taken a young girl and called up that girl in front of everyone, and ordered her to open fire without provocation on a classmate.

It didn't *matter* if Professor Quirrell was right about her needing to learn it.

Professor McGonagall wouldn't ever have done that.

Professor Flitwick wouldn't ever have done that.

Maybe not even Professor Snape would have done that.

Professor Quirrell was EVIL.

But she couldn't find the words, and she knew that Harry would never believe her.

"Hermione, I've talked to older students," Harry said. "Professor Quirrell could be the *only* competent Defense Professor we get in all seven years at Hogwarts. *Anything* else we can learn later. If we want to study Defense, we have to do it *this year.* The students who sign up for the extracurricular stuff are going to be learning huge amounts, way beyond what the Ministry thinks first-years are supposed to study—did you know we're going to be learning the Patronus Charm? In *January?*"

"The *Patronus Charm?*" Hermione said, her voice going up in surprise.

Her books said that was one of the brightest magics known, a weapon against the Darkest creatures, cast with pure positive emotions. It wasn't something she'd expect the evil Professor Quirrell to teach—or arrange to be taught, since Hermione couldn't imagine he could do the spell himself.

"Yes," Harry said. "Students don't usually learn the Patronus Charm until their fifth years or even later! But Professor Quirrell says the Ministry schedules were made up by talking Flobberworms, and the ability to cast the Patronus Charm depends on emotions more than magical strength. Professor Quirrell says that he thinks most students do *way* less than they can, and this year he's going to prove it."

There was the usual tone of awed worship that Harry's voice had when he talked about Professor Quirrell, and Hermione gritted her teeth and kept walking.

"I already signed up, actually," Hermione said, her voice a little quiet. "I did it this morning. For everything, just like you said."

In for a penny, in for a pound was the usual expression.

Besides, she didn't want to *lose*, and if she wanted to win she had to learn.

"So you *will* be in the armies, then?" Harry's voice was suddenly enthusiastic. "That's awesome, Hermione! I've already gotten my list of soldiers, but I'm sure Professor Quirrell will let me add one more, or trade—"

"I'm not joining *your* army." Hermione's voice was sharp. She knew it was a reasonable assumption but it *still* annoyed her.

Harry blinked. "Not Draco Malfoy's, surely. So you want to be in the third army? Even though we don't know who the general *is* yet?" Harry sounded surprised and a little wounded, and she couldn't blame him, though of course she did blame him, since in fact it was all his fault. "But why not mine?"

"Think about it," Hermione snapped, "and maybe you'll work it out!"

And she sped up her stride and left Harry gaping behind her.

"Professor Quirrell," Draco said in his most formal voice, "I must protest your appointment of Hermione Granger as the third general."

"Oh?" said Professor Quirrell, leaning back in his chair in a casual and relaxed manner. "Protest away, Mr. Malfoy."

"Granger is unfit for the position," said Draco.

Professor Quirrell tapped a finger on his cheek thoughtfully. "Why yes, yes she is. Do you have any further protests?"

"Professor Quirrell," said Harry Potter beside him, "with all due respect to Miss Granger's many outstanding academic talents and the Quirrell points she has justly earned in your classes, her personality is not suited to military command."

Draco had been relieved when Harry had agreed to accompany him to Professor Quirrell's office. It wasn't *just* that Harry was a gigantic blatant teacher's pet where Professor Quirrell was concerned. Draco had also started to worry that Harry actually *was* friends with Granger, it had been a while now and he *still* hadn't made his move... but this was more like it.

"I agree with Mr. Potter," said Draco. "Appointing her as a general turns it into a farce."

"Harshly put," said Harry, "but I cannot bring myself to disagree with Mr. Malfoy. To be blunt, Professor Quirrell, Hermione Granger has around as much intent to kill as a bowl of wet grapes."

"That," said Professor Quirrell mildly, "is not a thing I would fail to notice myself. You are telling me nothing I do not already know."

It was Draco's turn to say something, but the conversation had suddenly hiccupped. That answer had *not* been in the possibilities he and Harry had brainstormed before coming here. What *did* you say after the teacher said that he knew everything you knew and he was still going to commit an obvious mistake?

The silence stretched.

"Is this some sort of plot?" Harry said slowly.

"Must everything I do be some sort of plot?" said Professor Quirrell. "Can't I ever create chaos just for the sake of chaos?"

Draco almost choked.

"Not in your Battle Magic class," Harry said with calm certainty. "Other places, maybe, but not there."

Professor Quirrell slowly raised his eyebrows.

Harry gazed steadily back at him.

Draco shivered.

"Well then," Professor Quirrell said. "Neither of you seem to have considered a very simple question. Who could I appoint instead of Miss Granger?"

"Blaise Zabini," Draco said without hesitation.

"Any other suggestions?" said Professor Quirrell, sounding quite amused.

Anthony Goldstein and Ernie Macmillan, came the thought, before Draco's common sense kicked in and ruled out mudbloods and Hufflepuffs no matter how aggressively they dueled. So instead Draco just said, "What's wrong with Zabini?"

"I *see*..." Harry said slowly.

"I *don't,*" said Draco. "Why not Zabini?"

Professor Quirrell looked at Draco. "Because, Mr. Malfoy, no matter how hard he tries, he'll never be able to keep up with you or Mr. Potter."

The shock of it staggered Draco. "You can't believe *Granger* is going to—"

"He's gambling on her," Harry said quietly. "It's not guaranteed. The odds aren't even good. She'll probably never give us a good fight, and even if she does, it may take her months to learn. But she's the only one in our year with any chance at all of growing to beat us."

Draco's hands twitched but didn't clench into fists. Showing up as your supporter and then backing out was a classic undermining tactic, so Harry Potter *was* in it with Granger and *that* implied—

"But Professor," Harry went on smoothly, "I'm worried Hermione will be *miserable* as the general of an army. I'm speaking as her friend

now, Professor Quirrell. The competition might be good for Draco and I, but what you're asking her to do isn't good for *her!*"

Never mind.

"Your friendship for Hermione Granger does you credit," Professor Quirrell said dryly. "Especially as you are able to be friends with Draco Malfoy at the same time. Quite a feat, that."

Harry suddenly looked a little nervous, meaning he probably felt a lot *more* nervous, and Draco silently swore to himself. Of course Harry wasn't going to fool Professor Quirrell.

"And I doubt Miss Granger would appreciate your friendly concern," said Professor Quirrell. "She asked me for the position, Mr. Potter, I did not ask her."

Harry was quiet at this for a moment. Then he flashed Draco a quick look that mixed apology and warning, saying at the same time, *Sorry, I did my best* and *We'd better not press it any further.*

"As for her being miserable," Professor Quirrell went on, a slight smile now playing about his lips, "I suspect that she will have a much easier time with the rigors of her position than either of you suspect, and that she will put up a good fight much sooner than you think."

Harry and Draco both gasped in horror.

"You're not going to *advise* her, are you?" said Draco, utterly aghast.

"I never signed up to fight *you!*" said Harry.

The smile playing around Professor Quirrell's lips grew wider. "As a matter of fact, I *did* offer to share a few suggestions regarding Miss Granger's first battles."

"*Professor Quirrell!*" said Harry.

"Oh, don't worry," Professor Quirrell said. "She turned me down. Just as I expected."

Draco's eyes narrowed.

"Dear me, Mr. Potter," said Professor Quirrell, "didn't anyone ever tell you it's rude to stare?"

"You're not going to secretly help her some *other* way, are you?" said Harry.

"Would I do that?" said Professor Quirrell.

"Yes," said Draco and Harry at the same time.

"I am wounded by your lack of trust. Well then, I promise not to help General Granger in any way that the two of you don't know about. And now I suggest that both of you be about your military affairs. November approaches, and swiftly."

Draco saw the implications before the door had closed all the way behind them on their way out of Professor Quirrell's office.

Harry had once spoken dismissively of "people stuff".

And now that was Draco's only hope.

Let him not realize, let him not realize...

"We should just attack the Granger girl first and get her out of our way," said Draco. "After we crush her, we can have our own contest without any distractions."

"Now that doesn't really seem fair to her, does it?" said Harry in a mild voice.

"What do *you* care?" said Draco. "She's your rival, right?" Then, with just the right note of suspicion in his voice, "Don't tell me you've started *really* liking her, after being her rival all this time..."

"Founders forbid," said Harry. "What can I say, Draco? I merely have a natural sense of justice. Granger does too, you know. She has a very firm grasp on good and evil, and she's probably going to attack evil first. Having a name like 'Malfoy' is just asking for it, you know."

DAMN IT!

"Harry," said Draco, sounding wounded and maybe a little superior, "don't you want to fight *fairly* against me?"

"You mean rather than attacking you after you've already lost some of your forces beating Granger?" said Harry. "Oh, I don't know. Maybe after I get bored with just winning I'll try that 'fair' thing."

"Maybe she'll attack *you,*" Draco said. "*You're* her rival."

"But I'm her *friendly* rival," Harry said with an evil grin. "I bought her a nice birthday present and everything. You wouldn't go around sabotaging your friendly rival like that."

"What about sabotaging your *friend's* chance at a fair fight?" said Draco angrily. "I thought we were friends!"

"Let me rephrase that," said Harry. "*Granger* wouldn't sabotage a friendly rival. But that's because she has the killing intention of a bowl of wet grapes. *You* would. You *totally* would. And guess what, so would I."

Damn it!

If it had been a play, there would have been dramatic music.

The hero, impeccably turned out in green-trimmed robes and perfectly combed white-blonde hair, faced the villain.

The villain, leaning back in a simple wooden chair with her buck-teeth clearly visible and stray chestnut curls drifting over her cheeks, faced the hero.

It was Wednesday, October 30th, and the first battle was coming up on Sunday.

Draco was standing in General Granger's office, a room the size of a small classroom. (*Why* each general's office was so large, Draco wasn't quite sure. A chair and a desk would have worked for him. He wasn't even clear on why the generals needed offices at all, his soldiers knew where to find him. Unless Professor Quirrell had deliberately arranged the huge offices for them as a sign of status, in which case Draco was all for it.)

Granger sat on the room's single chair like a throne, all the way on the other end of the office from where the door opened. There was a long oblong table stretched across the middle of the room between them, and four small circular tables scattered around the corners, but only that one single chair, all the way at the opposite end. The room had windows along one wall, and one beam of sunlight touched the top of Granger's hair like a glowing crown.

It would have been nice if Draco could have walked slowly forward. But there was a table in the way, and Draco had to go around it diagonally, and there was no good way to do that in a dramatic and dignified

fashion. Had that been deliberate? If it had been his father, it surely would have been; but this was Granger, so surely not.

There was nowhere for him to sit, and Granger hadn't stood up, either.

Draco kept the outrage entirely off his face.

"Well, Mr. Draco Malfoy," Granger said once he stood before her, "you requested an audience with me and I have been so gracious as to grant it. What was your plea?"

Come with me to visit Malfoy Manor, my father and I would like to show you some interesting spells.

"Your rival, Potter, came to me with an offer," said Draco, putting a serious look on his face. "He doesn't mind losing to me, but would be humiliated if you won. So he wants to join with me and wipe you out immediately, not just in our first battle, all of them. If I won't do that, Potter wants me to hold back or harass you, while he launches an all-out attack on you as his first move."

"I see," Granger said, looking surprised. "And you're offering to help me against him?"

"Of course," said Draco smoothly. "I didn't think what he wanted to do to you was fair."

"Why, that's very nice of you, Mr. Malfoy," said Granger. "I'm sorry for how I spoke to you earlier. We should be friends. Can I call you Drakey?"

Alarm bells started to sound in Draco's head, but there was a *chance* she meant it...

"Of course," said Draco, "if I can call you Hermy."

Draco was pretty sure he saw her expression flicker.

"Anyway," Draco said, "I was thinking it would serve Potter right if we both attacked him and wiped him out."

"But that wouldn't be fair to Mr. Potter, would it?" said Granger.

"I think it'd be very fair," Draco said. "He was planning to do it to you first."

Granger was giving him a stern look that could possibly have intimidated him if he'd been a Hufflepuff instead of a Malfoy. "You think I'm pretty stupid, don't you, Mr. Malfoy?"

Draco smiled charmingly. "No, Miss Granger, but I thought I'd at least *check*. So, what do you want?"

"Are you offering to *bribe* me?" said Granger.

"Sure," said Draco. "Can I just slip you a Galleon and have you beat on Potter instead of me for the rest of the year?"

"Nope," said Granger, "but you can offer me ten Galleons and have me attack both of you equally, instead of just you."

"Ten Galleons is a lot of money," Draco said cautiously.

"I didn't know the Malfoys were poor," said Granger.

Draco stared at Granger.

He was starting to get a strange feeling about this.

That particular reply didn't seem like it should have come from this particular girl.

"Well," said Draco, "you don't get to be rich by wasting money, you know."

"I don't know if you know what a dentist is, Mr. Malfoy, but my parents are *dentists* and anything less than ten Galleons isn't worth my time at all."

"Three Galleons," Draco said, more as a probe than anything else.

"Nope," said Granger. "If you want an equal fight at all, I don't believe that a Malfoy wants an equal fight less than he wants ten Galleons."

Draco was starting to get a *very* strange feeling about this.

"No," said Draco.

"No?" said Granger. "This is a limited time offer, Mr. Malfoy. Are you sure you want to risk a whole year of being miserably crushed by the Boy-Who-Lived? That would be pretty embarrassing for the House of Malfoy, wouldn't it?"

It was a very persuasive argument, one that was hard to refuse, but you didn't get to be rich by spending money when your heart told you it was a setup.

"No," said Draco.

"See you on Sunday," said Granger.

Draco turned and walked out of the office without another word.

That had been *not right*...

"Hermione," Harry said patiently, "we're *supposed* to be plotting against each other. You could even betray me and it wouldn't mean anything outside the battlefield."

Hermione shook her head. "It wouldn't be nice, Harry."

Harry sighed. "I don't think you're getting into the spirit of this at all."

It wouldn't be nice. She'd actually said that. Hermione didn't know whether to be insulted at what Harry thought of her, or worried about whether she really *did* sound like that much of a goody-two-shoes usually.

It was probably time to change the subject.

"Anyway, are you doing anything special for tomorrow?" said Hermione. "It's—"

Her voice cut off abruptly as she realized.

"Yes, Hermione," Harry said a little tightly, "what day is it?"

INTERLUDE:

There was a time when October 31st had been called Halloween in magical Britain.

Now it was Harry Potter Day.

Harry had turned down all the offers, even the one from Minister Fudge which might have been good for future political favors and which he *really* should have gritted his teeth and taken. But to Harry, October 31st would always be The Dark Lord Killed My Parents Day. There should have been a quiet, dignified memorial service somewhere, and if there was one, he hadn't been invited.

Hogwarts got the day off to celebrate. Even the Slytherins didn't dare wear black outside their own dorm. There were special events and special foods and the teachers looked the other way if anyone ran through the hallways. It was the tenth anniversary, after all.

Harry spent the day in his trunk so as not to spoil it for anyone else, eating snack bars in place of meals, reading some of his sadder science

fiction books (no fantasy), and writing a letter to Mum and Dad that was much longer than the ones he usually sent.

CHAPTER THIRTY

WORKING IN GROUPS, PART I

The day was Sunday, November 3rd, and soon the three great powers of their school year, Harry Potter, Draco Malfoy, and Hermione Granger, would begin their struggle for supreme dominance.

(Harry was slightly annoyed by the way the Boy-Who-Lived had been demoted from supreme dominance to one of three equal rivals just by entering the contest, but he expected to get it back soon.)

The battleground was a section of non-Forbidden forest, dense with trees, because Professor Quirrell thought that being able to see all the enemy forces was too boring even for your very first battle.

All the students who were not actually *in* a first-year army were camped out nearby and watching on screens that Professor Quirrell had set up. Except for three Gryffindors in their fourth year, who were currently sick and confined to healer's beds by Madam Pomfrey. Aside from that, everyone was there.

The students were dressed, not in their ordinary school robes, but in Muggle camouflage uniforms that Professor Quirrell had obtained somewhere and supplied in sufficient quantity and variety to fit everyone. It wasn't that students would have worried about stains and rips, that was what Charms were for. But as Professor Quirrell had explained to the surprised wizardborns, nice dignified clothing was not efficient for hiding in forests or dodging around trees.

And on each uniform's breast, a patch bearing the name and insignia of your army. A *small* patch. If you wanted your soldiers to wear, say,

colored ribbons so that they could identify each other at a distance, and risk the enemy getting their hands on the ribbons, that was all up to you.

Harry had tried to get the name Dragon Army.

Draco had pitched a fit and said that would confuse everyone completely.

Professor Quirrell had ruled that Draco could lay prior claim to the name, if he wished.

So now Harry was fighting Dragon Army.

This probably wasn't a good sign.

For their insignia, instead of the too-obvious dragon's head breathing fire, Draco had elected to simply go with the fire. Elegant, understated, deadly: *This is what's left after we've passed.* Very Malfoy.

Harry, after considering alternate choices such as the 501st Provisional Battalion and Harry's Minions o' Doom, had decided that his army would be known by the simple and dignified appellation of the Chaos Legion.

Their insignia was a hand poised with fingers ready to snap.

It was *universally* agreed that this wasn't a good sign.

Harry had earnestly advised Hermione that the young boys serving under her were probably nervous about her being a girl with a reputation for being nice, and that she should pick something scary that would reassure them of her toughness and make them proud to be part of her army, like the Blood Commandos or something.

Hermione had named her army the Sunshine Regiment.

Their insignia was a smiley face.

And in ten minutes, they would be at war.

Harry stood in the bright forest clearing that was their assigned starting location, an area of open space with old and rotting tree stumps that had been cleared away for some unknown purpose, ground coated with a small scattering of blown leaves and the dried grey remnants of grass that had failed the test of summer's heat, and the sun shining down brilliantly from above.

Around him were the twenty-three soldiers that Professor Quirrell had assigned to him. Nearly all of Gryffindor had signed up, of course, and more than half of Slytherin, and less than half of Hufflepuff, and a

handful of Ravenclaw. In Harry's army there were twelve Gryffindors and six Slytherins and four Hufflepuffs and one Ravenclaw besides himself... not that there was any way to tell that by looking at the uniforms. No red, no green, no yellow, no blue. Just Muggle camouflage patterns, and a patch on the breast with the device of a hand poised to snap its fingers.

Harry looked upon his twenty-three soldiers, all wearing the same uniforms with no marks of group identity save that single patch.

And lo, Harry smiled, because he understood what this part of Professor Quirrell's master plan was about; and Harry was taking full advantage of it for his *own* purposes, too.

There was a legendary episode in social psychology called the Robbers Cave experiment. It had been set up in the bewildered aftermath of World War II, with the intent of investigating the causes and remedies of conflicts between groups. The scientists had set up a summer camp for 22 boys from 22 different schools, selecting them to all be from stable middle-class families. The first phase of the experiment had been intended to investigate what it took to *start* a conflict between groups. The 22 boys had been divided into two groups of 11—

—and this had been quite sufficient.

The hostility had started from the moment the two groups had become aware of each others' existences in the state park, insults being hurled on the first meeting. They'd named themselves the Eagles and the Rattlers (they hadn't needed names for themselves when they thought they were the only ones in the park) and had proceeded to develop contrasting group stereotypes, the Rattlers thinking of themselves as rough-and-tough and swearing heavily, the Eagles correspondingly deciding to think of themselves as upright-and-proper.

The other part of the experiment had been testing how to resolve group conflicts. Bringing the boys together to watch fireworks hadn't worked at all. They'd just shouted at each other and stayed apart. What *had* worked was warning them that there might be vandals in the park, and the two groups needing to work together to solve a failure of the park's water system. A common task, a common enemy.

Harry had a strong suspicion Professor Quirrell had understood this

principle very well indeed when he had chosen to create *three* armies per year.

Three armies.

Not *four*.

And definitely *not* segregated by House... except that no Slytherins had been assigned to Draco besides Mr. Crabbe and Mr. Goyle.

It was things like this which reassured Harry that Professor Quirrell, despite his affected Dark atmosphere and his pretense of neutrality in the conflict between Good and Evil, was secretly backing Good, not that Harry would ever dare say that out loud.

And Harry had decided to take full advantage of Professor Quirrell's plan to define a group identity *his* way.

The Rattlers, once they'd met the Eagles, had started thinking of themselves as rough-and-tough, and they'd conducted themselves accordingly.

The Eagles had thought of themselves as good-and-proper.

And in that bright forest clearing, scattered around the old and rotting tree stumps, outlined in the sun shining down brilliantly from above, General Potter and his twenty-three soldiers were arranged in nothing remotely resembling a formation. Some soldiers stood, some soldiers sat, some stood on one leg just to be different.

It was the *Chaos* Legion, after all.

And if there wasn't a *reason* to stand in neat little lines, Harry had said disdainfully, there weren't going to be neat little lines.

Harry had divided the army into 6 squads of 4 soldiers each, each squad commanded by a Squad Suggester. All troops were under strict orders to disobey any orders they were given if it seemed like a good idea at the time, including that one... unless Harry or the Squad Suggester prefixed the order with "Merlin says", in which case you were supposed to actually obey.

The Chaos Legion's chief attack was to split up and run in from multiple directions, randomly changing vectors and firing the approved sleep spell as rapidly as you could rebuild the magical strength. And if you saw a chance to distract or confuse the enemy, you took it.

Fast. Creative. Unpredictable. Non-homogenous. Don't just obey orders, think about whether what you're doing *right now* makes sense.

Harry wasn't quite as sure as he'd pretended that this was the optimum of military efficiency... but he'd been given a golden opportunity to change how some students *thought about themselves,* and that was how he intended to use it.

Five minutes to wartime, according to Harry's watch.

General Potter walked (not marched) over to where his air force was waiting tensely, broomsticks already clutched firmly in their hands.

"All wings report in," said General Potter. They'd rehearsed this during their one training session on Saturday.

"Red Leader standing by," said Seamus Finnigan, who had no idea what it meant.

"Red Five standing by," said Dean Thomas, who'd waited his entire life to say it.

"Green Leader standing by," Theodore Nott said rather stiffly.

"Green Forty-One standing by," Tracey Davis said.

"I want you in the air the instant we hear the bell," said General Potter. "Do not engage, repeat, do not engage. Evade if under fire." (Of course you did *not* aim sleep spells at broomsticks; you fired a spell that gave a temporary red glow to whatever it hit. If you hit the broomstick or the rider, they were out of the war.) "Red Leader and Red Five, fly toward Malfoy's army as fast as you can, stay as high as you can while still seeing them, return the instant you know for sure what they're doing. Green Leader, do the same for Granger's army. Green Forty-One, fly above us and watch for any approaching broomsticks or soldiers, you and only you are authorized to fire. And remember, I didn't say 'Merlin says' for any of that, but we *do* really need the information. For Chaos!"

"For Chaos!" the four echoed with varying degrees of enthusiasm.

Harry expected Hermione to launch an immediate attack on Draco, in which case he'd move his troops into position and start supporting her, but only after she'd taken severe losses and caused some damage. He would frame it as a heroic rescue, if possible; it wouldn't do to have Sunshine thinking that Chaos wasn't their friend, after all.

But just in case she *didn't*... well, that was why the Chaos Legion was staying put until Green Leader reported back.

Draco's moves would be in his own self-interest. He would predictably ready his army to defend against Hermione; he might or might not realize that Harry had been lying about waiting to attack until after that battle finished. Harry had still put two broomsticks on Dragon Army, just in case they *were* doing something, and just in case Draco or Mr. Goyle or Mr. Crabbe was good enough to shoot a broomstick out of the sky.

But General Granger was the unpredictable one, and Harry couldn't move until he knew how she was moving.

⁂

In the heart of the forest, with shadow patterns dancing on the ground as leafy canopies swayed high above, General Malfoy stood where the trees were relatively sparser, and looked out on his troops with calm satisfaction. Six units of three troops each, the Aerial Unit of four (to which Gregory was assigned), and the Command Unit, which was himself and Vincent. They'd only drilled for a short time on the previous Saturday, but Draco was confident that he'd managed to explain the basics. Stay with your mates, watch their back and trust them to watch yours. Move as a single body. Obey orders and show no fear. Aim, fire, move, aim again, fire again.

The six units were formed up in a defensive perimeter around Draco, watchfully gazing outward into the forest. Back-to-back they stood, wands gripped low until they needed to strike.

They already looked remarkably like the Auror units whose training Draco had watched during his father's inspections.

Chaos and Sunshine weren't going to know what hit them.

"Attention," said General Malfoy.

The six units unfolded and spun toward Draco; the faces of his broomstick riders turned from where they stood with broomsticks already in hand.

Draco had decided to wait on demanding salutes until after they won their first battle, when Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs would be more willing to salute a Malfoy.

But his soldiers were already standing straight enough, especially the Gryffindors, that Draco wondered if he'd even needed to delay. Gregory had quietly listened, and reported back that Draco's volunteering to stand by Harry Potter in Defense class, that time when Professor Quirrell had taught Harry how to lose, had marked Draco as an acceptable commander. At least if you happened to be assigned to his army. *Not all Slytherins are alike; there are Slytherins, and then there are Slytherins* was what the Gryffindors in Draco's army were quoting to their Housemates.

Draco was frankly *astounded* at how incredibly *easy* that had been. Draco had protested at first about not being assigned any Slytherins, and Professor Quirrell had told him that if he wanted to be the first Malfoy to gain complete political control of the country, he needed to learn how to govern the other three-quarters of the population. It was things like this which reassured Draco that Professor Quirrell had a great deal more sympathy for the good guys than Professor Quirrell was letting on.

The actual battle wouldn't be easy, especially if Granger did attack the Dragons first. Draco had agonized over whether to commit all his forces against Granger immediately in a preemptive strike, but had worried that (1) Harry had been misleading him completely about what Granger was likely to do, and (2) Harry had been misleading him about waiting until after Granger's attack to join the battle.

Though Dragon Army had a secret weapon, three of them in fact, which might be enough to win even if they were attacked by both armies at once...

It was almost time, and that meant it was time for the pre-battle speech that Draco had composed and memorized.

"The battle is about to begin," Draco said. His voice was calm and precise. "Remember everything that I and Mr. Crabbe and Mr. Goyle showed you. An army wins because it is disciplined and deadly. General Potter and the Chaos Legion will not be disciplined. Granger and the Sunshine Regiment will not be deadly. We are disciplined, we are deadly,

we are Dragons. The battle is about to begin, and we are about to win it."

⁂

(Ex tempore speech given by General Potter to the Chaos Legion, immediately before their first battle, on November 3rd, 1991, at 2:56PM:)

My troops, I'm not going to lie to you, our situation today is very grim. Dragon Army has never lost a single battle. And Hermione Granger... has a very good memory. The truth is, most of you are probably going to die. And the survivors will envy the dead. But we have to win this. We have to win this so that someday, our children can enjoy the taste of chocolate again. Everything is at stake here. Literally everything. If we lose, the whole universe just blinks out like a light bulb. And now I realize that most of you don't know what a light bulb is. Well, take it from me, it's bad. But if we have to go down, let's go down fighting, like heroes, so that as the darkness closes in, we can think to ourselves, *at least we had fun.* Are you afraid to die? I know I am. I can feel those cold shivers of fear like someone is pumping ice cream into my shirt. But I know... that history is watching us. It was watching us when we changed into our uniforms. It was probably taking pictures. And history, my troops, is written by the victors. If we win this, we can write our own history. A history in which Hogwarts was founded by four renegade house elves. We can make everyone study that history, even though it isn't true, and if they don't answer the right way on our tests... they'll fail the class. Isn't that worth dying for? No, don't answer that. Some things are better left unknown. None of us know why we're here. None of us know why we're fighting. We just woke up in these uniforms in this mysterious forest, knowing only that there was no way to get our names and memories back except victory. The students in those other armies out there... they're just like us. They don't want to die. They're fighting to protect each other, the only friends they have left. They're fighting because they know they have families who'll miss them, even if they can't remember now. They may even be fighting to save the world. But we have a better reason to fight than they do. We

fight because we like it. We fight to amuse eldritch monstrosities from beyond Space and Time. We fight because we're Chaos. Soon the final battle will begin, so let me say now, because I won't get a chance later, that it was an honor to be your commander, however briefly. Thank you, thank you all. And remember, your goal isn't just to cut down the enemy, it's to make them afraid.

A great booming gong echoed over the forest.

And the Sunshine Regiment began to march.

The tension rose and rose, as Harry and the nineteen other soldiers who remained waited for the aerial warriors to report back. It shouldn't take long, broomsticks were fast and the distances in the forest were not great—

Two broomsticks approached, at speed, from the direction of Draco's camp, and all the soldiers tensed. They weren't executing the maneuvers that were today's code for a *friendly* broomstick.

"*Scatter and fire!*" roared General Potter, and then suited action to words, scurrying off at top speed toward the forest cover; and then as soon as Harry was among the trees, he spun back, raised his wand, tried to seek out the broomstick in the sky—

"Clear!" shouted a voice. "They're heading back!"

Harry gave a mental shrug. There'd been no way to prevent Draco from obtaining that information, and he'd only learn that they'd been standing still.

And the Chaotics slowly emerged from the forest—

"Broomstick approaching from Granger's direction!" yelled another voice. "I think it's Green Leader, he did the dip and roll!"

Moments later Theodore Nott dived out of the sky and pulled up in the midst of the soldiers.

"Granger has divided her forces in two!" yelled Nott as he hovered on his broomstick. There was sweat staining his uniform, and all the reserve was gone from his voice. "She's attacking both armies! Two brooms covering each force, they pursued me halfway here!"

Divided her army, what on Earth—

A large force concentrating fire on a small force could deplete that force rapidly without taking much damage in return. If twenty soldiers faced ten soldiers, twenty sleep spells would be aimed at the ten soldiers with only ten sleep spells going the other way, so unless every one of those first sleep spells hit its target, the smaller force would lose more people than they could manage to take down with them. *Defeated in detail* was the military term for what happened when you divided your forces like that. What could Hermione *possibly* be thinking...

Then Harry realized.

She's being fair.

It was going to be a long year in Defense class.

"All right," Harry said loudly, so the army could hear. "We'll wait until the Red Wing reports in, and then we'll go cloud up some Sunshine."

⁂

Draco listened to the flyers' reports with his face calm, all his shock concealed inside. What could Granger *possibly* be thinking?

Then Draco realized.

It's a feint.

One of Sunshine's two forces would change direction, and both would converge on... who?

⁂

Neville Longbottom marched through the forest toward the approaching Sunny force, occasionally glancing up at the sky for broomsticks. Beside him marched his squad comrades, Melvin Coote and Lavender Brown of Gryffindor, and Allen Flint of Slytherin. Allen Flint was their Squad

Suggester, though Harry had first said to Neville, in private, that the position was his if he wanted it.

Harry had said quite a lot of things to Neville in private, starting with "You know, Neville, if you want to become as awesome as the imaginary Neville who lives in your head but isn't allowed to do anything because you're scared, then you really should sign up for Professor Quirrell's armies."

Neville was now *sure* the Boy-Who-Lived could read minds. There was just no other way Harry Potter could've known. Neville had never talked about that with *anyone*, or given any sign; and *other* people weren't like that, not that Neville had ever noticed.

And Harry's promise had come true, this *did* feel different from sparring in Defense class. Neville had hoped that sparring would fix everything that was wrong with him, and, well, it hadn't. Even if he could fire a few spells at another student in class with Professor Quirrell watching to make sure nothing went wrong, even if he could dodge and fire back when it was *allowed* and everyone else was *expecting* it and they would stare at him funny if he *didn't* do it, none of that was the same as being able to stand up for himself.

But being part of an *army*...

Something strange was stirring inside Neville, as he marched through the forest alongside his comrades, upon their uniforms an insignia of fingers poised to snap.

He was allowed to walk if he wanted to, but he just felt like marching.

Beside him, Melvin and Lavender and Allen all seemed to feel like marching too.

And Neville softly began to sing the Song of Chaos.

The tune was what a Muggle would have identified as John Williams's Imperial March, also known as "Darth Vader's Theme"; and the words Harry had added were easy to remember.

Doom doom doom
Doom doom doom doom doom doom
Doom doom doom

Doom doom doom doom doom doom
Doom doom doom
Doom doom doom-doom-doom doom doom
Doom doom-doom-doom doom doom
Doom doom doom, doom doom doom.

By the second line the others had joined in, and soon you could hear the same soft chant coming from nearby parts of the forest.

And Neville marched alongside his fellow Chaos Legionnaires,
strange feelings stirring in his heart,
imagination becoming reality,
as from his lips poured a fearful song of doom.

Harry stared at the bodies scattered across the forest. Something inside him felt a bit queasy, and he had to remind himself hard that they were only sleeping. There were girls among the fallen, and that made it a lot worse somehow, and he would have to be careful never to mention that in front of Hermione or the Aurors would find his remains stuffed into a *small* teapot.

Half of Sunshine army hadn't put up much of a fight against all of Chaos. The nine ground soldiers had run in screaming inarticulately with Simple Shields raised, circular screens to protect their faces and chests. But you couldn't fire and hold the shield at the same time, and Harry's soldiers had simply aimed for the legs. All but one of the Sunnies had fallen over as soon as the cries of "*Somnium!*" filled the air. That last one had dropped her shield and managed to take out one of Harry's soldiers before being hit by the second wave of sleep spells (the Sleep Hex was safe for multiple hits). The two Sunny broomsticks had been much harder to take down and had accounted for three Chaotics before being auraed by massed ground fire.

Hermione wasn't among the fallen. Draco must have gotten her and that was making Harry feel *angry* on some completely incomprehensible

level, he wasn't sure if he was feeling protective toward Hermione, or cheated that he hadn't been the one to do it, or maybe *both.*

"All right," Harry said, raising his voice. "Let's everyone be clear on one thing, that wasn't a real fight. That was General Granger making a mistake in her first battle. Today's actual fight is with Dragon Army and it's not going to be anything like this. It's going to be a lot more fun. Let's move out."

A broomstick fell out of the sky, approaching terrifyingly fast, and spun on its end and decelerated so hard you could almost hear the air screaming in protest, and came to a halt directly beside Draco.

It wasn't dangerous showing-off. Gregory Goyle simply *was* that good and he didn't waste time.

"Potter's coming," Gregory said with no trace of his usual fake drawl. "They've still got all four of their brooms, you want me to take them out?"

"No," Draco said sharply. "Fighting over their army gives them too much of an advantage, they'll fire on you from the ground and even you might not be able to dodge it all. Wait until the forces engage."

Draco had lost four Dragons in exchange for twelve Sunnies. Apparently General Granger actually *had* been that incredibly stupid, though she hadn't been among the attackers, so Draco hadn't gotten a chance to taunt her or ask her what in Merlin's name she had been thinking.

The true battle, they all knew, would be with Harry Potter.

"Prepare yourselves!" roared Draco at his troops. "Stay together with your mates, act as a unit, fire as soon as the enemy is in range!"

Discipline against Chaos.

It shouldn't be much of a fight.

The adrenaline was pumping and pumping into Neville's blood until he felt like he could hardly breathe.

"We're closing in," said General Potter in a voice barely loud enough to carry to the whole army. "Time to spread out."

Neville's comrades moved away from him. They would still support each other, but if you clustered together, the enemy would have a much easier time hitting you; fire aimed at one of your comrades might miss and get you instead. You would be a lot harder to hit if you spread out and moved as fast as you could.

The first thing General Potter had done, during their training session, was get them to fire on each other when both sides were running fast, or both stood still and took time to aim, or one was moving and one was standing still—the reverse charm to the Sleep Hex was simple, though you weren't allowed to use it during real battles. General Potter had carefully recorded everything that happened, done some figuring and ciphering, and then announced that it made more sense for them to focus, not on slowing down to aim carefully, but on moving fast so they wouldn't get hit.

It still bothered Neville a little not to be marching side-by-side with his comrades, but the scary battlecries they'd learned were already thundering in his head and that made up for a lot.

This time, Neville silently vowed to himself, his voice was absolutely positively not going to squeak.

"Shields up," said General Potter, "power to forward deflectors."

"*Contego,*" murmured the army, and the circular screens sprang into existence before their heads and chests.

A sharp taste filled Neville's mouth. General Potter wouldn't have ordered them to cast shields unless they were almost in range. Neville could see the uniformed shapes of Dragons moving through the dense screens of trees, and the Dragons would be seeing them as well—

"*Attack!*" came a cry from the distance, the voice of Draco Malfoy, and General Potter bellowed, "*Charge*—"

All the adrenaline in Neville's blood was unleashed, and his legs took over, sending him flying faster than he'd ever run before, straight toward the enemy, knowing without needing to look that all his comrades were doing the same.

"*Blood for the blood god!*" screamed Neville. "*Skulls for the skull throne! Ia! Shub-Niggurath! The enemy's gate is sideways!*"

There was a soundless impact as a sleep spell wasted itself against Neville's shield. If there'd been other spells fired, they hadn't hit.

Neville saw the brief look of fear on Wayne Hopkins's face, as he stood besides two Gryffindors Neville didn't recognize, and then—

—Neville dropped the Simple Shield and fired at Wayne—

—missed—

—his racing legs went *straight* past the enemy grouping and toward another three Dragons, their wands coming up on him, their mouths opening—

—not even thinking about it, Neville dived down to the forest floor just as three voices cried "*Somnium!*"

It hurt, hard stones and hard twigs digging into Neville as he rolled, it wasn't as bad as falling off his broomstick but he'd still hit the ground pretty hard, and then Neville, with sudden insight, lay still and closed his eyes.

"Stop that!" screamed a voice. "Don't shoot us, we're Dragons!"

With a flash of glorious satisfaction, Neville realized that he'd managed to get between two groups of Dragons just as one group had fired on him. Harry had talked about this as a tactic for making the enemy afraid to fire, but apparently it worked a bit better than that.

And not only that, the Dragons believed they'd *gotten* him, since they'd seen Neville fall just as they fired.

Neville counted to twenty inside his head, then opened his eyes a crack.

The three Dragons were very near him, heads spinning rapidly as cries of "*Somnium!*" and "*Skulls for the skull throne!*" filled the air around them. All three had Simple Shields up now.

Neville's wand was still in his hand, and it didn't take much effort to point it at one boy's boots and whisper "*Somnium.*"

Neville quickly closed his eyes and relaxed his hand as he heard the boy fall to the ground.

"*Where'd it come from?*" screamed Justin Finch-Fletchley's voice, and Neville heard rustles on the leafy forest floor, as of two Dragons spinning around looking for an enemy.

"*Reform ranks!*" bellowed Malfoy's voice. "*To me, everyone, don't let them scatter you!*"

Neville's ears heard the two Dragons actually jump over his prone body as they ran off.

Neville opened his eyes, pushed himself to his feet a bit painfully, and then pointed his wand and said the new charm that General Potter had taught them all. They couldn't do real illusion spells to confuse the enemy, but even at their age they could—

"*Ventriliquo,*" whispered Neville, pointing the wand to one side of Justin and the other boy, and then yelled, "*For Cthulhu and glory!*"

Justin and the other boy stopped abruptly, turning their shields toward where Neville had moved his battlecry, and that was when multiple cries of "*Somnium!*" filled the air and the other boy dropped before Neville was finished aiming.

"*The last one's mine!*" yelled Neville, and then he started sprinting straight toward Justin, who'd been mean to him until the older Hufflepuffs straightened him out. Neville was surrounded by his comrades and *that* meant—

"*Special attack, Chaotic Leap!*" howled Neville as he ran, and felt his body lighten, then lighten twice again, as his comrades got their wands turned toward him and quietly cast the Hover Charm, and Neville raised his left hand and snapped his fingers and then used his legs to push off the ground as hard as he could and *soared* through the air. Sheer shock painted Justin's face as Neville went *over* the other boy's shield and pointed his wand down at the form passing beneath him and cried "*Somnium!*"

Because he'd felt like it, that was why.

Neville didn't quite get his feet turned around properly and rather plowed into the ground as he landed, but two out of three of the other Chaos Legionnaires had managed to hold their wands on him throughout and he didn't hit very hard.

And Neville got to his feet, panting. He knew he should be moving, people were yelling "Somnium!" all over the place—

"*I am Neville, the last scion of Longbottom!*" screamed Neville to the sky above, holding his wand pointed straight up as though to challenge the blazing blue heaven itself, knowing that nothing after this day would ever be the same again. "*Neville of Chaos! Face me if you da—*"

(When Neville woke up afterward, he was told that Dragon Army had taken this as their cue to counterattack.)

The girl beside Harry slumped to the ground, taking the shot meant for him, and he could hear Mr. Goyle's distant gloating laugh as his broomstick blasted past them, cutting the air so hard it should have shattered in his wake.

"*Luminos!*" cried one of the boys next to Harry, who hadn't been able to rebuild the magical strength fast enough to do it earlier, and Mr. Goyle dodged it without a pause.

Chaos had only six soldiers left, now, and Dragon Army had two, and the only problem was that one of those soldiers was invincible, and the other one was using up three soldiers just to cover him inside his shield.

They'd lost more soldiers to Mr. Goyle than all the other Dragons put together, he was weaving and dodging through the air so fast that no one could hit him, and he could *shoot people while he did that.*

Harry had thought of all sorts of ways to stop Mr. Goyle but none of them were *safe*, even using the Hover Charm to slow him down (it was a continuous beam and much easier to aim) wouldn't be safe because he might fall off the broomstick, throwing things in his way wouldn't be safe, and that was getting harder and harder to remember as Harry's blood froze over.

It's a game. You're not trying to kill *him. Don't throw away all your future plans for a game...*

Harry could *see* the pattern, he could *see* how Mr. Goyle was weaving, he could *see* how and when they all needed to fire in order to create a web of shots that Mr. Goyle wouldn't be able to dodge, but he just hadn't been able to *explain* it fast enough to his soldiers, they couldn't coordinate their shots well enough, and now they didn't have enough people left to do it—

I refuse to lose, not like this, not my whole army to one soldier!

Mr. Goyle's broomstick turned faster than anything should have been able to turn and started to angle in toward Harry and his surviving troops, he could sense the boy beside him tensing, getting ready to throw himself in front of his general.

Screw this.

Harry's wand came up, focusing on Mr. Goyle, Harry's mind visualized the pattern, and Harry's lips opened and his voice screamed—

"*Luminosluminosluminosluminosluminosluminosluminosluminosluminosluminosluminosluminosluminos*—"

When Harry's eyes opened again, he found himself resting in a comfortable position with his hands folded over his chest, holding his wand like a fallen hero.

Slowly, Harry sat up. His *magic* was aching, a strange sensation but not an entirely unpleasant one, much like the burn and lethargy that followed hard physical exercise.

"The general's awake!" cried a voice, and Harry blinked and focused in that direction.

Four of his soldiers held their wands on a shimmering prismatic hemisphere, and Harry realized that the battle wasn't over. Right... he hadn't been hit by a Sleep Hex, just exhausted himself, so when he woke up, he was still in the game.

Harry suspected he was going to get a lecture from someone-or-other about not exhausting his magic to the point of unconsciousness over a

children's game. But he hadn't hurt Mr. Goyle when he'd lost his temper, and that was the important thing.

Then Harry's mind clicked on another implication, and he looked down at the steel ring on his left hand's pinky finger, and almost swore out loud when he saw that the tiny diamond was missing and there was a marshmallow lying on the ground near where he'd fallen.

He'd sustained that Transfiguration for seventeen days, and would now need to start over.

Could've been worse. He could've done this fourteen days later, *after* Professor McGonagall had approved him to Transfigure his father's rock. That was one very good lesson to learn the easy way.

Note to self: Always remove ring from finger before completely exhausting magic.

Harry pushed himself up, making rather hard going of it. Using up your magic didn't exhaust your muscles, but dodging around trees certainly did.

He staggered over to the iridescent hemisphere that contained Draco Malfoy, who was holding his wand aloft to sustain the shield, and smiling coldly at Harry.

"Where's the fifth soldier?" said Harry.

"Um..." said a boy whose name Harry couldn't remember at the moment. "I fired a Sleep Hex at the shield and it bounced off and hit Lavender, I mean the angle shouldn't have been right but it did..."

Draco was smirking inside the shield.

"So let me guess," Harry said, looking Draco directly in the eyes, "those neat little trios are the formation used by professional magical militaries? Made up of trained soldiers who can easily hit moving targets if their own hands are steady, and who can combine their defensive powers so long as they stay together? Unlike *your* soldiers?"

The smirk had vanished from Draco's face, which was now hard and grim.

"You know," Harry said lightly, knowing that none of the others would understand the real message passing between them, "it just goes to show that you should always question everything you see your role models doing, and ask why it's being done, and whether it makes sense

in context for you to do it too. Don't forget to apply that advice to real life, by the way. And thanks for the slow-moving clustered targets."

Because Draco had already gotten that lecture, and, Harry suspected, discounted it out of suspicion that Harry was trying to shift his loyalties further away from pureblood tradition. Which of course Harry *was.* But this example would make an excellent excuse, next Saturday, to claim that questioning authority was a merely practical technique for real life. And Harry would also mention the experiments he'd run, first with individuals and then with groups, to check that his ideas about the importance of speed had actually been *correct,* by way of hammering home the point of Draco needing to keep an eye out at all times for chances to apply the methods in everyday practice.

"You haven't won *yet,* General Potter!" snarled Draco. "Maybe we'll run out of time, and Professor Quirrell will call it a draw."

A fair and worrisome point. The war only ended when Professor Quirrell, in his personal judgment, decided one army had won by practical real-world standards. There was no *formal* victory condition, Professor Quirrell had explained, because then Harry would figure out how to game the rules. Harry had to admit this was a fair cop.

And Harry couldn't blame Professor Quirrell for not calling an end, because it was plausible that the last soldier of Dragon Army could take out all five survivors of the Chaos Legion.

"All right," Harry said. "Does anyone know anything about General Malfoy's shield spell?"

It developed that Draco's shield was a version of the standard *Protego* which had several disadvantages, the most important of which was that the shield couldn't move with the caster.

The upside—or from Harry's perspective, downside—was that it was easier to learn, easier to cast, and much easier to sustain for long times.

They would need to hammer the shield with attack spells in order to bring it down.

And Draco could apparently exert some control over the angle of reflection at which the spells would bounce off.

The thought occurred to Harry that they could use Wingardium Leviosa to pile up heavy rocks on the shield until Draco couldn't sus-

tain it against the pressure... but then the rocks might fall in afterward and hit Draco, and injuring the enemy general for real was not among today's goals.

"So," said Harry. "Are there such things as specialized shield-piercing spells?"

There were.

Harry asked if any of his soldiers knew them.

No one did.

Draco was smirking again, inside his shield.

Harry asked if there was any sort of attack spell that *wouldn't* bounce.

Lightning bolts, it seemed, were usually absorbed by shields instead of bouncing off them.

...No one knew how to cast any sort of lightning-related spell.

Draco sniggered.

Harry sighed.

He quite deliberately laid his wand on the ground.

And Harry announced, with some weariness in his voice, that he would just go ahead and take down the shield himself, using some method that would remain mysterious; and everyone else was to fire on Draco as soon as his shield went down.

The Chaos Legionnaires looked nervous.

Draco looked calm, which was to say, controlled.

A thin, folded blanket came out of Harry's pouch.

Harry sat down next to the shimmering shield, and pulled the blanket over his head so no one could see what he did—except Draco, of course.

From Harry's pouch came a car battery and a set of jumper cables.

...it wasn't like he'd been about to leave the Muggle world to start a new era of magical research, and not take along any way of generating electricity.

Shortly after, the Chaos Legionnaires heard the sound of fingers snapping, followed by a crackling noise from beneath the blanket. The shield started glowing more brightly, and Harry's voice said, "Don't be distracted please, eyes on General Malfoy."

The strain was showing on Draco's face, along with the fury and annoyance and frustration.

Harry smiled up at him, and mouthed, *Tell you later.*

And that was when a spiral of green energy shot out of the forest and smashed into Draco's shield, which shrieked like pieces of sharp glass being rubbed together, and Draco staggered.

In sudden, frantic panic, Harry took the jumper cables off the battery and fed them into the pouch, then he fed the battery itself into the pouch, and then he tore off the blanket and grabbed his wand and stood up.

All of his soldiers were still there and glancing around frantically.

"*Contego,*" Harry said, and his soldiers followed suit, but Harry didn't even know which direction the shield ought to be pointing in. "Did anyone see where that came from?" Shaken heads. "And General Malfoy, would you mind telling me if *you* got General Granger?"

"Why yes," Draco said acidly, "I mind."

Oh, hell.

Harry's mind began calculating, Draco inside the shield, Draco worn out now to some degree, Harry worn out too, Hermione in the woods who-knew-where, Harry and four other Chaotics left...

"You know, General Granger," Harry said out loud, "you really should've waited to attack until after I'd fought General Malfoy. You might've been able to get *all* the survivors."

From somewhere came a girl's high-pitched laughter.

Harry froze.

That wasn't Hermione.

And that was when the dreadful, eerie, cheerful chant began to rise, coming from all around them.

"Don't be frightened, don't be sad,
We'll only hurt you if you're bad..."

"*Granger cheated!*" burst out Draco inside the shield. "She woke up her soldiers! Why doesn't Professor Quirrell—"

"Let me guess," Harry said, the sickness already churning in his stomach. He really hated losing. "It was a very easy battle, right? They dropped like flies?"

"Yes," Draco said. "We got them all on the first shot—"

The look of horrified realization spread from Draco to the Chaos Legionnaires.

"No," Harry said, "we didn't."

Camouflaged forms were appearing from among the trees.

"Allies?" Harry said.

"Allies," Draco said.

"Good," said General Granger's voice, and a spiral of green energy blazed out of the woods and shattered Draco's shield to splinters.

⁂

General Granger surveyed the battlefield with a definite feeling of satisfaction. She was down to nine Sunshine Soldiers, but that was probably enough to handle the last survivor of the enemy forces, especially when Parvati and Anthony and Ernie were already holding their wands on General Potter, whom she'd ordered taken alive (well, conscious).

It was Bad, she knew, but she'd really really *really* wanted to gloat.

"There's a trick, isn't there?" said Harry, the strain showing in his voice. "There *has* to be some trick. You can't just turn into a perfect general. Not on top of everything else. You're not that Slytherin! You don't write creepy poetry! *No one's that good at everything!*"

General Granger glanced around at her Sunshine Soldiers, and then looked back at Harry. Everyone was probably watching this on the screens outside.

And General Granger said, "I can do anything if I study hard enough."

"Oh now that's just bu—"

"*Somnium.*"

Harry slumped to the ground in mid-sentence.

"SUNSHINE WINS," intoned the huge voice of Professor Quirrell, seeming to come from everywhere and nowhere.

"Niceness has triumphed!" cried General Granger.

"*Hooray!*" shouted the Sunshine Soldiers. Even the Gryffindor boys said it, and they said it with pride.

"And what's the moral of today's battle?" said General Granger.

"*We can do anything if we study hard enough!*"

And the survivors of the Sunshine Regiment marched off toward the victory field, singing their marching song as they went:

Don't be frightened, don't be sad,
We'll only hurt you if you're bad,
And send you to a home that's true,
With new friends to watch over you,
Be sure to tell them you were sent
By Granger's Sunshine Regiment!

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

WORKING IN GROUPS, PART II

AFTERMATHS:

Harry paced backward and forward in his general's office, which made a wonderful room for pacing, it didn't have any other uses as far as he could tell.

How?

How?

Hermione shouldn't have won that battle! Not on her first try, not when she wasn't at all violent by her nature, automatically being a great military commander on top of everything else was too much even for *her*.

Had she read about the tactic in a military history book? But it hadn't been just that one tactic, she'd had her forces perfectly positioned to block any retreat, her troops had been better coordinated than his *or* Draco's...

Had Professor Quirrell broken his promise not to help her? Had he given her the diary of General Tacticus or something?

Harry was missing something here, something really important, and his mind went around and around in circles, and he still couldn't figure it out.

Finally Harry sighed. He wasn't getting anywhere on this, and he had to go learn the Breaking Drill Hex from Hermione or someone before the next battle—Professor Quirrell had explained to Harry, his voice amused but with a sharp undertone of warning, that "no magical

items except the ones I give you" included Muggle technology no matter how much that *wasn't magic.* Plus Harry also needed to figure out how to bring down Mr. Goyle next time...

Battles counted for a lot of Quirrell points if you were a general, and Harry needed to get cracking if he wanted to win Professor Quirrell's Christmas wish.

In his private room at Slytherin, Draco Malfoy stared off into space, as though the wall in front of his desk was the most fascinating surface in the world.

How?

How?

In retrospect it had been an obvious sort of idea as cunning plots went, but Granger wasn't *supposed* to be cunning! She'd been too much of a Hufflepuff to use a Simple Strike Hex! Had Professor Quirrell been advising her despite his promise, or...

And then Draco finally did what he should have done much earlier.

What he should have done after the first time he met with Granger.

What Harry Potter had *told* him to do, *trained* him to do, and yet Harry had also warned Draco that it would take time to make his brain realize that the methods applied to real life, and Draco hadn't *understood* that until today. He could have avoided every single one of his mistakes if he'd just *applied* the things Harry had already *told* him—

Draco said out loud, "I notice that I am confused."

Your strength as a rationalist is your ability to be more confused by fiction than by reality...

Draco was confused.

Therefore, something he believed was fiction.

Granger should not have been able to do all that.

Therefore, she probably hadn't.

I promise not to help General Granger in any way that the two of you don't know about.

With sudden horrified realization, Draco swept papers out of the way, hunting through the mess on his desk, until he found it.

And there it was.

Right in the list of people and equipment assigned to each of the three armies.

Curse Professor Quirrell!

Draco had *read* it and he still hadn't *seen* it—

The afternoon sunlight poured down into the office of the Sunshine Regiment, illuminating General Granger in her chair as though she glowed with a golden aura.

"How long do you think it will take Malfoy to figure it out?" said General Granger.

"Not long," said Colonel Blaise Zabini. "He may have already. How long will it take Potter to figure it out?"

"Forever," said General Granger, "unless Malfoy tells him, or one of his own soldiers realizes. Harry Potter just doesn't think like that."

"Really?" said Captain Ernie Macmillan, looking up from one of the corner tables where he was being crushed at chess by Captain Ron Weasley. (They'd brought back all the other chairs after Malfoy had left, of course.) "I mean it seems kind of obvious to me. Who would try to come up with all the ideas just by themselves?"

"Harry," said Hermione, at exactly the same time Zabini said, "Malfoy."

"Malfoy thinks he's way better than everyone else," said Zabini.

"And Harry... doesn't really *see* most other people like that," said Hermione.

It was kind of sad, actually. Harry had grown up very, very alone. It wasn't that he went around thinking in words that only geniuses had a right to exist. It just wouldn't *occur* to him that anyone in Hermione's army besides Hermione could have any good ideas.

"Anyhow," Hermione said. "Captains Goldstein and Weasley, you're on duty for thinking up strategic ideas for our next battle. Captains Macmillan and Susan—sorry, I mean Macmillan and Bones—try to come up with some tactics we can use, also any training you think we should try. Oh, and congratulations on your marching song, Captain Goldstein, I think it was a big plus for *esprit de corps*."

"What're you doing?" said Susan. "And Colonel Zabini?"

Hermione stood up out of her chair, stretching. "I'll try to figure out what Harry Potter is thinking and Colonel Zabini will try to figure out what Draco Malfoy might do, and both of us will join you again after we come up with something. I'm going to walk while I think. Zabini, you want to come along?"

"Yes, General," said Zabini stiffly.

It hadn't been meant as an order. Hermione sighed to herself a little. This was going to take some getting used to, and although Zabini's first idea had certainly worked, she wasn't *quite* sure that Professor Quirrell's quote mixture of positive and negative incentives unquote would be enough to keep the Slytherin fully on her side until December when traitors would be allowed for the first time...

She still had no idea what she was going to do with Professor Quirrell's Christmas wish, either. Maybe she'd just ask Mandy if she wanted anything, when the time came around.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

INTERLUDE: PERSONAL FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT

"But Headmaster," Harry argued, some of his desperation leaking into his voice, "leaving all of my assets in one undiversified vault full of gold coins—it's crazy, Headmaster! It's like, I don't know, doing Transfiguration experiments without consulting a recognized authority! You just don't do that with money!"

From the lined face of the old wizard—underneath a festive holiday hat like a catastrophic automobile collision between cars of green and red cloth—a grave, sad look peered out at Harry.

"I'm sorry, Harry," said Dumbledore, "and I do apologize, but allowing you control over your own finances would give you far too much independence of action."

Harry's mouth opened and no sound came out. He was, literally, speechless.

"I will permit you to withdraw five Galleons for Christmas presents," said Dumbledore, "which is more than any boy your age should spend, but poses no threat, I think—"

"*I can't believe you just said that!*" the words burst out of Harry's mouth. "You *admit* to being that manipulative?"

"Manipulative?" said the old wizard, smiling slightly. "No, manipulative would be if I did *not* admit it, or if I had some deeper motive behind the obvious. This is quite straightforward, Harry. You are not

yet ready to play the game, and it would be foolish to allow you thousands of Galleons with which to upset the gameboard."

The bright hustle and bustle of Diagon Alley had increased by a hundredfold and redoubled as Christmas approached, with all the shops enshrouded in brilliant sorceries that flashed and sparkled as though the season's spirit was about to blaze out of control and turn the whole area into a cheerful holiday crater. The streets were so crowded with witches and wizards in festive and *loud* clothing that your eyes were assaulted almost as severely as your ears; and it was clear, from the bewildering variety of the shoppers, that Diagon Alley was considered an international attraction. There were witches wrapped in giant swathes of cloth like toweled mummies, and wizards in formal top hats and bath-robes, and young children barely past toddling age who were decorated with lights that blazed almost as bright as the shops themselves, as their parents took them hand in hand through that magic wonderland and let them shriek to their heart's content. It was the season to be merry.

And in the midst of all that light and cheer, a note of blackest night; a cold, dark atmosphere that cleared a few precious paces of distance even in the midst of all that crush.

"No," said Professor Quirrell, with a look of grim revulsion, like he'd just bitten into food that not only tasted horrible but was morally repugnant to boot. It was the sort of grim face an ordinary person might make after biting into a meat pie, and discovering that it was rotten and had been made from kittens.

"Oh, come *on*," Harry said. "You must have *some* ideas."

"Mr. Potter," Professor Quirrell said, his lips set in a thin line, "I agreed to act as your adult guardian on this expedition. I did not agree to advise you on your choice of presents. I don't do Christmas, Mr. Potter."

"How about Newtonmas?" Harry said brightly. "Isaac Newton actually *was* born on December 25th, unlike some other historical figures I could name."

This failed to impress Professor Quirrell.

"Look," said Harry, "I'm sorry, but I've got to do *something* special for Fred and George and I've got no idea of my options."

Professor Quirrell made a thoughtful humming sound. "You could ask which family members they most dislike, and then hire an assassin. I know someone from a certain government-in-exile who is quite competent, and he would give you a discount on multiple Weasleys."

"*This* Christmas," Harry said, dropping his voice into a lower register, "give your friends the gift... of *death*."

That made Professor Quirrell smile. It went all the way to his eyes.

"Well," said Harry, "at least you didn't suggest getting them a pet rat—" Harry's mouth snapped shut, and he was regretting the words almost as soon as they were out of his mouth.

"Pardon me?" said Professor Quirrell.

"Nothing," Harry said at once, "long dumb story." And telling it seemed wrong somehow, maybe because Harry was afraid Professor Quirrell would have laughed even if Bill Weasley *hadn't* been cured and everything put back to right...

And where had Professor Quirrell *been* that he'd never heard the story? Harry had gotten the impression that everyone in magical Britain knew.

"Look," said Harry, "I'm trying to *solidify their loyalty to me,* you know? Make the Weasley twins my minions? Like the old saying goes: A friend isn't someone you use once and then throw away, a friend is someone you use over and over again. Fred and George are two of the most useful friends I have in Hogwarts, Professor Quirrell, and I plan to use them over and over again. So if you'd help me be Slytherin here, and suggest something they might be *very* grateful for..." Harry's voice trailed off invitingly.

You just had to pitch these things the right way.

They walked on for a good way before Professor Quirrell spoke again, his voice practically dripping with distaste. "The Weasley twins are using secondhand wands, Mr. Potter. They would be reminded of your generosity with every Charm they cast."

Harry clapped his hands together in involuntary excitement. Just put the money on account at Ollivander's, and tell Mr. Ollivander to never refund it—no, better yet, to send it to Lucius Malfoy if the Weasley twins didn't show up before the start of their next school year. "That's *brilliant*, Professor!"

Professor Quirrell did not look like he appreciated the compliment. "I suppose I can tolerate Christmas in *that* spirit, Mr. Potter, though only barely." Then he smiled slightly. "Of course that will cost you fourteen Galleons, and you only have five."

"*Five* Galleons," Harry said, with a sniff of outrage. "Just who does the Headmaster think he's dealing with, anyway?"

"I think," said Professor Quirrell, "that it simply did not occur to him to fear the consequences if you turned your ingenuity to the task of obtaining funds. Though you were wise to lose, rather than making it an explicit threat. Out of curiosity, Mr. Potter, what *would* you have done if I hadn't turned away in boredom while you, in a fit of childish pique, counted out five Galleons worth of Knuts?"

"Well, the easiest way would've been to borrow money from Draco Malfoy," said Harry.

Professor Quirrell chuckled briefly. "Seriously, Mr. Potter."

Duly noted. "Probably I'd have done a few celebrity appearances. I wouldn't resort to anything economically disruptive just for spending money." Harry had checked, and he *would* be allowed to keep the Time-Turner while he went home for the holidays, so that his sleep cycle didn't start to rotate. But then it was *also* possible that someone kept an eye out for magical day traders. The gold and silver trick would've taken work on the Muggle end, and seed funding, and the goblins might've gotten suspicious after the first cycle. And starting a real bank would be a *lot* of work... Harry hadn't *quite* worked out any money-making methods that were fast *and* certain *and* safe, so he'd been very glad when Professor Quirrell had turned out to be so easily fooled.

"I do hope those five Galleons will be enough to last, since you counted them so carefully," said Professor Quirrell. "I doubt the Headmaster shall be so eager to entrust me with your vault key a second time, once he discovers I've been tricked."

"I'm sure you did your best," Harry said with deep gratitude.

"Do you need any assistance finding a safe place to store all those Knuts, Mr. Potter?"

"Well, sort of," said Harry. "Do you know of any good investment opportunities, Professor Quirrell?"

And the two of them walked on, in their tiny sphere of silence and isolation, through the brilliant and bustling crowds; and if you looked carefully, you would see that where they went, leafy boughs faded, and flowers withered, and children's toys that played cheerful bells changed to lower and more ominous notes.

Harry *did* notice, but he didn't say anything, just smiled a little to himself.

Everyone had their own way of celebrating the holidays, and the Grinch was as much a part of Christmas as Santa.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

COORDINATION PROBLEMS, PART I

The terrifying part was how fast the whole thing had spiraled out of control.

"Albus," Minerva said, not even trying to keep the worry out of her voice as the two of them entered the Great Hall, "something has to be done."

The atmosphere at Hogwarts before Yuletide was usually bright and cheerful. The Great Hall had already been decorated in green and red, after a Slytherin and a Gryffindor whose Yule wedding had become a symbol of friendship transcending Houses and allegiances, a tradition almost as ancient as Hogwarts itself and which had even spread to Muggle countries.

Now the students eating dinner were glancing nervously over their shoulders, or sending vicious glares at other tables, or at some tables arguing heatedly. You could have described the atmosphere as *tense,* perhaps, but the phrase coming to Minerva's mind was *fifth degree of caution.*

Take a school, into four Houses divided...

Now into each year, add three armies at war.

And the partisanship of Dragon and Sunshine and Chaos had spread beyond the first-years; they had become the armies for those who had no armies. Students were wearing armbands with insignia of fire or smile or upraised hand, and hexing each other in the corridors. All three first-year generals had told them to stop—even Draco Malfoy had heard her out and then nodded grimly—but their supposed followers hadn't listened.

Dumbledore gazed out at the tables with a distant look. "*In every city,*" the old wizard quoted softly, "*the population has been divided for a long time past into the Blue and the Green factions... And they fight against their opponents knowing not for what end they imperil themselves... So there grows up in them against their fellow men a hostility which has no cause, and at no time does it cease or disappear, for it gives place neither to the ties of marriage nor of relationship nor of friendship, and the case is the same even though those who differ with respect to these colours be brothers or any other kin. I, for my part, am unable to call this anything except a disease of the soul...*"

"I'm sorry," said Minerva, "I don't—"

"Procopius," said Dumbledore. "They took their chariot-racing very seriously, in the Roman Empire. Yes, Minerva, I agree that something must be done."

"Soon," Minerva said, her voice lowering even further. "Albus, I think it must be done before Saturday."

On Sunday, most students would leave Hogwarts to stay the holiday with their families; Saturday, then, was the final battle of the three first-year armies that would determine the awarding of Professor Quirrell's thrice-cursed Christmas wish.

Dumbledore glanced over at her, studying her gravely. "You fear that the explosion will come then, and someone will be hurt."

Minerva nodded.

"And that Professor Quirrell will be blamed."

Minerva nodded again, her face tight. She had long since become wise in the ways that Defense Professors were fired. "Albus," Minerva said, "we cannot lose Professor Quirrell now, we *cannot!* If he but stays through January our fifth-years will pass their OWLS, if he stays through March our seventh-years will pass their NEWTS, he is remedying years of neglect in months, a whole generation will grow up able to defend themselves in spite of the Dark Lord's curse—you must stop the battle, Albus! Ban the armies now!"

"I am not sure the Defense Professor would take that kindly," said Dumbledore, glancing over toward the Head Table where Quirrell was drooling into his soup. "He did seem most attached to his armies, though

when I agreed I thought there would be four in each year." The old wizard sighed. "A clever man, probably with the best of intentions; but perhaps not clever enough, I fear. And to ban the armies might also trigger the explosion."

"But then Albus, what will you *do?*"

The old wizard favored her with a benign smile. "Why, I shall plot, of course. It's the new fashion in Hogwarts."

And they had come too close to the Head Table for Minerva to say anything more.

The terrifying part was how fast the whole thing had spiraled out of control.

The first battle in December had been... messy, or so Draco had heard.

The second battle had been *deranged*.

And the next one would be *worse*, unless the three of them together succeeded in their last desperate attempt to stop it.

"Professor Quirrell, this is insanity," Draco said flatly. "This isn't Slytherin any more, it's just..." Draco was at a loss for words. He waved his hands helplessly. "You can't possibly do any real plots with all this stuff going on. Last battle, one of my soldiers faked his own suicide. We have *Hufflepuffs* trying to plot, and they think they can, but they *can't.* Things just happen at random now, it doesn't have anything to do with who's cleverest, or which army fights best, it's..." He couldn't even describe it.

"I agree with Mr. Malfoy," said Granger in the tones of someone who hadn't ever expected to hear herself saying those words. "Allowing traitors isn't working, Professor Quirrell."

Draco had tried forbidding anyone in his army to plot except him, and that had just driven the plots underground, no one wanted to be left out when the soldiers in *other* armies got to plot. After miserably losing their last battle, he'd finally given in and revoked his decree; but

by then his soldiers had already started setting their own personal plans in motion, without any sort of central coordination.

After being told all the plans, or what his soldiers claimed were their plans, Draco had tried to sketch a plot to win the final battle. It had required considerably more than three different things to go right, and Draco had used *Incendio* on the paper and *Everto* to vanish the ashes, because if Father had seen it he would have been disowned.

Professor Quirrell's eyelids were half-closed, his chin resting on his hands as he leaned forward onto his desk. "And you, Mr. Potter?" said the Defense Professor. "Are you likewise in agreement?"

"All we'd need to do is shoot Franz Ferdinand and we could start World War One," said Harry. "It's gone to complete chaos. I'm all for it."

"*Harry!*" said Draco in utter shock.

He didn't even realize until a second later that he'd said it at exactly the same time, and in exactly the same tone of indignation, as Granger.

Granger shot him a startled glance, and Draco carefully kept his face neutral. Oops.

"That's right!" said Harry. "I'm betraying you! Both of you! Again! Ha ha!"

Professor Quirrell was smiling thinly, though his eyes were still half-closed. "And why is that, Mr. Potter?"

"Because I think I can cope with the chaos better than Miss Granger or Mr. Malfoy," said the traitor. "Our war is a zero-sum game, and it doesn't matter whether it's easy or hard in an absolute sense, only who does better or worse."

Harry Potter was learning far too fast.

Professor Quirrell's eyes moved beneath their lids to regard Draco, and then Granger. "In truth, Mr. Malfoy, Miss Granger, I simply could not live with myself if I shut down the grand debacle before its climax. One of your soldiers has even become a quadruple agent."

"*Quadruple?*" said Granger. "But there's only three sides in the war!"

"Yes," said Professor Quirrell, "you'd think that, wouldn't you. I am not sure that there has ever in history been a quadruple agent, or any

army with such a high fraction of real and pretended traitors. We are exploring new realms, Miss Granger, and we cannot turn back now."

Draco left the Defense Professor's office with his teeth gritting hard against each other, and Granger looking even more annoyed beside him.

"I can't believe you did that, Harry!" said Granger.

"Sorry," Harry said, not sounding sorry at all, his lips curved up in a merry smile of evil. "Remember, Hermione, it *is* just a game, and why should generals like us be the only ones who get to plot? And besides, what are the two of you going to do about it? Team up against me?"

Draco traded glances with Granger, knowing that his own face was as tight as hers. Harry had been relying, more and more openly and gloatingly, on Draco's refusal to make common cause with a mudblood girl; and Draco was beginning to get *sick* of having that used against him. If this kept up much longer he *was* going to ally with Granger just to crush Harry Potter, and see how much the son of a mudblood liked *that.*

The terrifying part was how fast the whole thing had spiraled out of control.

Hermione stared at the parchment Zabini had given her, feeling utterly and completely helpless.

There were names, and lines connecting the names to other names, and some of the lines were in different colors and...

"Tell me," said General Granger, "is there anyone in my army who *isn't* a spy?"

The two of them weren't in the office but in another, deserted classroom, and they were alone; because, Colonel Zabini had said, it was now nearly certain that at least one of the captains was a traitor. Probably Captain Goldstein, but Zabini didn't know for sure.

Her question had put an ironic smile on the young Slytherin's face. Blaise Zabini always seemed a little disdainful of her, but he didn't seem

to actively dislike her; nothing like the derision he held for Draco Malfoy, or the resentment he had developed for Harry Potter. She had worried at first about Zabini betraying her, but the boy seemed desperate to show that the other two generals were no better than him; and Hermione thought that while Zabini would probably be happy to sell her out to anyone *else*, he'd never let Malfoy or Harry win.

"Most of your soldiers *are* still loyal to you, I'm pretty sure," said Zabini. "It's just that no one wants to be left out of the fun." The scornful look on the Slytherin's face made it clear what he thought of people who didn't take plotting seriously. "So they think they can be double agents and secretly work for our side while pretending to betray us."

"And that would also go for anyone in the *other* armies who says they want to be *our* spy," Hermione said carefully.

The young Slytherin shrugged. "I think I did a good job of telling which ones really want to sell out Malfoy, I'm not sure *anyone* really wants to sell out Potter to you. But Nott is a sure bet for betraying Potter to Malfoy and since I had Entwhistle approach him supposedly on behalf of Malfoy and Entwhistle really reports to us, that's almost as good—"

Hermione closed her eyes for a moment. "We're going to lose, aren't we?"

"Look," Zabini said patiently, "You're in the lead right now on Quirrell points. We just have to not lose this last battle *completely* and you'll have enough Quirrell points to win the Christmas wish."

Professor Quirrell had announced that the final battle would operate on a formal scoring system, which he'd been asked to do to avoid recriminations afterward. Each time you shot someone, the general of your army got two Quirrell points. A gong would ring through the battle area (they didn't know yet where they would be fighting, though Hermione was hoping for the forest again, where Sunshine did well) and its pitch would tell which army had won the points. And if anyone was faking being hit, the gong would ring out anyway, and then a double gong would ring later, after no fixed time, to hail the retraction. And if you called the name of an army, cried "For Sunshine!" or "For Chaos!" or "For Dragon!", it switched your allegiance to that army...

Even Hermione had been able to see the flaw in *that* set of rules. But Professor Quirrell had gone on to announce that if you'd been originally assigned to Sunshine, nobody could shoot you in the name of Sunshine—or rather, they could, but then Sunshine lost a single Quirrell point, symbolized by a triple gong. That prevented you from shooting your own soldiers for points, and discouraged suiciding before the enemy got you, but you could still shoot spies if you had to.

Right now, Hermione had two hundred and forty-four Quirrell points, and Malfoy had two hundred and nineteen, and Harry had two hundred and twenty-one; and there were twenty-four soldiers in each army.

"So we fight carefully," Hermione said, "and just try not to lose too badly."

"No," said Zabini. The young Slytherin's face was now serious. "The problem is, Malfoy and Potter both know that their only way to win is to combine and crush us, then fight it out on their own. So here's what I think we should do—"

Hermione left the classroom in something of a daze. Zabini's plan hadn't been the obvious one, it had been strange and complicated and layered and the sort of thing she would've expected Harry to come up with, not Zabini. It felt wrong just for her to be able to *understand* a plan like that. Young girls shouldn't be able to understand plans like that. The Hat would've Sorted her into Slytherin, if it'd seen that she could understand plans like that...

The awesome thing was how fast he'd been able to escalate the chaos once he started doing it deliberately.

Harry sat in his office; he'd been given the authority to order furniture from the house elves, so he'd ordered a throne, and curtains in a black and crimson pattern. Scarlet light like blood, mixed with shadow, poured over the floor.

Something in Harry felt like he'd finally come home.

Before him stood the four Lieutenants of Chaos, his most trusted minions, one of whom was a traitor.

This. This was what life should be like.

"We are gathered," said Harry.

"Let Chaos reign," chorused his four Lieutenants.

"My hovercraft is full of eels," said Harry.

"I will not buy this record, it is scratched," chorused his four Lieutenants.

"All mimsy were the borogroves."

"And the mome raths outgrabe!"

That concluded the formalities.

"How goes the confusion?" Harry said in a dry whisper like Emperor Palpatine.

"It goes well, General Chaos," said Neville in the tone he always used for military matters, a tone so deep that the boy often had to stop and cough. The Chaotic Lieutenant was neatly dressed in his black school robes, trimmed in the yellow of Hufflepuff House, and his hair was parted and combed in the usual look for an earnest young boy. Harry had liked the incongruity better than any of the cloaks they'd tried. "Our Legionnaires have begun five new plots since yesterday evening."

Harry smiled evilly. "Do any of them have a chance of working?"

"I don't think so," said Neville of Chaos. "Here's the report."

"Excellent," said Harry, and laughed chillingly as he took the parchment from Neville's hand, trying his best to make it sound like he was choking on dust. That brought the total to sixty.

Let Draco *try* to handle that. Let him *try*.

And as for Blaise Zabini...

Harry laughed again, and this time it didn't even take an effort to sound evil. He really needed to borrow someone's pet Kneazle for his staff meetings, so he'd have a cat to stroke while he did this.

"Can the Legion stop making plots now?" said Finnigan of Chaos. "I mean, don't we have enough already—"

"No," Harry said flatly. "We can *never* have enough plots."

Professor Quirrell had put it perfectly. They were pushing the boundaries further, perhaps, then they had ever been pushed; and Harry wouldn't have been able to live with himself if he'd turned back now.

There came a knock at the door.

"That will be the Dragon General," Harry said, smiling with evil prescience. "He arrives precisely as I expected. Do show him in, and yourselves out."

And the four Lieutenants of Chaos shuffled out, casting dark looks at Draco as the enemy general entered into Harry's secret lair.

If he wasn't allowed to do this when he was older, Harry was just going to stay eleven forever.

⁂

The sun was dripping through the red curtains, sending rays of blood dancing across the floor from behind Harry Potter's grownup-sized cushioned chair, which he had covered in gold and silver glitter and insisted on referring to as his throne.

(Draco was beginning to feel a lot more confident that he'd done the right thing in deciding to overthrow Harry Potter before he could take over the world. Draco couldn't even *imagine* what it would be like to live under his rule.)

"Good evening, Dragon General," said Harry Potter in a chill whisper. "You have arrived just as I expected."

This was not surprising, considering that Draco and Harry had agreed on the meeting time in advance.

And it also wasn't evening, but by now Draco knew better than to say anything.

"General Potter," Draco said with as much dignity as he could manage, "you know that our two armies have to work together for *either* of us to win Professor Quirrell's wish, right?"

"Yesss," hissed Harry, like the boy thought he was a Parselmouth. "We must cooperate to destroy Sunshine, and only then fight it out between us. But if one of us betrays the other earlier on, that one could gain an advantage in the later fight. And the Sunshine General, who

knows all this, will try to trick each of us into thinking the other has betrayed them. And you and I, who know that, will be tempted to betray the other and pretend that it is Granger's trickery. And Granger knows *that*, as well."

Draco nodded. That much was obvious. "And... both of us *only* want to win, and there's no one else who'll punish either of us if we defect..."

"Precisely," said Harry Potter, his face now turning serious. "We are faced with a *true* Prisoner's Dilemma."

The Prisoner's Dilemma, according to Harry's teachings, ran thus: Two prisoners had been locked in separate cells. There was evidence against each prisoner, but only minor evidence, enough for a prison sentence of two years piece. Each prisoner could opt to *defect,* betray the other, testify against them in court; and this would take one year off their own prison sentence, but add two years to the other's. Or a prisoner could *cooperate,* staying silent. So if both prisoners defected, each testifying against the other, they would serve three years apiece; if both cooperated, or stayed silent, they would serve two years each; but if one defected and the other cooperated, the defector would serve a single year, and the cooperator would serve four.

And both prisoners had to make their decision without knowing the other one's choice, and neither would be given a chance to change their decision afterward.

Draco had observed that if the two prisoners had been Death Eaters during the Wizarding War, the Dark Lord would have killed any traitors.

Harry had nodded and said that was *one* way to resolve the Prisoner's Dilemma—and in fact both Death Eaters would *want* there to be a Dark Lord for exactly that reason.

(Draco had asked Harry to stop and let him to think about this for a while before they continued. It had explained a *lot* about why Father and his friends had agreed to serve under a Dark Lord who often wasn't nice to them...)

In fact, Harry had said, this was pretty much the reason why people had governments—*you* might be better off if you stole from someone else, just like each prisoner would be individually better off if they defected in the Prisoner's Dilemma. But if *everyone* thought like that, the

country would fall into chaos and everyone would be worse off, like what would happen if both prisoners defected. So people let themselves be ruled by governments, just like the Death Eaters had let themselves be ruled by the Dark Lord.

(Draco had asked Harry to stop again. Draco had always taken for granted that ambitious wizards put themselves in power because they wanted to rule, and people let themselves be ruled because they were scared little Hufflepuffs. And this, on reflection, still seemed true; but Harry's perspective was fascinating even if it was wrong.)

But, Harry had continued afterward, the fear of a third party punishing you was not the *only* possible reason to cooperate in the Prisoner's Dilemma.

Suppose, Harry had said, you were playing the game against a magically produced identical copy of yourself.

Draco had said that if there were two Dracos, of course neither Draco would want anything bad to happen to the other one, not to mention that no Malfoy would let himself become known as a traitor.

Harry had nodded again, and said that this was yet *another* solution to the Prisoner's Dilemma—people might cooperate because they cared about each other, or because they had senses of honor, or because they wanted to preserve their reputation. Indeed, Harry had said, it was rather difficult to construct a *true* Prisoner's Dilemma—in real life, people usually cared about the other person, or their honor or their reputation or a Dark Lord's punishment or *something* besides the prison sentences. But suppose the copy had been of someone *completely* selfish—

(Pansy Parkinson had been the example they'd used)

—so each Pansy only cared what happened to *her* and not to the other Pansy.

Given that this was all Pansy cared about... and that there was no Dark Lord... and Pansy wasn't worried about her reputation... and Pansy either had no sense of honor or didn't consider herself obligated to the other prisoner... *then* would the rational thing be for Pansy to cooperate, or defect?

Some people, Harry said, claimed that the rational thing to do was for Pansy to defect against her copy, but Harry, plus someone named

Douglas Hofstadter, thought these people were wrong. Because, Harry had said, if Pansy defected—not at random, but for what seemed to her like *rational reasons*—then the other Pansy would think exactly the same way. Two identical copies wouldn't decide different things. So Pansy had to choose between a world in which both Pansies cooperated, or a world in which both Pansies defected, and she was better off if both copies cooperated. And if Harry had thought 'rational' people *did* defect in the Prisoner's Dilemma, then he wouldn't have done anything to spread that kind of 'rationality', because a country or a conspiracy full of 'rational' people would dissolve into chaos. You would tell your *enemies* about 'rationality'.

Which had all *sounded* reasonable at the time, but *now* the thought was occurring to Draco that...

"*You* said," Draco said, "that the rational solution to the Prisoner's Dilemma is to cooperate. But of course *you* would want me to believe that, wouldn't you?" And if Draco was fooled into cooperating, Harry would just say, *Ha ha, betrayed you again!* and laugh at him about it afterward.

"I wouldn't fake your lessons," Harry said seriously. "But I have to remind you, Draco, that I didn't say you should just automatically cooperate. Not on a *true* Prisoner's Dilemma like this one. What I said was that when you choose, you shouldn't think like you're choosing for just yourself, *or* like you're choosing for everyone. You should think like you're choosing for all the people who are *similar enough* to you that they'll probably do the same thing you do for the same reasons. And also choosing the predictions made by anyone who knows you well enough to predict you accurately, so that you never have to regret being rational because of the correct predictions that other people make about you—remind me to explain about Newcomb's Problem at some point. So the question you and I have to ask, Draco, is this: are we similar enough that we'll probably do the *same thing* whatever it is, making our decisions in mostly the same way? Or do we know each other well enough to predict each other, so that *I* can predict whether you'll cooperate or defect, and *you* can predict that I've decided to do the same thing I predict you'll do, because *I* know that you can predict me deciding that?"

...and Draco could not help but think that since he had to strain just to understand *half* of that, the answer was obviously 'No'.

"Yes," said Draco.

There was a pause.

"I see," said Harry, sounding disappointed. "Oh, well. I guess we'll have to think of some other way, then."

Draco hadn't thought that was going to work.

Draco and Harry talked about it back and forth. They had both agreed much earlier that what they did on the battlefield would *not* count as broken promises in real life—though Draco was a little angry about what Harry had done in Professor Quirrell's office, and said so.

But if the two of them couldn't rely on honor or friendship, that *did* leave the question of how to get their armies to work together on beating Sunshine, despite everything Granger might try to break them up. Professor Quirrell's rules didn't make it tempting to let Sunshine kill the other army's soldiers—that just increased the bar you had to pass yourself—but it did tempt each side to steal kills instead of acting like a single army would, or to shoot some of the other side's soldiers during the confusion of battle...

Hermione was walking back to Ravenclaw not really looking where she was going, her mind preoccupied with war and treachery and other age-inappropriate concepts, and she turned a corner and bumped straight into a grownup.

"Sorry," she said automatically, and then, entirely without thinking, "*Eeeeek!*"

"Don't worry, Miss Granger," said the cheerful smile, set beneath the twinkling eyes, and above the silver beard, of the HEADMASTER OF HOGWARTS. "You are quite forgiven."

Her gaze was helplessly locked on the kindly face of the most powerful wizard in the world, who was also the Chief Warlock, who was also the Supreme Mugwump, who had gone insane years ago from the stress of fighting the Dark Lord, and numerous other facts that were popping

up into her mind one after the other while her throat went on making little embarrassing squeaks.

"In fact, Miss Granger," said Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, "it is quite lucky that we bumped into each other. Why, I was just now wondering curiously what the three of you were thinking of asking for your wishes..."

Saturday dawned bright and clear and with the students speaking in hushed voices, as though the first to shout might set off the explosion.

Draco had hoped that they would be fighting in the upper levels of Hogwarts again. Professor Quirrell had said that real fights were more likely to take place in cities than forests, and fighting inside schoolrooms and corridors was supposed to simulate that, with ribbons to mark the allowed areas. Dragon Army had done well in those fights.

Instead, just as Draco had feared, Professor Quirrell had come up with something *special* for this battle.

The battleground was the Hogwarts Lake.

And not in boats, either.

They were fighting *underwater*.

The Giant Squid had been temporarily paralyzed; spells had been set in place to keep away the grindylows; Professor Quirrell had gone and talked to the merfolk; and all the soldiers had been issued *potions of underwater action* that allowed them to breathe, see clearly, talk to each other, and swim not quite as fast as a fast walk by kicking their legs.

A huge silver sphere hung in the center of the battleground, shining like a small underwater moon. It would help to provide a sense of direction—at first. The moon would slowly go into eclipse as the battle went on, and when it had gone entirely dark, the battle would end if it hadn't already.

War in water. You couldn't defend a perimeter, attackers could come at you from any direction, and even with the potion you couldn't see very far in the darkness of the lake.

And if you swam too far away from the action, you would start to glow after a while, and be easy to hunt down—ordinarily if an army scattered and ran instead of fighting, Professor Quirrell would just declare them defeated; but today they were working on a points system. Of course you still had some time *before* you started to glow, if you wanted to play assassin.

Dragon Army had been set low in the water at the start of the game; above and far away, the distant underwater moon shone. The murky water was mostly lit by *Lumos* Charms, though his soldiers would extinguish the lights as soon as they began maneuvers. There was no point in letting the enemy see you before you saw them.

Draco kicked his legs a few times, propelling him to a higher position from which he could gaze down at where his soldiers hovered in the water.

The conversations died down almost at once under Draco's icy glare, his soldiers looking up at him with gratifying expressions of fear and worry.

"Listen to me very carefully," said General Malfoy. His voice came out a little lower, a little burbly with bubbles, *libsten to me vebwy caerbfully*, but the sound traveled clearly. "There's only one way we can win this. We've got to march on Sunshine together with Chaos, and beat Sunshine. *Then* we fight it out with Potter and win. That's *got* to happen, understand? No matter what else goes on, that part *has* to happen that way—"

And Draco explained the plan he and Harry had come up with.

Astonished looks were exchanged among the soldiers.

"—and if any of *your* plots get in the way of that," finished Draco, "after we are out of the water, I will set you on *fire*."

There was a nervous chorus of yessirs.

"And everyone with secret orders, make sure you carry them out *to the letter*," said Draco.

Around half his soldiers *openly nodded,* and Draco marked them for death after he rose to power.

Of course all the private orders were fake, like one Dragon being told to offer a false traitor's commission to another Dragon, and the second Dragon being told in hushed confidence to report anything said by the first Dragon. Draco had told each Dragon that the whole war could depend on that one thing, and that he hoped they understood it was more important than the plans they'd previously made. With luck that would keep all the idiots happy, and maybe flush out a few spies to boot, if the reports didn't match the instructions.

Draco's real plan for winning against Chaos... well, it was simpler than the one he'd burned, but Father still wouldn't have liked it. Despite trying, though, Draco hadn't been able to think of anything better. It was a plot that couldn't *possibly* have worked against anyone except Harry Potter. In fact it had *been* Harry's plan originally, according to the traitor, though Draco had guessed that without being told. Draco and the traitor had just modified it a little...

Harry took a deep breath, feeling the water gurgle harmlessly in his lungs.

They'd fought in the forest, and he hadn't gotten a chance to say it.

They'd fought in the corridors of Hogwarts, and he hadn't gotten a chance to say it.

They'd fought in the air, broomsticks issued to every soldier, and it still hadn't made sense to say it.

Harry had thought he wouldn't ever get to say those words, not while he was still young enough for them to be real...

The Chaos Legionnaires were looking at Harry in puzzlement, as their general swam with his feet pointing up toward the distant light of the surface, and his head pointed down toward the murky depths.

"*Why are you upside down?*" the young commander shouted at his army, and began to explain how to fight after you abandoned the privileged orientation of gravity.

A hollow, booming bell echoed through the water, and on the instant, Zabini and Anthony and five other soldiers struck out downward, into the murky depths of the lake. Parvati Patil, the only Gryffindor in the group, turned her head back for a moment and gave them all a cheery wave as she dived; and after a moment, Scott and Matt did the same. The rest just sank and vanished.

General Granger swallowed a lump in her throat as she watched them go. She was risking everything on this, dividing her army instead of just trying to take as many enemy soldiers with them as possible.

The thing to realize, Zabini had told her, was that no army would move until they had a plan that let them expect victory. Sunshine couldn't just plan to win themselves, they had to make both other armies *think* they would win until it was too late.

Ernie and Ron still looked like they were in shock. Susan was gazing after the disappearing soldiers with a calculating look. Her army, what was left of it, just looked bewildered, traceries of light dappling on their uniforms as they all drifted just below the sunlit surface of the lake.

"*Now* what?" said Ron.

"Now we wait," said Hermione, loudly enough for all the soldiers to hear. It felt odd to talk with her mouth full of water, she kept feeling like she was committing some sort of horrible impoliteness at the dinner table and was about to drool all over herself. "All of us left here are going to get zapped, but that was going to happen anyway with Dragon and Chaos ganging up on us. We've just got to take as many of them with us as we can."

"I've got a plan," said one of her Sunshine Soldiers... Hannah, her voice had been a little hard to recognize at first. "It's like all complicated,

but I know how we can get Dragon and Chaos to start fighting each other—"

"Me too!" said Fay. "I've got a plan too! See, Neville Longbottom is secretly on our side—"

"*You* were talking to Neville?" said Ernie. "That's not right, *I* was the one who—"

Daphne Greengrass and a couple of other Slytherins who hadn't gone with Zabini were giggling helplessly as the cries of "No, wait, *I* was the one who got Longbottom" erupted from one soldier after another.

Hermione just looked at them all wearily.

"Okay," said Hermione when it had all died down, "does everyone get it? All your plots were faked by the Chaos Legion, or maybe some by Dragon. Anyone who *really* wanted to betray Harry or Malfoy went straight to me or Zabini, not you. Just go ahead and compare notes on all your secret plots and you'll see it for yourselves." She might not be as good at plotting as Zabini, but she could always understand what all her officers told her, that was why Professor Quirrell had made her the general. "So don't bother trying to do any plots when the other armies get here. Just fight, okay? Please?"

"But," said Ernie with shock on his face, "Neville is in *Hufflepuff!* You're saying he *lied* to us?"

Daphne was laughing so hard and so helplessly that the exhalations had turned her upside down in the water.

"I'm not sure *what* Longbottom is," said Ron darkly, "but I don't think he's a Hufflepuff any more. Not now that *Harry Potter's* got to him."

"Do you know," said Susan, "I *asked* him that, and Neville told me he had become a Chaos Hufflepuff?"

"*Anyway*," said Hermione in a loud voice. "Zabini took with everyone who we thought was a spy, so in *our* army we can stop watching each other quite so hard now, I hope."

"*Anthony* was a spy?" yelled Ron.

"*Parvati* was a spy?" gasped Hannah.

"Parvati was *totally* a spy," said Daphne. "She shopped at the spy shoe store and wore spy lipstick, and someday she's going to marry a

nice spy husband and have a lot of little spies."

And then a gong sound echoed through the water, indicating that Sunshine had just scored two points.

This was shortly followed by the triple gong of Dragon losing a single point.

Traitors weren't allowed to kill generals, not after the disaster of the first battle in December when all three generals had been shot in the first minute. But with any luck...

"Aw," said Hermione. "It sounds like Mr. Crabbe is taking a little nap."

Like two shoals of fish, the armies swam along.

Neville Longbottom kicked his feet in slow, measured motions. Diving, always diving in whatever direction you happened to be moving. You wanted to show the enemy the smallest profile, present them with your head or your feet. So you were always diving, downward and headfirst, and the enemy was always *down.*

Like every Chaos Legionnaire in the army, Neville's head was constantly rotating as he swam, looking up, down, around, to every side. Not just watching for Sunshine Soldiers, but watching for any sign that a Chaos Legionnaire had drawn their wand and was about to betray them. Usually traitors waited until the confusion of battle to make their move, but that early gong had put them all on guard.

...the truth was, Neville was feeling sad about that. In November he'd been a soldier in a united army, all of them pulling together and helping each other, and now they were all watching each other constantly for the first signs of betrayal. It might have been more fun for General Chaos, but it wasn't nearly as much fun for Neville.

The direction formerly known as 'up' was getting steadily brighter, as they came closer to the surface and Sunshine.

"Wands out," said General Chaos.

Neville's squad drew their wands, pointing them straight ahead toward the enemy, as their heads scanned around more rapidly. If there were Sunny traitors, the time was approaching for them to strike.

The other shoal of fish, Dragon Army, was doing the same thing.

"*Now!*" shouted the distant voice of the Dragon General.

"*Now!*" shouted General Chaos.

"*For Sunshine!*" shouted all the soldiers in both armies, and charged downward.

⁂

"*What?*" said Minerva involuntarily as she watched the screens from next to the lake, a cry echoed in many other places; all of Hogwarts was watching this battle as they had watched the first.

Professor Quirrell was laughing dryly. "I warned you, Headmaster. It is impossible to have rules without Mr. Potter exploiting them."

⁂

For long precious seconds, as the forty-seven soldiers charged her own seventeen, Hermione's mind went blank.

Why...

Then it all snapped into place.

Every time a soldier originally from Sunshine got shot by someone crying the name of Sunshine, she would lose a Quirrell point. When two Sunshine Soldiers were shot by either army, *both* enemy armies would be two points closer to overtaking her, it was the same gain only *shared*. And if anyone shot another soldier *not* in the name of Sunshine, that gong *wouldn't* get lost in the confusion...

Hermione was suddenly very glad that Zabini hadn't gone with the obvious plan of starting trouble between the other two armies while they attacked Sunshine.

It was still disheartening, though, that sense of your chances closing down, of hope being taken away.

Most of Hermione's soldiers were still looking confused, but some had expressions of dawning horror as they got it.

"It's all right," Susan Bones said firmly. Heads turned to look at the Sunshine Captain. "Our job is the same, to take as many of them with us as we can. And remember, Zabini took away all the spies! We don't have to stay on the lookout like *they* do!" The girl was smiling defiantly, provoking answering smiles from many of the other soldiers, even from Hermione herself. "It can be like it was in November. We just have to keep our heads high, fight our best, and trust each other—"

Daphne shot her.

"*Blood for the blood god!*" shrieked Neville of Chaos, though since he was underwater it came out more like 'Blubbled for the blubbled glub!'

Captain Weasley spun and raised his wand toward Neville and fired. But Neville was swimming *downward* toward him, wand pointed straight ahead, and that meant the Simple Shield could shelter Neville's entire profile; if anyone shot him now, it wasn't going to be Sunny Ron.

A grimly determined look came over Captain Weasley's face, and he arrowed straight up toward Neville, mouthing the word *Contego,* though the shield wasn't visible in the water.

The two enemy champions shot toward each other like arrows released from bows, each aimed to split the other down the middle. They had dueled many times before, but this time would pay for all.

(Far away by the lakeside, a hundred breaths were held.)

"*Rainbows and unicorns!*" roared the Sunshine Captain.

"*The Black Goat with a thousand young!*"

"*Do your homework!*"

Closer and yet closer, the two champions charged, neither willing to swerve, the first person to turn would present a vulnerable broadside and get shot, though if neither lost their nerve they would crash right into each other...

Falling straight down as the enemy rose straight up to meet him, hammer descending to meet anvil in a path neither was willing to leave...

"*Special attack, Chaotic Twist!*"

Neville saw the look of horror on Captain Weasley's face as the Hover Charm caught him. They'd tested it before the battle had started; and just as Harry had suspected, *Wingardium Leviosa* became a whole new sort of weapon once everyone was swimming underwater.

"*Curse you, Longbottom!*" shrieked Ron Weasley, "*Can't you ever fight without your dumb special attacks—*"

and by that time the Sunshine Captain had been spun around sideways and Neville shot him in the leg.

"I don't fight fair," said Neville to the sleeping form, "I fight like Harry Potter."

⁂

Granger: 237 / Malfoy: 217 / Potter: 220

It still hurt every time he had to shoot Hermione. Harry could hardly stand to look at the expression of peace that had come over her sleeping face, arms now drifting aimlessly as the curves of sunlight moved over her camouflage uniform and the cloud of her chestnut hair.

And if Harry had tried to duck out of being the one to shoot her... not only would Draco have known what it meant, *Hermione* would have been offended.

She's not dead, Harry said to his brain as his kicking feet pushed him away, *she's just resting. IDIOT.*

Are you sure? said his brain. *What if she's an ex-Hermione? Could we go back and check?*

Harry glanced back briefly.

See, she's fine, there are bubbles coming out of her mouth.

Could've been her last breath escaping.

Oh be quiet. Why are you being so paranoid-protective, anyway?

Er, first real friend we've ever had in our whole life? Hey, remember what happened to our pet rock?

Would you SHUT UP about that worthless lump of rubble, it wasn't even alive let alone sentient, that is like the most pathetic childhood trauma ever—

The two armies swiftly separated, becoming two shoals of fish once more.

General Granger had gone down seventeen points, and taken three Chaotics and two Dragons with her; and one Chaotic and two Dragons had been shot as traitors. So she'd lost net seven points, Harry had lost one, Draco had lost two; that put Sunshine twenty points up on Dragon, and seventeen points up on Chaos. Chaos could still win easily if they exterminated all twenty remaining Dragons. The wild card, of course, being those seven remaining Sunshine Soldiers...

...if you could call them that.

The two shoals swam uneasily next to each other, the soldiers in each army awaiting an order to call out their true allegiances, and attack...

"Everyone who got them," Harry said loudly, "remember Special Orders One through Three. And don't forget it's Merlin Says on Three. Do not acknowledge."

The trustworthy two-thirds of the army did not nod, and the other third just looked puzzled.

Special Order One: Don't bother trying to call out any codewords in this battle, don't expend effort on any plot not specially approved by the commander; just swim, shield, and fire.

Hermione and Draco had both been fighting their soldiers, trying to get them to stop plotting on their own all through December. Harry had egged his soldiers on and supported their plotting through the last two battles... while also telling them that at some *future* point he might ask them to put a plot or two on hold, to which they'd all readily agreed. So now, in this critical battle, they were happy to obey.

Neither Hermione or Draco could have given that order successfully, Harry was certain. It was the difference between your soldiers seeing you as an ally in their plotting, and seeing you as a spoilsport old fuddy-duddy who didn't want them to have any fun. Imposition of order equaled escalation of chaos, and it also worked in reverse...

"There they are!" shouted someone, and pointed.

From the depths of the lake arose the forgotten ones, the ones who'd forsaken the last battle, the seven missing Sunshine Soldiers, glowing with the bright aura of cowards, now fading as they returned to battle.

The two shoals of fish wavered, pointing wands uneasily.

"Hold your fire!" shouted Harry, and a similar cry came from General Malfoy.

There was a moment of held breath.

Then the seven Sunshine Soldiers swam up to join Dragon Army.

There was a triumphant cheer from Dragon Army.

There were cries of dismay from a third of the Chaos Legion.

Some of the other two-thirds smiled, though they shouldn't have.

Harry wasn't smiling.

Oh, this is so completely not going to work...

But Harry hadn't been able to think of anything better.

"Special Orders Two and Three still apply!" shouted Harry. "Fight!"

"*For the Chaos Legion!*" roared twenty Chaotic Legionnaires.

"*For Dragon Army!*" roared twenty Dragon Warriors and seven Sunshine Soldiers.

And the Chaotics dived straight downward, as all the traitors got ready to strike.

⁂

Granger: 237 / Malfoy: 220 / Potter: 226

Draco's head darted around frantically, trying to weigh up what was happening; somehow, despite his greater forces, he'd *lost the initiative.* Four small Chaotic forces were being pursued by four larger Dragon forces, but because Draco's forces were the ones trying to force an engagement, it meant that they had to *follow* where Chaos *ran,* and somehow that was producing concentrations of Chaotic force that would fire into the exposed sides of Dragon—

It was happening *again!*

"*Prismatis!*" shouted Draco, raising his wand, and that shield you could see even through the water, a sparkling multicolored flat wall wide enough to shield Draco and the five other Dragons with him from the Chaotic force that had just started firing on them as they swam past, and *that* let the other five Dragons turn *their* attentions back to the Chaotic force they'd been chasing—

There was a tense moment as sleep spell after sleep spell crashed into Draco's Prismatic Wall, and Draco was hoping to Merlin that none of those four Chaotics had learned the Breaking Drill Hex—

Then there was the bell of a Dragon victory, and the Chaotic force spun head-for-foot and began swimming away; and Draco, his hands now shaking slightly, dropped the Prismatic Wall and lowered his wand.

Fighting in water was more exhausting even than fighting on broomsticks.

"*Do not pursue!*" Draco cried to his soldiers as they started to follow, then, "*Sonorus! REFORM ON ME!*"

The Dragon forces started converging on Draco, and the Chaotic forces spun around and began *pursuing* the Dragons on the instant—Draco swore out loud as he heard the bell of a Chaotic victory, someone hadn't gotten their Simple Shield oriented right—and then the Dragon forces were in supporting range of each other and the Chaotics were moving back into the murky distance.

Somehow, despite their numerical superiority, the Dragons had scored three times against the Chaotics and the Chaotics had scored four times back, and he'd heard one Dragon spy get executed. Either Harry Potter had thought of a lot of very good ideas very fast, or for some unimaginable reason he'd already spent a lot of time working out how to fight underwater. This wasn't working, and Draco needed to rethink things.

It looked like everyone was having trouble aiming while swimming, too, the battle might last long enough that time would be called... the distant underwater moon was only half full now, that wasn't good... he had to rethink things *fast*...

"What is it?" said Padma Patil, as she and her force swam over toward Draco.

Padma was his second-in-command; she was clever and powerful, and better yet, she hated Granger and saw Harry as a rival, which made her *trustworthy*. Working with Padma was making him realize the truth of the old adage that Ravenclaw was sister to Slytherin; Draco had been surprised when his father had told him it was an acceptable House for his future wife, but now he saw the sense of it.

"Wait until we're all here," Draco said. The truth was, he needed to catch his breath. That was the trouble with being the general *and* the most powerful wizard, you had to keep using magic.

Zabini came in next, commanding a force of two Sunnies and four Dragons, one of whom was Gregory keeping an eye on Zabini. Draco didn't trust Zabini. And neither Draco nor Zabini trusted the Sunnies enough to make them a majority of any unit; they were *supposed* to be loyal either to Draco directly, or to Granger who'd been fooled by the promise that the Dragons would be betrayed in the end after both forces had been depleted, just as Harry's more trusted Chaotics should've been fooled into not shooting at the Sunnies by the promise of their firing fake Sleep Hexes and switching to support Chaos later; but it was possible some of the Sunnies *were* loyal to Chaos and *weren't* firing real Sleep Hexes and that was why Dragon wasn't winning the way their numerical advantage should've let them win...

The next unit that approached was depleted, three soldiers holding wands on two other soldiers, who were swimming with empty hands.

Draco gritted his teeth. More traitor problems. He needed to talk to Professor Quirrell about having some way to *punish* traitors at least, conditions like these were *unrealistic*, in real life you tortured your traitors to death.

"General Malfoy!" shouted the commander of the problem unit as it swam up, a Ravenclaw boy named Terry. "We don't know what to do—Cesi shot Bogdan, but Cesi says Kellah told him that Bogdan shot Specter—"

"I *didn't!*" said Kellah.

"Yes you *did!*" shrieked Cesi. "General Malfoy, *she's* the spy, I should've rea—"

"*Somnium,*" said Draco.

There was the triple bell of a one-point loss from Dragon, and then Kellah's limp body began to float away in the water.

Draco *had* heard the word 'recursion' by this point, and he knew a Harry Potter plot when he saw one.

(Unfortunately Draco had *not* heard of autoimmune disorders, and the thought did *not* readily occur to him that a clever virus would begin

its attack by creating symptoms of an autoimminue disorder so as to get the body to distrust its own immune system...)

"*General order!*" said Draco, raising his voice. "Nobody gets to shoot spies except myself, Gregory, Padma, and Terry. If anyone sees anything suspicious they come to one of *us.*"

And then—

There was the bell of Sunshine scoring two points.

"*What?*" said Draco and Zabini around the same time; their heads swiveled around. No one seemed to have gotten hit, and all the Sunshine soldiers were present and accounted for. (Except Parvati, who had been shot by some still-unknown traitor in Padma's squad; and of course Padma had shot Parvati again in case she was faking, so it wasn't her...)

"A Sunny traitor in Chaos?" said Zabini, sounding puzzled. "But all the ones I knew about were supposed to strike during Chaos's attack on Sunshine—"

"No!" said Padma in a tone of sudden realization. "That was *Chaos* executing a spy!"

"*What?*" said Zabini. "But why—"

And Draco got it. *Damn it!* "Because Potter thinks he's safe for how much he beats Sunshine, but not for how much he beats *us!* So he doesn't want to lose a single point when he executes a traitor! *General order!* If you have to execute a traitor, call Sunshine first! Do that only until the Sunshine bell has rung four more times! And don't forget to switch back to Dragon afterward—"

⁂

Granger: 253 / Malfoy: 252 / Potter: 252

Longbottom's body drifted chaotically through the water, arms and legs disarrayed. After Draco had finally got a hit in they'd all shot him *again* just to be sure.

Nearby was Harry Potter, now protected by a Prismatic Sphere, looking at them all grimly as the last sliver of crescent moon slowly diminished, somewhere far away. If Longbottom had managed to shoot

one more soldier (Draco knew Harry was thinking), if the two Chaotics had managed to hold out just a little longer, they might have *won*...

After Draco had reformed his forces and struck out again, the ensuing battle and execution of spies in Sunshine's name had left Sunshine exactly one point ahead of Dragon and Chaos both. Once Harry had started doing it, Draco had been left with no choice but to follow suit.

But now they had General Chaos outnumbered three to one, the survivors of Dragon Army and the last remaining Sunny traitor: Draco, and Padma, and Zabini.

And Draco, who was no fool, had ordered Padma to take Zabini's wand after Longbottom had shot Gregory and fallen in turn to Draco. The boy had given him an insulted look, told Draco that he owed him for this, and handed it over.

That left Draco and Padma to take down General Chaos.

"I don't suppose you'd like to surrender?" said Draco, smiling as evilly as any smile he'd ever directed at Harry Potter.

"Sleep before surrender!" shouted General Chaos.

"Just so you know," said Draco, "Zabini doesn't actually *have* an older sister for you to rescue from Gryffindor bullies. But Zabini *does* have a mother who doesn't approve of Muggleborns like Granger, and I wrote her a few notes, and offered Zabini a few favors—nothing involving my father, just things *I* can do in school. And by the way, Zabini's mother doesn't approve of the Boy-Who-Lived, either. Just in case you still thought Zabini was really on your side."

Harry's face grew even grimmer.

Draco raised his wand, and began breathing rhythmically, building up strength for a Breaking Drill Hex. Granger's Prismatic Sphere was almost as strong as Draco's now, and Harry's wasn't much weaker, where did those two find *time?*

"*Lagann!*" spoke Draco, putting everything he had into it, and the green spiral blazed out and Harry's shield shattered, and at almost the same moment—

"*Somnium!*" said Padma.

Granger: 253 / Malfoy: 252 / Potter: 254

Harry let out a long breath of relief, and not just because he didn't have to hold the Prismatic Sphere any more. His hand was shaking as he lowered his wand.

"You know," said Harry, "I was pretty worried there for a moment."

Special Order Two: If a Sunny traitor doesn't seem to be really shooting at you, fake being hit occasionally. Prefer targeting Dragons to Sunnies but go ahead and shoot Sunnies if you can't shoot Dragons.

Special Order Three: Merlin says do not shoot at Blaise Zabini or either Patil twin.

With a wide grin, Parvati Patil stripped the Transfigured patch off her uniform's insignia, and let it float away in the water.

"Gryffindors for Chaos," she said, and handed Zabini his wand back.

"Thank you *very* much," Harry said, and bowed sweepingly to the Gryffindor girl. "And thank *you* as well," bowing to Zabini. "You know, when you came to me with that plan, I wondered if you were brilliant or crazy, and I've decided that you're both. And by the way," Harry said, now turning as though to address Draco's body, "Zabini *does* have a cousin—"

"*Somnium,*" said Zabini's voice.

Granger: 255 / Malfoy: 252 / Potter: 254

And Harry Potter's body floated away, his expression of shock and horror quickly relaxing into sleep.

"On second thought," Parvati said cheerfully, "make that Gryffindors for Sunshine."

She started to laugh, more exhiliarated than she'd ever been in her life, she'd *finally* gotten to assassinate and replace her twin sister and she'd wanted to do that since *forever,* and this had been *perfect,* it had all been *perfect—*

—and then her wand spun around in a lightning motion just as Zabini's wand turned to point at her.

"Wait!" said Zabini. "Do not shoot, do not resist. That's an order."

"*What?*" said Parvati.

"Sorry," said Zabini, looking not-quite-sincerely apologetic, "but I can't be totally *sure* you're for Sunshine. So I order you to let me shoot you."

"*Hold on!*" said Parvati. "We're only ahead of Chaos by one point! If you shoot me now—"

"I'll shoot you in the name of Dragon, *obviously*," said Zabini, now sounding a little superior. "Just because we tricked *them* into doing it, doesn't mean it won't work for us."

Parvati stared at him, her eyes narrowing. "General Malfoy said your mother doesn't like Hermione."

"I suppose," said Zabini, still with that superior smirk. "But some of us are more willing than Draco Malfoy to annoy a parent."

"And Harry Potter said you have a cousin—"

"Nope," said Zabini.

Parvati stared at him, trying to think, but she wasn't really good at plotting; Zabini'd said the plan was to secretly keep the scores of Chaos and Dragon as even as possible so they'd use Sunshine's name to execute their traitors instead of losing even a single point, and that had *worked*... but... she had the feeling she was missing something, she wasn't a Slytherin...

"Why don't *I* shoot *you* in the name of Dragon?" said Parvati.

"Because I outrank you," said Zabini.

Parvati had a bad feeling about this.

She stared at him for a long moment.

And then—

"*Somni*—" she started to say, and then realized she hadn't said *for Dragon,* and frantically cut herself off—

Granger: 255 / Malfoy: 254 / Potter: 254

"Hey, everyone," said Blaise Zabini's face on the screens, looking quite amused, "guess it's all down to me."

All by the lakeside, people were holding their breath.

Sunshine was ahead of Dragon and Chaos by exactly one point.

Blaise Zabini could shoot himself in the name of either Dragon or Chaos, or just leave things the way they were.

A series of chimes indicated that the last minute of time was running out.

And the Slytherin was smiling a strange, twisted smile, and casually toying with his wand, the dark wood barely visible in the dark water.

"You know," said Blaise Zabini's voice, in the tones of someone who'd been rehearsing the words for a while, "it's just a game, really. And games are supposed to be *fun.* So how about if I just do whatever I feel like?"

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

COORDINATION PROBLEMS, PART II

Minerva and Dumbledore together had applied their combined talent to conjure the grand stage toward which Quirrell now slowly trudged; it was, at its core, sturdy wood, but the outer surfaces shone with glitter of marble inlaid with platinum and studded with gems of every House color. Neither she nor the Headmaster was any Founder of Hogwarts, but the conjuration only needed to last a few hours. Minerva ordinarily enjoyed the few occasions when she had the occasion to tire herself out on large Transfigurations; she should have enjoyed the many small chances for artistry, and the illusion of opulence; but this time she had done the work with the dreadful feeling of digging her own grave.

But Minerva was feeling a little better now. There'd been one brief moment when the explosion might've come; but Dumbledore had already been standing up and applauding warmly, and no one had proven foolish enough to riot in front of the Headmaster.

And the explosive mood had rapidly faded into a collective sentiment which might perhaps have been described by the phrase: *Give us a break!*

Behind the stage, waiting to ascend, three children were glaring at each other in mingled fury and frustration. It didn't help that they were still damp from being fished out of the lake, and that the Warming Charms didn't seem quite enough to make up for the crisp December air, or maybe it was just their mood.

"That's *it*," said Granger. "I've *had* it! No more traitors!"

"I completely agree with you, Miss Granger," Draco said icily. "Enough is enough."

"And what do *you* two intend to do about it?" snapped Harry Potter. "Professor Quirrell already said he wouldn't ban spies!"

"We'll ban them *for* him," said Draco grimly. He hadn't even understood what he meant by the words as he said them, but the very act of speaking seemed to crystallize a plan—

The stage really was well done, at least for a temporary structure; the makers hadn't fallen into the usual pitfall of being impressed by their own illusion of wealth, and knew something about architecture and visual style. From where Draco stood, in the obvious place for him to stand, the watching students would see him haloed in the faint glitter of emeralds; and Granger, standing where Draco had subtly motioned her, would be haloed in Ravenclaw's sapphire. As for Harry Potter, Draco wasn't looking at him right now.

Professor Quirrell had... awakened, or whatever it was he did; and was leaning upon a platinum podium bare of all gems. With evident showmanship, the Defense Professor was carefully stacking and squaring those three envelopes containing the three parchments upon which the three generals had written their wishes, as all the students of Hogwarts watched, and waited.

Finally Professor Quirrell looked up from the envelopes. "Well," said the Defense Professor. "This is inconvenient."

A slight titter of laughter ran through the crowd, with a sharp undertone.

"I suppose you are all wondering what I will do?" said Professor Quirrell. "There is nothing for it; I shall have to do what is fair. Although first there was a little speech I wanted to make, and before even that, it appears to me that Mr. Malfoy and Miss Granger have something they wish to share."

Draco blinked, and then he and Granger traded rapid glances—*may I?—yes, go ahead*— and Draco raised his voice.

"General Granger and I would both like to say," Draco said in his most formal voice, knowing it was being amplified and heard, "that we will no longer accept the help of any traitors. And if, in any battle, we

find that Potter has accepted traitors from either of our armies, we will join forces to crush him."

And Draco shot a glance filled at malice at the Boy-Who-Lived. *Take that, General Chaos!*

"I agree completely with General Malfoy," said Granger standing beside him, her high voice clear and strong. "Neither of us will use traitors, and if General Potter does, we will wipe him off the battlefield."

There was a sursurration of surprise from the watching students.

"Very good," said their Defense Professor, smiling. "It took the two of you long enough, but you are still to be congratulated on having thought of it before any other generals."

It took a moment for this to soak in—

"In the future, Mr. Malfoy, Miss Granger, before you come to my office with any request, consider whether there is a way for you to accomplish it without my help. I will not deduct Quirrell points on this occasion, but next time you may expect to lose the full fifty." Professor Quirrell wore an amused grin. "And what do you have to say about that, Mr. Potter?"

Harry Potter's gaze went to Granger, then to Draco. His face appeared calm; though Draco was sure *controlled* would have been the better term.

Finally Harry Potter spoke, his voice level. "The Chaos Legion is still happy to accept traitors. See you on the battlefield."

Draco knew the shock was showing on his own face; there were astonished murmurs from the watching students, and when Draco glanced at the front row he saw that even Harry's Chaotics looked taken aback.

Granger's face was angry, and getting angrier. "Mr. Potter," she said in a sharp tone like she thought she was a teacher, "are you *trying* to be obnoxious?"

"Most certainly not," Harry Potter said calmly. "I won't make you do it every time. Beat me once, and I'll stay beaten. But threats aren't always enough, General of Sunshine. You did not ask me to join with you, but tried simply to impose your will; and sometimes you must actually defeat the enemy, to impose your will on him. You see, I am skeptical that Hermione Granger, the brightest academic star of Hog-

warts, and Draco, son of Lucius, scion of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Malfoy, can work together to beat their common foe, Harry Potter." An amused smile crossed Harry Potter's face. "Maybe I'll just do what Draco tried with Zabini, and write a letter to Lucius Malfoy and see what *he* thinks about that."

"*Harry!*" gasped Granger, looking absolutely aghast, and there were gasps from the audience as well.

Draco controlled the anger flushing through him. That had been a *stupid* move on Harry's part, saying that in public. If Harry had simply *done* it, it might have worked, Draco hadn't even thought about that, but *now* if Father did that it would look like he was playing into Harry's hands—

"If you think my father, Lord Malfoy, can be manipulated by *you* that easily," Draco said coldly, "you have a surprise coming, Harry Potter."

And Draco realized as the words finished leaving his mouth that he'd just backed *his own father* squarely into the corner, more or less without even meaning to. Father probably *wasn't* going to like this, not the tiniest bit, but now it would be impossible for him to say so... Draco would have to apologize for that, it *had* been an honest accident, but it was strange to think that he'd done it at all.

"Then go ahead and defeat the evil General Chaos," Harry said, still looking amused. "I can't win against both your armies—not if you *really* work together. But I wonder if perhaps I could break you up before then."

"You won't, and we'll *crush* you!" said Draco Malfoy.

And beside him, Hermione Granger firmly nodded.

"Well," said Professor Quirrell after the astounded silence had stretched for a while. "That was *not* how I expected that particular conversation to go." The Defense Professor had a rather intrigued expression on his face. "Truthfully, Mr. Potter, I expected you to concede immediately and with a smile, then announce that you had long since worked out my intended lesson but had decided not to spoil it for others. Indeed, I planned my speech accordingly, Mr. Potter."

Harry Potter just shrugged. "Sorry about that," he said, and said nothing more.

"Oh, don't worry," said Professor Quirrell. "This, too, will serve."

And Professor Quirrell turned from the three children, and straightened at the podium to address the whole watching crowd; his customary air of detached amusement dropped away like a falling mask, and when he spoke again his voice was amplified louder than it had been.

"If not for Harry Potter," said Professor Quirrell, his voice as crisp and cold as December, "You-Know-Who would have won."

The silence was instant, and total.

"Make no mistake," said Professor Quirrell. "The Dark Lord *was* winning. There were fewer and fewer Aurors who dared face him, the vigilantes who opposed him were being hunted down. One Dark Lord and perhaps fifty Death Eaters were *winning* against a country of thousands. That is beyond ridiculous! There are no grades low enough for me to mark that incompetence!"

There was a frown on the face of Headmaster Dumbledore; and on the faces of the audience, puzzlement; and the utter silence went on.

"Do you understand now how it happened? You saw it today. I allowed traitors, and gave the generals no means to restrain them. You saw the result. Clever plots and clever betrayals, until the last soldier left on the battlefield shot himself! You cannot *possibly* doubt that all three of those armies could have been defeated by *any* outside foe that was unified within itself."

Professor Quirrell leaned forward at the podium, his voice now filled with a grim intensity. His right hand stretched out, fingers open and spread. "Division is weakness," said the Defense Professor. His hand closed into a tight fist. "Unity is strength. The Dark Lord understood that well, whatever his other follies; and he *used* that understanding to create the one simple invention that made him the most terrible Dark Lord in history. Your parents faced one Dark Lord. And fifty Death Eaters who were perfectly unified, knowing that any breach of their loyalty would be punished by death, that any slack or incompetence would be punished by pain. None could escape the Dark Lord's grasp once they took his Mark. And the Death Eaters agreed to take that terrible Mark because they knew that once they took it, they would be *united*,

facing a divided land. One Dark Lord and fifty Death Eaters would have defeated an entire country, by the power of the Dark Mark."

Professor Quirrell's voice was bleak and hard. "Your parents *could* have fought back in kind. They did not. There was a man named Yermy Wibble who called upon the nation to institute a draft, though he did not quite have vision enough to propose a Mark of Britain. Yermy Wibble knew what would happen to him; he hoped his death would inspire others. So the Dark Lord took his family for good measure. Their empty skins inspired nothing but fear, and no one dared to speak again. And your parents would have faced the consequences of their despicable cowardice, if not for being saved by a one-year-old boy." Professor Quirrell's face showed full contempt. "A dramatist would have called that a *dei ex machina,* for they did nothing to earn their salvation. He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named may not have deserved to win, but make no doubt of it, your parents deserved to lose."

The voice of the Defense Professor rang forth like iron. "And know this: your parents have learned nothing! The nation is still fragmented and weak! How few decades passed between Grindelwald and You-Know-Who? Do you think *you* will not see the next threat in your own lifetimes? Will *you* repeat then the follies of your parents, when you have seen the results so clearly laid out before you this day? For I can tell you what your parents will do, when the day of darkness comes! I can tell you what lesson they have learned! They have learned to hide like cowards and do nothing while they wait for Harry Potter to save them!"

There was a wondering look in the eyes of Headmaster Dumbledore; and other students gazed up at their Defense Professor with bewilderment and anger and awe.

Professor Quirrell's eyes were as cold now as his voice. "Mark this, and mark it well. He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named wished to rule over this country, to hold it in his cruel grasp forever. But at least he wished to rule over a *living* country, and not a heap of ash! There have been Dark Lords who were mad, who wished only to make the world a vast funeral pyre! There have been wars in which one whole country marched against another! Your parents nearly lost against half a hundred, who

thought to take this country alive! How quickly would they have been crushed by a foe more numerous than they, a foe that cared for nothing but their destruction? This I foretell: When the next threat rises, Lucius Malfoy will claim that you must follow him or perish, that your only hope is to trust in his cruelty and strength. And though Lucius Malfoy himself will believe it, this will be a lie. For when the Dark Lord perished, Lucius Malfoy did not unite the Death Eaters, they were shattered in an instant, they fled like whipped dogs and betrayed each other! Lucius Malfoy is not strong enough to be a true Lord, Dark or otherwise."

Draco Malfoy's fists were clenched white, there were tears in his eyes, and fury, and unbearable shame.

"No," said Professor Quirrell, "I do not think it will be Lucius Malfoy who saves you. And lest you think that I speak on my own behalf, time will make clear soon enough that this is not so. I make you no recommendation, my students. But I say that if a whole country were to find a leader as strong as the Dark Lord, but honorable and pure, and take his Mark; then they could crush any Dark Lord like an insect, and all the rest of our divided magical world could not threaten them. And if some still greater enemy rose against us in a war of extermination, then only a united magical world could survive."

There were gasps, mostly from Muggleborns; the students in green-trimmed robes looked merely puzzled. Now it was Harry Potter whose fists were clenched tight and trembling; and Hermione Granger beside him was angry and dismayed.

The Headmaster rose from his seat, his face now stern, saying no word as yet; but the command was clear.

"I do not say *what* threat will come," said Professor Quirrell. "But you will not live all your lives in peace, not if the past history of the world is any guide at all to its future. And if you do in the future as you have seen three armies do this day, if you cannot throw aside your petty bickering and take the Mark of a single leader, then indeed you might wish that the Dark Lord had lived to rule over you, and regret the day that ever Harry Potter was born—"

"*Enough!*" bellowed Albus Dumbledore.

There was silence.

Professor Quirrell slowly turned his head to gaze at where Albus Dumbledore stood in the fury of his wizardry; their eyes met, and a soundless stress pressed down like weight upon all the students, as they listened not daring to move.

"You, too, failed this country," said Professor Quirrell. "And you know the peril as well as I."

"Such speeches are not for the ears of students," said Albus Dumbledore in a dangerously rising voice. "Nor for the mouths of professors!"

Dryly, then, Professor Quirrell spoke: "There were many speeches made for the ears of adults, as the Dark Lord rose. And the adults clapped and cheered, and went home having enjoyed their day's entertainment. But I will obey you, Headmaster, and make no further speeches if you do not like them. My lesson is simple. I will go on doing nothing about traitors, and we will see what students can do for themselves about that, when they do not wait for professors to save them."

And then Professor Quirrell turned back to his students, and his mouth quirked up in a wry grin that seemed to dissipate the dreadful pressure like a god blowing to scatter the clouds. "But do please be kind to the traitors up until now," said Professor Quirrell. "They were just having fun."

There was laughter, though it was nervous at first, and then it seemed to build, as Professor Quirrell stood there smiling wryly and some of the tension released itself.

Draco's mind was still whirling through a thousand questions and a daze of horror, as Professor Quirrell prepared to open the envelopes in which the three had inscribed their wishes.

It had never before occurred to Draco that moon-traveling Muggles were a greater threat than the slow decline of wizardry, or that Father had proven himself too weak to stop them.

And even stranger, the obvious implication: Professor Quirrell believed that *Harry* could. The Defense Professor claimed to have made no recommendation, but he'd mentioned Harry Potter over and over in his speech; others would already be thinking the same thing as Draco.

It was ridiculous. The boy who had covered a stuffed chair in glitter and called it a throne—

The boy who faced down Snape and won, whispered a traitorous voice, *that boy could grow into a Lord strong enough to rule, strong enough to save us all—*

Harry had been *raised* by Muggles! He was practically a mudblood himself, he wouldn't fight against his adopted family—

He knows their arts, their secrets and their methods; he can take all of the Muggles' science and use it against them, alongside our own power as wizards.

But what if he refuses? What if he's too weak?

Then, said that inner voice, *it will have to be you, won't it, Draco Malfoy?*

And then there was a renewed hush from the crowd, as Professor Quirrell opened the first envelope.

"Mr. Malfoy," said Professor Quirrell, "your wish is for... Slytherin to win the House Cup."

There was a puzzled pause from the watching audience.

"Yes, Professor," said Draco in a clear voice, knowing that it was once again being amplified. "If you can't do that, then something else for Slytherin—"

"I will not award House points unfairly," said Professor Quirrell. He tapped a cheek, looking thoughtful. "Which makes your wish difficult enough to be interesting. Would you like to say anything about why, Mr. Malfoy?"

Draco turned from the Defense Professor, gazed out at the crowd from against that backdrop of platinum and emeralds. Not all of Slytherin had cheered for Dragon Army, there were anti-Malfoy factions who had expressed that dissatisfaction by supporting the Boy-Who-Lived, or even Granger; and those factions would be encouraged greatly by what Zabini had done. He needed to remind them that Slytherin meant Malfoy and Malfoy meant Slytherin—

"No," said Draco. "They're Slytherins, they'll understand."

There was some laughter from the audience, especially in Slytherin, even from some students who would have called themselves anti-Malfoy a moment earlier.

Flattery was a lovely thing.

Draco turned back to look at Professor Quirrell again, and was surprised to see an embarrassed look on Granger's face.

"And for Miss Granger..." said Professor Quirrell. There was the sound of a tearing envelope. "Your wish is for... Ravenclaw to win the House Cup?"

There was considerable laughter from the audience, including a chuckle from Draco. He hadn't thought Granger played that game.

"Well, um," said Granger, sounding like she was suddenly stumbling over a memorized speech, "I meant to say, that..." She took a deep breath. "There were soldiers from every House in my army, and I don't mean to slight any of them. But Houses should still count for something, too. It was sad when students in the same House were hexing each other just because they were in different armies. People should be able to rely on whoever's in their House. That's why Godric Gryffindor, and Salazar Slytherin, and Rowena Ravenclaw, and Helga Hufflepuff created the four Houses of Hogwarts in the first place. I'm the General of Sunshine, but even before that, I'm Hermione Granger of Ravenclaw, and I'm proud to be part of a House that's eight hundred years old."

"Well said, Miss Granger!" said Dumbledore's booming voice.

Harry Potter was frowning, and something tickled at the edge of Draco's recognition.

"An interesting sentiment, Miss Granger," said Professor Quirrell. "But there are times when it is good for a Slytherin to have friends in Ravenclaw, or for a Gryffindor to have friends in Hufflepuff. Surely it would be best if you could rely both on your friends in your House, and also your friends in your army?"

Granger's eyes flicked briefly toward the watching students and teachers, and she said nothing.

Professor Quirrell nodded as though to himself, and then turned back to the podium, and took up and tore open the last envelope. Beside Draco, Harry Potter visibly tensed up as the Defense Professor drew forth the parchment. "And Mr. Potter wishes for—"

There was a pause as Professor Quirrell looked at the parchment.

Then, without any change of expression on Professor Quirrell's face, the sheet of parchment burst into flames, and burned with a brief, in-

tense fire that left only drifting black dust sprinkling down from his hand.

"Please confine yourself to the possible, Mr. Potter," said Professor Quirrell, sounding very dry indeed.

There was a long pause; Harry, standing beside Draco, looked rather shaken.

What in Merlin's name did he ask for?

"I do hope," said Professor Quirrell, "that you prepared another wish, if I could not grant that one."

There was another pause.

Harry drew a deep breath. "I didn't," he said, "but I already thought of another one." Harry Potter turned to look out at the audience, and his voice firmed as he spoke. "People fear traitors because of the damage the traitor does directly, the soldiers they shoot or the secrets they tell. But that's only part of the danger. What people do because they're *afraid* of traitors also costs them. I used that strategy today against Sunshine and Dragon. I didn't tell my traitors to cause as much direct damage as possible. I told them to act in the way that would create the most distrust and confusion, and make the generals do the most costly things to try and stop them from doing it again. When there are just a few traitors and a whole country opposing them, it stands to reason that what a few traitors do might be less damaging than what a whole country does to stop them, that the cure might be worse than the disease—"

"Mr. Potter," said the Defense Professor, his voice suddenly cutting, "the lesson of history is that you are simply wrong. Your parents' generation did too little to unify themselves, not too much! This whole country almost fell, Mr. Potter, though you were not there to see it. I suggest that you ask your dorm-mates in Ravenclaw how many of them have lost family to the Dark Lord. Or if you are wiser, do *not* ask! *Do* you have a wish to make, Mr. Potter?"

"If you don't mind," said the mild voice of Albus Dumbledore, "I should like to hear what the Boy-Who-Lived has to say. He has more experience than either of us at stopping wars."

A few people laughed, but not many.

Harry Potter's gaze moved to Dumbledore, and he looked considering for a moment. "I'm not saying you're wrong, Professor Quirrell. In the last war, people didn't act together, and a whole country almost fell to a few dozen attackers, and yes, that was pathetic. And if we make the same mistake next time, yes, that'll be even more pathetic. But you never fight the same war twice. And the problem is, the enemy is *also* allowed to be smart. If you're divided you're vulnerable in one way; but when you try to unite, then you face other risks, and other costs, and the enemy will try to take advantage of those, too. You can't stop thinking at just one level of the game."

"Simplicity also has a great deal to commend it, Mr. Potter," said the dry voice of the Defense Professor. "I do hope that you have learned something this day about the dangers of strategies more complicated than uniting your people and attacking your enemy. And if all this does not tie into your wish somehow, I shall be quite annoyed."

"Yes," said Harry Potter, "it was pretty difficult coming up with a wish to symbolize the costs of unity. But the problem of acting together isn't just for wars, it's something we have to solve all our lives, every day. If everyone is coordinating using the same rules, and the rules are stupid, then if *one* person decides to do things differently, they're breaking the rules. But if *everyone* decides to do things differently, they can. It's exactly the same problem of everyone needing to act together. But for the *first* person who speaks out, it seems like they're going against the crowd. And if you thought that the only important thing was that people should always be unified, then you could never change the game, no matter how stupid the rules. So my own wish, to symbolize what happens when people unite in the wrong direction, is that in Hogwarts we should play Quidditch without the Snitch."

"WHAT?" screamed a hundred voices in the crowd, as Draco's jaw dropped.

"The Snitch ruins the whole game," said Harry Potter. "Everything the other players do ends up being irrelevant. It would make overwhelmingly more sense to just buy a clock. It's one of those incredibly stupid things you don't notice just because you grew up with it, that people only do because everyone else is doing it—"

But by that point Harry Potter's voice could no longer be heard, because the riot had started.

The riot ended around fifteen seconds later, after a gigantic spout of fire blasted out of the highest tower of Hogwarts to the sound of a hundred thunders. Draco hadn't known Dumbledore could *do* that.

The students sat down again very carefully and quietly.

Professor Quirrell was laughing, without pause. "So be it, Mr. Potter. Your will be done." The Defense Professor paused deliberately. "Of course, I only promised *one* cunning plot. And that is all that the three of you will get."

Draco had been half-expecting the words earlier, but now they still came as a shock; Draco exchanged rapid glances with Granger, they would have been the obvious allies but their wishes were directly opposed—

"You mean," said Harry, "we have to all agree on a wish?"

"Oh, that would be *far* too much to ask," said Professor Quirrell. "The three of you have no common enemy, do you?"

And for one brief moment, so fast that Draco thought he might have imagined it, the Defense Professor's eyes flicked in the direction of Dumbledore.

"No," said Professor Quirrell, "I mean that I shall grant all three of your wishes using a single plot."

There was a confused silence.

"You can't do that," Harry said flatly from beside Draco. "Not even *I* can do that. Two of those wishes are mutually incompatible. It's *logically impossible*—" and then Harry cut himself off.

"You're a few years too young to tell me what I can't do, Mr. Potter," said Professor Quirrell, with a brief dry smile.

Then the Defense Professor turned back to the watching students. "Truthfully, I have no confidence in your ability to learn this day's lesson. Go home, and enjoy your time with your families, or what's left of them, while they still live. My own family is long since dead at the Dark Lord's hand. I shall see you all when classes resume."

In the speechless silence that resulted, Professor Quirrell already turning to walk off the stage, Draco heard the Defense Professor's voice

say, quietly and no longer amplified, "But you, Mr. Potter, I would speak to now."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

COORDINATION PROBLEMS, PART III

They had gone to the Defense Professor's office, and Professor Quirrell had sealed the door before he leaned back in his chair and spoke.

The Defense Professor's voice was very calm, and that unnerved Harry a good deal more than if Professor Quirrell had been shouting.

"I am trying," said Professor Quirrell quietly, "to make allowances for the fact that you are young. That I myself, at the same age, was a quite extraordinary fool. You speak with adult style and meddle in adult games, and sometimes I forget that you are only a meddler. I hope, Mr. Potter, that your childish meddling has not just killed you, ruined your country, and lost the next war."

It was very hard for Harry to control his breathing. "Professor Quirrell, I said a good deal less than I wished to say, but I had to say something. Your proposals are extremely alarming to anyone who has the slightest familiarity with Muggle history over the last century. The Italian fascists, some very nasty people, got their name from the *fasces,* a bundle of rods bound together to symbolize the idea that unity is strength—"

"So the nasty Italian fascists believed that unity is stronger than division," said Professor Quirrell. Sharpness was beginning to creep into his voice. "Perhaps they also believed that the sky is blue, and advocated a policy of not dropping rocks on your head."

Reversed stupidity is not intelligence; the world's stupidest person may say the sun is shining, but that doesn't make it dark out... "Fine, you're

right, that was an ad hominem argument, it's not wrong *because* the fascists said it. But Professor Quirrell, you can't have everyone in a country take the Mark of one dictator! It's a single point of failure! Look, I'll put it this way. Suppose the enemy just Imperiuses whoever controls the Mark—"

"Powerful wizards are not so easy to Imperius," said Professor Quirrell dryly. "And if you cannot find a worthy leader, you are in any case doomed. But worthy leaders do exist; the question is whether the people shall follow them."

Harry raked his hands through his hair in frustration. He wanted to call a time-out and make Professor Quirrell read *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* and then start the conversation over again. "I don't suppose that if I suggested democracy was a better form of government than dictatorship—"

"I see," said Professor Quirrell. His eyes closed briefly, then opened. "Mr. Potter, the stupidity of Quidditch is transparent to you because you did not grow up revering the game. If you had never heard of elections, Mr. Potter, and you simply *saw what is there*, what you saw would not please you. Look to our elected Minister of Magic. Is he the wisest, the strongest, the greatest of our nation? No; he is a buffoon who is owned in fee simple by Lucius Malfoy. Wizards went to the polls and chose between Cornelius Fudge and Tania Leach, who had competed with each other in a grand and entertaining contest after the *Daily Prophet,* which Lucius Malfoy also controls, decided that they were the only serious candidates. That Cornelius Fudge was genuinely selected as the best leader our country could offer is not a suggestion anyone could make with a straight face. It is no different in the Muggle world, from what I have heard and seen; the last Muggle newspaper I read mentioned that the previous President of the United States had been a retired movie actor. If you had not grown up with elections, Mr. Potter, they would be as transparently silly to you as Quidditch."

Harry sat there with his mouth open, struggling for words. "The point of elections isn't to produce the one best leader, it's to keep politicians scared enough of the voters that they don't go completely evil like dictators do—"

"The last war, Mr. Potter, was fought between the Dark Lord and Dumbledore. And while Dumbledore was a flawed leader who was losing the war, it is *ridiculous* to suggest that *any* of the Ministers of Magic elected during that period could have taken Dumbledore's place! Strength flows from powerful wizards and their followers, not from elections and the fools they elect. That is the lesson of magical Britain's recent history; and I doubt that the next war will teach you a lesson any different. *If* you survive it, Mr. Potter, which you will *not* do unless you abandon the enthusiastic illusions of childhood!"

"If you think there are no dangers in the course of action you advocate," said Harry, and despite everything his voice was growing sharp, "then that, too, is childish enthusiasm."

Harry stared grimly into Professor Quirrell's eyes, who stared back without blinking.

"Such dangers," said Professor Quirrell coldly, "are to be discussed in offices like this one, not in speeches. The fools who elected Cornelius Fudge are not interested in complications and caution. Present them with anything more nuanced than a rousing cheer, and you will face your war alone. *That*, Mr. Potter, was your childish error, which Draco Malfoy would not have made even when he was eight years old. It should have been obvious even to *you* that you should have stayed silent, and *consulted with me first*, not spoken your worries before the crowd!"

"I am no friend of Albus Dumbledore," said Harry, a cold in his voice to match Professor Quirrell's. "But he is no child, and he did not seem to think my concerns were childish, nor that I should have waited to speak them."

"Oh," said Professor Quirrell, "so you take your cues from the Headmaster now, do you?" and stood up from behind his desk.

⁂

When Blaise turned the corner on the way to the office, he saw that Professor Quirrell was already leaning against the wall.

"Blaise Zabini," said the Defense Professor, straightening; his eyes were set like dark stones within his face, and his voice sent a shiver of fear down Blaise's spine.

He can't do anything against me, I just have to remember that—

"I believe," said Professor Quirrell, in a clear, cold voice, "that I have already guessed the name of your employer. But I would hear it from your own lips, and tell me also the price that bought you."

Blaise knew he was sweating under his robes, and that the moisture would be already visible on his forehead. "I got a chance to show I was better than all three generals, and I took it. A lot of people hate me now, but there're also plenty of Slytherins who'll love me for it. What makes you think I'm—"

"You did not devise the plan of today's battle, Mr. Zabini. Tell me who did."

Blaise swallowed hard. "Well... I mean, in that case... then you already know who did, right? The only one who's that crazy is Dumbledore. And he'll protect me if you try to do anything."

"Indeed. Tell me the price." The Defense Professor's eyes were still hard.

"It's my cousin Kimberly," Blaise said, swallowing again and trying to control his voice. "She's real, and she's really being bullied, Potter checked that, he wasn't dumb. Only Dumbledore said that he'd nudged the bullies into doing it, just for the plan, and if I worked for *him* she'd be fine afterward, but if I *did* go with Potter, there was more trouble Kimberly could get into!"

Professor Quirrell was silent for a long moment.

"I see," Professor Quirrell said, his voice now much milder. "Mr. Zabini, should such an event occur again, you may contact me directly. I have my own ways of protecting my friends. Now, a final question: Even with all the power you took into your hands, forcing a tie would have been difficult. Did Dumbledore instruct you as to who should win otherwise?"

"Sunshine," said Blaise.

Professor Quirrell nodded. "As I thought." The Defense Professor sighed. "In your future career, Mr. Zabini, I do not suggest trying any

plots that complicated. They have a tendency to fail."

"Um, I said that to the Headmaster, actually," Blaise said, "and he said that was why it was important to have more than one plot going at a time."

Professor Quirrell passed a weary hand across his forehead. "It's a wonder the Dark Lord didn't go mad from fighting *him.* You may go on to your meeting with the Headmaster, Mr. Zabini. I will say nothing of this, but if the Headmaster should somehow discover that we have spoken, remember my standing offer to give you what protection I can. You are dismissed."

Blaise didn't wait for any other word, just turned and fled.

Professor Quirrell waited for a time, and then said, "Go ahead, Mr. Potter."

Harry tore the Cloak of Invisibility off his head and stuffed into his pouch. He was trembing with so much rage he could hardly speak. "He *what?* He did *what?*"

"You should have deduced it yourself, Mr. Potter," Professor Quirrell said mildly. "You must learn to blur your vision until you can see the forest obscured by the trees. Anyone who heard the stories about you, and who did not know that you were the mysterious Boy-Who-Lived, could easily deduce your ownership of an invisibility cloak. Step back from these events, blur away their details, and what do we observe? There was a great rivalry between students, and their competition ended in a perfect tie. That sort of thing only happens in stories, Mr. Potter, and there is one person in this school who thinks in stories. There was a strange and complicated plot, which you should have realized was uncharacteristic of the young Slytherin you faced. But there is a person in this school who deals in plots that elaborate, and his name is not Zabini. And I did warn you that there was a quadruple agent; you knew that Zabini was at least a triple agent, and you should have guessed a high

chance that it was he. No, I will not declare the battle invalid. All three of you failed the test, and lost to your common enemy."

Harry didn't care about tests at this point. "Dumbledore *blackmailed* Zabini by *threatening his cousin?* Just to make our battle end in a tie? *Why?*"

Professor Quirrell gave a mirthless laugh. "Perhaps the Headmaster thought the rivalry was good for his pet hero and wished to see it continue. For the greater good, you understand. Or perhaps he was simply mad. You see, Mr. Potter, everyone knows that Dumbledore's madness is a mask, that he is sane pretending to be insane. They pride themselves on that clever insight, and knowing the secret explanation, they stop looking. It does not occur to them that it is *also* possible to have a mask behind the mask, to be insane pretending to be sane pretending to be insane. And I am afraid, Mr. Potter, that I have urgent business elsewhere, and must depart; but I should strongly advise you not to take your cues from Albus Dumbledore when fighting a war. Until later, Mr. Potter."

And the Defense Professor inclined his head with some irony, and then strode off in the same direction Zabini had fled, while Harry was still standing in open-mouthed shock.

Aftermath: Harry Potter.

Harry trudged slowly toward the Ravenclaw dorm, eyes unseeing of walls, paintings, or other students; he went up stairs and down ramps without slowing, speeding, or noticing where he trod.

It had taken him more than a minute after Professor Quirrell's departure to realize that his only source of information about Dumbledore being involved was (a) Blaise Zabini, who he would have to be an absolute gaping idiot to trust again, and (b) Professor Quirrell, who could have easily faked a plot in Dumbledore's style, and who might also think that a little student rivalry was a fine thing; and who had, if you stepped back and blurred out the details, just proposed turning the country into a magical dictatorship.

And it was also possible that Dumbledore *was* the one behind Zabini, and that Professor Quirrell had been sincerely trying to fight the Dark

Mark in kind, and prevent the repetition of a performance he saw as pathetic. Trying to make sure that Harry didn't end up fighting the Dark Lord alone, while everyone else hid, frightened, trying to stay out of the line of fire, waiting for Harry to save them.

But the truth was...

Well...

Harry was sort of okay with that.

It was, he knew, the kind of thing that was supposed to make heroes resentful and bitter.

To heck with that. Harry was very much in favor of everyone else *staying out of danger* while the Boy-Who-Lived took down the Dark Lord by himself, plus or minus a small number of companions. If the next conflict with the Dark Lord got to the point of a Second Wizarding War that killed lots of people and embroiled a whole country, that would mean Harry had *already failed*.

And if afterward a war broke out between wizards and Muggles, it didn't matter who won, Harry would have already failed by letting it get that far. Besides, who said the societies couldn't peacefully integrate when the secrecy inevitably broke down? (Though Harry could hear Professor Quirrell's dry voice in his mind, asking him if he was a fool, and saying all the obvious things...) And if mages and Muggles couldn't live in peace, then Harry would combine magic and science and figure out how to evacuate all the wizards to Mars or somewhere, instead of letting a war break out.

Because if it did come down to a war of extermination...

That was the thing Professor Quirrell hadn't realized, the one most important question he'd forgotten to ask his young general.

The real reason why Harry had no intention of being argued into endorsing a Light Mark, no matter *how* much it would help him in his fight against the Dark Lord.

One Dark Lord and fifty Marked followers had been a peril to all of magical Britain.

If all Britain took the Mark of a strong leader, they would be a peril to the whole magical world.

And if the whole wizarding world took a single Mark, they would be a danger to the rest of humanity.

No one knew quite how many wizards there were in the world. He'd done a few estimates with Hermione and come up with numbers in the rough range of a million.

But there were six billion Muggles.

If it came down to a final war...

Professor Quirrell had forgotten to ask Harry which side he would protect.

A scientific civilization, reaching outward, looking upward, knowing that its destiny was to grasp the stars.

And a magical civilization, slowly fading as knowledge was lost, still governed by a nobility that saw Muggles as not quite human.

It was a terribly sad feeling, but not one that held any hint of doubt.

Aftermath: Blaise Zabini.

Blaise strolled through the hallways with careful, self-imposed slowness, his heart beating wildly as he tried to calm down—

"Ahem," said a dry, whispering voice from a shadowy alcove as he passed.

Blaise jumped, but he didn't scream.

Slowly, he turned.

In that small, shadowy corner was a black cloak so wide and billowing that it was impossible to determine whether the figure beneath was male or female, and atop the cloak a broad-brimmed black hat, and a black mist seemed to gather beneath it and obscure the face of whoever or whatever might lie beneath.

"Report," whispered Mr. Hat and Cloak.

"I said just what you told me to," said Blaise. His voice was a little calmer now that he wasn't lying to anyone. "And Professor Quirrell reacted just the way you expected."

The broad black hat tilted and straightened, as though the head below had nodded. "Excellent," said the unidentifiable whisper. "The reward I promised you is already on its way to your mother, by owl."

Blaise hesitated, but his curiosity was eating him alive. "Can I ask now why you want to cause trouble between Professor Quirrell and Dumbledore?" The Headmaster hadn't had anything to do with the Gryffindor bullies that Blaise knew about, and besides helping Kimberly, the Headmaster had also offered to make Professor Binns give him excellent marks in History of Magic even if he turned in blank parchments for his homework, though he'd still have to attend class and pretend to hand them in. Actually Blaise would have betrayed all three generals for free, and never mind his cousin either, but he'd seen no need to say that.

The broad black hat cocked to one side, as if to convey a quizzical stare. "Tell me, friend Blaise, did it occur to you that traitors who betray so many times over often meet with ill ends?"

"Nope," said Blaise, looking straight into the black mist under the hat. "Everyone knows that nothing *really* bad ever happens to students in Hogwarts."

Mr. Hat and Cloak gave a whispery chuckle. "Indeed," said the whisper. "With the murder of one student five decades ago being the exception that proves the rule, since Salazar Slytherin would have keyed his monster into the ancient wards at a higher level than the Headmaster himself."

Blaise stared at the black mist, now beginning to feel a little uneasy. But it ought to take a Hogwarts professor to do anything significant to him without setting off alarms. Quirrell and Snape were the only professors who'd do something like this, and Quirrell wouldn't care about fooling *himself*, and Snape wouldn't hurt one of his own Slytherins... would he?

"No, friend Blaise," whispered the black mist, "I only wished to advise you never to try anything like this in your adult life. So many betrayals would certainly lead to at least one vengeance."

"My *mother* never got any vengeances," said Blaise proudly. "Even though she married *seven* husbands and every single one of them died mysteriously and left her lots of money."

"Really?" said the whisper. "However did she persuade the seventh to marry her after he heard what happened to the first six?"

"I asked Mum that," said Blaise, "and she said I couldn't know until I was old enough, and I asked her how old was old enough, and she said, older than her."

Again the whispery chuckle. "Well then, friend Blaise, my congratulations on having followed in your mother's footsteps. Go, and if you say nothing of this, we will not meet again."

Blaise backed uneasily away, feeling an odd reluctance to turn his back.

The hat tilted. "Oh, come now, little Slytherin. If you were truly the equal of Harry Potter or Draco Malfoy, you would have already realized that my hinted threats were just to ensure your silence before Albus. Had I intended to harm, I would not have hinted; had I said nothing, *then* you should have worried."

Blaise straightened, feeling a little insulted, and nodded to Mr. Hat and Cloak; then turned decisively and strode off toward his meeting with the Headmaster.

He'd been hoping to the very end that someone *else* would show up and give him a chance to sell out Mr. Hat and Cloak.

But then Mum hadn't betrayed seven different husbands at the *same time.* When you looked at it *that* way, he was still doing better than her.

And Blaise Zabini went on walking toward the Headmaster's office, smiling, content to be a quintuple agent—

For a moment the boy stumbled, but then straightened, shaking off the odd feeling of disorientation.

And Blaise Zabini went on walking toward the Headmaster's office, smiling, content to be a quadruple agent.

Aftermath: Hermione Granger.

The messenger didn't approach her until she was alone.

Hermione was just leaving the girl's bathroom where she sometimes hid to think, and a bright shining cat leaped out of nowhere and said, "Miss Granger?"

She let out a little shriek before she realized the cat had spoken in Professor McGonagall's voice.

Even so she hadn't been frightened, only startled; the cat was bright and brilliant and beautiful, glowing with a white silver radiance like moon-colored sunlight, and she couldn't imagine being scared.

"What are you?" said Hermione.

"This is a message from Professor McGonagall," said the cat, still in the Professor's voice. "Can you come to my office, and not speak of this to anyone?"

"I'll be there right away," said Hermione, still surprised, and the cat leaped and vanished; only it didn't vanish, it traveled away somehow; or that was what her mind said, even though her eyes just saw it disappear.

By the time Hermione had got to the office of her favorite professor, her mind was all a-whirl with speculations. Was there something wrong with her Transfiguration scores? But then why would Professor McGonagall say not to tell anyone? It was probably about Harry practicing his partial Transfiguration...

Professor McGonagall's face looked worried, not stern, as Hermione seated herself in front of the desk—trying to keep her eyes from going to the nest of cubbyholes containing Professor McGonagall's homework, she'd always wondered what sort of work grownups had to do to keep the school running and whether they could use any help from her—

"Miss Granger," said Professor McGonagall, "let me start by saying that I already know about the Headmaster asking you to make that wish—"

"He *told* you?" blurted Hermione in startlement. The Headmaster had said no one else was supposed to know!

Professor McGonagall paused, looked at Hermione, and gave a sad little chuckle. "It's good to see Mr. Potter hasn't corrupted you too much. Miss Granger, you aren't supposed to *admit* anything just because I say I know. As it happens, the Headmaster did *not* tell me, I simply know him too well."

Hermione was blushing furiously now.

"It's fine, Miss Granger!" said Professor McGonagall hastily. "You're a Ravenclaw in your first year, nobody expects you to be a Slytherin."

That *really* stung.

"Fine," said Hermione with some acerbity, "I'll go ask Harry Potter for Slytherin lessons, then."

"That *wasn't* what I wanted to..." said Professor McGonagall, and her voice trailed off. "Miss Granger, I'm worried about this *because* young Ravenclaw girls shouldn't have to be Slytherins! If the Headmaster asks you to get involved in something you're not comfortable with, Miss Granger, it really is all right to say no. And if you're feeling pressured, please tell the Headmaster that you would like me to be there, or that you would like to ask me first."

Hermione's eyes were very wide. "Does the Headmaster do things that are wrong?"

Professor McGonagall looked a little sad at that. "Not on purpose, Miss Granger, but I think... well, it probably *is* true that sometimes the Headmaster has trouble remembering what it's like to be a child. Even when he was a child, I'm sure he must have been brilliant, and strong of mind and heart, with courage enough for three Gryffindors. Sometimes the Headmaster asks too much of his young students, Miss Granger, or isn't careful enough not to hurt them. He is a good man, but sometimes his plotting can go too far."

"But it's *good* for students to be strong and have courage," said Hermione. "That's why you suggested Gryffindor for me, wasn't it?"

Professor McGonagall smiled wryly. "Perhaps I was only being selfish, wanting you for my own House. Did the Sorting Hat offer you—no, I should not have asked."

"It told me I might go anywhere but Slytherin," said Hermione, "at least in the beginning." She'd *almost* asked why she wasn't good enough for Slytherin, before she'd managed to stop herself... "So I *have* courage, Professor!"

Professor McGonagall leaned forward over her desk. The worry was showing plainer on her face now. "Miss Granger, it's not about courage, it's about what's healthy for young girls! The Headmaster is drawing you into his plots, Harry Potter is giving you his secrets to keep, and now you're making alliances with Draco Malfoy! And I promised your mother that you would be safe at Hogwarts!"

Hermione just didn't know what to say to that. But the thought was occurring to her that Professor McGonagall might not have been warning her if she'd been a boy in Gryffindor instead of a girl in Ravenclaw and *that* was, well... "I'll try to be good," she said, "and I won't let anyone tell me otherwise."

Professor McGonagall pressed her hands over her eyes. When she took them away, her lined face looked very old. "Yes," she said in a whisper, "you would have done well in my House. Stay safe, Miss Granger, and be careful. And if you are ever worried or uncomfortable about anything, please come to me at once. I won't keep you any longer."

Aftermath: Draco Malfoy.

Neither of them really wanted to do anything complicated that Saturday, not after fighting a battle earlier. So Draco was just sitting in an unused classroom and trying to read a book called *Thinking Physics.* It was one of the most fascinating things that Draco had ever read in his life, at least the parts he could understand, at least when the *accursed idiot* who refused to let his books out of his sight could manage to *shut up* and let Draco *concentrate*—

"Hermione Granger is a *muuudbloood,*" sang Harry Potter from where he sat at a nearby desk, reading a far more advanced book of his own.

"I know what you're trying to do," said Draco calmly without looking up from the pages. "It's not going to work. We're still ganging up and crushing you."

"A *Maaaalfoy* is working with a *muuudblood,* what will all your father's *frieeeends* think—"

"They'll think Malfoys aren't as easily manipulated as *you* seem to believe, *Potter!*"

The Defense Professor was crazier than Dumbledore, no future saviour of the world could ever be this *childish* and *undignified* at any age.

"Hey, Draco, you know what's really going to suck? *You* know that Hermione Granger has two copies of the magical allele, just like you

and just like me, but all your classmates in Slytherin don't know that and *yooouuu're* not allowed to *explaaaaain*—"

Draco's fingers were whitening where they gripped the book. Being beaten and spat upon couldn't possibly require this much self-control, and if he didn't get back at Harry soon, he was going to do something incriminating—

"So what *did* you wish for the first time?" said Draco.

Harry didn't say anything, so Draco looked up from his book, and felt a twinge of malicious satisfaction at the sad look on Harry's face.

"Um," Harry said. "A lot of people asked me that, but I don't think Professor Quirrell would have wanted me to talk about it."

Draco put a serious look on his own face. "You can talk about it with *me*. It's probably not important compared to the other secrets you've told me, and what else are friends for?" *That's right, I'm your friend! Feel guilty!*

"It wasn't really all that interesting," Harry said with obviously artificial lightness. "Just, *I wish Professor Quirrell would teach Battle Magic again next year.*"

Harry sighed, and looked back down at his book.

And said, after another few seconds, "Your father's probably going to be pretty upset with you this Christmas, but if you promise him that you'll betray the mudblood girl and wipe out her army, everything will go back to being all right, and you'll still get your Christmas presents."

Draco calmly closed his fascinating book, stood up, and walked out of the classroom. From behind him, Draco heard a call of "Wait, Draco, I'm sorry—" but it was much too late for that.

Maybe if he and Granger asked Professor Quirrell extra politely and used some of their Quirrell points, the two of them would be allowed to do something more interesting to General Chaos than putting him to sleep.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

STATUS DIFFERENTIALS

Wrenching disorientation, that was how it felt to walk out of Platform Nine and Three-Quarters into the rest of Earth, the world that Harry had once thought was the only real world. People dressed in casual shirts and pants, instead of the more dignified robes of wizards and witches. Scattered bits of trash here and there around the benches. A forgotten smell, the fumes of burned gasoline, raw and sharp in the air. The ambiance of the King's Cross train station, less bright and cheerful than Hogwarts or Diagon Alley; the people seemed smaller, more afraid, and likely would have eagerly traded their problems for a dark wizard to fight. Harry wanted to cast *Scourgify* for the dirt, and *Everto* for the garbage, and if he'd known the spell, a Bubble-Head Charm so he wouldn't have to breathe the air. But he couldn't use his wand, in this place...

This, Harry realized, must be what it felt like to go from a First World country to a Third World country.

Only it was the Zeroth World which Harry had left, the wizarding world, of Cleansing Charms and house elves; where, between the healer's arts and your own magic, you could hit one hundred and seventy before old age really started catching up with you.

And nonmagical London, Muggle Earth, to which Harry had temporarily returned. This was where Mum and Dad would live out the rest of their lives, unless technology leapfrogged over wizardry's quality of life, or something deeper in the world changed.

Without even thinking about it, Harry's head turned and his eyes darted behind him to see the wooden trunk that was scurrying after

him, unnoticed by any Muggles, the clawed tentacles offering quick confirmation that, yes, he hadn't just imagined it all...

And then there was the other reason for the tight feeling in his chest.

His parents didn't know.

They didn't know *anything*.

They didn't know...

"Harry?" called a thin, blonde woman whose perfectly smooth and unblemished skin made her look a good deal younger than thirty-three; and Harry realized with a start that it *was* magic, he hadn't known the signs before but he could see them now. And whatever sort of potion lasted that long, it must have been terribly dangerous, because most witches didn't do that to themselves, they weren't that desperate...

There was water gathering in Harry's eyes.

"*Harry*?" yelled an older-looking man with a paunch gathering about his stomach, dressed with ostentatious academic carelessness in a black vest thrown over a dark grey-green shirt, someone who would always be a professor anywhere he went, who would certainly have been one of the most brilliant wizards of his generation, if he'd been born with two copies of that gene, instead of zero...

Harry raised his hand and waved to them. He couldn't speak. He couldn't speak at all.

They came over to him, not running, but at a steady, dignified walk; that was how fast Professor Michael Verres-Evans walked, and Mrs. Petunia Evans-Verres wasn't about to walk any faster.

The smile on his father's face wasn't very wide, but then his father never was given to huge smiles; it was, at least, as wide as Harry had ever seen it, wider than when a new grant came in, or when one of his students got a position, and you couldn't ask for a wider smile than that.

Mum was blinking hard, and she was trying to smile but not doing a very good job.

"So!" said his father as he came striding up. "Made any revolutionary discoveries yet?"

Of course Dad thought he was joking.

It hadn't hurt quite so much when his parents didn't believe in him, back when no one *else* had believed in him either, back when Harry

hadn't *known* how it felt to be taken seriously by people like Headmaster Dumbledore and Professor Quirrell.

And that was when Harry realized that the Boy-Who-Lived only existed in magical Britain, that there wasn't any such person in Muggle London, just a cute little eleven-year-old boy going home for Christmas.

"Excuse me," Harry said, his voice trembling, "I'm going to break down and cry now, it doesn't mean there was anything wrong at school."

Harry started to move forward, and then stopped, torn between hugging his father and hugging his mother, he didn't want either one to feel slighted or that Harry loved them more than the other—

"You," said his father, "are a very silly boy, Mr. Verres," and he gently took Harry by the shoulders and pushed him into the arms of his mother, who was kneeling down, tears already streaking her cheek.

"Hello, Mum," Harry said with his voice wavering, "I'm back." And he hugged her, amid the noisy mechanical sounds and the smell of burned gasoline; and Harry started crying, because he knew that nothing *could* go back, least of all him.

The sky was completely dark, and stars were coming out, by the time they negotiated the Christmas traffic to the university town that was Oxford, and parked in the driveway of the small, dingy-looking old house that their family used to keep the rain off their books.

As they walked up the brief stretch of pavement leading to the front door, they passed a series of flower-pots holding small, dim electric lights (dim since they had to recharge themselves off solar power during the day), and the lights lit up just as they passed. The hard part had been finding motion sensors that were waterproof and triggered at just the right distance...

In Hogwarts there were real torches like that.

And then the front door opened and Harry stepped into their living-room, blinking hard.

Every inch of wall space is covered by a bookcase. Each bookcase has six shelves, going almost to the ceiling. Some bookshelves are stacked to the brim with hardcover books: science, math, history, and everything else. Other shelves have two layers of paperback science fiction, with the back layer of books propped up on old tissue boxes or two-by-fours, so that you can see the back layer of books above the books in front. And it still isn't enough. Books are overflowing onto the tables and the sofas and making little heaps under the windows...

The Verres household was just as he'd left it, only with more books, which was also just how he'd left it.

And a Christmas tree, naked and undecorated just two days before Christmas Eve, which threw Harry briefly before he realized, with a warm feeling blossoming in his chest, that of course his parents had *waited*.

"We took the bed out of your room to make room for more bookcases," said his father. "You can sleep in your trunk, right?"

"*You* can sleep in my trunk," said Harry.

"That reminds me," said his father. "What *did* they end up doing about your sleep cycle?"

"Magic," Harry said, making a beeline for the door that opened upon his bedroom, just in case Dad *wasn't* joking...

"That's not an explanation!" said Professor Verres-Evans, just as Harry shouted, "*You used up all the open space on my bookcases?*"

Harry had spent the 23rd of December shopping for Muggle things that he couldn't just Transfigure; his father had been busy and had said that Harry would need to walk or take the bus, which had suited Harry just fine. Some of the people at the hardware store had given Harry questioning looks, but he'd said with an innocent voice that his father was shopping nearby and was very busy and had sent him to get some things (holding up a list in carefully adult-looking half-illegible handwriting); and in the end, money was money.

They had all decorated the Christmas tree together, and Harry had put a tiny dancing fairy on top (two Sickles, five Knuts at Gambol & Japes).

Gringotts had readily exchanged Galleons for paper money, but they didn't seem to have any simple way to turn larger quantities of gold into tax-free, unsuspicious Muggle money in a numbered Swiss bank account. This had rather spiked Harry's plan to turn most of the money he'd self-stolen into a sensible mix of 60% international index funds and 40% Berkshire Hathaway. For the moment, Harry had diversified his assets a little further by sneaking out late at night, invisible and Time-Turned, and burying one hundred golden Galleons in the backyard. He'd always always *always* wanted to do that anyway.

Some of December 24th had been spent with the Professor reading Harry's books and asking questions. Most of the experiments his father had suggested were impractical, at least for the moment; of those remaining, Harry had done many of them already. ("Yes, Dad, I checked what happened if Hermione was given a changed pronunciation and she didn't know whether it was changed, that was the very first experiment I did, Dad!")

The last question Harry's father had asked, looking up from *Magical Draughts and Potions* with an expression of bewildered disgust, was whether it all made sense if you were a wizard; and Harry had answered no.

Whereupon his father had declared that magic was unscientific.

Harry was still a little shocked at the idea of pointing to a section of *reality* and calling it unscientific. Dad seemed to think that the conflict between his intuitions and the universe meant that the universe had a problem.

(Then again, there were lots of physicists who thought that quantum mechanics was weird, instead of quantum mechanics being normal and them being weird.)

Harry had shown his mother the healer's kit he'd bought to keep in their house, though most of the potions wouldn't work on Dad. Mum had stared at the kit in a way that made Harry ask whether Mum's sister had ever bought anything like that for Grandpa Edwin and Grandma

Elaine. And when Mum still hadn't answered, Harry had said hastily that she must have just never thought of it. And then, finally, he'd fled the room.

Lily Evans probably *hadn't* thought of it, that was the sad thing. Harry knew that other people had a tendency to not-think about painful subjects, in the same way they had a tendency not to deliberately rest their hands on red-hot stove burners; and Harry was starting to suspect that most Muggleborns rapidly acquired a tendency to not-think about their family, who were all going to die before they reached their first century anyway.

Not that Harry had any intention of letting *that* happen, of course.

And then it was late in the day on December 24th and they were driving off for their Christmas Eve dinner.

The house was huge, not by Hogwarts standards, but certainly by the standards of what you could get if your father was a distinguished professor trying to live in Oxford. Two stories of brick gleaming in the setting sun, with windows on top of windows and one tall window that went up much further than glass should go, that was going to be one huge living room...

Harry took a deep breath, and rang the doorbell.

There was a distant call of "Honey, can you get it?"

This was followed by a slow patter of approaching steps.

And then the door opened to reveal a genial man, of fat and rosy cheeks and thinning hair, in a blue button-down shirt straining slightly at the seams.

"Dr. Granger?" Harry's father said briskly, before Harry could even speak. "I'm Michael, and this is Petunia and our son Harry. The food's in the magical trunk," and Dad made a vague gesture behind him—not quite in the direction of the trunk, as it happened.

"Yes, please, come in," said Leo Granger. He stepped forward and took the wine bottle from the Professor's outstretched hands, with a

muttered "Thank you," and then stepped back and waved at the living room. "Have a seat. And," his head turning down to address Harry, "all the toys are downstairs in the basement, I'm sure Herm will be down shortly, it's the first door on your right," and pointed toward a hallway.

Harry just looked at him for a moment, conscious that he was blocking his parents from coming in.

"Toys?" said Harry in a bright, high-pitched voice, with his eyes wide. "I love toys!"

There was an intake of breath from his mother behind him, and Harry strode into the house, managing not to stomp too hard as he walked.

The living room was every bit as large as it had looked from outside, with a huge vaulted ceiling dangling a gigantic chandelier, and a Christmas tree that must have been murder to maneuver through the door. The lower levels of the tree were thoroughly and carefully decorated in neat patterns of red and green and gold, with a newfound sprinkling of blue and bronze; the heights that only a grownup could reach were carelessly, randomly draped with strings of lights and wreaths of tinsel. A hallway extended until it terminated in the cabinetry of a kitchen, and wooden stairs with polished metal railings stretched up toward a second floor.

"Gosh!" Harry said. "This is a big house! I hope I don't get lost in here!"

⁂

Dr. Roberta Granger was feeling rather nervous as dinner approached. The turkey and the roast, their own contributions to the common project, were steadily cooking away in the oven; the other dishes were to be brought by their guests, the Verres family, who had adopted a boy named Harry. Who was known to the wizarding world as the Boy-Who-Lived. And who was also the only boy that Hermione had ever called "cute", or noticed at all, really.

The Verreses had said that Hermione was the only child in Harry's age group whose existence their son had ever acknowledged in any way whatsoever.

And it might've been jumping the gun just a little; but both couples had a sneaking suspicion that wedding bells might be in the offing a few years down the road.

So while Christmas Day would be spent, as always, with her husband's family, they'd decided to spend Christmas Eve meeting their daughter's possible future in-laws.

The doorbell rang while she was right in the middle of basting the turkey, and she raised her voice and shouted, "*Honey, can you get it?*"

There was a brief groan of a chair and its occupant, and then there was the sound of her husband's heavy footsteps and the door swinging open.

"Dr. Granger?" said an older man's brisk voice. "I'm Michael, and this is Petunia and our son Harry. The food's in the magical trunk."

"Yes, please, come in," said her husband, followed by a muttered "Thank you" that indicated some sort of present had been accepted, and "Have a seat." Then Leo's voice altered to a tone of artificial enthusiasm, and said, "And all the toys are downstairs in the basement, I'm sure Herm will be down shortly, it's the first door on your right."

There was a brief pause.

Then a young boy's bright voice said, "Toys? I love toys!"

There was the sound of footsteps entering the house, and then the same bright voice said, "Gosh! This is a big house! I hope I don't get lost in here!"

Roberta closed up the oven, smiling. She'd been a bit worried about the way Hermione's letters had described the Boy-Who-Lived—though certainly her daughter hadn't said anything indicating that Harry Potter was *dangerous;* nothing like the dark hints written in the books Roberta had bought, supposedly for Hermione, during their trip to Diagon Alley. Her daughter hadn't said much at all, only that Harry talked like he came out of a book, and Hermione was studying harder than she ever had in her life just to stay ahead of him in class. But from the sound of it, Harry Potter was an ordinary eleven-year-old boy.

She got to the front door just as her daughter came clattering frantically down the stairs at a speed that didn't look safe at all, Hermione had claimed that witches were more resistant to falls but Roberta wasn't quite sure she believed that—

Roberta took in her first sight of Professor and Mrs. Verres, who were both looking rather nervous, just as the boy with the legendary scar on his forehead turned to her daughter and said, now in a lower voice, "Well met on this fairest of evenings, Miss Granger." His hand stretched back, as though offering his parents on a silver platter. "I present to you my father, Professor Michael Verres-Evans, and my mother, Mrs. Petunia Evans-Verres."

And as Roberta's mouth was gaping open, the boy turned back to his parents and said, now in that bright voice again, "Mum, Dad, this is Hermione! She's really smart!"

"*Harry!*" hissed her daughter. "Stop that!"

The boy swiveled again to regard Hermione. "I'm afraid, Miss Granger," the boy said gravely, "that you and I have been exiled to the labyrinthine recesses of the basement. Let us leave them to their adult conversations, which would no doubt soar far above our own childish intellects, and resume our ongoing discussion of the implications of Humean projectivism for Transfiguration."

"Excuse us, please," said her daughter in a very firm tone, and grabbed the boy by his left sleeve, and dragged him into the hallway—Roberta swiveled helplessly to track them as they went past her, the boy gave her a cheery wave—and then Hermione pulled the boy into the basement access and slammed the door behind her.

"I, ah, I apologize for..." said Mrs. Verres in a faltering voice.

"I'm sorry," said the Professor, smiling fondly, "Harry can be a bit touchy about that sort of thing. But I expect he's right about us not being interested in their conversation."

Is he dangerous? Roberta wanted to ask, but she kept her silence and tried to think of subtler questions. Her husband beside her was chuckling, as if he'd found what they'd just seen funny, rather than frightening.

The most terrible Dark Lord in history had tried to kill that boy, and the burnt husk of his body had been found next to the crib.

Her possible future son-in-law.

Roberta had been increasingly apprehensive about giving her daughter over to witchcraft—especially after she'd read the books, put the dates together, and realized that her magical mother had probably been killed at the height of Grindelwald's terror, *not* died giving birth to her as her father had always claimed. But Professor McGonagall had made other visits after her first trip, to "see how Miss Granger is doing"; and Roberta couldn't help but think that if Hermione said her parents were being troublesome about her witching career, something would be done to *fix* them...

Roberta put her best smile on her face, and did what she could to spread some pretended Christmas cheer.

The dining room table was much longer than six people—er, four people and two children—really needed, but all of it was draped with a tablecloth of fine white linen, and the dishes had been needlessly transferred to fancy serving plates, which at least were of stainless steel rather than real silver.

Harry was having a bit of trouble concentrating on the turkey.

The conversation had turned to Hogwarts, naturally; and it'd been obvious to Harry that his parents were hoping that Hermione would trip up and say more about Harry's school life than Harry had been telling them. And either Hermione had realized this, or she was just automatically steering clear of anything that might prove troublesome.

So *Harry* was fine.

But unfortunately Harry had made the mistake of owling his parents with all sorts of facts about Hermione that she hadn't told her *own* parents.

Like that she was general of an army in their after-school activities.

Hermione's mother had looked very alarmed, and Harry had quickly interrupted and done his best to explain that all the spells were stunners, Professor Quirrell was always watching, and the existence of

magical healing meant that lots of things were much less dangerous than they sounded, at which point Hermione had kicked him hard under the table. Thankfully Harry's father, who Harry had to admit was better than him at some things, had announced with firm professorial authority that he hadn't worried at all, since he couldn't imagine children being allowed to do it if it was dangerous.

That wasn't why Harry was having trouble enjoying dinner, though.

...the problem with feeling sorry for yourself was that it never took any time at all to find someone else who had it worse.

Dr. Leo Granger had asked, at one point, whether that nice teacher who'd seemed to like Hermione, Professor McGonagall, was awarding her lots of points in school.

Hermione had said yes, with an apparently genuine smile.

Harry had managed, with some effort, to stop himself from icily pointing out that Professor McGonagall would never show favoritism to any Hogwarts student, and that Hermione was getting lots of points because she'd earned *every, single, one.*

At another point, Leo Granger had offered the table his opinion that Hermione was very smart and could have gone to medical school and become a dentist, if not for the whole witch business.

Hermione had smiled again, and a quick glance had prevented Harry from suggesting Hermione might also have been an *internationally famous scientist*, and asking whether that thought would've occurred to the Grangers if they'd had a *son* instead of a *daughter*, or if it was unacceptable either way for their offspring to do better than them.

But Harry was rapidly reaching his boiling point.

And becoming a *lot* more appreciative of the fact that his own father had *always* done everything he could to support Harry's development as a prodigy and *always* encouraged him to reach higher and *never* belittled a single one of his accomplishments, even if a child prodigy was still just a child. Was this the sort of household he could have ended up in, if Mum had married Vernon Dursley?

Harry was doing what he could, though.

"And she's really beating you in *all* your classes except broomstick riding and Transfiguration?" said Professor Michael Verres-Evans.

"Yes," Harry said with forced calm, as he cut himself another bite of Christmas Eve turkey. "By solid margins, in most of them." There were other circumstances under which Harry would have been more reluctant to admit that, which was why he hadn't gotten around to telling his father until now.

"Hermione has always been quite good in school," said Dr. Leo Granger in a satisfied tone.

"Harry competes at the national level!" said Professor Michael Verres-Evans.

"Dear!" said Petunia.

Hermione was giggling, and that wasn't making Harry feel any better about her situation. It didn't seem to bother Hermione and *that bothered Harry.*

"I'm not embarrassed to lose to her, Dad," Harry said. Right at this moment he wasn't. "Did I mention that she memorized all her schoolbooks before the first day of class? And yes, I tested it."

"Is that, ah, *usual* for her?" Professor Verres-Evans said to the Grangers.

"Oh, yes, Hermione's always memorizing things," said Dr. Roberta Granger with a cheerful smile. "She knows every recipe in all my cookbooks by heart. I miss her every time I make dinner."

Judging by the look on his father's face, Dad was feeling at least some of what Harry felt.

"Don't worry, Dad," Harry said, "she's getting all the advanced material she can take, now. Her teachers at Hogwarts know she's smart, *unlike her parents!*"

His voice had risen on the last three words, and even as all faces turned to stare at him and Hermione kicked him again, Harry knew that he'd blown it, but it was too much, just way too much.

"Of course we know she's smart," said Leo Granger, starting to look offended at the child who'd had the temerity to raise his voice at their dinner table.

"You don't have the tiniest idea," said Harry, the ice now leaking into his voice. "You think she reads a lot of books and it's cute, right? You see a perfect report card and you think it's good that she's doing

well in class. Your daughter is the most talented witch of her generation and the brightest star of Hogwarts, and someday, Dr. and Dr. Granger, the fact that you were her parents will be the only reason that history remembers you!"

Hermione, who had calmly got up from her seat and walked around the table, chose that moment to grab Harry's shirt by the shoulder and pull him out of his chair. Harry let himself be pulled, but as Hermione dragged him away, he said, raising his voice even louder, "It is entirely possible that in a thousand years, the fact that Hermione Granger's parents were dentists will be the only reason anyone remembers dentistry!"

⁂

Roberta stared at where her daughter had just dragged the Boy-Who-Lived out of the room with a patient look upon her young face.

"I'm terribly sorry," said Professor Verres with an amused smile. "But please don't worry, Harry always talks like that. Aren't they just like a married couple already?"

The frightening thing was that they *were.*

⁂

Harry had been expecting a rather severe lecture from Hermione.

But after Hermione pulled them into the basement access and closed the door behind them, she'd turned around—

—and was smiling, genuinely so far as Harry could tell.

"Please don't, Harry," she said in a soft voice. "Even though it's very nice of you. Everything's fine."

Harry just looked at her. "How can you stand it?" he said. He had to keep his voice quiet, they didn't want the parents to hear, but it rose in pitch if not in volume. "*How can you stand it?*"

Hermione shrugged, and said, "Because that's the way parents *should* be?"

"No," Harry said, his voice low and intense, "it's not, my father *never* puts me down—well, he *does*, but never like that—"

Hermione held up a single finger, and Harry waited, watching her search for words. It took her a while before she said, "Harry... Professor McGonagall and Professor Flitwick like me because I'm the most talented witch of my generation and the brightest star of Hogwarts. And Mum and Dad don't know that, and you'll never be able to tell them, but they love me anyway. Which means that everything is just the way it should be, at Hogwarts and at home. And since they're *my* parents, Mr. Potter, *you* don't get to argue." She was once again smiling her mysterious smile from dinnertime, and looking at Harry very fondly. "*Is* that clear, Mr. Potter?"

Harry nodded tightly.

"Good," said Hermione, and leaned over and kissed him on the cheek.

⁂

The conversation had only just gotten started again when a distant high-pitched yelp floated back to them,

"*Hey! No kissing!*"

The two fathers burst out in laughter just as the two mothers rose up from their chairs with identical looks of horror and dashed toward the basement.

When the children had been brought back, Hermione was saying in an icy tone that she was never going to kiss Harry ever again, and Harry was saying in an outraged voice that the Sun would burn down to a cold dead cinder before he let her get close enough to try.

Which meant that everything was just the way it should be, and they all sat back down again to finish their Christmas dinner.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

INTERLUDE: CROSSING THE BOUNDARY

It was almost midnight.

Staying up late was simple enough for Harry. He just hadn't used the Time-Turner. Harry followed a tradition of timing his sleep cycle to make sure he was awake for when Christmas Eve turned into Christmas Day; because while he'd never been young enough to *believe* in Santa Claus, he'd once been young enough to doubt.

It would have been nice if there *had* been a mysterious figure who entered your house in the night and brought you presents...

A chill went down Harry's spine then.

An intimation of something dreadful approaching.

A creeping terror.

A sense of doom.

Harry sat bolt upright in bed.

He looked at the window.

"*Professor Quirrell?*" Harry shrieked very quietly.

Professor Quirrell made a slight lifting gesture, and Harry's window seemed to fold into its frame. At once a cold gust of winter blew into the room through the gap, along with a scant few flakes of snow from a sky spotted with grey night-clouds, amid the black and stars.

"Fear not, Mr. Potter," said the Defense Professor in a normal voice. "I have Charmed your parents asleep; they shall not wake until I have departed."

"No one's supposed to know where I am!" said Harry, still keeping the shriek quiet. "Even owls are supposed to deliver my mail to Hogwarts, not here!" Harry had agreed to that willingly; it would be silly if a Death Eater could win the whole war at any time just by owling him a magically triggered hand grenade.

Professor Quirrell was grinning, from where he stood in the backyard beyond the window. "Oh, I shouldn't worry, Mr. Potter. You *are* well protected against locating Charms, and no blood purist is likely to think of consulting a phone book." His grin grew wider. "And it did take considerable effort to cross the wards that the Headmaster put around this house—though of course anyone who knew your address could simply wait outside and attack you the next time you left."

Harry stared at Professor Quirrell for a while. "What are you *doing* here?" Harry said finally.

The smile left Professor Quirrell's face. "I've come to apologize, Mr. Potter," the Defense Professor said quietly. "I should not have spoken to you so harshly as I—"

"Don't," Harry said. He looked down at the blanket that he was clutching around his pajamas. "Just don't."

"Have I offended you that much?" said Professor Quirrell's quiet voice.

"No," Harry said. "But you *will* if you apologize."

"I see," said Professor Quirrell, and in an instant his voice grew stern. "Then if I am to treat you as an equal, Mr. Potter, I should say that you have gravely violated the etiquette that holds between friendly Slytherins. If you are not currently playing the game against someone, you *must* not meddle in their plans like that, not without asking them *before*. For you do not know what their true design may be, nor what stakes they may lose. It would mark you as their enemy, Mr. Potter."

"I'm sorry," Harry said, in just the same quiet tone that Professor Quirrell had used.

"Apology accepted," said Professor Quirrell.

"But," Harry said, still quietly, "you and I really must speak further on politics, at some point."

Professor Quirrell sighed. "I know you dislike condescension, Mister Potter—"

That was a bit of an understatement.

"But it would be even more condescending," said Professor Quirrell, "if I were not to state it clearly. You are missing some life experience, Mr. Potter."

"And does everyone who has sufficient life experience agree with you, then?" said Harry calmly.

"What good is life experience to someone who plays Quidditch?" said Professor Quirrell, and shrugged. "I think you will change your mind in time, after every trust you place has failed you, and you have become cynical."

The Defense Professor said it as though it were the most ordinary statement in the world, framed against the black and the stars and the cloud-spotted sky, as one or two tiny snowflakes blew past him in the biting winter air.

"That reminds me," said Harry. "Merry Christmas."

"I suppose," said Professor Quirrell. "After all, if it is *not* an apology, then it must be a Christmas gift. The very first one I have ever given, in fact."

Harry hadn't even started yet on learning Latin so he could read the experimental diary of Roger Bacon; and he hardly dared open his mouth to ask.

"Put on your winter coat," said Professor Quirrell, "or take a warming potion if you have one; and meet me outside, under the stars. I shall see if I can maintain it a little longer this time."

It took Harry a moment to process the words, and then he was dashing for the coat closet.

Professor Quirrell kept the spell of starlight going for more than an hour, though the Defense Professor's face grew strained, and he had to sit down after a while. Harry protested only once, and was shushed.

They crossed the boundary from Christmas Eve to Christmas Day within that timeless void where Earthly rotations meant nothing, the

one true everlasting Silent Night.

And just as promised, Harry's parents slept soundly all through it, until Harry was safely back in his room, and the Defense Professor had gone.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

THE CARDINAL SIN

Bright the sun, bright the air, bright the students and bright their parents, clean the paved ground of Platform 9.75, the winter Sun hanging low in the sky at 9:45AM in the morning on January 5th, 1992. Some of the younger students wore scarves and mittens, but most simply wore their robes; they were wizards, after all.

After Harry had moved away from the landing platform, he took off his scarf and coat, opened a compartment of his trunk, and stowed away his winter things.

For a long moment, he stood there letting the January air bite at him, just to see what it was like.

Harry took out his wizards' robes, shrugged them on.

And finally, Harry drew his wand; and he couldn't help thinking of the parents he'd only just kissed goodbye, of the world whose problems he was leaving behind...

With a strange feeling of guilt for the unavoidable, Harry said, "*Thermos.*"

The warmth flowed through him.

And the Boy-Who-Lived was back.

Harry yawned and stretched, feeling more lethargic than anything else at the conclusion of his vacation. He didn't feel like reading his textbooks, or even any serious science fiction, this morning; what he needed was something completely frivolous to occupy his attention...

Well, that wouldn't be hard to come by, if he was willing to part with four Knuts.

Besides, if the *Daily Prophet* was corrupt and the *Quibbler* was the only competing newspaper, there might be some suppressed real news in there.

Harry trudged back over to the same newsstand from last time, wondering if the *Quibbler* could top the headline he'd seen before.

The vendor started to smile as Harry approached, and then the man's face suddenly changed, as he caught sight of the scar.

"*Harry Potter*?" gasped the vendor.

"No, Mr. Durian," said Harry, eyes dipping briefly to the man's nametag, "just an amazing imitation—"

And then Harry's voice stopped in his throat, as he caught sight of the top fold of the *Quibbler.*

SLOSHED SEER SPILLS SECRETS:
DARK LORD TO RETURN,

For just an instant, Harry tried to clamp down on his face, before realizing that *not* being shocked could be just as revealing, in a sense—

"Excuse me," Harry said. His voice sounded a little alarmed, and he didn't even know whether that was too revealing, or just what his normal reaction *would* be if he didn't know anything. He'd spent too much time around Slytherins, he was forgetting how to keep secrets from ordinary people. Four Knuts hit the counter. "One copy of the *Quibbler*, please."

"Oh, no worries, Mr. Potter!" said the vendor hastily, waving his hands. "It's—never mind, just—"

A newspaper flew through the air and hit Harry's fingers, and he unfolded it.

SLOSHED SEER SPILLS SECRETS:
DARK LORD TO RETURN,
WED DRACO MALFOY

"It's free," said the vendor, "for *you*, I mean—"

"No," Harry said, "I was going to buy one anyway."

The vendor took the coins, and Harry read on.

"Gosh," Harry said half a minute later, "you get a seer smashed on six slugs of Scotch and she spills all *sorts* of secret stuff. I mean, who'd have thought that Sirius Black and Peter Pettigrew were secretly the same person?"

"Not me," said the vendor.

"They've even got a picture of the two of them together, so we know who it is that's secretly the same person."

"Yup," said the vendor. "Pretty clever disguise, innit?"

"And I'm secretly sixty-five years old."

"You don't look half that," the vendor said amiably.

"And I'm betrothed to Hermione Granger, *and* Bellatrix Black, *and* Luna Lovegood, and oh yes, Draco Malfoy too..."

"Goin' ter be one interesting wedding," said the vendor.

Harry looked up from the newspaper, and said in a pleasant voice, "You know, I heard at first that Luna Lovegood was insane, and I wondered if she really was, or if she was just making stuff up and giggling to herself the whole time. Then when I read my second *Quibbler* headline, I decided that she *couldn't* be insane, I mean, it can't be *easy* to make this stuff up, you couldn't do it by *accident*. And *now* do you know what I think? I think she must be mad after all. When ordinary people try to make stuff up, it doesn't come out like *this*. Something's got to go really *wrong* with the inside of your head before *this* is what comes out when you start making stuff up!"

The vendor stared at Harry.

"Seriously," said Harry. "Who *reads* this stuff?"

"You," said the vendor.

Harry wandered off to read his newspaper.

He didn't sit at the same nearby table he'd sat down at with Draco, the *first* time he'd prepared to board this train. That seemed like tempting history to repeat itself.

It wasn't *just* that his first week at Hogwarts had been, judging by the *Quibbler*, fifty-four years long. It was that, in Harry's humble opinion, his life did not *need* any new threads of complexity.

So Harry found a small iron chair somewhere else, distant from the main crowd and the occasional muffled cracks of parents Apparating in with their children, and sat down and read the *Quibbler* to see if it contained any suppressed news.

And besides the obvious craziness (heaven help them all if any of *that* was real) there was a good deal of snide romantic gossip; but nothing that would really be all that *important* if it was true.

Harry was just reading about the Ministry's proposed marriage law, to ban all marriages, when—

"Harry Potter," said a silken voice that sent a shock of adrenaline jolting through Harry's blood.

Harry looked up.

"Lucius Malfoy," Harry said, his voice weary. Next time he was going to do the smart thing, and wait outside in the Muggle part of King's Cross until 10:55 AM.

Lucius inclined his head courteously, sending his long white hair drifting over his shoulders. The man was still carrying that same cane, lacquered in black with a silver snake's head for its handle; and something about his grip silently said *this is a weapon of deadly power,* not *I am feeble and leaning on this.* His face was expressionless.

Two men flanked him, their eyes continuously scanning, their wands already gripped low in their hands. The two of them moved like a single organism with four legs and four arms, the senior Crabbe-and-Goyle, and Harry thought he could guess which was which, but then it didn't really matter. They were merely Lucius's appendages, as certainly as if they'd been the two rightmost toes on his left foot.

"I apologize for disturbing you, Mr. Potter," said the smooth, silken voice. "But you have answered none of my owls; and this, I thought, might be my only opportunity to meet you."

"I have received none of your owls," Harry said calmly. "Dumbledore intercepted them, I presume. But I would not have answered them

if I had, except through Draco. For me to deal with you directly, without Draco's knowledge, would trespass on our friendship."

Please go away, please go away...

The grey eyes glittered at him. "Is that your pose, then..." said the senior Malfoy. "Well. I shall play along a little. What was your purpose in maneuvering your good friend, my son, into a public alliance with that girl?"

"Oh," Harry said lightly, "that's obvious, right? Draco's working with Granger will make him realize that Muggleborns are human after all. Bwa. Ha. Ha."

A thin trace of a smile moved over Lucius's lips. "Yes, that does sound like one of Dumbledore's plans. Which it is *not*."

"Indeed," said Harry. "It is part of my game with Draco, and no work of Dumbledore's, and that is all I will say."

"Let us dispense with games," said the senior Malfoy, the grey eyes suddenly hardening. "If my suspicions are true, you would hardly do Dumbledore's bidding in any case, *Mr. Potter.*"

There was a slight pause.

"So you know," Harry said, his voice cold. "Tell me. At which point, exactly, did you realize?"

"When I read your response to Professor Quirrell's little speech," said the white-haired man, and chuckled grimly. "I was puzzled, at first, for it seemed not in your own interest; it took me days to understand whose interest was being served, and then it all finally became clear. And it is also obvious that you are weak, in some ways if not others."

"Very clever of you," said Harry, still cold. "But perhaps you mistake my interests."

"Perhaps I do." A hint of steel came into the silken voice. "Indeed, that is precisely what I fear. You are playing strange games with my son, to a purpose I cannot guess. That is not a friendly act, and you cannot but *expect* me to be concerned!"

Lucius was leaning upon his cane with both hands now, and both those hands white, and his bodyguards had suddenly tensed.

Some instinct within Harry claimed that it would be a very bad idea to show his fear, to let Lucius see that he could be intimidated. They

were in a public train station anyway—

"I find it interesting," Harry said, putting steel into his own voice, "that you think I could benefit from doing Draco harm. But it is irrelevant, Lucius. *He* is my friend, and I do not betray my friends."

"*What?*" whispered Lucius. His face showed sheer shock.

Then—

"Company," said one of the minions, and Harry thought, from the voice, that it must be the senior Crabbe.

Lucius straightened and turned, then let out a hiss of disapproval.

Neville was approaching, looking scared but determined, in tow behind a tall woman who didn't look scared at all.

"Madam Longbottom," Lucius said icily.

"Mr. Malfoy," returned the woman with equal ice. "Are you being an annoyance to our Harry Potter?"

The bark of laughter that came from Lucius seemed strangely bitter. "Oh, I rather think not. Come to protect him from me, have you?" The white-haired head shifted toward Neville. "And this would be Mr. Potter's loyal lieutenant, the last scion of Longbottom, Neville, self-styled of Chaos. How strangely does the world turn. Sometimes I think it must all be mad."

Harry had no idea at all what to say to that, and Neville looked confused, and frightened.

"I doubt it is the world that is mad," said Madam Longbottom. Her voice took on a gloating tone. "You seem in a poor mood, Mr. Malfoy. Did the speech of our dear Professor Quirrell cost you a few allies?"

"It was a clever enough slander of my abilities," Lucius said coldly, "though only effective upon the fools who believe that I was truly a Death Eater."

"*What?*" blurted Neville.

"I was under the *Imperius,* young man," said Lucius, now sounding tired. "The Dark Lord could hardly have begun recruiting among pureblood families without the support of House Malfoy. I demurred, and he simply made sure of me. His own Death Eaters did not know it until afterward, hence the false Mark I bear; though since I did not truly consent, it does not bind me. Some of the Death Eaters still believe I

was foremost among their number, and for the peace of this nation I let them believe it, to keep them controlled. But I was not such a fool as to support that ill-fated adventurer of my own choice—"

"Ignore him," Madam Longbottom said, the instruction addressed to Harry as well as Neville. "He must spend the rest of his life pretending, for fear of your testimony under Veritaseum." Said with malicious satisfaction.

Lucius turned his back on her dismissively, and faced Harry again. "Will you request this harridan to depart, *Mr. Potter?*"

"I think not," said Harry in a dry voice. "I prefer to deal with the part of House Malfoy that's my own age."

There was a long pause, then. The grey eyes searched him.

"Of course..." said Lucius slowly. "I *do* feel the fool now. This whole time you were just pretending to have no idea what we were talking about."

Harry met the gaze, and said nothing.

Lucius raised his cane a few centimeters and struck it hard on the ground.

The world vanished in a pale haze, all sounds went quiet, there was nothing in the universe but Harry and Lucius Malfoy and the snake-headed cane.

"My son is my heart," said the senior Malfoy, "the last worthwhile thing I have left in this world, and this I say to you in a spirit of friendship: if he were to come to harm, I would give my life over to vengeance. But so long as my son does *not* come to harm, I wish you the best of luck in your endeavors. And as you have asked nothing more of me, I will ask nothing more of you."

Then the pale haze vanished, showing an outraged Madam Longbottom being blocked from moving forward by the senior Crabbe; her wand was in her hand, now.

"How *dare* you!" she hissed.

Lucius's dark robes swirled around him, and his white hair, as he turned to the senior Goyle. "We return to Malfoy Manor."

There were three pops of Apparition, and they were gone.

A silence followed.

"Dear *heavens*," said Madam Longbottom. "What was that about?"

Harry shrugged helplessly. Then he looked at Neville.

There was sweat on Neville's forehead.

"Thank you very much, Neville," said Harry. "Your help was greatly appreciated, Neville. And now, Neville, I think you should sit down."

"Yes, General," said Neville, and instead of coming over to one of the other chairs near Harry, he semi-collapsed into a sitting position on the pavement.

"You have wrought many changes in my grandson," said Madam Longbottom. "I approve of some, but not others."

"Send me the list of which is which," said Harry. "I'll see what I can do."

Neville groaned, but said nothing.

Madam Longbottom gave a chuckle. "I shall, young man, thank you." Her voice lowered. "Mr. Potter... the speech given by Professor Quirrell is something our nation has long needed to hear. I cannot say as much of your comment on it."

"I will take your opinion under advisement," Harry said mildly.

"I dearly hope that you do," said Madam Longbottom, and turned back to her grandson. "Do I still need to—"

"It's okay for you to go, Granma," said Neville. "I'll be fine on my own, this time."

"Now *that* I approve of," she said, and popped and vanished like a soap bubble.

The two boys sat quietly for a moment.

Neville spoke first, his voice weary. "You're going to try to fix all the changes she *approves* of, right?"

"Not *all* of them," Harry said innocently. "I just want to make sure I'm not corrupting you."

Draco looked *very* worried. His head kept darting around, despite the fact that Draco had insisted on them going down into Harry's trunk, and using a true Quieting Charm and not just the sound-blurring barrier.

"*What* did you say to Father?" blurted Draco, the moment the Quieting Charm went up and the sounds of Platform 9¾ vanished.

"I... look, can you tell me what he said to *you,* before he dropped you off?" said Harry.

"That I should tell him right away if you seemed to be threatening me," said Draco. "That I should tell him right away if there was anything *I* was doing that could pose a threat to *you!* Father thinks you're *dangerous,* Harry, whatever you said to him today it *scared* him! *It's not a good idea to scare Father!*"

Oh, hell...

"*What* did you talk about?" demanded Draco.

Harry leaned back wearily in the small folding chair that sat at the bottom of his trunk's cavern. "You know, Draco, just as the fundamental question of rationality is 'What do I think I know and how do I think I know it?', there's also a cardinal sin, a way of thinking that's the opposite of that. Like the ancient Greek philosophers. They had no clue what was going on, so they'd go around saying things like 'All is water' or 'All is fire', and they never asked themselves, 'Wait a minute, even if everything *is* water, how could I possibly *know* that?' They didn't ask themselves if they had evidence which discriminated *that* possibility from all the *other* possibilities you could imagine, evidence they'd be very unlikely to encounter if the theory *wasn't* true—"

"*Harry*," Draco said, his voice strained, "*What did you talk about with Father?*"

"I don't know, actually," said Harry, "so it's very important that I *not* just make stuff up—"

Harry had never heard Draco shriek in horror in quite that high a pitch before.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

PRETENDING TO BE WISE, PART I

Whistle. Tick. Bzzzt. Ding. Glorp. Pop. Splat. Chime. Toot. Puff. Tinkle. Bubble. Beep. Thud. Crackle. Whoosh. Hiss. Pffft. Whirr.

Professor Flitwick had silently passed Harry a folded parchment during Charms class that Monday, and the note had said that Harry was to visit the Headmaster at his convenience and in such fashion that no one else would notice, especially not Draco Malfoy or Professor Quirrell. His one-time password for the gargoyle would be "squeamish ossifrage". This had been accompanied by a remarkably artistic ink drawing of Professor Flitwick staring at him sternly, the eyes of which occasionally blinked; and at the bottom of the note, underlined three times, was the phrase DON'T GET INTO TROUBLE.

And so Harry had finished up Transfiguration class, and studied with Hermione, and eaten dinner, and spoken with his lieutenants, and finally, when the clock struck nine, turned himself invisible and dropped back to 6PM and wearily trudged off toward the gargoyle, the turning spiral stairs, the wooden door, the room full of little fiddly things, and the silver-bearded figure of the Headmaster.

This time, Dumbledore looked quite serious, the customary smile absent; and he was dressed in pajamas of a darker and more sober purple than usual.

"Thank you for coming, Harry," said the Headmaster. The old wizard rose from his throne, began to slowly pace through the room and

the strange devices. "First, do you have with you the notes of yesterday's encounter with Lucius Malfoy?"

"Notes?" blurted Harry.

"*Surely* you wrote it down..." said the old wizard, and his voice trailed off.

Harry felt rather embarrassed. Yes, if you'd just fumbled through a mysterious conversation full of significant hints you didn't understand, the *bloody obvious* thing to do would be to write it all down immediately afterward, before the memory faded, so you could try to figure it out later.

"All right," said the Headmaster, "from memory then."

Harry sheepishly recited as best he could, and got almost halfway through before he realized that it wasn't smart to just go around telling the possibly-crazy Headmaster everything, at least not without *thinking* about it first, but then Lucius was *definitely* a bad guy and Dumbledore's opponent so it probably *was* a good idea to tell him, and Harry had already started talking and it was too late to try and calculate things out now...

Harry finished his recollections honestly.

Dumbledore's face had grown more remote as Harry went on, and at the end there was a look of ancientness about him, a sternness in the air.

"Well," said Dumbledore. "I suggest you take the best of care that the heir of Malfoy does *not* come to harm, then. And I will do the same." The Headmaster was frowning, his fingers drumming soundlessly through the inky black surface of a plate inscribed with the word *Leliel.* "And I think it would be most extremely wise for you to avoid *all* interaction with Lord Malfoy henceforth."

"*Did* you intercept owls from him to me?" said Harry.

The Headmaster gazed at Harry for a long moment, then reluctantly nodded.

For some reason Harry wasn't feeling as outraged as he should have been. Maybe it was just that Harry was finding it very easy to sympathize with the Headmaster's point of view right now. Even Harry

could understand why Dumbledore wouldn't want him to interact with Lucius Malfoy; it didn't seem like an *evil* deed.

Not like the Headmaster blackmailing Zabini... for which they had only Zabini's word, and Zabini was wildly untrustworthy, in fact it was hard to see why Zabini *wouldn't* just tell the story that got him the most sympathy from Professor Quirrell...

"How about if, instead of protesting, I say that I understand your point of view," said Harry, "and you go on intercepting my owls, but you tell me who from?"

"I have intercepted a great many owls to you, I am afraid," Dumbledore said soberly. "You are a celebrity, Harry, and you would receive dozens of letters a day, some from far outside this country, did I not turn them back."

"*That*," Harry said, now starting to feel a bit of indignation, "seems like going a little too far—"

"Many of those letters," the old wizard said quietly, "will be asking you for things you cannot give. I have not read them, of course, only turned them back to their senders undelivered. But I know, for I receive them too. And you are too young, Harry, to have your heart broken six times before breakfast each morning."

Harry looked down at his shoes. He *should* insist on reading the letters and judging for himself, but... there was a small voice of common sense inside him, and it was screaming very loudly right now.

"Thank you," Harry muttered.

"The other reason I asked you here," said the old wizard, "was that I wished to consult your unique genius."

"Transfiguration?" said Harry, surprised and flattered.

"No, not *that* unique genius," said Dumbledore. "Tell me, Harry, what evil could you accomplish if a Dementor were allowed onto the grounds of Hogwarts?"

It developed that Professor Quirrell had asked, or rather demanded, that his students test their skills against an actual Dementor after they learned the words and gestures to the Patronus Charm.

"Professor Quirrell is unable to cast the Patronus Charm himself," said Dumbledore, as he paced slowly through the devices. "Which is never a good sign. But then, he *volunteered* that fact to me in the course of demanding that outside instructors be brought in to teach the Patronus Charm to every student who wished to learn; he offered to pay the expense himself, if I would not. This impressed me greatly. But now he insists on bringing in a Dementor—"

"Headmaster," Harry said quietly, "Professor Quirrell believes *very* strongly in live-fire tests under realistic combat conditions. Wanting to bring in an actual Dementor is *completely* in character for him."

Now the Headmaster was giving Harry a strange look.

"*In character?*" said the old wizard.

"I mean," said Harry, "it's entirely consistent with the way Professor Quirrell usually acts..." Harry trailed off. Why *had* he put it that way?

The Headmaster nodded. "So you have the same sense I do; that it is an excuse. A very *reasonable* excuse, to be sure; more so than you may realize. Often, wizards seemingly unable to cast a Patronus Charm will succeed in the presence of an actual Dementor, going from not a single flicker of light to a full corporeal Patronus. Why this should be, no one knows; but it is so."

Harry frowned. "Then I really don't see why you're suspicious—"

The Headmaster spread his hands as though in helplessness. "Harry, the *Defense Professor* has asked me to pass the darkest of all creatures through the gates of Hogwarts. I *must* be suspicious." The Headmaster sighed. "And yet the Dementor will be guarded, warded, in a mighty cage, I will be there myself to watch it at all times—I cannot think of what ill *could* be done. But perhaps I am merely unable to see it. And so I am asking you."

Harry stared at the Headmaster with his mouth open. He was so shocked he couldn't even feel flattered.

"*Me?*" said Harry.

"Yes," said Dumbledore, smiling slightly. "I try my best to anticipate my foes, to encompass their wicked minds and predict their evil thoughts. But *I* would never have imagined sharpening a Hufflepuff's bones into weapons."

Was Harry *ever* going to live that down?

"Headmaster," Harry said wearily, "I know it doesn't sound good, but in all seriousness: I'm not evil, I'm just very creative—"

"I did not say that you were evil," Dumbledore said seriously. "There are those who say that to comprehend evil is to become evil; but they are merely pretending to be wise. Rather it is evil which does not know love, and dares not imagine love, and cannot ever understand love without ceasing to be evil. And I suspect that you can imagine your way into the minds of Dark Wizards better than I ever could, while still knowing love yourself. So, Harry." The Headmaster's eyes were intent. "If you stood in Professor Quirrell's shoes, what misdeeds could you accomplish after you tricked me into allowing a Dementor onto the grounds of Hogwarts?"

"Hold *on*," said Harry, and in something of a daze trudged over to the chair in front of the Headmaster's desk, and sat down. It was a large and comfortable chair this time, not a wooden stool, and Harry could feel himself enveloped as he sank into it.

Dumbledore was asking him to outwit Professor Quirrell.

Point one: Harry was rather fonder of Professor Quirrell than of Dumbledore.

Point two: The hypothesis was that the Defense Professor was planning to do something evil, and in that subjunctive case, Harry *ought* to be helping the Headmaster prevent it.

Point three...

"Headmaster," Harry said, "if Professor Quirrell *is* up to something, I'm not sure I *can* outwit him. He's got a lot more experience than I do."

The old wizard shook his head, somehow managing to appear very solemn despite his smile. "You underestimate yourself."

That was the first time anyone had ever said *that* to Harry.

"I remember," the old wizard continued, "a young man in this very office, cold and controlled as he faced down the Head of House Slytherin, blackmailing his own Headmaster to protect his classmates. And I believe that young man is more cunning than Professor Quirrell, more cunning than Lucius Malfoy, that he will grow to be the equal of Voldemort himself. It is he who I wish to consult."

Harry suppressed the chill that went through him at the name, frowned thoughtfully at the Headmaster.

How much does he know...?

The Headmaster had seen Harry in the grip of his mysterious dark side, as deep as Harry had ever sunk into it. Harry still remembered what it had been like to watch, invisibly Time-Turned, as his past self faced down the older Slytherins; the boy with the scar on his forehead who didn't act like the others. *Of course* the Headmaster would have noticed something odd about the boy in his office...

And Dumbledore had concluded that his pet hero had cunning to match his destined foe, the Dark Lord.

Which wasn't asking for very much, considering that the Dark Lord had put a clearly visible Dark Mark on all of his servants' left arms, and that he'd slaughtered the entire monastery that taught the martial art he'd wanted to learn.

Enough cunning to match *Professor Quirrell* would be a *whole* different order of problem.

But it was also clear that the Headmaster wouldn't be satisfied until Harry went all cold and darkish, and came up with some sort of answer that sounded impressively cunning... which had better not *actually* get in the way of Professor Quirrell's teaching Defense...

And of course Harry *would* go over to his dark side and think it through from that direction, just to be honest, and just in case.

"Tell me," Harry said, "everything about how the Dementor is to be brought in, and how it is to be guarded."

Dumbledore's eyebrows rose for a moment, and then the old wizard began to speak.

The Dementor would be transported to the grounds of Hogwarts by an Auror trio, all three personally known to the Headmaster, and all

three able to cast a corporeal Patronus Charm. They would be met at the edge of the grounds by Dumbledore, who would pass the Dementor through the Hogwarts wards—

Harry asked if the pass was permanent or temporary—whether someone could just bring in the same Dementor again the next day.

The pass was temporary (replied the Headmaster with an approving nod), and the explanation went on: The Dementor would be in a cage of solid titanium bars, not Transfigured but true-forged; in time a Dementor's presence would corrode that metal to dust, but not in a single day.

Students awaiting their turn would stay well back of the Dementor, behind two corporeal Patronuses maintained by two of the three Aurors at any given time. Dumbledore would wait by the Dementor's cage with his Patronus. A single student would approach the Dementor; and Dumbledore would dispel his Patronus; and the student would attempt to cast their own Patronus Charm; and if they failed, Dumbledore would restore his Patronus before the student could suffer any permanent damage. Past dueling champion Professor Flitwick would also be present while there were students near, just to add safety margin.

"Why just *you* waiting by the Dementor?" said Harry. "I mean, shouldn't it be you plus an Auror—"

The Headmaster shook his head. "They could not withstand the repeated exposure to the Dementor, each time I dispel my Patronus."

And if Dumbledore's Patronus did fail for some reason, while one of the students was still near the Dementor, the third Auror would cast another corporeal Patronus and send it to shield the student...

Harry poked and prodded, but he couldn't see a flaw in the security.

So Harry took a deep breath, sank further into the chair, closed his eyes, and remembered:

"And that will be... five points? No, let us make it an even ten points from Ravenclaw for backchat."

The cold came more slowly now, more reluctantly, Harry hadn't been calling much on his dark side lately...

Harry had to run through that entire session in Potions in his mind, before his blood chilled into something approaching deadly crystalline

clarity.

And then he thought of the Dementor.

And it was obvious.

"The Dementor is a distraction," Harry said. The coldness clear in his voice, since that was what Dumbledore wanted and expected. "A large, salient threat, but in the end straightforward, and easy to defend against. So while all your attention is focused on the Dementor, the real plot will be happening elsewhere."

Dumbledore stared at Harry for a moment, and then gave a slow nod. "Yes..." said the Headmaster. "And I do believe I know what it might be a distraction *from*, if Professor Quirrell means ill... thank you, Harry."

The Headmaster was still staring at Harry, a strange look in those ancient eyes.

"*What?*" said Harry with a tinge of annoyance, the cold still lingering in his blood.

"I have another question for that young man," said the Headmaster. "It is something I have long wondered to myself, yet been unable to comprehend. *Why?*" There was a tinge of pain in his voice. "Why would anyone deliberately make himself a monster? Why do evil for the sake of evil? Why Voldemort?"

Whirr, bzzzt, tick; ding, puff, splat...

Harry stared at the Headmaster in surprise.

"How would *I* know?" said Harry. "Am I supposed to magically understand the Dark Lord because I'm the hero, or something?"

"*Yes!*" said Dumbledore. "My own great foe was Grindelwald, and *him* I understood very well indeed. Grindelwald was my dark mirror, the man I could so easily have been, had I given in to the temptation to believe that I was a good person, and therefore always in the right. *For the greater good*, that was his slogan; and he truly believed it himself, even as he tore at all Europe like a wounded animal. And him, I defeated in the end. But then after him came Voldemort, to destroy everything I had

protected in Britain." The hurt was plain now in Dumbledore's voice, exposed upon his face. "He committed acts worse by far than Grindelwald's worst, horror for the sake of horror. I sacrificed everything only to hold him back, and I still don't understand *why! Why*, Harry? Why did he do it? He was never my destined foe, but yours, so if you have any guesses at all, Harry, please tell me! *Why?*"

Harry stared down at his hands. The truth was that Harry hadn't read up on the Dark Lord yet, and right now he hadn't the tiniest clue. And somehow that didn't seem like an answer the Headmaster wanted to hear. "Too many Dark rituals, maybe? In the beginning he thought he'd do just one, but it sacrificed part of his good side, and that made him less reluctant to perform other Dark rituals, so he did more and more rituals in a positive feedback cycle until he ended up as a tremendously powerful monster—"

"No!" Now the Headmaster's voice was agonized. "I can't believe that, Harry! There has to be something more to it than just that!"

Why should there be? thought Harry, but he didn't say it, because it was clear that the Headmaster thought the universe was a story and had a plot, and that huge tragedies weren't allowed to happen except for equally huge, significant reasons. "I'm sorry, Headmaster. The Dark Lord doesn't seem like much of a dark mirror to me, not at all. There isn't anything I find even the *tiniest* bit tempting about nailing the skins of Yermy Wibble's family to a newsroom wall."

"Have you *no* wisdom to share?" said Dumbledore. There was pleading in the old wizard's voice, almost begging.

Evil happens, thought Harry, *it doesn't mean anything or teach us anything, except to not be evil? The Dark Lord was probably just a selfish bastard who didn't care who he hurt, or an idiot who made stupidly avoidable mistakes that snowballed. There is no destiny behind the ills of this world; if Hitler had been allowed into architecture school like he wanted, the whole history of Europe would have been different; if we lived in the sort of universe where horrible things were only allowed to happen for good reasons, they just wouldn't happen in the first place.*

And none of that, obviously, was what the Headmaster wanted to hear.

The old wizard was still looking at Harry from over a fiddly thing like a frozen puff of smoke, a painful desperation in those ancient, waiting eyes.

Well, sounding wise wasn't difficult. It was a lot easier than being intelligent, actually, since you didn't have to say anything surprising or come up with any new insights. You just let your brain's pattern-matching software complete the cliche, using whatever Deep Wisdom you'd stored previously.

"Headmaster," Harry said solemnly, "I would rather not define myself by my enemies."

Somehow, even in the midst of all the whirring and ticking, there was a kind of silence.

That had come out a bit more Deeply Wise than Harry had intended.

"You may be very wise, Harry..." the Headmaster said slowly. "I do wish... that I could have been defined by my friends." The pain in his voice had grown deeper.

Harry's mind searched hastily for something else Deeply Wise to say that would soften the unintended force of the blow—

"Or perhaps," Harry said more softly, "it is the foe that makes the Gryffindor, as it is the friend that makes the Hufflepuff, and the ambition that makes the Slytherin. I do know that it is always, in every generation, the puzzle that makes the scientist."

"It is a dreadful fate to which you condemn my House, Harry," said the Headmaster. The pain was still in his voice. "For now that you remark on it, I do think that I was very much made by my enemies."

Harry stared at his own hands, where they lay in his lap. Maybe he should just shut up while he was ahead.

"But you *have* answered my question," said Dumbledore more softly, as though to himself. "I should have realized that would be a Slytherin's key. For his ambition, all for the sake of his ambition; and *that* I know, though not *why*..." For a time Dumbledore stared off into nothingness; then he straightened, and his eyes seemed to focus on Harry again.

"And you, Harry," said the Headmaster, "you name yourself a *scientist?*" His voice was laced with surprise and mild disapproval.

"You don't like science?" said Harry a little wearily. He'd hoped Dumbledore would be fonder of Muggle things.

"I suppose it is useful to those without wands," said Dumbledore, frowning. "But it seems a strange thing by which to define yourself. Is science as important as love? As kindness? As friendship? Is it science that makes you fond of Minerva McGonagall? Is it science that makes you care for Hermione Granger? Will it be science to which you turn, when you try to kindle warmth in Draco Malfoy's heart?"

You know, the sad thing is, you probably think you just uttered some kind of incredibly wise knockdown argument.

Now, how to phrase the rejoinder in such fashion that it also sounded incredibly wise...

"You are not Ravenclaw," Harry said with calm dignity, "and so it might not have occurred to you that to respect the truth, and seek it all the days of your life, could also be an act of grace."

The Headmaster's eyebrows rose up. And then he sighed. "How did you become so wise, so young...?" The old wizard sounded sad, as he said it. "Perhaps it will prove valuable to you."

Only for impressing ancient wizards who are overly impressed with themselves, thought Harry. He was actually a bit disappointed by Dumbledore's credulity; it wasn't that Harry had *lied*, but Dumbledore seemed far too impressed with Harry's ability to phrase things so that they sounded profound, instead of putting them into plain English like Richard Feynman had done with *his* wisdom...

"Love is more important than wisdom," said Harry, just to test the limits of Dumbledore's tolerance for blindingly obvious cliches completed by sheer pattern matching without any sort of detailed analysis.

The Headmaster nodded gravely, and said, "Indeed."

Harry stood up out of the chair, and stretched his arms. *Well, I'd better go off and love something, then, that's bound to help me defeat the Dark Lord. And next time you ask me for advice, I'll just give you a hug—*

"This day you have helped me much, Harry," said the Headmaster. "And so there is one last thing I would ask that young man."

Great.

"Tell me, Harry," said the Headmaster (and now his voice sounded simply puzzled, though there was still a hint of pain in his eyes), "why do Dark Wizards fear death so greatly?"

"Er," said Harry, "sorry, I've got to back the Dark Wizards on that one."

Whoosh, hiss, chime; glorp, pop, bubble—

"*What?*" said Dumbledore.

"Death is bad," said Harry, discarding wisdom for the sake of clear communication. "Very bad. Extremely bad. Being scared of death is like being scared of a great big monster with poisonous fangs. It actually makes a great deal of sense, and does not, in fact, indicate that you have a psychological problem."

The Headmaster was staring at him as though he'd just turned into a cat.

"Okay," said Harry, "let me put it this way. Do you *want* to die? Because if so, there's this Muggle thing called a suicide prevention hotline—"

"When it is time," the old wizard said quietly. "Not before. I would never seek to hasten the day, nor seek to refuse it when it comes."

Harry was frowning sternly. "That doesn't sound like you have a very strong will to live, Headmaster!"

"Harry..." The old wizard's voice was starting to sound a little helpless; and he had paced to a spot where his silver beard, unnoticed, had drifted into a crystalline glass goldfish bowl, and was slowly taking on a greenish tinge that crept up the hairs. "I think I may have not made myself clear. Dark Wizards are not eager to live. They *fear death.* They do not reach up toward the sun's light, but flee the coming of night into infinitely darker caverns of their own making, without moon or stars. It is not life they desire, but *immortality;* and they are so driven to grasp at it that they will sacrifice their very souls! Do you want to live *forever*, Harry?"

"Yes, and so do you," said Harry. "I want to live one more day. Tomorrow I will still want to live one more day. Therefore I want to live forever, proof by induction on the positive integers. If you don't want to die, it means you want to live forever. If you don't want to live forever, it means you want to die. You've got to do one or the other... I'm not getting through here, am I."

The two cultures stared at each other across a vast gap of incommensurability.

"I have lived a hundred and ten years," the old wizard said quietly (taking his beard out of the bowl, and jiggling it to shake out the color). "I have seen and done a great many things, too many of which I wish I had never seen or done. And yet I do not regret being alive, for watching my students grow is a joy that has not begun to wear on me. But I would not wish to live so long that it does! What would you *do* with eternity, Harry?"

Harry took a deep breath. "Meet all the interesting people in the world, read all the good books and then write something even better, celebrate my first grandchild's tenth birthday party on the Moon, celebrate my first great-great-great grandchild's hundredth birthday party around the Rings of Saturn, learn the deepest and final rules of Nature, understand the nature of consciousness, find out why anything exists in the first place, visit other stars, discover aliens, create aliens, rendezvous with everyone for a party on the other side of the Milky Way once we've explored the whole thing, meet up with everyone else who was born on Old Earth to watch the Sun finally go out, and I used to worry about finding a way to escape this universe before it ran out of negentropy but I'm a lot more hopeful now that I've discovered the so-called laws of physics are just optional guidelines."

"I did not understand much of that," said Dumbledore. "But I must ask if these are things that you truly desire so desperately, or if you only imagine them so as to imagine not being tired, as you run and run from death."

"Life is not a finite list of things that you check off before you're allowed to die," Harry said firmly. "It's life, you just go on living it. If I'm not doing those things it'll be because I've found something better."

Dumbledore sighed. His fingers drummed on a clock; as they touched it, the numerals changed to an indecipherable script, and the hands briefly appeared in different positions. "In the unlikely event that I am permitted to tarry until a hundred and fifty," said the old wizard, "I do not think I would mind. But two hundred years would be entirely too much of a good thing."

"Yes, well," Harry said, his voice a little dry as he thought of his Mum and Dad and *their* allotted span if Harry didn't do something about it, "I suspect, Headmaster, that if you came from a culture where people were accustomed to living four hundred years, that dying at two hundred would seem just as tragically premature as dying at, say, *eighty*." Harry's voice went hard, on that last word.

"Perhaps," the old wizard said peacefully. "I would not wish to die before my friends, nor live on after they had all gone. The hardest time is when those you loved the most have gone on before you, and yet others still live, for whose sake you must stay..." Dumbledore's eyes were fixed on Hary, and growing sad. "Do not mourn me too greatly, Harry, when my time comes; I will be with those I have long missed, on our next great adventure."

"Oh!" Harry said in sudden realization. "You believe in an *afterlife*. I got the impression wizards didn't have religion?"

Toot. Beep. Thud.

"*How can you not believe it?*" said the Headmaster, looking completely flabbergasted. "*Harry, you're a wizard! You've seen ghosts!*"

"Ghosts," Harry said, his voice flat. "You mean those things like portraits, stored memories and behaviors with no awareness or life, accidentally impressed into the surrounding material by the burst of magic that accompanies the violent death of a wizard—"

"I've heard that theory," said the Headmaster, his voice growing sharp, "repeated by wizards who mistake cynicism for wisdom, who think that to look down upon others is to elevate themselves. It is one

of the silliest ideas I have heard in a hundred and ten years! *Yes,* ghosts do not learn or grow, because this is *not where they belong!* Souls are meant to move on, there is no life remaining for them *here!* And if not ghosts, then what of the Veil? What of the Resurrection Stone?"

"All right," Harry said, trying to keep his voice calm, "I'll hear out your evidence, because *that's what a scientist does.* But first, Headmaster, let me tell you a little story." Harry's voice was trembling. "You know, when I got here, when I got off the train from King's Cross, I don't mean yesterday but back in September, when I got off the train then, Headmaster, I'd never seen a ghost. I wasn't *expecting* ghosts. So when I saw them, Headmaster, I did something really dumb. I *jumped to conclusions.* I, I thought there *was* an afterlife, I thought no one had ever really died, I thought that everyone the human species had ever lost was really fine after all, I thought that wizards could talk to people who'd passed on, that it just took the right spell to summon them, that wizards could *do* that, I thought I could meet my parents who died for me, and tell them that I'd heard about their sacrifice and that I'd begun to call them my mother and father—"

"Harry," whispered Dumbledore. Water glittered in the old wizard's eyes. He took a step closer across the office—

"And *then,*" spat Harry, the fury coming fully into his voice, the cold rage at the universe for being like that and at himself for being so stupid, "I asked Hermione and she said that they were just *afterimages,* burned into the stone of the castle by the death of a wizard, like the silhouettes left on the walls of Hiroshima. And I should have known! I should have known without even having to ask! I shouldn't have believed it even for all of thirty seconds! Because if people had souls there wouldn't be any such thing as brain damage, if your soul could go on speaking after your whole brain was gone, how could damage to the left cerebral hemisphere take away your ability to talk? And Professor McGonagall, when she told me about how my parents had died, she didn't act like they'd just gone away on a long trip to another country, like they'd emigrated to Australia back in the days of sailing ships, which is the way people would act if they *actually knew* that death was just going somewhere else, if they had hard evidence for an afterlife, instead of making stuff up to console

themselves, it would change *everything,* it wouldn't *matter* that everyone had lost someone in the war, it would be a little sad but not *horrible!* And I'd already seen that people in the wizarding world didn't act like that! So I should have known better! And that was when I knew that my parents were really dead and gone forever and ever, that there wasn't anything left of them, that I'd never get a chance to meet them and, and, and the other children thought I was crying because I was *scared of ghosts*—"

The old wizard's face was horrified, he opened his mouth to speak—

"So tell me, Headmaster! Tell me about the evidence! But *don't you dare* exaggerate a single tiny bit of it, because if you give me false hope again, and I find out later that you lied or stretched things just a little, I won't ever forgive you for it! *What's the Veil?*"

Harry reached up and wiped at his cheeks, while the glass things of the office stopped vibrating from his last shriek.

"The Veil," said the old wizard with only a slight tremble in his voice, "is a great stone archway, kept in the Department of Mysteries; a gateway to the land of the dead."

"And how does anyone know that?" said Harry. "Don't tell me what you believe, tell me what you've *seen!*"

The physical manifestation of the barrier between worlds was a great stone archway, old and tall and coming to a sharp point, with a tattered black veil like the surface of a pool of water, stretched between the stones; rippling, always, from the constant and one-way passage of the souls. If you stood by the Veil you could hear the voices of the dead calling, always calling in whispers barely on the wrong side of comprehension, growing louder and more numerous if you stayed and tried to hear, as they tried to communicate; and if you listened too long, you would go to meet them, and in the moment you touched the Veil you would be sucked through, and never be heard from again.

"That doesn't even sound like an *interesting* fraud," Harry said, his voice calmer now that there was nothing there to make him hope, or make him angry for having hopes dashed. "Someone built a stone archway, made a little black rippling surface between it that Vanished anything it touched, and enchanted it to whisper to people and hypnotize them."

"Harry..." the Headmaster said, starting to look rather worried. "I can tell you the truth, but if you refuse to hear it..."

Also not interesting. "What's the Resurrection Stone?"

"I would not tell you," the Headmaster said slowly, "save that I fear what this disbelief may do to you... so listen, then, Harry, please listen..."

The Resurrection Stone was one of the three legendary Deathly Hallows, kin to Harry's cloak. The Resurrection Stone could call souls back from the dead—bring them back into the world of the living, though not as they were. Cadmus Peverell used the stone to call back his lost beloved from the dead, but her heart stayed with the dead, and not in the world of the living. And in time it drove him mad, and he killed himself to be truly with her once more...

In all politeness, Harry raised his hand.

"Yes?" the Headmaster said reluctantly.

"The obvious test to see if the Resurrection Stone is *really* calling back the dead, or just projecting an image from the user's mind, is to ask a question whose answer *you* don't know, but the dead person *would*, and that can be definitely verified in this world. For example, call back—"

Then Harry paused, because *this* time he'd managed to think it through one step ahead of his tongue, fast enough to *not* say the first name and test that had sprung to mind.

"...your dead wife, and ask her where she left her lost earring, or something like that," Harry finished. "Did anyone do any tests like that?"

"The Resurrection Stone has been lost for centuries, Harry," the Headmaster said quietly.

Harry shrugged. "Well, I'm a scientist, and I'm always willing to be convinced. If you *really* believe the Resurrection Stone calls back the dead—then you must believe a test like that will succeed, right? So do you know anything about where to find the Resurrection Stone? I got *one* Deathly Hallow already under highly mysterious circumstances, and, well, we both know how the rhythm of the world works on that sort of thing."

Dumbledore stared at Harry.

Harry gazed equably back at the Headmaster.

The old wizard passed a hand across his forehead and muttered, "This is madness."

(Somehow, Harry managed to stop himself from laughing.)

And Dumbledore told Harry to draw forth the Cloak of Invisibility from his pouch; at the Headmaster's direction, Harry stared at the inside and back of the hood until he saw it, faintly drawn against the silvery mesh in faded scarlet like dried blood, the symbol of the Deathly Hallows: a triangle, with a circle drawn inside, and a line dividing them both.

"Thank you," Harry said politely. "I shall be sure to keep an eye out for a stone so marked. Do you have any other evidence?"

Dumbledore appeared to be fighting a struggle within himself. "Harry," the old wizard said, his voice rising, "this is a dangerous road you are walking, I am not sure I do the right thing by saying this, but I *must* wrench you from this way! Harry, *how could Voldemort have survived the death of his body if he did not have a soul?*"

And *that* was when Harry realized that there was exactly one person who'd *originally* told Professor McGonagall that the Dark Lord was still alive in the first place; and it was the crazy Headmaster of their madhouse of a school, who thought the world ran on cliches.

"Good question," Harry said, after some internal debate about how to proceed. "Maybe he found some way of duplicating the power of the Resurrection Stone, only he loaded it in advance with a *complete* copy of his brain state. Or something like that." Harry was suddenly far from sure that he was trying to come up with an explanation for something that had *actually happened*. "Actually, can you just go ahead and tell me everything you know about how the Dark Lord survived and what it might take to kill him?" *If he even still exists as more than Quibbler headlines.*

"You are not fooling me, Harry," said the old wizard; his face looked ancient now, and lined by more than years. "I know why you are truly asking that question. No, I do not read your mind, I do not have to, your hesitation gives you away! You seek the secret of the Dark Lord's immortality in order to use it for yourself!"

"Wrong! I want the secret of the Dark Lord's immortality in order to use it for *everyone!*"

Tick, crackle, fzzzt...

Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore just stood there and stared at Harry with his mouth gaping open dumbly.

(Harry awarded himself a tally mark for Monday, since he'd managed to blow someone's mind completely before the day was over.)

"And in case it wasn't clear," said Harry, "by *everyone* I mean all Muggles too, not just all wizards."

"No," said the old wizard, shaking his head. His voice rose. "No, no, no! *This is insanity!*"

"Bwa ha ha!" said Harry.

The old wizard's face was tight with anger and worry. "Voldemort stole the book from which he gleaned his secret; it was not there when I went to look for it. But this much I know, and this much I will tell you: his immortality was born of a ritual terrible and Dark, blacker than pitchest black! And it was Myrtle, poor sweet Myrtle, who died for it; his immortality took sacrifice, it took *murder*—"

"Well *obviously* I'm not going to popularize a method of immortality that requires killing people! That would defeat the *entire point!*"

There was a startled pause.

Slowly the old wizard's face relaxed out of its anger, though the worry was still there. "You would use no ritual requiring human sacrifice."

"I don't know what you take me for, *Headmaster,*" Harry said coldly, his own anger rising, "but let's not forget that *I'm* the one who wants people to *live!* The one who wants to *save* everyone! *You're* the one who thinks death is awesome and everyone ought to die!"

"I am at a loss, Harry," said the old wizard. His feet once more began trudging across his strange office. "I know not what to say." He picked up a crystal ball that seemed to hold a hand in flames, looked into it

with a sad expression. "Only that I am greatly misunderstood by you... I don't *want* everyone to die, Harry!"

"You just don't want anyone to be immortal," Harry said with considerable irony. It seemed that elementary logical tautologies like $All\ x : Die(x) = Not\ Exist\ x : Not\ Die(x)$ were beyond the reasoning abilities of the world's most powerful wizard.

The old wizard nodded. "I am less afraid than I was, but still greatly worried for you, Harry," he said quietly. His hand, a little wizened by time, but still strong, placed the crystal ball firmly back into its stand. "For the fear of death is a bitter thing, an illness of the soul by which people are twisted and warped. Voldemort is not the only Dark Wizard to go down that bleak road, though I fear he has taken it further than any before him."

"And you think *you're* not afraid of death?" Harry said, not even trying to mask the incredulity in his voice.

The old wizard's face was peaceful. "I am not perfect, Harry, but I think I have accepted my death as part of myself."

"Uh huh," Harry said. "See, there's this little thing called *cognitive dissonance,* or in plainer English, *sour grapes.* If people were hit on the heads with truncheons once a month, and no one could do anything about it, pretty soon there'd be all sorts of philosophers, *pretending to be wise* as you put it, who found all sorts of *amazing benefits* to being hit on the head with a truncheon once a month. Like, it makes you tougher, or it makes you happier on the days when you're *not* getting hit with a truncheon. But if you went up to someone who *wasn't* getting hit, and you asked them if they wanted to *start*, in exchange for those *amazing benefits,* they'd say no. And if you *didn't* have to die, if you came from somewhere that no one had ever even *heard* of death, and I suggested to you that it would be an *amazing wonderful great idea* for people to get wrinkled and old and eventually cease to exist, why, you'd have me hauled right off to a lunatic asylum! So why would anyone possibly think any thought so silly as that death is a *good* thing? Because you're afraid of it, because you don't *really* want to die, and that thought hurts so much inside you that you have to rationalize it away, do something to numb the pain, so you won't have to think about it—"

"No, Harry," the old wizard said. His face was gentle, his hand trailed through a lighted pool of water that made small musical chimes as his fingers stirred it. "Though I can understand how you must think so."

"Do you want to understand the Dark Wizard?" Harry said, his voice now hard and grim. "Then look within the part of yourself that flees not from death but from the *fear* of death, that finds that fear so unbearable that it will embrace Death as a friend and cozen up to it, try to become one with the night so that it can think itself master of the abyss. You have taken the most terrible of all evils and called it good! With only a slight twist that same part of yourself would murder innocents, and call it friendship. If you can call death better than life then you can twist your moral compass to point *anywhere*—"

"I think," said Dumbledore, shaking water droplets from his hand to the sound of tiny tinkling bells, "that you understand Dark Wizards *very* well, without yet being one yourself." It was said in perfect seriousness, and without accusation. "But your comprehension of *me*, I fear, is sorely lacking." The old wizard was smiling now, and there was a gentle laughter in his voice.

Harry was trying not to go any colder than he already was; from somewhere there was pouring into his mind a blazing fury of resentment, at Dumbledore's condescension, and all the laughter that wise old fools had ever used in place of argument. "Funny thing, you know, I thought Draco Malfoy was going to be this impossible to talk to, and instead, in his childish innocence, he was a hundred times stronger than you."

A look of puzzlement crossed the old wizard's face. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," Harry said, his voice biting, "that Draco actually *took his own beliefs seriously* and *processed* my words instead of *throwing them out the window* by smiling with gentle superiority. You're so old and wise, you can't even *notice* anything I'm saying! Not understand, *notice!*"

"I *have* listened to you, Harry," said Dumbledore—a smile crossed his face before being quickly wiped away—"but to listen is not always to agree. Disagreements aside, what is it that you think I do not compre-

hend?"

That if you really *believed in an afterlife, you'd go down to St. Mungo's and kill Neville's parents, Alice and Frank Longbottom, so they could go on to their* next great adventure, *instead of letting them linger here in their damaged state—*

Harry barely, *barely* kept himself from saying it out loud.

"All right," Harry said coldly. "I'll answer your original question, then. You asked why Dark Wizards are afraid of death. Pretend, Headmaster, that you *really* believed in souls. Pretend that anyone could verify the existence of souls at any time, pretend that nobody cried at funerals because they *knew* their loved ones were still alive. Now can you imagine *destroying* a soul? Ripping it to shreds so that nothing remains to go on its next great adventure? Can you imagine what a terrible thing that would be, the worst crime that had ever been committed in the history of the universe, which you would do anything to prevent from happening even once? Because *that's* what Death really is—the annihilation of a soul!"

The old wizard was staring at him, a sad look in his eyes. "I suppose I *do* understand now," he said quietly.

"Oh?" said Harry. "Understand what?"

"Voldemort," said the old wizard. "I understand him now at last. Because to believe that the world is truly like that, you must believe there is no justice in it, that it is woven of darkness at its core. I asked you why he became a monster, and you could give no reason. And if I could ask *him*, I suppose, his answer would be: Why not?"

They stood there gazing into each other's eyes, the old wizard in his robes, and the young boy with the lightning-bolt scar on his forehead.

"Tell me, Harry," said the old wizard, "will *you* become a monster?"

"No," said the boy, an iron certainty in his voice.

"Why not?" said the old wizard.

The young boy stood very straight, his chin raised high and proud, and said: "There is no justice in the laws of Nature, Headmaster, no term for fairness in the equations of motion. The universe is neither evil, nor good, it simply does not care. The stars don't care, or the Sun, or the sky. But they don't have to! *We* care! There *is* light in the world, and it is *us!*"

"I wonder what will become of you, Harry," said the old wizard. His voice was soft, with a strange wonder and regret in it. "It is enough to make me wish to live just to see it."

The boy bowed to him with heavy irony, and departed; and the oaken door slammed shut behind him with a thud.

CHAPTER FORTY

PRETENDING TO BE WISE, PART II

Harry, holding the tea cup in the exactly correct way that Professor Quirrell had needed to demonstrate three times, took a small, careful sip. All the way across the long, wide table that was the centerpiece of Mary's Room, Professor Quirrell took a sip from his own cup, making it look far more natural and elegant. The tea itself was something whose name Harry couldn't even pronounce, or at least, every time Harry had tried to repeat the Chinese words, Professor Quirrell had corrected him, until finally Harry had given up.

Harry had maneuvered himself into getting a glimpse at the bill last time, and Professor Quirrell had let him get away with it.

He'd felt an impulse to drink a Comed-Tea first.

Even taking that into account, Harry had still been shocked out of his skin.

And it still tasted to him like, well, tea.

There was a quiet, nagging suspicion in Harry's mind that Professor Quirrell *knew* this, and was deliberately buying ridiculously expensive tea that Harry couldn't appreciate *just to mess with him.* Professor Quirrell *himself* might not like it all that much. Maybe *nobody* actually liked this tea, and the only point of it was to be ridiculously expensive and make the victim feel unappreciative. In fact, maybe it was really just ordinary tea, only you asked for it in a certain code, and they put a fake gigantic price on the bill...

Professor Quirrell's expression was drawn and thoughtful. "No," Professor Quirrell said, "you should *not* have told the Headmaster about

your conversation with Lord Malfoy. Please try to think faster next time, Mr. Potter."

"I'm sorry, Professor Quirrell," Harry said meekly. "I still don't see it." There were times when Harry felt very much like an impostor, pretending to be cunning in Professor Quirrell's presence.

"Lord Malfoy is Albus Dumbledore's opponent," said Professor Quirrell. "At least for this present time. All Britain is their chessboard, all wizards their pieces. Consider: Lord Malfoy threatened to throw away everything, abandon his game, to take vengeance on you if Mr. Malfoy was hurt. In which case, Mr. Potter...?"

It took more long seconds for Harry to get it, but it was clear that Professor Quirrell wasn't going to give any more hints, not that Harry wanted them.

Then Harry's mind finally made the connection, and he frowned. "Dumbledore kills Draco, makes it look like *I* did it, and Lucius sacrifices his game against Dumbledore to get at me? That... doesn't seem like the Headmaster's *style,* Professor Quirrell..." Harry's mind flashed back to a similar warning from Draco, which had made Harry say the same thing.

Professor Quirrell shrugged, and sipped his tea.

Harry sipped his own tea, and sat in silence. The tablecloth spread over the table was in a very peaceful pattern, seeming at first like plain cloth, but if you stared at it long enough, or kept silent long enough, you started to see a faint tracery of flowers glimmering on it; the curtains of the room had changed their pattern to match, and seemed to shimmer as though in a silent breeze. Professor Quirrell was in a contemplative mood that Saturday, and so was Harry, and Mary's Room, it seemed, had not neglected to notice this.

"Professor Quirrell," Harry said suddenly, "is there an afterlife?"

Harry had chosen the question carefully. Not, *do you believe in an afterlife?* but simply *Is there an afterlife?* What people *really* believed didn't seem to them like *beliefs* at all. People didn't say, 'I strongly believe in the sky being blue!' They just said, 'the sky is blue'. Your true inner map of the world just felt to you like the way the world *was*...

The Defense Professor raised his cup to his lips again before answering. His face was thoughtful. "If there is, Mr. Potter," said Professor

Quirrell, "then quite a few wizards have wasted a great deal of effort in their searches for immortality."

"That's not actually an answer," Harry observed. He'd learned by now to notice that sort of thing when talking to Professor Quirrell.

Professor Quirrell set down his teacup with a small, high-pitched tacking sound on his saucer. "Some of those wizards were reasonably intelligent, Mr. Potter, so you may take it that the existence of an afterlife is not obvious. I have looked into the matter myself. There have been many claims of the sort which hope and fear would be expected to produce. Among those reports whose veracity is not in doubt, there is nothing which could not be the result of mere wizardry. There are certain devices said to communicate with the dead, but these, I suspect, only project an image from the mind; the result seems indistinguishable from memory because it *is* memory. The alleged spirits tell no secrets they knew in life, nor could have learned after death, which are not known to the wielder—"

"Which is why the Resurrection Stone is not the most valuable magical artifact in the world," said Harry.

"Precisely," said Professor Quirrell, "though I wouldn't say no to a chance to try it." There was a dry, thin smile on his lips; and something colder, more distant, in his eyes. "You spoke to Dumbledore of that as well, I take it."

Harry nodded.

The curtains were taking on a faintly blue pattern, and a dim tracery of elaborate snowflakes now seemed to be becoming visible on the tablecloth. Professor Quirrell's voice sounded very calm. "The Headmaster can be very persuasive, Mr. Potter. I hope he has not persuaded you."

"*Heck* no," said Harry. "Didn't fool me for a second."

"I should hope not," said Professor Quirrell, still in that very calm tone. "I would be extremely put out to discover that the Headmaster had convinced you to throw away your life on some fool plot by telling you that death is the next great adventure."

"I don't think the Headmaster believed it himself, actually," Harry said. He sipped his own tea again. "He asked me what I could possibly do with eternity, gave me the usual line about it being boring, and he

didn't seem to see any conflict between that and his own claim to have an immortal soul. In fact, he gave me a whole long lecture about how awful it was to want immortality before he claimed to have an immortal soul. I can't quite visualize what must have been going on inside his head, but I don't think he *actually* had a mental model of himself continuing forever in the afterlife..."

The temperature of the room seemed to be dropping.

"You perceive," said a voice like ice from the other end of the table, "that Dumbledore does not truly believe as he speaks. It is not that he has compromised his principles. It is that he never had them from the beginning. Are you becoming cynical yet, Mr. Potter?"

Harry had dropped his eyes to his teacup. "A little," Harry said to his possibly-ultra-high-quality, perhaps-ridiculously-expensive Chinese tea. "I'm certainly becoming a bit *frustrated* with... whatever's going wrong in people's heads."

"Yes," said that icy voice. "I find it frustrating as well."

"Is there any way to get people *not* to do that?" said Harry to his teacup.

"There is indeed a certain useful spell which solves the problem."

Harry looked up hopefully at that, and saw a cold, cold smile on the Defense Professor's face.

Then Harry got it. "I mean, *besides* Avada Kedavra."

The Defense Professor laughed. Harry didn't.

"Anyway," Harry said hastily, "I *did* think fast enough not to suggest the obvious idea about the Resurrection Stone in front of Dumbledore. Have you ever seen a stone with a line, inside a circle, inside a triangle?"

The deathly chill seemed to draw back, fold into itself, as the ordinary Professor Quirrell returned. "Not that I can recall," Professor Quirrell said after a while, a thoughtful frown on his face. "That is the Resurrection Stone?"

Harry set aside his teacup, then drew on his saucer the symbol he had seen on the inside of his cloak. And before Harry could take out his own wand to cast the Hover Charm, the saucer went floating obligingly across the table toward Professor Quirrell. Harry really wanted to

learn that wandless stuff, but that, apparently, was far above his current curriculum.

Professor Quirrell studied Harry's tea-saucer for a moment, then shook his head; and a moment later, the saucer went floating back to Harry.

Harry put his teacup back on the saucer, noting absently as he did so that the symbol he'd drawn had vanished. "If you happen to see a stone with that symbol," said Harry, "and it *does* talk to the afterlife, do let me know. I have a few questions for Merlin or anyone who was around in Atlantis."

"Quite," said Professor Quirrell. Then the Defense Professor lifted up his teacup again, and tipped it back as though to finish the last of what was there. "By the way, Mr. Potter, I fear we shall have to cut short today's visit to Diagon Alley. I was hoping it would—but never mind. Let it stand that there is something else I must do this afternoon."

Harry nodded, and finished his own tea, then rose from his seat at the same time as Professor Quirrell.

"One last question," Harry said, as Professor Quirrell's coat lifted itself off the coatrack and went floating toward the Defense Professor. "Magic is loose in the world, and I no longer trust my guesses so much as I once did. So in your own best guess and without any wishful thinking, do *you* believe there's an afterlife?"

"If I did, Mr. Potter," said Professor Quirrell as he shrugged on his coat, "would I still be *here*?"

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

INTERLUDE: FRONTAL OVERRIDE

The biting January wind howled around the vast, blank stone walls that demarcated the material bounds of the castle Hogwarts, whispering and whistling in odd pitches as it blew past closed windows and stone minarets. The most recent snow had mostly blown away, but occasional patches of melted and refrozen ice still stuck to the stone face and blazed reflected sunlight. From a distance, it must have looked like Hogwarts was blinking hundreds of eyes.

A sudden gust made Draco flinch, and try, impossibly, to press his body even closer to the stone, which felt like ice and smelled like ice. Some utterly pointleiss instinct seemed convinced that he was about to be blown off the outer wall of Hogwarts, and that the best way to prevent this was to jerk around in helpless reflex and possibly throw up.

Draco was trying very hard *not* to think about the six stories worth of empty air underneath him, and focus, instead, on how he was going to kill Harry Potter.

"You know, Mr. Malfoy," said the young girl beside him in a conversational voice, "if a seer had told me that someday I'd be hanging onto the side of a castle by my fingertips, trying not to look down or think about what Mum'd say if she saw me, I wouldn't've had *any* idea of how it'd happen, *except* that it'd be Harry Potter's fault."

Earlier:

The two allied Generals stepped together over Longbottom's body, their boots hitting the floor in almost perfect synchrony.

Only a single soldier now stood between them and Harry, a Slytherin boy named Samuel Clamons, whose hand was clenched white around his wand, held upward to sustain his Prismatic Wall. The boy's breathing was coming rapidly, but his face showed the same cold determination that lit the eyes of his general, Harry Potter, who was standing behind the Prismatic Wall at the dead end of the corridor next to an open window, with his hands held mysteriously behind his back.

The battle had been ridiculously difficult, for the enemy being outnumbered two-to-one. It should have been easy, the Dragon Army and Sunshine Regiment had melded together easily in practice sessions, they'd fought each other long enough to know each other very well indeed. Morale was high, both armies knowing that this time they weren't just fighting to win for themselves, but fighting for a world free of traitors. Despite the surprised protests of both generals, the soldiers of the combined army had insisted on calling themselves Dramione's Sungon Argiment, and produced patches for their insignia of a smiling face wreathed in flames.

But Harry's soldiers had all blackened their own insignia—it didn't look like paint, more like they'd *burned* that part of their uniforms—and they'd fought all through the upper levels of Hogwarts with a desperate fury. The cold rage that Draco sometimes saw in Harry had seemed to trickle down into his soldiers, and they'd fought like it hadn't been play. And Harry had emptied out his entire bag of tricks, there'd been tiny metal balls (Granger had identified them as "ball bearings") on floors and staircases, rendering them impassable until cleared, only Harry's army had already practiced coordinated Hover Charms and they could fly their own people *right over* the obstacles they'd made...

You couldn't bring devices into the game from outside, but you could Transfigure anything you wanted *during* the game, so long as it was safe. And that just wasn't fair when you were fighting a boy raised by sci-

entists, who knew about things like ball bearings and skateboards and bungee cords.

And so it had come to this.

The survivors of the allied forces had cornered the last remnants of Harry Potter's army in a dead-end corridor.

Weasley and Vincent had rushed Longbottom at the same time, moving together like they'd practiced for weeks instead of hours, and somehow Longbottom had managed to hex them *both* before falling himself.

And now it was Draco and Granger and Padma and Samuel and Harry, and by the looks of Samuel, his Prismatic Wall couldn't last much longer.

Draco had already leveled his wand at Harry, waiting for the Prismatic Wall to fall of its own accord; there was no need to waste a Breaking Drill Hex before then. Padma leveled her own wand at Samuel, Granger leveled hers at Harry...

Harry was still hiding his hands behind his back, instead of aiming his wand; and looking at them with a face that could have been carved out of ice.

It might be a bluff. It probably wasn't.

There was a brief, tense silence.

And then Harry spoke.

"I'm the villain now," the young boy said coldly, "and if you think villains are this easy to finish off, you'd better think again. Beat me when I'm fighting seriously, and I'll stay beaten; but lose, and we'll be doing this all over again next time."

The boy brought his hands forward, and Draco saw that Harry was wearing strange gloves, with a peculiar grayish material on the fingertips, and buckles that stapped the gloves tightly to his wrists.

Beside Draco, the Sunshine General gasped in horror; and Draco, without even asking why, fired a Breaking Drill Hex.

Samuel staggered, he let out a scream as he staggered, but he held the Wall; and if Padma or Granger fired now, they would exhaust their own forces so badly that they might just lose.

"*Harry!*" shouted Granger. "*You can't be serious!*"

Harry was already in motion.

And as he swung out the open window, his cold voice said, "Follow if you dare."

⁂

The icy wind howled around them.

Draco's arms were already starting to feel tired.

...It had developed that, yesterday, Harry had carefully demonstrated to Granger exactly how to Transfigure the gloves he was currently wearing, which used something called 'gecko setae'; and how to glue Transfigured patches of the same material to the toes of their shoes; and Harry and Granger had, in innocent childish play, tried climbing around the walls and ceiling a little.

And that, also yesterday, Harry had supplied Granger with a grand total of exactly two doses of Feather-Falling Potion to carry around in her pouch, "just in case".

Not that Padma would have followed them, anyway. *She* wasn't crazy.

Draco carefully peeled loose his right hand, stretched it over as far as he could, and slapped it down on the stone again. Beside him, Granger did the same.

They'd already swallowed the Feather-Falling Potion. It was skirting the edges of the game rules, but the potion wouldn't be activated unless one of them actually fell, and so long as they *didn't* fall they weren't using the item.

Professor Quirrell was watching them; and so, no doubt, was Dumbledore.

The two of them were *perfectly, completely, utterly safe.*

Harry Potter, on the other hand, was going to die.

"I wonder why Harry is doing this," said General Granger in a reflective tone, as she slowly peeled the fingertips of one hand off the wall with an extended sticky sound. Her hand plopped back down again almost as soon as it was lifted. "I'll have to ask him that after I kill him."

It was amazing how much the two of them were turning out to have in common.

Draco didn't really feel like talking right now, but he managed to say, through gritted teeth, "Could be revenge. For the date."

"Really," said Granger. "After all this time."

Stick. Plop.

"How sweet of him," said Granger.

Stick. Plop.

"I guess I'll find some truly romantic way to thank him," said Granger.

Stick. Plop.

"What's he got against *you*?" said Granger.

Stick. Plop.

The icy wind howled around them.

One might have thought it would feel safer to have ground under your feet again.

But if that ground was a slanted roof tiled with rough slats, which had rather a lot more ice on it than the stone walls, and you were running across it at a high rate of speed...

Then you would be *sadly mistaken.*

"*Luminos!*" shouted Draco.

"*Luminos!*" shouted Granger.

"*Luminos!*" shouted Draco.

"*Luminos!*" shouted Granger.

The distant figure was dodging and scrambling as it ran, and not a single shot hit, but they were gaining.

Until Granger slipped.

It was inevitable, in retrospect, in real life you couldn't *actually* run across icy slanted rooftops at a high rate of speed.

And also inevitably, because it happened without the slightest thought, Draco spun and grabbed for Granger's right arm, and he *caught* her, only she was already too far off balance, she was falling and pulling Draco with her, it all happened so quickly—

There was a hard, painful impact, not just Draco's weight hitting the rooftop but some of Granger's weight too, and if she'd hit just a little bit closer to the edge they could have made it, but instead her body tipped again and her legs slipped off and her other hand grabbed frantically...

And that was how Draco ended up holding onto Granger's arm in a white grip, while her other hand clenched frantically at the edge of the rooftop and the toes of Draco's shoes dug into the edge of a roof tile.

"*Hermione!*" Harry's voice shrieked distantly.

"Draco," whispered Granger's voice, and Draco looked down.

That might have been a mistake. There was a lot of air underneath her, nothing but air, they were on the edge of a rooftop that had jutted out from the main stone wall of Hogwarts.

"He's going to come help me," whispered the girl, "but first he's going to *Luminos* both of us, there's no way he wouldn't. You have to let me go."

It should have been the easiest thing in the world.

She was just a mudblood, just a mudblood, *just a mudblood!*

She wouldn't even be *hurt!*

...Draco's brain wasn't listening to anything Draco was telling it right now.

"Do it," Hermione Granger whispered, her eyes blazing without a single trace of fear, "do it, Draco, do it, you can beat him yourself *we have to win Draco!*"

There was a sound of someone running and it was coming closer.

Oh, be rational...

The voice in Draco's head sounded an awful lot like Harry Potter teaching lessons.

...are you going to let your brain run your life?

Aftermath, 1:

It was taking a bit of an effort for Daphne Greengrass to keep herself quiet, as Millicent Bulstrode retold the story in the Slytherin girls' common room (a cozy cool place in the dungeons running beneath the Hogwarts Lake, with fish swimming past every window, and couches

you could lie down in if you wanted). Mostly because, in Daphne's opinion, it was a perfectly good story already without all of Millicent's *improvements*.

"And then what?" gasped Flora and Hestia Carrow.

"General Granger looked up at him," Millicent said dramatically, "and she said, 'Draco! You've got to let go of me! Don't worry about me, Draco, I promise I'll be all right! And what do you suppose Malfoy did then?"

"He said 'Never!'," shouted Charlotte Wiland, "and held on even tighter!"

All the listening girls except Pansy Parkinson nodded.

"Nope!" said Millicent. "He dropped her. And then he jumped up and shot General Potter. The end."

There was a stunned pause.

"You can't *do* that!" said Charlotte.

"She's a *mudblood,*" said Pansy, sounding confused. "Of *course* he let go!"

"Well, Malfoy shouldn't have grabbed her in the first place, then!" said Charlotte. "But once he grabbed her, he *had* to hang on! *Especially* in the face of approaching certain doom!" Tracey Davis, sitting next to Daphne, was nodding along in firm agreement.

"I don't see why," said Pansy.

"That's because you don't have the tiniest smidgin of romance in you," said Tracey. "Besides, you can't just go dropping girls. A boy who'd drop a girl like that... he'd drop *anyone.* He'd drop *you,* Pansy."

"What d'you mean, *drop me?*" Pansy said.

Daphne couldn't resist any more. "You know," Daphne said darkly, "you're eating breakfast one day at our table, and the next thing you know, Malfoy *lets go of you,* and you're falling off the top of Hogwarts! That's what!"

"Yeah!" said Charlotte. "He's a witch dropper!"

"You know why Atlantis fell?" said Tracey. "'Cause someone like Malfoy *dropped* it, that's why!"

Daphne lowered her voice. "In fact... what if Malfoy's the one who made Hermione, I mean General Granger, slip in the first place? What if he's out to make *all* the Muggleborns trip and fall?"

"You mean—?" gasped Tracey.

"That's right!" Daphne said dramatically. "What if Malfoy is—*the heir of Slipperin?*"

"The next Drop Lord!" said Tracey.

Which was far too good a line for anyone to keep to themselves, so by nightfall it was all over Hogwarts, and the next morning it was the *Quibbler's* headline.

Aftermath, 2:

Hermione made sure she got to their usual classroom nice and early that evening, just so that she would be by herself, in a chair, peacefully reading a book, when Harry got there.

If there was any way for a door to creak open apologetically, that was how the door was creaking open.

"Um," said Harry Potter's voice.

Hermione kept reading.

"I'm, um, kinda sorry, I didn't mean for you to *actually* fall off the roof or anything..."

It had been quite an entertaining experience, in fact.

"I, ah... I don't have much experience apologizing, I'll fall to my knees if you want, or buy you something expensive, *Hermione I don't know how to apologize to you for this what can I do just tell me?*"

She kept reading the book in silence.

It wasn't as if *she* had any idea how Harry could apologize, either.

Right now she was just feeling a sort of odd curiosity as to what would happen if she kept reading her book for a while.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

COURAGE

"*Romantic?*" Hermione said. "They're both *boys!*"

"Wow," Daphne said, sounding a little shocked. "You mean Muggles really *do* hate that? I thought that was just something the Death Eaters made up."

"No," said an older Slytherin girl Hermione didn't recognize, "it's true, they have to get married in secret, and if they're ever discovered, they get burned at the stake together. And if you're a girl who thinks it's romantic, they burn you too."

"That can't be right!" objected a Gryffindor girl, while Hermione was still trying to sort out what to say to that. "There wouldn't be any Muggle girls *left!*"

She'd kept on reading quietly, and Harry Potter had kept on trying to apologize, and it had soon dawned on Hermione that Harry had realized, possibly for the first time in his life, that he'd done something annoying; and that Harry, definitely for the first time in his life, was *terrified* that he'd lost her as a friend; and she'd started to feel (a) guilty and (b) worried about the direction Harry's increasingly desperate offers were going. But she still had no idea what sort of apology was appropriate, so she'd said that the Ravenclaw girls should vote on it—and this time she wouldn't fix the outcome, though she hadn't mentioned that part—to which Harry had instantly agreed.

The next day, practically every Ravenclaw girl over the age of thirteen had voted to have Draco drop Harry.

Hermione had felt mildly disappointed it was that simple, though it was obviously fair.

Right now, however, standing just outside the great doors of the castle amid half the female population of Hogwarts, Hermione was beginning to suspect that there were *things* going on here that she did not understand and that she desperately hoped neither of her fellow generals ever heard about.

⁂

You couldn't really see the details from up there, just the general fact of a sea of expectant female faces.

"You've got no idea what this is about, do you?" said Draco, sounding amused.

Harry had read a fair number of books he wasn't supposed to read, not to mention a few *Quibbler* headlines.

"Boy-Who-Lived gets Draco Malfoy pregnant?" said Harry.

"Okay, you *do* know what this is about," said Draco. "I thought Muggles hated that?"

"Only the dumb ones," said Harry. "But, um, aren't we, uh, a little *young?*"

"Not too young for *them,*" said Draco. He snorted. "*Girls!*"

They silently walked toward the edge of the roof.

"So *I'm* doing this for revenge on you," said Draco, "but why are *you* doing this?"

Harry's mind made a lightning calculation, weighing the factors, whether it was too soon...

"Honestly?" said Harry. "Because I meant to have her climb up the icy walls, but I *didn't* mean to have her fall off the roof. And, um, I kinda *did* feel really awful about that. I mean, I guess I actually did start seeing her as my friendly rival after a while. So this is a real apology to her, not a plot or anything."

There was a pause.

Then—

"Yeah," said Draco. "I understand."

Harry didn't smile. It might have been the most difficult nonsmile of his life.

Draco looked at the edge of the roof, and made a face. "This is going to be a lot harder to do on purpose than by accident, isn't it."

Harry's other hand held the roof in a reflexively terrified grip, his fingers white on the cold, cold stone.

You could know with your conscious mind that you'd drunk the Feather-Falling Potion. Knowing it with your unconscious mind was another matter entirely.

It was every bit as scary as Harry had thought it might have been for Hermione, which was justice.

"Draco," said Harry, controlling his voice wasn't easy, but the Ravenclaw girls had given them a script, "You've got to let me go!"

"Okay!" said Draco, and let go of Harry's arm.

Harry's other hand scrabbled at the edge, and then, without any decision being made, his fingers failed, and Harry fell.

There was a brief moment when Harry's stomach tried to leap up into his throat, and his body tried desperately to orient itself in the absence of any possible way to do so.

There was a brief moment when Harry could feel the Feather-Falling Potion kicking in, starting to slow him, a sort of lurching, cushioning feeling.

And then something *pulled* on Harry and he accelerated downward again *faster than gravity*—

Harry's mouth had already opened and begun screaming while part of his brain tried to think of something creative he could do, part of his brain tried to calculate how much time he had left to be creative, and a tiny rump part of his brain noticed that he wasn't even going to finish the remaining-time calculation before he hit the ground—

Harry was desperately trying to control his hyperventilating, and it wasn't helping him to hear the shrieking of all the girls, now lying in heaps on the ground and each other.

"Good heavens," said the unfamiliar man, he of the old-looking clothes and faintly scarred face, who was holding Harry in his arms. "Of all the ways I imagined we might meet again someday, I didn't expect it to be you falling out of the sky."

Harry remembered the last thing he'd seen, the falling body, and managed to gasp, "Professor... Quirrell..."

"He'll be all right after a few hours," said the unfamiliar man holding Harry. "He's just exhausted. I wouldn't have thought it possible... he must have knocked down *two hundred students* just to make sure he got whoever was jinxing you..."

Gently, the man set Harry upright on the ground, supporting him the while.

Harry carefully balanced himself, and nodded to the man.

He let go, and Harry promptly fell over.

The man helped him rise again. Making sure, at all times, to stand between Harry and the girls now picking themselves up from the ground, his head constantly glancing in that direction.

"Harry," the man said quietly, and very seriously, "do you have any idea which of these girls might have wanted to kill you?"

"Not murder," said a strained voice. "Just stupidity."

This time it was the unfamiliar man who seemed to almost fall over, utter shock on his face.

Professor Quirrell was already sitting up from where he'd fallen on the grass.

"Good heavens!" gasped the man. "You shouldn't be—"

"Mr. Lupin, your concerns are misplaced. No wizard, no matter how powerful, casts such a Charm by strength alone. You must do it by being *efficient.*"

Professor Quirrell didn't stand up, though.

"Thank you," Harry whispered. And then, "Thank you," to the man standing beside him as well.

"What happened?" said the man.

"I should have foreseen it myself," Professor Quirrell said, his voice crisp with disapproval. "Some number of girls tried to summon Mr. Potter to their own, particular arms. Individually, I suppose, they all thought they were being gentle."

Oh.

"Consider it a lesson in preparedness, Mr. Potter," said Professor Quirrell. "Had I not *insisted* that there be more than one adult witness to this little event, and that *both* of us have our wands out, Mr. Lupin would not have been available to slow your fall afterward, and you would have been gravely injured."

"*Sir!*" said the man—Mr. Lupin, apparently. "You should not say such things to the boy!"

"Who is—" Harry started to say.

"The only other person who was available to watch, besides myself," said Professor Quirrell. "I introduce you to Remus Lupin, who is here temporarily to instruct students in the Patronus Charm. Though I am told that the two of you have already met."

Harry studied the man, puzzled. He should have remembered that faintly scarred face, that strange, gentle smile.

"Where did we meet?" said Harry.

"In Godric's Hollow," said the man. "I changed a number of your diapers."

Mr. Lupin's temporary office was a small stone room with a small wooden desk, and Harry couldn't see anything of what Mr. Lupin was sitting on, suggesting that it was a small stool just like the one in front of his desk. Harry guessed that Mr. Lupin wouldn't be at Hogwarts for long, or use this office much, and so he'd told the house elves not to waste the effort. It said something about a person that he tried not to bother house elves. Specifically, it said that he'd been Sorted into Hufflepuff,

since, to the best of Harry's knowledge, Hermione was the only non-Hufflepuff who worried about bothering house elves. (Harry himself thought her qualms rather silly. Whoever had created house elves in the first place had been unspeakably evil, obviously; but that didn't mean Hermione was doing the right thing *now* by denying sentient beings the drudgery they had been shaped to enjoy.)

"Please sit down, Harry," the man said quietly. His formal robes were of low quality, not quite tattered, but visibly worn by the passage of time in a way that simple Repair Charms couldn't fix; *shabby* was the word that came to mind. And despite that, somehow, there was a dignity about him that couldn't have been obtained by fine and expensive robes, that wouldn't have *fit* with fine robes, that was the exclusive property of the shabby. Harry had *heard* of humility, but he'd never seen the real thing before—only the satisfied modesty of people who thought it was part of their style and wanted you to notice.

Harry took a seat on the small wooden stool in front of Mr. Lupin's short desk.

"Thank you for coming," the man said.

"No, thank *you* for saving me," said Harry. "Let me know if you ever need something impossible done."

The man seemed to hesitate. "Harry, may I... ask a personal question?"

"You can ask, certainly," Harry said. "I have a lot of questions for you, too."

Mr. Lupin nodded. "Harry, are your stepparents treating you well?"

"My *parents*," Harry said. "I have four. Michael, James, Petunia, and Lily."

"Ah," said Mr. Lupin. And then, "Ah" again. He seemed to be blinking rather hard. "I... that is good to hear, Harry, Dumbledore would tell none of us where you were... I was afraid he might think you ought to have wicked stepparents, or some such... "

Harry wasn't sure Mr. Lupin's concern had been misplaced, considering his own first encounter with Dumbledore; but it had all turned out well enough, so he said nothing. "What about my..." Harry searched for

a word that didn't raise them higher or put them lower... "*other* parents? I want to know, well, everything."

"A tall order," Mr. Lupin said. He wiped a hand across his forehead. "Well, let us begin at the beginning. When you were born, James was so happy that he couldn't touch his wand without it glowing gold, for a whole week. And even after that, whenever he held you, or saw Lily holding you, or just thought of you, it would happen again. James was an Auror, and it was hard for him to look properly imposing with his wand shining like that—"

"A tall order," Mr. Lupin said. He wiped a hand across his forehead. "Well, let us begin at the beginning. When you were born, James was so happy that he couldn't touch his wand without it glowing gold, for a whole week. And even after that, whenever he held you, or saw Lily holding you, or just thought of you, it would happen again—"

Every now and then Harry would look at his watch, and find that another thirty minutes had passed. He felt slightly bad about making Remus miss dinner, especially since Harry himself would just drop back to 7PM later, but that wasn't enough to stop either of them.

Finally Harry screwed up enough courage to ask the critical question, while Remus was in the middle of an extended discourse on the wonders of James's Quidditch that Harry couldn't find the heart to squash more directly.

"And that was when," Remus said, his eyes shining brightly, "James pulled off a *triple reverse Mulhanney Dive* with *extra backspin!* The whole crowd went wild, even some of the Hufflepuffs were cheering—"

I guess you had to be there, Harry thought—not that being there would have helped in any way—and said, "Mr. Lupin?"

Something about Harry's voice must have reached the man, because he stopped in mid-sentence.

"Was my father a bully?" said Harry.

Remus looked at Harry for a long moment. "For a little while," Remus said. "He grew out of it soon enough. Where did you hear that?"

Harry didn't answer, he was trying to think of something true to say that would deflect suspicion, but he didn't think fast enough.

"Never mind," said Remus, and sighed. "I can guess who." The faintly scarred face was pinched in disapproval. "What a thing to tell—"

"Did my father have any extenuating circumstances?" Harry said. "Poor home life, or something like that? Or was he just... being naturally nasty?" *Cold?*

Remus's hand swept his hair back, the first nervous gesture Harry had seen from him. "Harry," Remus said, "you can't judge your father by what he did as a young boy!"

"*I'm* a young boy," Harry said, "and I judge *myself*."

Remus blinked twice at that.

"I want to know *why*," Harry said. "I want to *understand*, because to me, it seems like there isn't any possible excuse for that!" Voice shaking a bit. "Please tell me anything you know about why he did it, even if it doesn't sound nice." *So I don't fall into the same trap myself, whatever it is.*

"It was the thing to do if you were in Gryffindor," Remus said, slowly, reluctantly. "And... I didn't think so back then, I thought it was the other way around, but... it might have been *Black* who got *James* into it, really... Black wanted so much to show everyone that he was against Slytherin, you see, we all wanted to believe that blood wasn't destiny—"

"No, Harry," said Remus. "I don't know why Black went after Peter instead of running. It was as though Black was making tragedy for the sake of tragedy that day." The man's voice was unsteady. "There was no hint, no warning, we all thought—to think that he was to be—" Remus's voice cut off.

Harry was crying, he couldn't help it, it hurt worse to hear it from Remus than anything he'd ever felt himself. Harry had lost two parents

he didn't remember, knew only from stories. Remus Lupin had lost all four of his best friends in less than twenty-four hours; and for the loss of his last remaining one, Peter Pettigrew, there'd just been no reason at all.

"Sometimes it still hurts to think of him in Azkaban," Remus finished, his voice almost a whisper. "I am glad, Harry, that Death Eaters are not allowed visitors. It means I do not have to feel ashamed of not going."

Harry had to swallow hard several times before he could speak. "Can you tell me about Peter Pettigrew? He was my father's friend, and it seems—that I should know, that I should remember—"

Remus nodded, water glittering in his own eyes now. "I think, Harry, that if Peter had known it would end that way—" the man's voice choked up. "Peter was more afraid of the Dark Lord than any of us, and if he'd known it would end that way, I don't think he would have done it. But Peter knew the *risk*, Harry, he knew the risk was real, that it *could* happen, and yet he stayed by James and Lily's side. All through Hogwarts I used to wonder why Peter hadn't been sorted into Slytherin, or maybe Ravenclaw, because Peter so adored secrets, he couldn't resist them, he would find out things about people, things they wanted kept hidden—" A brief wry look crossed Remus's face. "But he didn't *use* those secrets, Harry. He just wanted to know. And then the Dark Lord's shadow fell over everything, and Peter stood by James and Lily and put his talents to good use, and I understood why the Hat had sent him to Gryffindor." Remus's voice was fierce now, and proud. "It's *easy* to stand by your friends if you're a hero like Godric, bold and strong like people think Gryffindors should be. But if Peter was more afraid than any of us, doesn't that also make him the most brave?"

"It does," Harry said. His own voice was choked to where he almost couldn't talk. "If you could, Mr. Lupin, if you have time, there's someone else who I think should hear Peter Pettigrew's story, a student in first-year Hufflepuff, named Neville Longbottom."

"Alice and Frank's boy," said Remus, his voice turning sad. "I see. It is not a happy story, Harry, but I can tell it again, if you think it will help him."

Harry nodded.

A brief silence fell.

"Did Black have *any* unfinished business with Peter Pettigrew?" Harry said. "*Anything* that would make him seek out Mr. Pettigrew, even if it wasn't a killing matter? Like a secret Mr. Pettigrew knew, that Black wanted to know himself, or wanted to kill him to hide?"

Something flickered in Remus's eyes, but the older man shook his head, and said, "Not really."

"That means there *is* something," said Harry.

That wry smile appeared again beneath the salt-and-pepper mustache. "You have a bit of Peter in you yourself, I see. But it's not important, Harry."

"I'm a Ravenclaw, I'm not *supposed* to resist the temptation of secrets. And," Harry said more seriously, "if it was worth Black getting caught, I can't help but think it might matter."

Remus looked quite uncomfortable. "I suppose I could tell you when you're older, but really, Harry, it's *not* important! Just something from our school days."

Harry couldn't have put his finger on exactly what tipped him off; it might have been something about the exact tone of nervousness in Remus's voice, or the way the man had said *when you're older*, that sparked the sudden leap of Harry's intuition...

"Actually," said Harry, "I think I've sort of guessed it already, sorry."

Remus raised his eyebrows. "Have you?" He sounded a bit skeptical.

"They were lovers, weren't they?"

There was an awkward pause.

Remus gave a slow, grave nod.

"Once," Remus said. "A long time ago. A sad affair, ending in vast tragedy, or so it seemed to us all when we were young." The unhappy puzzlement was plain on his face. "But I had thought that long since over and done and buried beneath adult friendship, until the day that Black killed Peter."

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

HUMANISM, PART I

The gentle sun of January shone on the cold fields outside Hogwarts. For some of the students it was a study hour, and others had been let out of class. The first-years who'd signed up for it were practicing a certain spell, a spell that was most advantageously learned outdoors, beneath the bright sun and a clear blue sky, rather than within the confines of any classroom. Cookies and lemonade were also considered helpful.

The early gestures of the spell were complex and precise; you twitched your wand once, twice, thrice, and four times with small tilts at exactly the right relative angles, you shifted your forefinger and thumb exactly the right distances...

The Ministry thought this meant it was futile to try and teach anyone the spell before their fifth year. There had been a few known cases of younger children learning it, and this had been dismissed as "genius".

It might not have been a very polite way of putting it, but Harry was beginning to see why Professor Quirrell had claimed that the Ministry Committee of Curriculum would have been of greater benefit to wizardkind if they had been used as landfill.

So the gestures were complicated and delicate. That didn't stop you from learning it when you were eleven. It meant you had to be extra careful and practice each part for a lot longer than usual, that was all.

Most Charms that could only be learned by older students were like that because they required more strength of magic than any young student could muster. But the Patronus Charm *wasn't* like that, it wasn't difficult because it needed too much magic, it was difficult because it took *more* than mere magic.

It took the warm, happy feelings that you kept close in your heart, the loving memories, a different kind of strength that you didn't need for ordinary spells.

Harry twitched his wand once, twice, thrice and four times, shifted his fingers exactly the right distances...

"Good luck at school, Harry. Do you think I bought you enough books?"

"You can never have enough books... but you certainly tried, it was a really, really, really good try..."

It had brought tears to his eyes, the first time Harry had remembered and tried to put it into the spell.

Harry brought the wand up and around and brandished it, a gesture that didn't have to be precise, only bold and defiant.

"*Expecto Patronum!*" cried Harry.

Nothing happened.

Not a single flicker of light.

When Harry looked up, Remus Lupin was still studying the wand, a rather troubled look on his faintly scarred face.

Finally Remus shook his head. "I'm sorry, Harry," the man said quietly. "Your wandwork was exactly right."

And there wasn't a flicker of light anywhere else, either, because all the other first-years who were supposed to be practicing their Patronus Charms had been glancing out of the corners of their eyes at Harry instead.

The tears were threatening to come back into Harry's eyes, and they weren't happy tears. Of all the things, of all the things, Harry had never expected this.

There was something horribly humiliating about being informed that you weren't happy enough.

What did Anthony Goldstein have inside him that Harry didn't, that made Anthony's wand shine with that bright light?

Did Anthony love his own father more?

"What thought were you using to cast it?" said Remus.

"My father," Harry said, his voice trembling. "I asked him to buy me some books before I came to Hogwarts, and he did, and they were expensive, and then he asked me if they were enough—"

Harry didn't try to explain about the Verres family motto.

"Take a rest before you try a different thought, Harry," said Remus. He gestured toward where some other students were sitting on the ground, looking disappointed or embarrassed or regretful. "You won't be able to cast a Patronus Charm while you're feeling ashamed of not being grateful enough." There was a gentle compassion in Mr. Lupin's voice, and for a moment, Harry felt like hitting something.

Instead Harry turned around, and stalked to where the other failures were sitting. The other students whose wandwork had also been proclaimed perfect, and who were now supposed to be searching for happier thoughts; by the looks of them they weren't making much progress. There were many robes there trimmed in dark blue, and a handful of red, and one lone Hufflepuff girl who was still crying. The Slytherins hadn't even bothered showing up, except for Daphne Greengrass and Tracey Davis, who were still trying to get the gestures.

Harry plopped down on the cold dead grass of winter, next to the student whose failure had surprised him the most.

"So you couldn't do it either," Hermione said. She'd fled the field at first, but she'd come back after that, and you had to look closely at her reddened eyes to see that she'd been crying.

"I," Harry said, "I, I'd probably feel a lot worse about that if you hadn't failed, you're the nicest, person I know, that I've ever met, Hermione, and if *you* also can't do it, it means I might still be, be good..."

"I should have gone to Gryffindor," Hermione whispered. She blinked hard a few times, but she didn't wipe her eyes.

The boy and the girl walked forward together, definitely not holding hands, but each drawing a kind of strength from the other's presence, something that let them ignore the whispers of their year-mates, as they walked through the hallway approaching the great doors of Hogwarts.

Harry hadn't been able to cast the Patronus Charm no matter what happy thought he tried. People hadn't seemed surprised by that, which

made it even worse. Hermione hadn't been able to do it either. People had been *very* surprised by that, and Harry had seen her starting to get the same sidelong looks as him. The other Ravenclaws who'd failed weren't getting those looks. But Hermione was the Sunshine General, and her fans were treating it like she'd failed them, somehow, like she'd betrayed a promise she'd never made.

The two of them had gone to the library to research the Patronus Charm, which was Hermione's way of dealing with distress, as it was sometimes also Harry's. Study, learn, try to understand *why*...

The books had confirmed what the Headmaster had told Harry; often, wizards who couldn't cast the Patronus Charm in practice would be able to do so in the presence of a real Dementor, going from flat failure all the way to a full corporeal Patronus. It defied all logic, the Dementor's aura of fear ought to make it *harder* to wield a happy thought; but that was the way it was.

So the two of them were both going to give it one last try, there was no way either of them wouldn't give it one last try.

It was the day the Dementor came to Hogwarts.

Earlier, Harry had unTransfigured his father's rock from where it usually rested on his pinky ring in the form of a tiny diamond, and placed the huge gray stone back into his pouch. Just in case Harry's magic failed entirely, when he confronted the darkest of all creatures.

Harry had already started to feel pessimistic, and he wasn't even in front of a Dementor yet.

"I bet you can do it and I can't," Harry said in a whisper. "I bet that's what happens."

"It felt wrong to me," Hermione said, her voice even quieter than his. "I tried it this morning and I realized. When I was doing the brandish at the end, even before I said the words, it felt wrong."

Harry didn't say anything. He'd felt the same thing, right from the start, though it had taken another five attempts using five other happy thoughts before he'd been able to acknowledge it to himself. Every time he tried to brandish his wand, it had felt hollow; the spell he was trying to learn didn't fit him.

"It doesn't mean we're going to be Dark Wizards," said Harry. "Lots of people who can't cast the Patronus Charm aren't Dark Wizards. Godric Gryffindor wasn't a Dark Wizard..."

Godric had defeated Dark Lords, fought to protect commoners from Noble Houses and Muggles from wizards. He'd had many fine friends and true, and lost no more than half of them in one good cause or another. He'd listened to the screams of the wounded, in the armies he'd raised to defend the innocent; young wizards of courage had rallied to his calls, and he'd buried them afterward. Until finally, when his wizardry had only just begun to fail him in his old age, he'd brought together the three other most powerful wizards of his era to raise Hogwarts from the bare ground; the one great accomplishment to Godric's name that wasn't about war, any kind of war, no matter how just. It was Salazar, and not Godric, who'd taught the first Hogwarts class in Battle Magic. Godric had taught the first Hogwarts class in Herbology, the magics of green growing life.

To his last day he'd never been able to cast the Patronus Charm.

Godric Gryffindor had been a good man, not a happy one.

Harry didn't believe in angst, he couldn't stand reading about whiny heroes, he knew a billion other people in the world would have given anything to trade places with him, and...

And on his deathbed, Godric had told Helga (for Salazar had abandoned him, and Rowena passed before) that he didn't regret any of it, and he was *not* warning his students not to follow in his footsteps, no one was *ever* to say he'd told anyone not to follow in his footsteps. If it had been the right thing for *him* to do, then he wouldn't tell anyone else to choose wrongly, not even the youngest student in Hogwarts. And yet for those who *did* follow in his footsteps, he hoped they would remember that Gryffindor had told his House that it was all right for them to be happier than him. That red and gold would be bright warm colors, from now on.

And Helga had promised him, weeping, that when she was Headmistress she would make sure of it.

Whereupon Godric had died, and left no ghost behind him; and Harry had shoved the book back to Hermione and walked away a little,

so she wouldn't see him crying.

You wouldn't think that a book with an innocent title like "The Patronus Charm: Wizards Who Could and Couldn't" would be the saddest book Harry had ever read.

Harry...

Harry didn't want that.

To be in that book.

Harry didn't want that.

The rest of the school just seemed to think that *No Patronus* meant *Bad Person,* plain and simple. Somehow the fact that Godric Gryffindor also hadn't been able to cast the Patronus Charm seemed not to get repeated. Maybe people didn't talk about it to respect his last wish, Fred and George probably didn't know and Harry certainly wasn't about to tell them. Or maybe the other failures didn't mention it because it was less shameful, the smaller loss of pride and status, to be thought Dark rather than unhappy.

Harry saw that Hermione, beside him, was blinking hard; and he wondered if she was thinking of Rowena Ravenclaw, who'd also loved books.

"Okay," Harry whispered. "Happier thoughts. If you do go to a full corporeal Patronus, what do you think your animal will be?"

"An otter," Hermione said at once.

"An *otter?*" Harry whispered incredulously.

"Yes, an otter," said Hermione. "What about yours?"

"Peregrine falcon," Harry said without hesitation. "It can dive faster than three hundred kilometers per hour, it's the fastest living creature there is." The peregrine falcon had been Harry's favorite animal since forever. Harry was determined to become an Animagus someday, just to get that as his form, and fly by the strength of his own wings, and see the land below with sharper eyes... "But why an *otter?*"

Hermione smiled, but didn't say anything.

And the vast doors of Hogwarts swung open.

They walked for a time, the children, over a pathway that led toward the unforbidden forest, and continued through the forest itself. The Sun was lowering to near the horizon, the shadows long, the sunlight filtered

through the bare branches of the winter trees; for it was January, and the first-years the last to learn, that day.

Then the path swerved and took a new direction, and they all saw it in the distance, the clearing in the forest, and the sere winter grounds, yellowing dried grass whitened by a few small remnants of snow.

The human figures still small at that range. The two spots of dim white light from the Aurors' Patronuses, and the brighter spot of silver light from the Headmaster's, next to something...

Harry squinted.

Something...

It must have been purely Harry's imagination, because there shouldn't have been any way for a Dementor to reach past three corporeal Patronuses, but he thought he could feel a touch of emptiness brushing at his mind, brushing straight at the soft inner center of himself without any respect for Occlumency barriers.

Seamus Finnigan was ashen and trembling as he rejoined the students milling about on the withered and snow-spotted grass. Seamus's Patronus Charm had been successful, but there was still that interval between when the Headmaster dispelled his own Patronus and when you were supposed to cast your own, when you faced the Dementor's fear unshielded.

Up to twenty seconds of exposure at five paces was certainly safe, even for an eleven-year-old wizard with weak resistance and a still-maturing brain. There was a lot of variance in how hard the Dementor's power hit people, which was another thing not quite understood; but twenty seconds was definitely safe.

Forty seconds of Dementor exposure at five paces might *possibly* have been enough to cause permanent damage, though only to the most sensitive subjects.

It was harsh training even by the standards of Hogwarts, where the way you learned to fly on a hippogriff was by being tossed on one and

told to get going. Harry was no fan of overprotectiveness, and if you looked at the difference in maturity between a fourth-year in Hogwarts and a fourteen-year-old Muggle, it was clear that Muggles were smothering their children... but even Harry had started to wonder if this was pushing it. Not every hurt could be healed afterward.

But if you couldn't cast the spell under those conditions, it meant you couldn't rely on using the Patronus Charm to defend yourself; overconfidence was even more dangerous to wizards than to Muggles. Dementors could drain your magic and your physical vitality, not just your happy thoughts, which meant you might *not* be able to Apparate away if you waited too long, or if you didn't recognize the approaching fear until the Dementor was within range for its attack. (During his reading, Harry had discovered with considerable horror that some books claimed the Dementor's Kiss would *eat your soul* and that this was the reason for the permanent mindless coma into which it put the victims. And that wizards who *believed this* had deliberately used the Dementor's Kiss to *execute criminals.* It was a certainty that some called criminals were innocent, and even if they weren't, *destroying their souls?* If Harry had believed in souls, he would have... drawn a blank, he just couldn't think of an appropriate response to that.)

The Headmaster was taking security seriously, and so were the three Aurors standing guard. Their leader was an Asianish-looking man, solemn without being grim, Auror Komodo, whose wand never left his hand. His Patronus, an orangutan of solid moonlight, paced back and forth between the Dementor and the first-years awaiting their turn; beside the orangutan moved the bright white panther of Auror Butnaru, a man with a piercing gaze, long black hair in a ponytail, and a long braided goatee. Those two Aurors, and their two Patronuses, were all watching the Dementor. On the opposite side of the students was the resting Auror Goryanof, tall and thin and pale and unshaven, sitting back on a chair he'd conjured without word or wand, and maintaining an absentminded pokerface as he scanned the entire scene. Professor Quirrell had shown up not long after the first-years began their attempts, and his eyes never strayed far from Harry. The tiny Professor Flitwick, who had been a champion duellist, was fiddling absently with his wand;

and *his* eyes, peering out from within the huge puffy beard that served as his face, stayed focused on Professor Quirrell.

And it must have been Harry's imagination, but Professor Quirrell seemed to wince slightly each time the Headmaster's Patronus winked out to test the next student. Maybe Professor Quirrell was imagining the same placebo effect as Harry, that backwash of emptiness caressing at his mind.

"Anthony Goldstein," called the voice of the Headmaster.

Harry quietly walked toward Seamus, even as Anthony began to approach the shining silver phoenix, and... whatever it was beneath the tattered cloak.

"What did you see?" Harry asked Seamus in a low voice.

A lot of students hadn't answered Harry, when he'd tried to gather the data; but Seamus was Finnigan of Chaos, one of Harry's lieutenants. Maybe that wasn't fair, but...

"Dead," said Seamus in a whisper, "grayish and slimy... dead and left in water for a while... "

Harry nodded. "That's what a lot of people see," Harry said. He projected confidence, even though it was fake, because Seamus needed it. "Go eat some chocolate, you'll feel better."

Seamus nodded and stumbled off toward the table of healing sweets.

"*Expecto Patronum!*" cried a young boy's voice.

Then there were gasps of shock, even from the Aurors.

Harry spun around to look—

There was a brilliant silver bird standing between Anthony Goldstein and the cage. The bird reared its head and let out a cry, and the cry was also silver, as bright and hard and beautiful as metal.

And something in the back of Harry's mind said, *if that's a peregrine falcon, I'm going to strangle him in his sleep.*

Shut up, Harry said to the thought, *do you want us to be a Dark Wizard?*

What's the point? You're going to end up as one eventually.

That... wasn't something Harry would usually have thought...

It's a placebo effect, Harry told himself again. *The Dementor can't actually get to me through three corporeal Patronuses, I'm just imagining*

what I think it's like. When I actually face the Dementor, it'll feel completely different, and then I'll know I was just being silly before.

A slight chill went down Harry's spine then, because he had a feeling that yes, it *would* be completely different, and not in a positive direction.

The blazing silver phoenix sprang back into existence from the Headmaster's wand, the lesser bird vanished; and Anthony Goldstein began to walk back.

The Headmaster was coming with Anthony instead of calling out the next name, the Patronus waiting behind to guard the Dementor.

Harry glanced over to where Hermione was standing, just behind the glowing panther. Hermione's turn would have come next, but had apparently just been delayed.

She looked stressed.

Earlier, she'd politely asked Harry to please stop trying to destress her.

Dumbledore was smiling slightly as he escorted Anthony back toward the others; smiling only slightly, because the Headmaster looked very, very tired.

"Unbelievable," said Dumbledore in a voice that sounded much weaker than his accustomed boom. "A corporeal Patronus, in his first year. And an astounding number of successes among the other young students. Quirinus, I must acknowledge that you have proved your point."

Professor Quirrell inclined his head. "A simple enough guess, I should think. A Dementor attacks through fear, and children are less afraid."

"*Less* afraid?" said Auror Goryanof from where he was sitting.

"So I said as well," said Dumbledore. "And Professor Quirrell pointed out that adults had more courage, not less to fear; which thought, I confess, had never occurred to me before."

"That was not my *precise* phrasing," Professor Quirrell said dryly, "but it will do. And the rest of our agreement, Headmaster?"

Dumbledore looked wry, for a moment. "As you say. I admit I was not expecting to lose that bet, Quirinus, but you have proven your wisdom."

All the students were looking at them, puzzled; except Hermione, who was staring in the direction of the cage and the tall decaying robes; and Harry, who was watching everyone, since he was imagining himself feeling paranoid.

Professor Quirrell said, in tones that did not invite further comments, "I am allowed to teach the Killing Curse to students who wish to learn it. Which will render them considerably safer from Dark Wizards and other pests, and it is foolish to think they will otherwise know no deadly magics." Professor Quirrell paused, his eyes narrowing. "Headmaster, I respectfully observe that you are not looking well. I suggest leaving the remainder of the day's task to Professor Flitwick."

Dumbledore shook his head. "We are almost done for the day, Quirinus. I will last."

Hermione had approached Anthony. "Captain Goldstein," she said, and her voice trembled only a little, "can you give me any advice?"

"Don't be afraid," Anthony said firmly. "Don't think about anything it tries to make you think about. You're not just holding up the wand in front of you as a shield against the fear, you're *brandishing* your wand to drive the fear away, that's how you make a happy thought into something solid..." Anthony shrugged helplessly. "I mean, I *heard* all that before, but..."

Other students were starting to congregate around Anthony, with their own questions.

"Miss Granger?" the Headmaster said. His voice might have been gentle, or just weakened.

Hermione straightened her shoulders, and followed him.

"What did you see under the cloak?" Harry said to Anthony.

Anthony looked at Harry, surprised, and then answered, "A very tall man who was dead, I mean, sort of dead-shaped and dead-colored... it hurt to see him and I knew that was the Dementor trying to get at me."

Harry looked back out at where Hermione was confronting the cage and the cloak.

Hermione raised her wand into position for the first gestures.

The Headmaster's phoenix winked out of existence.

And Hermione gave a tiny, pathetic shriek, flinched—

—took a step back, Harry could see her wand moving, and then she brandished it and said "Expecto Patronum!"

Nothing happened.

Hermione turned and ran.

"*Expecto Patronum!*" said the Headmaster's deeper voice, and the silver phoenix blazed back to life.

The young girl stumbled, and kept running, strange sounds beginning to come from her throat.

"*Hermione!*" Susan yelled it, and Hannah, and Daphne, and Ernie, and they all started to run toward her; even as Harry, who was always thinking one step ahead, spun on his own heel and ran for the table with the chocolate.

Even after Harry had shoved the chocolate into Hermione's mouth and she'd chewed and swallowed, she was still breathing in great gasps and crying, her eyes still seemed unfocused.

She can't have been permanently Demented, Harry thought desperately at the confusion inside him, the horrible fear and deathly fury beginning to twist around each other, *she can't have been, she wasn't exposed for even ten seconds let alone forty—*

But she could be *temporarily* Demented, as Harry realized in that moment, there wasn't any rule that you couldn't be *temporarily* injured by a Dementor in just ten seconds if you were sensitive enough.

Then Hermione's eyes seemed to focus, and dart around, and settle on him.

"Harry," she gasped, and the other students went silent. "Harry, don't. *Don't!*"

Harry was suddenly afraid to ask what he shouldn't do, was *he* in her worst memories, or some sleep's nightmare that she was now reliving in waking life?

"*Don't go near it!*" said Hermione. Her hand reached out, grabbed him by the lapel of his robes. "You mustn't go near it, Harry! *It spoke to me, Harry, it knows you, it knows you're here!*"

"What—" Harry said, and then cursed himself for asking.

"*The Dementor!*" said Hermione. Her voice rose to a shriek. "*Professor Quirrell wants it to eat you!*"

In the sudden hush, Professor Quirrell came forward a few steps; but he didn't approach any closer (Harry was there, after all). "Miss Granger," he said, and his voice was grave, "I think you should have some more chocolate."

"*Professor Flitwick, don't let Harry try, send him back!*"

The Headmaster had arrived by then, and he and Professor Flitwick were exchanging worried looks.

"I did not hear the Dementor speak," the Headmaster said. "Still..."

"Just ask," said Professor Quirrell, sounding a little weary.

"Did the Dementor say *how* it would get to Harry?" said the Headmaster.

"All his tastiest parts first," said Hermione, "it would—it would eat—"

Hermione blinked. Some sanity seemed to come back into her eyes.

Then she started crying.

"You were too brave, Hermione Granger," the Headmaster said. His voice was gentle, and clearly audible. "Too much braver than I comprehended. You should have turned and run, not endured and tried to complete your Charm. When you are older and stronger, Miss Granger, I know that you will try again, and I know that you will succeed."

"I'm sorry," Hermione said in gasps, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry... I'm sorry, Harry, I can't tell you what I saw, I didn't look at it, I didn't dare look at it, I knew it was too horrible to ever be seen..."

It should have been Harry, but he'd hesitated, because his hands were all chocolatey; and then Ernie and Susan were there, helping Hermione from where she'd fallen on the grass, leading her toward the snacks table.

Five bars of chocolate later, Hermione seemed to be all right again, and she went over and apologized to Professor Quirrell; but she was always watching Harry, every time that he glanced in her direction. He'd stepped toward her only once, and stopped when she'd stepped away. Her eyes had silently apologized, and silently pleaded for him to leave her be.

Neville Longbottom had seen something dead and half-dissolved, oozing and running with a face like a squashed sponge.

It was the worst thing anyone had yet described seeing. Neville had been able to produce a small flicker of light from his wand before, but he had, intelligently and with great presence of mind, turned and run away instead of trying to cast his own Patronus Charm.

(The Headmaster had said nothing to the other students, told no one else to be less brave; but Professor Quirrell had calmly observed that if you made the mistake *after* being warned, that was when ignorance became stupidity.)

"Professor Quirrell?" Harry said in a low voice, having come as close to the Defense Professor as he dared. "What do *you* see when you—"

"Don't ask." The voice was very flat.

Harry nodded respectfully. "What was your *original* phrasing to the Headmaster, if I can ask?"

Dryly. "Our worst memories can only grow worse as we grow older."

"Ah," Harry said. "Logical."

Something strange flickered in Professor Quirrell's eyes, then, as he looked at Harry. "Let us hope," Professor Quirrell said, "that you succeed upon this try, Mr. Potter. For if you do, the Headmaster may teach you his trick of using a Patronus to send messages that cannot be forged or intercepted, and the military importance of that is impossible to overstate. It would be a tremendous advantage to the Chaos Legion, and someday, I suspect, this entire country. But if you do *not* succeed, Mr. Potter... well, *I* shall understand."

Padma Patil had said, in a wavering voice, "Ouch"; she hadn't screamed or run, and Dumbledore had recast his Patronus right away.

Parvati Patil had produced a corporeal Patronus in the form of a tiger, larger than Dumbledore's phoenix, though not nearly as bright. There

had been a great burst of applause from all the watchers, though not the same shock as when Anthony had done it.

And then it was Harry's turn.

The Headmaster called the name of Harry Potter, and Harry was afraid.

Harry knew, he knew that he was going to fail, and he knew that it was going to hurt.

But he still had to try; because sometimes, in the presence of a Dementor, a wizard went from not a flicker of light to a full corporeal Patronus, and no one understood why.

And because if Harry *couldn't* defend himself from Dementors, he had to be able to recognize their approach, recognize the feeling of them in his mind, and run before it was too late.

What is my worst memory...?

Harry had expected the Headmaster to give him a worried look, or a hopeful look, or deeply wise advice; but instead Albus Dumbledore only watched him with quiet calm.

He thinks I'm going to fail, but he won't sabotage me by telling me so, thought Harry, *if he had true words of encouragement to speak, he would speak them...*

The cage came closer. It was already tarnished, but not rusted away to nothing, not yet.

The cloak came closer. It was unraveling and shot through with unpatched holes; it had been new that morning, Auror Goryanof had said.

"Headmaster?" Harry said. "What do you see?"

The Headmaster's voice was also calm. "The Dementors are creatures of fear, and as your fear of the Dementor diminishes, so does the fearsomeness of its form. I see a tall, thin, naked man. He is not decaying. He is only slightly painful to look upon. That is all. What do you see, Harry?"

...Harry couldn't see under the cloak.

Or that wasn't right, it was that his mind was *refusing* to see what was under the cloak...

No, his mind was trying to see the *wrong* thing under the cloak, Harry could feel it, his eyes trying to force a mistake. But Harry had

done his best to train himself to notice that tiny feeling of confusion, to automatically flinch away from making stuff up; and every time his mind tried to start inventing a lie about what was under the cloak, that reflex was fast enough to shut it down.

Harry looked under the cloak and saw...

An open question. Harry wouldn't let his mind see something false, and so he didn't see anything, like the part of his visual cortex getting that signal was just ceasing to exist. There was a blind spot under the cloak. Harry couldn't know what was under there.

Just that it was far worse than any decaying mummy.

The unseeable horror beneath the cloak was very close, now, but the blazing bird of moonlight, the white phoenix, yet lay between them.

Harry wanted to run away like some of the other students had. Half the ones who'd had no luck with their Patronus Charms just hadn't shown up today in the first place. Of those remaining, half had fled before the Headmaster had even dispelled his own Patronus, and no one had said a word. There'd been a little laughter when Terry had turned and walked back before his own try; and Susan and Hannah, who'd gone before, had yelled at everyone to shut up.

But Harry was the Boy-Who-Lived, and he would lose much respect if he was seen to give up without even trying...

Pride and roles seemed to diminish and fall away, in the presence of whatever lay beneath the cloak.

Why am I still here?

It wasn't the shame of others thinking him cowardly, that kept Harry's feet in place.

It wasn't the hope of repairing his reputation that brought up his wand.

It wasn't the desire to master the Patronus Charm as magic, that moved his fingers into the initial position.

It was something else, something that *had* to oppose whatever lay beneath the cloak, this was the true darkness and Harry had to find out whether it lay within him, the power to drive it back.

Harry had planned to try one final time to think of his book-shopping spree with his father, but instead, at the last minute, facing the

Dementor, a different memory occurred to him, something he hadn't tried before; a thought that wasn't warm and happy in the ordinary way, but felt righter, somehow.

And Harry remembered the stars, remembered them burning terribly bright and unwavering in the Silent Night; he let that image fill him, fill all of him like an Occlumency barrier across his entire mind, became once again the bodiless awareness of the void.

The bright silver shining phoenix vanished.

And the Dementor smashed into his mind like the fist of God.

Fear / Cold / Darkness

There was an instant when the two forces clashed head-on, when the peaceful starlit memory held its own against the fear, even as Harry's fingers began the wand motions, practiced until they had become automatic. They weren't warm and happy, those blazing points of light in perfect blackness; but it was an image the Dementor could not easily pierce. For the silent burning stars were vast and unafraid, and to shine in the cold and darkness was their natural state.

But there was a flaw, a crack, a fault-line in the immovable object trying to resist that irresistible force. Harry felt a twinge of anger at the Dementor for trying to feed on him, and it was like slipping on wet ice. Harry's mind began to slide sideways, into bitterness, black fury, deathly hatred—

Harry's wand came up in the final brandish.

It felt wrong.

"Expecto Patronum," his voice spoke, the words hollow and pointless.

And Harry fell into his dark side, fell down into his dark side, further and faster and deeper than ever before, down down down as the slide accelerated, as the Dementor latched onto the exposed and vulnerable parts and fed on them, eating away the light. A fading reflex scrabbled for warmth, but even as an image of Hermione came to him, or an image of Mum and Dad, the Dementor twisted it, showed him Hermione lying

dead on the ground, the corpses of his mother and father, and then even that was sucked away.

Into the vacuum rose the memory, the worst memory, something forgotten so long ago that the neural patterns shouldn't have still existed.

"Lily, take Harry and go! It's him!" shouted a man's voice. "Go! Run! I'll hold him off!"

And Harry couldn't help but think, in the empty depths of his dark side, how ridiculously overconfident James Potter had been. Hold off Lord Voldemort? With what?

Then the other voice spoke, high-pitched like the hiss of a teakettle, and it was like dry ice laid on Harry's every nerve, like a brand of metal cooled to liquid helium temperatures and laid on every part of him. And the voice said:

"Avadakedavra."

(The wand flew from the boy's nerveless fingers as his body began to convulse and fall, the Headmaster's eyes widening in alarm as he began his own Patronus Charm.)

"Not Harry, not Harry, please not Harry!" screamed the woman's voice.

Whatever was left of Harry listened with all the light drained out of him, in the dead void of his heart, and wondered if she thought that Lord Voldemort would stop because she asked politely.

"Step aside, woman!" said the shrill voice of burning cold. "For you I am not come, only the boy."

"Not Harry! Please... have mercy... have mercy..."

Lily Potter, Harry thought, seemed not to understand what type of people became Dark Lords in the first place; and if this was the best strategy she could conceive to save her child's life, that was her final failure as a mother.

"I give you this rare chance to flee," said the shrill voice. "But I will not trouble myself to subdue you, and your death here will not save your child. Step aside, foolish woman, if you have any sense in you at all!"

"Not Harry, please no, take me, kill me instead!"

The empty thing that was Harry wondered if Lily Potter seriously imagined that Lord Voldemort would say yes, kill her, and then depart leaving her son unharmed.

"Very well," said the voice of death, now sounding coldly amused, "I accept the bargain. Yourself to die, and the child to live. Now drop your wand so that I can murder you."

There was a hideous silence.

Lord Voldemort began to laugh, horrible contemptuous laughter.

And then, at last, Lily Potter's voice shrieked in desperate hate, "Avada ke—"

The lethal voice finished first, the curse rapid and precise.

"Avadakedavra."

A blinding flare of green marked the end of Lily Potter.

And the boy in the crib saw it, the eyes, those two crimson eyes, seeming to glow bright red, to blaze like miniature suns, filling Harry's whole vision as they locked to his own—

The other children saw Harry Potter fall, they heard Harry Potter scream, a thin high-pitched scream that seemed to pierce their ears like knives.

There was a brilliant silver flash as the Headmaster bellowed "*Expecto Patronum!*" and the blazing phoenix returned to being.

But Harry Potter's horrible scream went on and on and on, even as the Headmaster scooped up the boy in his arms and bore him away from the Dementor, even as Neville Longbottom and Professor Flitwick both went for the chocolate at the same time and—

Hermione knew it, she knew it as she saw it, she knew that her nightmare had been real, it was coming true, somehow it was coming true.

"Get him chocolate!" demanded the voice of Professor Quirrell, pointlessly, because Professor Flitwick's tiny form was already cannonballing toward where the Headmaster was racing toward the students.

Hermione was moving forward herself, though she didn't know what else she meant to do—

"*Cast Patronuses!*" shouted the Headmaster, as he brought Harry behind the Aurors. "*Everyone who can! Get them between Harry and the Dementor! It's still feeding on him!*"

There was a moment of frozen horror.

"*Expecto Patronum!*" shouted Professor Flitwick and Auror Goryanof, and then Anthony Goldstein, but he failed the first time, and then Parvati Patil, who succeeded, and then Anthony tried again and his silver bird spread its wings and screamed at the Dementor, and Dean Thomas roared the words like they had been written in letters of fire and his wand gave birth to a towering white bear; there were eight blazing Patronuses all in a line between Harry and the Dementor, and Harry went on screaming and screaming as the Headmaster laid him on the dried grass.

Hermione couldn't cast a Patronus Charm, so she ran toward where Harry lay. In her mind, something tried to guess how long it had been already. Was it twenty seconds? More?

There was a dreadful agony and bewilderment on the face of Albus Dumbledore. His long black wand was in his hand, but he spoke no spells, only looked down at Harry's convulsing body in horror—

Hermione didn't know what to do, she didn't know what to do, she didn't understand what was happening, and the most powerful wizard in the world seemed equally at a loss.

"*Use your phoenix!*" bellowed Professor Quirrell. "*Take him far away from that Dementor!*"

Without a single word the Headmaster scooped up Harry in his arms and vanished in a crack of fire along with the suddenly appearing Fawkes; and the Headmaster's Patronus winked out, where it had guarded the Dementor.

Horror and confusion and sudden babble.

"Mr. Potter should recover," Professor Quirrell said, raising his voice, but his tone now calm once again, "I think it was just over twenty seconds."

Then the blazing white phoenix appeared again, like it was flying before them from elsewhere, to Hermione Granger came the creature of moonlight, and it cried to her in Albus Dumbledore's voice:

"*It still feeds on him, even here! How? If you know, Hermione Granger, you must tell me! Tell me!*"

The senior Auror turned to stare at her, and so did many students. Professor Flitwick didn't turn, he was now leveling his wand on Professor Quirrell, who was holding out clearly empty hands.

Seconds ticked past, uncounted.

She couldn't remember it, she couldn't remember the nightmare clearly, she couldn't remember why she had thought it was possible, why she had been afraid—

Hermione realized then what she ought to do, and it was the hardest decision of her life.

What if whatever had happened to Harry, happened to her too?

All her limbs cold as death, her vision gone dark, fear overwhelming everything; she'd seen Harry dying, Mum and Dad dying, all her friends dying, everyone dying, so that in the end, when she died, she would be alone. That was her secret nightmare she'd never talked about with anyone, that had given the Dementor its power over her, the loneliest thing was to die alone.

She didn't want to go to that place again, she, she didn't, she didn't want to stay there forever—

You have courage enough for Gryffindor, said the calm voice of the Sorting Hat in her memory, *but you will do what is right in any House I give you. You will learn, you will stand by your friends, in any House you choose. So don't be afraid, Hermione Granger, just decide where you belong...*

There was no time for deciding, Harry was dying.

"I can't remember now," said Hermione, her voice cracking, "but just hold on, I'll go in front of the Dementor again..."

She started to run toward the Dementor.

"Miss Granger!" squeaked Professor Flitwick, but he made no move to stop her, only kept holding his wand on Professor Quirrell.

"*Everyone!*" shouted Auror Komodo in a voice of military command. "*Get your Patronuses out of her way!*"

"FLITWICK!" roared Professor Quirrell. "SUMMON POTTER'S WAND!"

Even as Hermione understood, Professor Flitwick was already crying "*Accio!*", and she saw the stick of wood zooming up from where it

had lain almost touching the Dementor's cage.

The eyes opened, dead and vacant.

"*Harry!*" gasped a voice in the colorless world. "*Harry! Speak to me!*"

The face of Albus Dumbledore leaned over into the field of vision, which had been occupied by a distant marble ceiling.

"You're annoying," said the empty voice. "You should die."

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

HUMANISM, PART II

"Fawkes," said Albus Dumbledore, his voice cracking, "help him, please—"

A brilliant creature of red-gold shuffled into the field of vision, looking down quizzically; and it began to croon.

The meaningless chirps slid off the emptiness, there was nothing onto which they could hold.

"You're noisy," said the voice, "you should die."

"Chocolate," Albus Dumbledore said, "you need chocolate, and your friends—but I dare not take you back—"

Then a shining raven came, and spoke in Professor Flitwick's voice; whereupon Albus Dumbledore gasped in sudden comprehension, and cursed aloud at his own stupidity.

The empty thing laughed at that, for it had retained the capacity to be amused.

And a moment later they had all vanished in another flash of fire.

*
* *

It was only a moment, it seemed, between when Flitwick's raven had flown to elsewhere, and when Albus Dumbledore reappeared in another crack of red and golden fire with Harry in his arms; but somehow in that time Hermione had already managed to fill her hands with chocolate.

Before Hermione even got there, chocolate had zoomed off the table and straight into Harry's mouth, which a tiny part of her mind said was unfair, *he'd* gotten a chance to do it for *her*—

Harry spat the chocolate back out again.

"Go away," said a voice so empty it wasn't even cold.

...

Everything seemed to freeze, everyone who had been moving toward Harry halted, all movements broken by the shock of those two dead words.

Then: "No," said Albus Dumbledore, "I will not," and time resumed again, even as another piece of chocolate zoomed off the table and into Harry's mouth.

Hermione was close enough now that she could see Harry's expression become more hateful, as his mouth chewed with a mechanical, unnatural rhythm.

The Headmaster's voice was grim as iron. "Filius, call Minerva, tell her she must come at speed."

Professor Flitwick whispered to his silver raven, and it flew into the air and vanished.

Another piece of chocolate floated into Harry's mouth, and the mechanical chewing continued.

There were more students gathering around where the Headmaster watched over Harry with grim eyes: Neville, Seamus, Dean, Lavender, Ernie, Terry, Anthony, none of them daring to approach any closer than Hermione had.

"What can we do?" said Dean in a trembling voice.

"Back off and give him more space—" said the dry voice of Professor Quirrell.

"No!" interrupted the Headmaster. "Let him be surrounded by his friends."

Harry swallowed his chocolate, and said in that empty voice, "They're stupid. They should die*mmmpppphhh*" as another piece of chocolate entered his mouth.

Hermione saw the looks of shock that crossed their faces.

"He doesn't mean it, does he?" Seamus said it like he was begging.

"You don't understand," Hermione said, her voice breaking, "*that's not Harry*—" and she shut up before she said anything more, but she *had* to say that much.

She saw from the look on his face that Neville understood, and she also saw that the others didn't. If Harry had really never thought anything like that, then being exposed to a Dementor for less than a minute wouldn't have made him say it. That's what they were probably thinking.

Less than a minute of Dementor exposure couldn't create a whole new evil person inside you out of nothing.

But if that person was *already there*—

Does the Headmaster know?

Hermione looked up at the Headmaster, and found that Albus Dumbledore was gazing at *her*, and that his blue eyes had grown suddenly piercing—

Words came into her mind.

Do not speak of it, said the will of Dumbledore to her.

You know, thought Hermione. *About his dark side.*

I know. But this is beyond even that. Fawkes's song cannot reach him, where he is lost.

What can we—

I have a plan, sent the Headmaster. *Patience.*

Something about the tenor of that thought made Hermione nervous. *What sort of plan?*

It is better that you not know, sent the Headmaster.

Now Hermione was getting *really* nervous. She didn't know how *much* the Headmaster knew about Harry's dark side—

A fair point, sent the Headmaster. *I am about to tell you; steel yourself so as not to react. Are you ready? Good. I am going to pretend to cast the Killing Curse on Professor McGonagall—Do* NOT REACT, *Hermione!*

That took work. The Headmaster really was crazy! That wouldn't bring Harry *out* of his dark side, Harry would go *completely berserk*, he'd *kill* the Headmaster—

But that is not true darkness, sent Albus Dumbledore. *That is protectiveness, that is love. Fawkes will be able to reach him, then. And when Harry sees that Minerva is alive after all, it will return him fully.*

The thought came to Hermione—

I doubt that will work, sent the Headmaster, *and you may not like the way he reacts if you try. But you may try if you wish.*

She hadn't really meant that seriously! It was too—

Then her eyes moved, breaking gaze with the Headmaster, going to the boy looking around with empty, despising eyes as his mouth kept chewing and swallowing bar after bar of chocolate without effect. Her heart wrenched, and suddenly a lot of things didn't seem to matter, only that there was a chance.

⁂

There was a compulsion to chew and swallow chocolate. The response to compulsion was killing.

People had gathered around and stared. That was annoying. The response to annoyance was killing.

Other people were chattering in the background. That was insolent. The response to insolence was to inflict pain, but since none of them were useful, killing them would be simpler.

Killing all those people would be difficult. But many of them didn't trust Quirrell, who was strong. Finding exactly the right trigger could cause them all to kill each other.

Then a person leaned over into the field of vision and did something completely strange, something that belonged to a foreign mode of thought, for which there was only a single response stored anywhere—

⁂

She heard the gasps around her, and they didn't matter, she maintained the kiss on those chocolate-smeared lips as the tears welled in her eyes.

And Harry's arms came up and pushed her away, and his lips yelled, "*I told you, no kissing!*"

⁂

"I think he'll be all right now," the Headmaster said, looking at where Harry was crying in great wretched sobs as Fawkes crooned over him.

"Excellently done, Miss Granger. Do you know, not even I would have expected that to actually work?"

The phoenix's song wasn't meant for her, Hermione knew, but she could still be soothed by it, which she needed, because her life was officially over.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

HUMANISM, PART III

Fawkes's song gently trailed off into nothing.

Harry sat up from where he had lain on the winter-blasted grass, Fawkes still perched on his shoulder.

There were intakes of breath from all around him.

"Harry," said Seamus in a wavering voice, "are you all right?"

The peace of the phoenix was still in him, and warmth, from where Fawkes perched. Warmth, spreading out through him, and the memory of the song, still alive in the phoenix's presence. There were terrible things that had happened to him, terrible thoughts that had passed through him. He had regained an impossible memory, for all that the Dementor had made him desecrate it. A strange word kept echoing in his mind. And all of that could be put on hold for later, while the phoenix still shone red and gold beneath the setting sun.

Fawkes cawed at him.

"Something I have to do?" Harry said to Fawkes. "What?"

Fawkes bobbed its head in the direction of the Dementor.

Harry looked at the unseeable horror still in its cage, then back at the phoenix, puzzled.

"Mr. Potter?" said Minerva McGonagall's voice from behind him. "*Are* you all right?"

Harry climbed to his feet and turned.

Minerva McGonagall was looking at him, looking very worried; Albus Dumbledore beside her was studying him carefully; Filius Flitwick appeared tremendously relieved; and all the students were just plain staring.

"I think so, Professor McGonagall," Harry said calmly. He'd almost said *Minerva* before managing to stop himself. While Fawkes was on his shoulder, at least, Harry was fine; it might be that he would collapse a moment after Fawkes left, but somehow thoughts like that didn't seem important. "I think I'm okay."

There ought to have been cheering, or sighs of relief, or something, but no one seemed to know what to say, no one at all.

The peace of the phoenix lingered.

Harry turned back. "Hermione?" he said.

Everyone with the tiniest smidgin of romance in their hearts held their breath.

"I don't really know how to say thank you graciously," Harry said quietly, "any more than I know how to apologize. All I can say that if you're wondering whether it was the right thing to do, it was."

The boy and the girl gazed into each other's eyes.

"Sorry," Harry said. "About what happens next. If there's anything I can do—"

"No," Hermione said back. "There isn't. It's all right, though." Then she turned from Harry and walked away, toward the path that led back to the gates of Hogwarts.

A number of girls gave Harry puzzled looks, and then followed her. As they went, you could hear the excited questions starting.

Harry looked at them as they left, turned back to look at the other students. They'd seen him on the ground, screaming, and...

Fawkes nuzzled his cheek, briefly.

...and that would help them, someday, understanding that the Boy-Who-Lived could also be hurt, could be wretched. So that when they were hurt and wretched themselves, they would remember seeing Harry writhing on the ground, and know that their own pain and troubles didn't mean they'd never amount to anything. Had the Headmaster calculated that, when he had let the other students stay and watch?

Harry's eyes went back to the tall tattered cloak, almost absentmindedly, and without really being aware of what he was speaking, Harry said, "It shouldn't ought to exist."

"Ah," said a dry, precise voice. "I thought you might say that. I am very sorry to tell you, Mr. Potter, that Dementors cannot be killed. Many have tried."

"Really?" Harry said, still absentmindedly. "What did they try?"

"There is a certain extremely dangerous and destructive spell," Professor Quirrell said, "which I will not name here; a spell of cursed fire. It is what you would use to destroy an ancient device such as the Sorting Hat. It has no effect on Dementors. They are undying."

"They are not undying," said the Headmaster. The words mild, the gaze sharp. "They do not possess eternal life. They are wounds in the world, and attacking a wound only makes it larger."

"Hm," Harry said. "Suppose you threw it into the Sun? Would it be destroyed?"

"*Throw* it into the *Sun*?" squeaked Professor Flitwick, looking like he wanted to faint.

"It seems unlikely, Mr. Potter," Professor Quirrell said dryly. "The Sun is very large, after all; I doubt the Dementor would have much effect on it. But it is not a test I would like to try, Mr. Potter, just in case."

"I see," Harry said.

Fawkes cawed a final time, mantled his wings around Harry's head, and then launched himself from Harry. Launched himself straight toward the Dementor, screaming a great piercing cry of defiance that echoed around the field. And before anyone could react to that, there was a flash of fire, and Fawkes was gone.

The peace faded, a little.

The warmth faded, a little.

Harry took in a deep breath, let it out again.

"Yep," Harry said. "Still alive."

Again that silence, again the absence of cheering; no one seemed to know how to respond—

"It is good to know you are fully recovered, Mr. Potter," Professor Quirrell said firmly, as though to deny any other possibility. "Now, I believe Miss Ransom was up next?"

That started a bit of an argument, in which Professor Quirrell was right and everyone else was wrong. The Defense Professor pointed out

that, despite the understandable emotions of all concerned, the chance of a similar mishap occurring to any other student verged on the infinitesimal; the more so as they now knew to avoid mischances with wands. And meanwhile, there were other students who needed to take their own best chance at casting a corporeal Patronus Charm, or else learn the feeling of a Dementor so they could flee, and discover their own degree of vulnerability...

In the end it turned out that Dean Thomas and Ron Weasley of Gryffindor were the only ones left who were still willing to go anywhere near the Dementor, which simplified the argument.

Harry glanced in the Dementor's direction. The word echoed in his mind again.

All right, Harry thought to himself, *if the Dementor is a riddle, what is the answer?*

And just like that, it was obvious.

Harry looked at the tarnished, slightly corroded cage.

He saw what lay beneath the tall, tattered cloak.

That was it, then.

Professor McGonagall came and spoke to Harry. She hadn't seen the worst of it, so there was only a slight glitter of water in her eyes. Harry told her that he needed to talk to her afterward and ask a question he'd put off for a while, but that didn't need to happen right now, if she was busy. There was a certain look about her which suggested that she had been pulled away from something important; and Harry observed this to her, and said that she honestly didn't need to feel guilty about leaving. This earned him something of a sharp look, but then leave she did, hurriedly, with a promise that they would talk later.

Dean Thomas cast his white bear again, even in the Dementor's presence; and Ron Weasley put up an adequate shield of sparkling mist. Which concluded the day, so far as everyone else was concerned, and Professor Flitwick began to herd the students back to Hogwarts. When it was clear that Harry meant to stay behind, Professor Flitwick looked at him quizzically; and Harry, for his part, glanced significantly at Dumbledore. Harry didn't know what Professor Flitwick made of that, but after a sharp gaze of warning, his Head of House departed.

And so remained only Harry, Professor Quirrell, Headmaster Dumbledore, and an elite Auror trio.

It would have been better to get rid of the trio first, but Harry couldn't think of a good way to do that.

"All right," said Auror Komodo, "let's take it back."

"Excuse me," Harry said. "I'd like to have another go at the Dementor."

⁂

Harry's request met with a certain amount of opposition of the *you're completely insane* variety, though it was only Auror Butnaru who actually said that out loud.

"Fawkes told me to," Harry said.

This did not overcome all the opposition, despite the look of shock it produced on Dumbledore's face. The argument went on, and it was starting to wear the edges off the phoenix's remaining peace, which annoyed Harry, though only a little.

"Look," Harry said, "I'm pretty sure I know what I was doing wrong before. There's a kind of person who has to use a different sort of warm and happy thought. Just let me try it, okay?"

This did not prove persuasive either.

"I think," Professor Quirrell said finally, staring at Harry with narrowed eyes, "that if we do not allow him to do this under supervision, he may, at some point or another, sneak off and look for a Dementor on his own. Do I accuse you falsely, Mr. Potter?"

There was an appalled pause at this. It seemed like a good time to play his trump card.

"I don't mind if the Headmaster keeps his own Patronus up," Harry said. *For I will be in the presence of a Dementor just the same, Patronus or no.*

There was confusion at this, even Professor Quirrell looked puzzled; but the Headmaster finally acceded, since it didn't seem likely that Harry could be hurt through four Patronuses.

If the Dementor could not reach through your Patronus on some level, Albus Dumbledore, you would not see a naked man painful to look upon...

Harry didn't say it out loud, for obvious reasons.

And they began to walk toward the Dementor.

"Headmaster," Harry said, "suppose the Ravenclaw door asked you this riddle: What lies at the center of a Dementor? What would you say?"

"Fear," said the Headmaster.

It was a simple enough mistake. The Dementor approached, and the fear came over you. The fear hurt, you felt the fear weakening you, you wanted the fear to go away.

It was natural to think the fear was the problem.

So they'd concluded that the Dementor was a creature of pure fear, that there was nothing there to fear but fear itself, that the Dementor couldn't hurt you if you weren't afraid...

But...

What lies at the center of a Dementor?

Fear.

What is so horrible that the mind refuses to see it?

Fear.

What is impossible to kill?

Fear.

...it didn't quite fit, once you thought about it.

Though it was clear enough why people would be reluctant to look beyond the first answer.

People *understood* fear.

People knew what they were supposed to *do* about fear.

So, faced with a Dementor, it wouldn't exactly be comforting to ask: 'What if the fear is just a side effect rather than the main problem?'

They had come very close to the Dementor's cage guarded by four Patronuses, when there came sharp intakes of breath from the three Aurors and Professor Quirrell. Everyone's faces turned to look at the Dementor, seeming to listen; there was horror on Auror Goryanof's face.

Then Professor Quirrell raised his head, his face hard, and spat toward the Dementor.

"It did not like having its prey taken from it, I suppose," Dumbledore said quietly. "Well. If it becomes necessary, Quirinus, there will always be a refuge for you at Hogwarts."

"What did it say?" said Harry.

Every head swung to stare at him.

"You didn't hear it...?" Dumbledore said.

Harry shook his head.

"It said to me," said Professor Quirrell, "that it knew me, and that it would hunt me down someday, wherever I tried to hide." His face was rigid, showing no fright.

"Ah," Harry said. "I wouldn't worry about that, Professor Quirrell." *It's not like Dementors can actually talk, or think; the structure they have is borrowed from your own mind and expectations...*

Now everyone was giving him *very* strange looks. The Aurors were glancing nervously at each other, at the Dementor, at Harry.

And they stood directly before the Dementor's cage.

"They are wounds in the world," Harry said. "It's just a wild guess, but I'm guessing the one who said that was Godric Gryffindor."

"Yes..." said Dumbledore. "How did you know?"

It is a common misconception, thought Harry, *that all the best rationalists are Sorted into Ravenclaw, leaving none for other Houses. This is not so; being Sorted into Ravenclaw indicates that your strongest virtue is curiosity, wondering and desiring to know the true answer. And this is not the* only *virtue a rationalist needs. Sometimes you have to work hard on a problem, and stick to it for a while. Sometimes you need a clever plan for finding out. And sometimes what you need more than anything else to see an answer, is the courage to face it...*

Harry's gaze went to what lay beneath the cloak, the horror far worse than any decaying mummy. Rowena Ravenclaw might also have known, for it was an obvious enough riddle once you saw it as a riddle.

And it was also obvious why the Patronuses were animals. The animals didn't know, and so were sheltered from the fear.

But Harry knew, and would always know, and would never be able to forget. He'd tried to teach himself to face reality without flinching, and though Harry had not yet mastered that art, still those grooves had been

worn into his mind, the learned reflex to look *toward* the painful thought instead of away. Harry would never be able to forget by thinking warm happy thoughts about something else, and that was why the spell hadn't worked for him.

So Harry would think a warm happy thought that *wasn't* about something else.

Harry drew forth his wand that Professor Flitwick had returned to him, put his feet into the beginning stance for the Patronus Charm.

Within his mind, Harry discarded the last remnants of the peace of the phoenix, put aside the calm, the dreamlike state, remembered instead Fawkes's piercing cry, and roused himself for battle. Called upon all the pieces and elements of himself to awaken. Raised up within himself all the strength that the Patronus Charm could ever draw upon, to put himself into the right frame of mind for the final warm and happy thought; remembered all bright things.

The books his father had bought him.

Mum's smile when Harry had handmade her a mother's day card, an elaborate thing that had used half a pound of spare electronics parts from the garage to flash lights and beep a little tune, and had taken him three days to make.

Professor McGonagall telling him that his parents had died well, protecting him. As they had.

Realizing that Hermione was keeping up with him and even running faster, that they could be true rivals and friends.

Coaxing Draco out of the darkness, watching him slowly move toward the light.

Neville and Seamus and Lavender and Dean and everyone else who looked up to him, everyone that he would have fought to protect if anything threatened Hogwarts.

Everything that made life worth living.

His wand rose into the starting position for the Patronus Charm.

Harry thought of the stars, the image that had almost held off the Dementor even without a Patronus. Only this time, Harry added the missing ingredient, he'd never truly seen it but he'd seen the pictures and the video. The Earth, blazing blue and white with reflected sunlight as

it hung in space, amid the black void and the brilliant points of light. It belonged there, within that image, because it was what gave everything else its meaning. The Earth was what made the stars significant, made them more than uncontrolled fusion reactions, because it was Earth that would someday colonize the galaxy, and fulfill the promise of the night sky.

Would they still be plagued by Dementors, the children's children's children, the distant descendants of humankind as they strode from star to star? No. Of course not. The Dementors were only little nuisances, paling into nothingness in the light of that promise; not unkillable, not invincible, not even close. You had to put up with little nuisances, if you were one of the lucky and unlucky few to be born on Earth; on Ancient Earth, as it would be remembered someday. That too was part of what it meant to be alive, if you were one of the tiny handful of sentient beings born into the beginning of all things, before intelligent life had come fully into its power. That the much vaster future depended on what you did here, now, in the earliest days of dawn, when there was still so much darkness to be fought, and temporary nuisances like Dementors.

Mum and Dad, Hermione's friendship and Draco's journey, Neville and Seamus and Lavender and Dean, the blue sky and brilliant Sun and all bright things, the Earth, the stars, the promise, everything humanity was and everything it would become...

On the wand, Harry's fingers moved into their starting positions; he was ready, now, to think the right sort of warm and happy thought.

And Harry's eyes stared directly at that which lay beneath the tattered cloak, looked straight at that which had been named Dementor. The void, the emptiness, the hole in the universe, the absence of color and space, the open drain through which warmth poured out of the world.

The fear it exuded stole away all happy thoughts, its closeness drained your power and strength, its kiss would destroy everything that you were.

I know you now, Harry thought as his wand twitched once, twice, thrice and four times, as his fingers slid exactly the right distances, *I comprehend your nature, you symbolize Death, through some law of magic*

you are a shadow that Death casts into the world.

And Death is not something I will ever embrace.

It is only a childish thing, that the human species has not yet outgrown.

And someday...

We'll get over it...

And people won't have to say goodbye any more...

The wand rose up and leveled straight at the Dementor.

"Expecto Patronum!"

The thought exploded from him like a breaking dam, surged down his arm into his wand, burst from it as blazing white light. Light that became corporeal, took on shape and substance.

A figure with two arms, two legs, and a head, standing upright; the animal *Homo sapiens,* the shape of a human being.

And the shape glowed brighter and brighter as Harry poured all his strength into his spell, blazing with incandescent light brighter than the fading sunset, the Aurors and Professor Quirrell shielding their eyes in shock.

And someday when the descendants of humanity have spread from star to star, they won't tell the children about the history of Ancient Earth until they're old enough to bear it; and when they learn they'll weep to hear that such a thing as Death had ever once existed!

The figure of a human shone more brilliant now than the noonday Sun, so radiant that Harry could feel the warmth of it on his skin; and Harry sent out all his defiance at the shadow of Death, opening all the floodgates inside him to make that bright shape blaze even brighter and yet brighter.

You are not invincible, and someday the human species will end you.

I will end you if I can, by the power of mind and magic and science.

I won't cower in fear of Death, not while I have a chance of winning.

I won't let Death touch me, I won't let Death touch the ones I love.

And even if you do end me before I end you,

Another will take my place, and another,

Until the wound in the world is healed at last...

The bright figure of a human faded away as Harry lowered his wand.

The tattered cloak lay empty within the cage.

Harry breathed in deeply, and exhaled.

Like waking up from a dream, like opening his eyes after sleep, his gaze moved away from the cage, he looked around and saw that everyone was staring at him.

Albus Dumbledore was staring at him.

Professor Quirrell was staring at him.

The Auror trio was staring at him.

They were all looking at him like they'd just seen him destroy a Dementor.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

HUMANISM, PART IV

The last tip of the Sun was sinking below the horizon, the red light fading from the treetops, only the blue sky illuminating the six people standing upon the winter-dried and snow-spotted grass, near a vacant cage.

Harry felt... well, *normal* again. Sane-ish. The spell hadn't undone the day and its damage, hadn't made the injuries as if they had never been, but his hurts had been... bandaged, meliorated? It was hard to describe.

Dumbledore was also looking healthier, though not fully restored. The old wizard's head turned for a moment, locked eyes with Professor Quirrell, then looked back to Harry. "Harry," Dumbledore said, "are you about to collapse in exhaustion and possibly die?"

"No, strangely enough," Harry said. "That took something out of me, but a lot less than I thought it would." *Or maybe it gave something back, as well as taking...* "Honestly, I expected my body to be hitting the ground with a thud about now."

There was a distinct body-hitting-the-ground-with-a-thuddish sort of sound.

"Thank you for taking care of that, Quirinus," said Dumbledore to Professor Quirrell, who was now standing above and behind the unconscious forms of the three Aurors. "I confess I am still feeling a bit peaky. Though I shall handle the Memory Charms myself."

Professor Quirrell inclined his head, and then looked at Harry. "I will omit a good deal of useless incredulity," said Professor Quirrell, "remarks to the effect that Merlin himself failed to do that, et cetera. Let us

go straight to asking the important question. What the sweet slithering snakes was *that?*"

"The Patronus Charm," Harry said. "Version 2.0."

"I rejoice to see that you are your usual self again," said Dumbledore. "But you are not going *anywhere*, young Ravenclaw, until you tell me what exactly was that warm and happy thought."

"Hm..." said Harry. He tapped a contemplative finger on his cheek. "I wonder if I should?"

Professor Quirrell muffled a sudden grin.

"Please?" said the Headmaster.

Harry felt an impulse and decided to go with it. It was dangerous, but there might not ever be a better opportunity until the end of time.

"Three sodas," Harry said to his pouch, then looked up at the Defense Professor and the Headmaster of Hogwarts. "Gentlemen," Harry said, "I bought these sodas on my first visit to Platform Nine and Three-Quarters, on the day I entered into Hogwarts. I have been saving them for special occasions; there is a minor enchantment on them to ensure they are drunk at the right time. This is the last of my supply, but I do not think there will ever come a finer occasion. Shall we?"

Dumbledore took a soda can from Harry, and Harry tossed another to Professor Quirrell. The two older men each muttered identical charms over the can and frowned briefly at the result. Harry, for his part, simply popped the top and drank.

The Defense Professor and the Headmaster of Hogwarts politely followed suit.

Harry said, "I thought of my absolute rejection of death as the natural order."

It might not be the right kind of warm feeling you needed to cast a Patronus Charm, but it was going into Harry's Top 10 nonetheless.

The looks he got from the Defense Professor and the Headmaster briefly made Harry nervous, as the spilled Comed-Tea faded out of existence; but then the two of them each glanced at the other and both apparently decided that they couldn't get away with doing anything really awful to Harry in the other's presence, just as Harry had been counting on.

"Mr. Potter," said Professor Quirrell, "even *I* know that is not how things are supposed to work."

"Indeed," said Dumbledore. "Explain."

Harry opened his mouth, and then, as realization hit him, rapidly snapped his mouth shut again. Godric hadn't told anyone, nor had Rowena if she'd known; there might have been any number of wizards who'd figured it out and kept their mouths shut. You couldn't forget if you *knew* that was what you were trying to do; once you realized *how* it worked, the animal form of the Patronus Charm would never work for you again—and most wizards didn't have the right upbringing to turn on Dementors and destroy them—

"Erm, sorry about this," said Harry. "But I've just this instant realized that explaining would be an *incredibly* bad idea until you work some things out on your own."

"Is that the truth, Harry?" Dumbledore said slowly. "Or are you just pretending to be wise—"

"*Headmaster!*" said Professor Quirrell, sounding genuinely shocked. "Mr. Potter has told you that this spell is not spoken of with those who cannot cast it! You do not press a wizard on such matters!"

"If I told you—" Harry began.

"No," Professor Quirrell said, sounding rather severe. "You don't tell us *why,* Mr. Potter, you simply tell us that we are not to know. If you wish to devise a hint, you do so carefully, at leisure, not in the midst of conversation."

Harry nodded.

"But," said the Headmaster. "But, but what am I to tell the Ministry? You can't just *lose* a Dementor!"

"Tell them I ate it," said Professor Quirrell, causing Harry to choke on the soda he had unthinkingly raised to his lips. "I don't mind. Shall we head on back, Mr. Potter?"

The two of them began to walk the dirt path back to Hogwarts, leaving behind Albus Dumbledore staring forlornly at the empty cage and the three sleeping Aurors awaiting their Memory Charms.

Aftermath, Harry Potter and Professor Quirrell:

They walked for a while before Professor Quirrell spoke, and all background noise dropped into silence when he did.

"You are exceptionally good at killing things, my student," said Professor Quirrell.

"Thank you," Harry said sincerely.

"I am not prying," said Professor Quirrell, "but on the off-chance that it was *only* the Headmaster who you did not trust with the secret...?"

Harry considered this. Professor Quirrell already couldn't cast the animal Patronus Charm.

But you couldn't untell a secret, and Harry was a fast enough learner to realize that he ought to at least *think* for a while before unleashing this one upon the world.

Harry shook his head.

Professor Quirrell nodded acceptance.

"Out of curiosity, Professor Quirrell," said Harry, "if your bringing the Dementor to Hogwarts had been part of an evil plot, what would have been its goal?"

"Assassinate Dumbledore while he was weakened," Professor Quirrell said without even hesitating. "Hm. The Headmaster told you he was suspicious of me?"

Harry said nothing for a second while he tried to think of a reply, and then gave up when he realized he'd already answered.

"Interesting..." Professor Quirrell said. "Mr. Potter, it is not out of the question that there *was* a plot at work today. Your wand ending up that close to the Dementor's cage *could* have been an accident. Or one of the Aurors could have been Imperiused, Confunded, or Legilimized to exert an influence. Flitwick and myself should not be excluded as suspects, in your calculation. One notes that Professor Snape canceled all his classes today, and I suspect he is powerful enough to Disillusion himself; the Aurors cast detection charms early on, but they did not repeat them immediately before your turn. But most easily of all, Mr. Potter, the deed could have been plotted by Dumbledore himself; and if

he *did*, why, he might also take steps in advance to cast your suspicion elsewhere."

They walked on for a few steps.

"But why *would* he?" Harry said.

The Defense Professor stayed quiet a moment, and then said, "Mr. Potter, what steps have you taken to investigate the Headmaster's character?"

"Not many," said Harry. "Not enough."

"Then I will observe," said Professor Quirrell, "that you do not find out all there is to know about a man by asking only his friends."

Now it was Harry's turn to walk a few steps in silence on the slightly beaten dirt path that led back to Hogwarts. He'd really been supposed to know better than that already. Confirmation bias was the technical term; it meant, among other things, that when you chose your information sources, there was a notable tendency to choose information sources that agreed with your current opinions.

"Thank you," Harry said. "Actually... I didn't say it earlier, did I? Thank you for *everything*. If another Dementor ever threatens you, or for that matter, slightly annoys you, just let me know and I'll introduce it to Mister Glowy Person. I don't like it when Dementors slightly annoy my friends."

That got him an indecipherable glance from Professor Quirrell. "You destroyed the Dementor because it threatened me?"

"Erm," Harry said, "I'd sort of decided on it before then, but yes, that would have been sufficient reason by itself."

"I see," said Professor Quirrell. "And what would you have done about the threat to me if your spell *hadn't* worked for destroying the Dementor?"

"Plan B," said Harry. "Encase the Dementor in dense metal with a high melting point, probably tungsten, drop it into an active volcano, and hope it ends up inside Earth's mantle. Ah, the whole planet is filled with molten lava under its surface—"

"Yes," said Professor Quirrell. "I know." The Defense Professor was wearing a very odd smile. "I really should have thought of that myself, all

things considered. Tell me, Mr. Potter, if you wanted to lose something where no one would ever find it again, where would you put it?"

Harry considered this question. "I suppose I shouldn't ask *what* you've found that needs losing—"

"Quite," said Professor Quirrell, as Harry had expected; and then, "Perhaps you will be told when you are older," which Harry hadn't.

"Well," said Harry, "besides trying to get it into the molten core of the planet, you could bury it in solid rock a kilometer underground in a randomly selected location—maybe teleport it in, if there's some way to do that blindly, or drill a hole and repair the hole afterward; the important thing would be not to leave any traces leading there, so it's just an anonymous cubic meter somewhere in the Earth's crust. You could drop it into the Mariana Trench, that's the deepest depth of ocean on the planet—or just pick some random other ocean trench, to make it less obvious. If you could make it bouyant and invisible, then you could throw it into the stratosphere. Or ideally you would launch it into space, with a cloak against detection, and a randomly fluctuating acceleration factor that would take it out of the Solar System. And afterward, of course, you'd Obliviate yourself, so even you didn't know exactly where it was."

The Defense Professor was laughing, and it sounded even odder than his smile.

"Professor Quirrell?" Harry said.

"All excellent suggestions," said Professor Quirrell. "But tell me, Mr. Potter, why those exact five?"

"Huh?" said Harry. "They just seemed like the obvious sorts of ideas."

"Oh?" said Professor Quirrell. "But there is an interesting pattern to them, you see. One might say it sounds like something of a riddle. I must admit, Mr. Potter, that although it has had its ups and downs, on the whole, this has been a surprisingly good day."

And they continued walking down the path that led to the gates of Hogwarts, quite some distance apart; as Harry, without even thinking about it, automatically stayed far enough away from the Defense Pro-

fessor not to trigger that sense of doom, which for some reason seemed unusually strong right now.

Aftermath, Daphne Greengrass:

Hermione had refused to answer any questions, and as soon as they'd passed the split leading to the Slytherin dungeons, Daphne and Tracey had peeled off at once, walking as quickly as they could. Rumor traveled fast in Hogwarts, so they'd have to go to the dungeons right away if they wanted to be the first to tell everyone the story.

"Now remember," said Daphne, "don't just blurt out about the kiss as soon as we walk in, okay? It works better if we tell the whole story in order."

Tracey nodded excitedly.

And as soon as they burst into the Slytherin common room, Tracey Davis took a deep breath and shouted, "*Everyone! Harry Potter couldn't cast the Patronus Charm and the Dementor almost ate him and Professor Quirrell saved him but then Potter was all evil until Granger brought him back with a kiss! It's true love for sure!*"

It was ordered storytelling of a sort, Daphne supposed.

The news failed to produce the expected reaction. Most of the girls glanced over and then stayed in their couches, or the boys simply kept reading in their chairs.

"Yes," said Pansy sourly, from where she was sitting with Gregory's feet in her lap, leaning back and reading what seemed to be a coloring book, "Millicent already told us."

How—

"Why didn't *you* kiss him first, Tracey?" said Flora and Hestia Carrow from their own chairs. "Now Potter's going to marry a mudblood girl! *You* could've been his true love and gotten into a rich Noble House and everything if you'd just kissed him first!"

Tracey's face was a picture in stunned realization.

"*What?*" shrieked Daphne. "Love does not work like that!"

"Of course it does," stated Millicent from where she was practicing some sort of Charm while looking out a window at the swirling waters of the Hogwarts Lake. "First kiss gets the prince."

"*It wasn't their first kiss!*" shouted Daphne. "Hermione was *already* his true love! That's why *she* could bring him back!" Then Daphne realized what she'd just said and winced internally, but as the saying went, you had to fit the tongue to the ear.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, what?" said Gregory, swinging his feet off Pansy's lap. "What's this? Miss Bulstrode didn't tell that part."

Everyone else was also looking at Daphne, now.

"Oh, yeah," said Daphne, "Harry shoved her away and shouted, 'I told you, no kissing!' Then Harry screamed like he was dying and Fawkes started singing to him—I'm not sure which one of those happened first, actually—"

"That doesn't sound like true love to *me*," said the Carrow twins. "That sounds like the *wrong person* kissed him."

"It was supposed to be *me*," whispered Tracey. Her face was still stunned. "*I* was supposed to be his true love. Harry Potter was *my* general. I should've, I should've fought Granger for him—"

Daphne spun on Tracey, incensed. "*You?* Take Harry away from Hermione?"

"Yeah!" said Tracey. "Me!"

"You're nuts," Daphne stated with conviction. "Even if you *had* kissed him first, you know what that would make you? The sad little lovestruck girl who dies in the hero's arms at the end of Act Two."

"*You take that back!*" shouted Tracey.

Meanwhile, Gregory had crossed the room to where Vincent was doing his homework. "Mr. Crabbe," Gregory said in a low voice, "I think Mr. Malfoy needs to know about this."

Aftermath, Hermione Granger:

Hermione stared at the wax-sealed paper, on the surface of which was inscribed simply the number *42*.

I figured out why we couldn't cast the Patronus Charm, Hermione, it doesn't have anything to do with us not being happy enough. But I can't tell you. I couldn't even tell the Headmaster. It needs to be even more secret than partial Transfiguration, for now, anyway. But if you ever need to fight Dementors, the secret is written here, cryptically, so that if someone doesn't know it's about Dementors and the Patronus Charm, they won't know what it means...

She'd told Harry about seeing him dying, her parents dying, all her friends dying, everyone dying. She hadn't told him about her terror of dying alone, somehow that was still too painful.

Harry had told her about remembering his parents dying, and that he'd thought it was funny.

There's no light in the place the Dementor takes you, Hermione. No warmth. No caring. It's somewhere that you can't even understand happiness. There's pain, and fear, and those can still drive you. You can hate, and take pleasure in destroying what you hate. You can laugh, when you see other people hurting. But you can't ever be happy, you can't even remember what it is that isn't there anymore... I don't think there's any way I can ever explain just what you saved me from. I'm usually ashamed to put people to trouble, I usually can't stand it when people make sacrifices for me, but this one time I'll say that no matter what it ends up costing you to have kissed me, don't ever doubt for a second that it was the right thing to do.

Hermione hadn't realized just how *little* the Dementor had touched her, how small and shallow had been the darkness into which it had taken her.

She'd seen everyone dying, and that had still been able to hurt.

Hermione put the paper back into her pouch, like a good girl ought to.

She'd really wanted to read it, though.

She was frightened of Dementors.

Aftermath, Minerva McGonagall:

She felt frozen; she shouldn't have been so shocked, she shouldn't have found Harry so hard to face, but after what he'd been through... She had searched the young boy in front of her for any signs of Dementation, and failed to find them. But something about the calm with which he had asked such a foreboding question seemed deeply worrying. "Mr. Potter, I can't possibly speak of such matters without the Headmaster's permission!"

The boy in her office took this in without changing expression. "I would prefer not to disturb the Headmaster over this matter," Harry said calmly. "I *insist* on not disturbing him, in fact, and you did promise that our conversation would be kept private. So let me put it this way. I know that there was, in fact, a prophecy. I know that you are the one who originally heard it from Professor Trelawney. I know that the prophecy identified the child of James and Lily as someone dangerous to the Dark Lord. And I know who I am, indeed everyone now knows who I am, so you are revealing nothing new or dangerous, if you tell me only this: What was the *exact wording* which identified *me,* the child of James and Lily?"

Trelawney's hollow voice echoed in her mind—

> Born to those who have thrice defied him,
> Born as the seventh month dies...

"Harry," said Professor McGonagall, "I can't possibly tell you that without permission!" It chilled her to the bone that Harry knew so much already, she couldn't imagine how Harry had learned—

The boy looked at her with strange, sorrowful eyes. "Can you not sneeze without the Headmaster's permission, Professor McGonagall? For I do promise to you that I have good reason to ask, and good reason to keep the question private."

"Please don't, Harry," she whispered.

"All right," Harry said. "One simple question. Please. Was the Potter family mentioned by *name*? Does the prophecy literally say 'Potter'?"

She stared at Harry for a while. She couldn't have said why or where she got the sense that this was a critical point, that she could not lightly refuse the request, nor lightly accede to it—

"No," she finally said. "Please, Harry, don't ask any more."

The boy smiled, a little sadly it seemed, and said, "Thank you, Minerva. You are a good woman and true."

And while her mouth was still open in utter shock, Harry Potter got up and left the office; and only then did she realize that Harry had taken her refusal as an answer, and the true answer at that—

Harry closed the door behind himself.

The logic had presented itself with a strange diamondlike clarity. Harry couldn't have said if it had come to him during Fawkes's singing, or maybe even before.

Lord Voldemort had killed James Potter. He had preferred to spare Lily Potter's life. He had continued his attack, therefore, with the sole purpose of killing their infant child.

Dark Lords were not usually scared of infant children.

So there was a prophecy about Harry Potter being dangerous to Lord Voldemort, and Lord Voldemort had known that prophecy.

"I give you this rare chance to flee. But I will not trouble myself to subdue you, and your death here will not save your child. Step aside, foolish woman, if you have any sense in you at all!"

Had it been a whim, to give her that chance? But then Lord Voldemort would not have tried to persuade her. Had the prophecy warned Lord Voldemort against killing Lily Potter? Then Lord Voldemort *would* have troubled himself to subdue her. Lord Voldemort had been *mildly* inclined not to kill Lily Potter. The preference had been stronger than a whim, but not as strong as a warning.

So suppose that someone whom Lord Voldemort considered a lesser ally or servant, useful but not indispensable, had begged the Dark Lord to spare Lily's life. Lily's, but not James's.

This person had known that Lord Voldemort would attack the house of the Potters. Had known both the prophecy, and the fact that the Dark Lord knew it. Otherwise he would not have begged Lily's life.

According to Professor McGonagall, besides herself, the other two who knew of the prophecy were Albus Dumbledore and Severus Snape.

Severus Snape, who had loved Lily before she was Lily Potter, and hated James.

Severus, then, had learned of the prophecy, and told it to the Dark Lord. Which he had done because the prophecy had not described the Potters by name. It had been a riddle, and Severus had solved that riddle only too late.

But if Severus had been the *first* to hear the prophecy, and disposed to tell it to the Dark Lord, then why would he also have told Dumbledore or Professor McGonagall?

Therefore Dumblefore or Professor McGonagall had heard it first.

The Headmaster of Hogwarts had no obvious reason to tell the Transfiguration Professor about an extremely sensitive and crucial prophecy. But the Transfiguration Professor had every reason to tell the Headmaster.

It seemed likely, then, that Professor McGonagall had been the first to hear it.

The prior probabilities said that it had been Professor Trelawney, Hogwarts's resident seer. Seers were rare, so if you counted up most of the seconds Professor McGonagall had spent in the presence of a seer over the course of her lifetime, most of those seer-seconds would be Trelawney-seconds.

Professor McGonagall had told Dumbledore, and would have told no one else about the prophecy without permission.

Therefore, it was Albus Dumbledore who had arranged for Severus Snape to somehow learn of the prophecy. And Dumbledore himself had solved the riddle successfully, or he would not have selected *Severus*, who had once loved Lily, as the intermediary.

Dumbledore had deliberately arranged for Lord Voldemort to hear about the prophecy, in hopes of luring him to his death. Perhaps Dumbledore had arranged for Severus to learn only *some* of the prophecy, or there were other prophecies of which Severus had remained innocent... somehow Dumbledore had known that an *immediate* attack on the Potters would still lead to Lord Voldemort's *immediate* defeat, although

Lord Voldemort himself had not believed this. Or maybe that had just been a lucky stroke of Dumbledore's insanity, his taste for bizarre plots...

Severus had ended up serving Dumbledore afterward; perhaps the Death Eaters would not look kindly on Severus if Dumbledore revealed his role in their defeat.

Dumbledore had tried to arrange for Harry's mother to be spared. But that part of his plot had failed. And he had knowingly condemned James Potter to his death.

Dumbledore was responsible for the deaths of Harry's parents. *If* the whole chain of logic was correct. Harry could not, in justice, say that successfully ending the Wizarding War did not count as extenuating circumstances. But somehow this still... *bothered him a great deal.*

And it was time and past time to ask Draco Malfoy what the *other* side of that war had to say about the character of Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

PERSONHOOD THEORY

There comes a point in every plot where the victim starts to suspect; and looks back, and sees a trail of events all pointing in a single direction. And when that point comes, Father had explained, the prospect of the loss may seem so unbearable, and admitting themselves tricked may seem so humiliating, that the victim will yet deny the plot, and the game may continue long after.

Father had warned Draco not to do that again.

First, though, he'd let Mr. Avery finish eating all of the cookies he'd swindled from Draco, while Draco watched and cried. The whole lovely jar of cookies that Father had given him just a few hours earlier, for Draco had lost all of them to Mr. Avery, down to the very last one.

So it was a familiar feeling that Draco had felt in the pit of his stomach, when Gregory told him about The Kiss.

Sometimes you looked back, and saw things...

(In a lightless classroom—you couldn't quite call it *unused* any more, since it'd seen weekly use over the last few months—a boy sat enshrouded in a hooded cowl, with an unlighted crystal globe on the desk in front of him. Thinking in silence, thinking in darkness, waiting for an opening door to let in the light.)

Harry had shoved Granger away and said, *I told you, no kissing!*

Harry would probably say something like, *She just did it to annoy me, last time, just like she made me go on that date.*

But the verified story was that Granger had been willing to face the Dementor again in order to help Harry; that she had kissed Harry, crying, when he was lost in the depths of Dementation; and that her kiss had brought him back.

That didn't sound like rivalry, even friendly rivalry.

That sounded like the kind of friendship you usually didn't see even in plays.

Then why had Harry made his friend climb the icy walls of Hogwarts?

Because that was the sort of thing Harry Potter did to his friends?

Father had told Draco that to fathom a strange plot, one technique was to look at what *ended up* happening, assume it was the *intended* result, and ask who benefited.

What had ended up happening as the result of Draco and Granger fighting Harry Potter together... was that Draco had started to feel a lot friendlier toward Granger.

Who benefited from the scion of Malfoy becoming friends with a mudblood witch?

Who benefited, that was famous for exactly that sort of plot?

Who benefited, that could possibly be pulling Harry Potter's strings?

Dumbledore.

And if that was true then Draco would *have* to go to Father and tell him everything, no matter what happened after that, Draco couldn't imagine what would happen after that, it was awful beyond imagining. Which made him want to cling desperately to the last shred of hope that it wasn't all what it looked like...

...Draco remembered that, too, from Mr. Avery's lesson.

Draco hadn't planned to confront Harry yet. He was still trying to think of an experimental test, something that Harry wouldn't just see through and fake. But then Vincent had come with the message that Harry wanted to meet early this week, on Friday instead of Saturday.

And so here Draco was, in a dark classroom, an unlit crystal globe on his desk, waiting.

Minutes passed.

Footsteps approached.

The door made a gentle creak as it swung open into the classroom, revealing Harry Potter dressed in his own hood and cowl; Harry stepped forward into the dark classroom, and the sturdy door closed behind him with a faint click.

Draco tapped the crystal globe, and the classroom lit with bright green light. Green light projected shadows of the desks onto the floor, and glared back at him from the curved chair-backs, photons bouncing off the wood in such fashion that the angle of incidence equaled the angle of reflection.

At least *that* much of what he'd learned wasn't likely to be a lie.

Harry had flinched as the light went on, halting for a moment, then resumed his approach. "Hello, Draco," Harry said quietly, drawing back his hood as he came to Draco's desk. "Thank you for coming, I know it's not our usual time—"

"You're welcome," Draco said flatly.

Harry dragged one of the chairs to face Draco across his desk, the legs making a slight screeching sound on the floor. He spun the chair so that it was facing the wrong way, and sat down straddling it, his arms folded across the back of the chair. The boy's face was pensive, frowning, serious, looking very adult even for Harry Potter.

"I have an important question to ask you," said Harry, "but there's something else I want us to do before that."

Draco said nothing, feeling a certain weariness. Part of him just wanted it all to be over with already.

"Tell me, Draco," said Harry. "Why don't Muggles ever leave ghosts behind when they die?"

"Because Muggles don't have souls, obviously," Draco said. He didn't even realize until after he'd said it that it might contradict Harry's politics, and then he didn't care. Besides, it *was* obvious.

Harry's face showed no surprise. "Before I ask my important question, I want to see if you can learn the Patronus Charm."

For a moment the sheer nonsequitur stumped Draco. Good old impossible-to-predict-or-understand Harry Potter. There were times when Draco wondered whether Harry was deliberately this disorienting as a tactic.

Then Draco understood, and shoved himself up and away from his desk in a single angry motion. That was it. It was over. "Like *Dumbledore's* servants," he spat.

"Like Salazar Slytherin," Harry said steadily.

Draco almost stumbled over his own feet in the middle of his first stride toward the door.

Slowly, Draco turned back toward Harry.

"I don't know where you came up with that," said Draco, "but it's wrong, everyone knows the Patronus Charm is a Gryffindor spell—"

"Salazar Slytherin could cast a corporeal Patronus Charm," Harry said. Harry's hand darted into his robes, brought out a book whose title was written as white on green, and so almost impossible to read in the green light; but it looked old. "I discovered that when I was researching the Patronus Charm before. And I found the original reference and checked the book out of the library just in case you didn't believe me. The author of this book doesn't think there's anything *unusual* about Salazar being able to cast a Patronus, either; the belief that Slytherins can't do that must be recent. And as a further historical note, though I don't have the book with me, Godric Gryffindor never could."

After the first six times Draco had tried calling Harry's bluff, on six successively more ridiculous occasions, he'd realized that Harry just *didn't* lie about what was written in books. Still, when Harry's hands opened the book and lay it out to the place of a bookmark, Draco leaned over and studied the place where Harry's finger pointed.

Then the fires of Ravenclaw fell upon the darkness that had cloaked the left wing of Lord Foul's army, breaking it, and it was revealed that the Lord Gryffindor had spoken true; the fear they all had felt was not natural in its source, but coming from thrice a dozen Dementors, who had been promised the souls of the defeated. At once the Lady Hufflepuff and Lord Slytherin brought forth their Patronuses, a vast angry badger and a bright silver serpent, and the defenders lifted their heads as the shadow passed from their hearts. And Lady Ravenclaw laughed, remarking that Lord Foul was a great fool, for now his own army would be subject to the fear, but not the defenders of Hogwarts. Yet the Lord Salazar said, "No fool he, that much I know." And the Lord Gryffindor beside him studied the battlefield with a frown upon his face...

Draco looked back up. "So?"

Harry closed the book and put it into his pouch. "Chaos and Sunshine both have soldiers that can cast corporeal Patronus Charms. Cor-

poreal Patronuses can be used to convey messages. If you can't learn the spell, Dragon Army will be at a severe military disadvantage—"

Draco didn't care about that right now, and told Harry so. His voice was sharper than it probably should have been.

Harry didn't blink. "Then I'm calling in the favor you owe me from that time I stopped a riot from breaking out, on our first day of broomstick lessons. I'm going to try to teach you the Patronus Charm, and for my favor, I want you to do your honest best to learn and cast it. I trust to the honor of House Malfoy that you will."

Draco felt that certain weariness again. If Harry had asked at any other time, it would have been a fair return on favor owed, given that it wasn't actually a Gryffindor spell. But...

"*Why?*" Draco said.

"To find out whether you can do this thing that Salazar Slytherin could do," Harry said evenly. "This is an experimental test, and I will not tell you what it means until after you have done it. Will you?"

...It probably *was* a good idea to discharge that favor on something innocuous, all the more so if it was time to break with Harry Potter. "All right."

Harry drew a wand from his robes, and laid it against the globe. "Not really the best color for learning the Patronus Charm," Harry said. "Green light the exact shade of the Killing Curse, I mean. But silver is a Slytherin color too, isn't it? *Dulak.*" The light went out, and Harry whispered the first two phrases of the Continual Light enchantment, recasting that part of it, though neither of them could have cast the whole thing by themselves. Then Harry tapped the globe again, and the room lit with a silver radiance, brilliant but still soft and gentle. Color returned to the desks and chairs, and to Harry's slightly sweaty face beneath his shock of black hair.

It took that long for Draco to realize the implication. "You saw a *Killing Curse* cast since the last time we met? When—how—"

"Cast the Patronus Charm," Harry said, looking more serious than ever, "and I'll tell you."

Draco pressed his hands to his eyes, shutting out the silver light. "You know, I really should remember that you're too *weird* for any *nor-*

mal plots!"

Within his self-imposed darkness, he heard the sound of Harry snickering.

Harry watched closely as Draco finished his latest run-through of the preliminary gestures, the part of the spell that was difficult to learn; the final brandish and the pronunciation didn't have to be precise. All three of the last runs had been perfect as far as Harry could see. Harry had also felt an odd impulse to adjust things that Mr. Lupin hadn't said anything about, like the angle of Draco's elbow or the direction his foot was pointing; it could have been entirely his own imagination, and probably was, but Harry had decided to go with it just in case.

"All right," Harry said quietly. There was a tension in his chest that made it a little hard to speak. "Now we don't have a Dementor here, but that's all right. We won't need one. Draco, when your father spoke to me at the train station, he said that you were the one thing in the world that was most precious to him, and he threatened to throw away all his other plans to take vengeance on me, if ever you came to harm."

"He... what?" There was a catch in Draco's voice, and a strange look on his face. "Why are you telling me *that*?"

"Why wouldn't I?" Harry didn't let his expression change, though he could guess what Draco was thinking; that Harry had been plotting to separate Draco from his father, and shouldn't be saying anything that would bring them closer together. "There's always been just one person who matters most to you, and I know exactly what warm and happy thought will let you cast the Patronus Charm. You told it to me at the train station before the first day of school. Once you fell off a broomstick and broke your ribs. It hurt more than anything you'd ever felt, and you thought you were going to die. Pretend that fear is coming from a Dementor, standing in front of you, wearing a tattered black cloak, looking like a dead thing left in water. And then cast the Patronus Charm, and when you brandish the wand to drive the Dementor away, think of how your father held your hand, so that you wouldn't be afraid; and then

think of how much he loves you, and how much you love him, and put it all into your voice when you say *Expecto Patronum.* For the honor of House Malfoy, and not just because you promised me a favor. Show me you didn't lie to me that day in the train station when you told me Lucius was a good father. Show me you can do what Salazar Slytherin could do."

And Harry stepped backward, behind Draco, out of Draco's field of vision, so that Draco only faced the dusty old teacher's desk and blackboard at the front of the unused classroom.

Draco cast one look behind him, that strange look still on his face, and then turned away to face forward. Harry saw the exhalation, the inhalation. The wand twitched once, twice, thrice, and four times. Draco's fingers slid along the wand, exactly the right distances—

Draco lowered his wand.

"This is too—" Draco said, "I can't *think* this right, while you're watching—"

Harry turned around and started walking toward the door. "I'll come back in a minute," Harry said. "Just hold to your happy thought, and the Patronus will stay."

⁂

From behind Draco came the sound of the door opening again.

Draco heard Harry's footsteps entering the classroom, but Draco didn't turn to look.

Harry didn't say anything either. The silence stretched.

Finally—

"What does this *mean?*" Draco said. His voice wavered a bit.

"It means you love your father," Harry's voice said. Which was just what Draco had been thinking, and trying not to cry in front of Harry. It was too right, just too right—

Before Draco, on the floor, was the shining form of a snake that Draco recognized; a Blue Krait, a snake first brought to their manor by Lord Abraxas Malfoy after a visit to some faraway land, and Father had kept a Blue Krait in the ophidiarium ever since. The thing about the Blue

Krait was that the bite wouldn't hurt much. Father had said that, and told Draco that he was *never* allowed to pet the snake, no matter who was watching. The venom killed your nerves so fast that you didn't have time to feel pain as the poison spread. You could die of it even after using Healing Charms. It ate other snakes. It was as Slytherin as any creature could possibly be.

That was why a Blue Krait head had been forged into the handle of Father's cane.

The bright snake blinked its eyes, which were also silver, and darted out its tongue; and seemed to *smile* somehow, in a warmer way than any reptile should.

And then Draco realized—

"But," Draco said, still staring at the beautifully radiant snake, "*you* can't cast the Patronus Charm." Now that Draco had cast it himself, he understood why that was important. You could be evil, like Dumbledore, and still cast the Patronus Charm, so long as you had *something* bright left inside you. But if Harry Potter didn't have a single thought inside him that shone like that—

"The Patronus Charm is more complicated than you think, Draco," Harry said seriously. "Not everyone who fails at casting it is a bad person, or even unhappy. But anyway, I *can* cast it. I did it on my second try, after I realized what I'd done wrong facing the Dementor my first time. But, well, my life gets a little peculiar sometimes, and my Patronus came out strange, and I'm keeping it a secret for now—"

"Am I supposed to just *believe* that?"

"You can ask Professor Quirrell if you don't believe me," said Harry. "Ask him whether Harry Potter can cast a corporeal Patronus, and tell him that I told you to ask. He'd know the request was from me, no one else would know."

Oh, and now Draco was to trust *Professor Quirrell?* Still, knowing Harry, it might be true; and Professor Quirrell wouldn't lie for trivial reasons.

The glowing snake turned its head back and forth, as though seeking a prey that wasn't there, and then coiled itself into a circle, as though to rest.

"I wonder," Harry said softly, "when it was, which year, which generation, that Slytherins stopped trying to learn the Patronus Charm. When it was that people started to think, that Slytherins themselves started to think, that being cunning and ambitious was the same as being cold and unhappy. And if Salazar knew that his students didn't even bother showing up to learn the Patronus Charm any more, I wonder, would he wish that he'd never been born? I wonder how it all went wrong, when Slytherin's House went wrong."

The shining creature winked out, the turmoil rising in Draco making it impossible to sustain the Charm. Draco spun on Harry, he had to control himself not to raise his wand. "What do *you* know about Slytherin House *or* Salazar Slytherin? *You* were never Sorted into my House, what gives you the right to—"

And *that* was when Draco *finally* realized.

"*You did get Sorted into Slytherin!*" Draco said. "You *did,* and afterwards you, you somehow, you *snapped your fingers*—" Draco had once asked Father if it would be cleverer to get Sorted into some other House so that everyone would trust him, and Father had smiled and said that he'd thought of that too at Draco's age, but there was no way to fool the Sorting Hat...

...not until *Harry Potter* came along.

How had he ever bought for *one minute* that *Harry* was a *Ravenclaw*?

"An interesting hypothesis," Harry said equably. "Do you know, you're the second person in Hogwarts to come up with a theory along those lines? At least you're the second that's actually said so to my face—"

"Snape," Draco said with certainty. His Head of House was no fool.

"Professor Quirrell, *of course,*" said Harry. "Though come to think, Severus did ask me how I managed to stay out of his House, and whether I had something the Sorting Hat wanted. I suppose you could say you're number three. Oh, but Professor Quirrell's theory was a little different than yours, though. May I have your word not to repeat it?"

Draco nodded without even really thinking about it. What was he supposed to do, say no?

"Professor Quirrell thought that Dumbledore wasn't happy with the Hat's choice for the Boy-Who-Lived."

And the instant Harry said it, Draco knew, he *knew* that it was true, it was just *obvious*. Who did Dumbledore even think he was fooling?

...well, besides every single other person in Hogwarts except Snape and Quirrell, Harry might even believe it *himself*...

Draco stumbled back over to his desk in something of a daze, and sat down hard enough to hurt slightly. This sort of thing happened around once a month with Harry, and it hadn't happened yet in January, so it was time.

His fellow Slytherin, who might or might not think himself a Ravenclaw, sat back down in the chair he'd used earlier, now sitting on it crosswise, and looking up intently at Draco.

Draco didn't know *what* he should be doing now, whether he should be trying to persuade the lost Slytherin boy that, no, he *wasn't* actually a Ravenclaw... or trying to figure out whether Harry was in league with Dumbledore, though that suddenly seemed less likely... but then *why* had Harry set up the whole thing with him and Granger...

He really *should* have remembered that Harry was too weird for any normal plots.

"Harry," Draco said. "Did you deliberately antagonize me and General Sunshine just so we'd work together against you?"

Harry nodded without hesitation, as though it was the most normal thing in the world, and nothing to be ashamed of.

"The whole thing with the gloves and making us climb up the walls of Hogwarts, the *only point* was to make me and Granger more friendly toward each other. And even before then. You've been plotting it for a really long time. Since the *beginning*."

Again the nod.

"WHYYYYY?"

Harry's eyebrows lifted for a moment, the only reaction he showed to Draco shrieking so loudly in the closed classroom that it hurt his own ears. WHY, WHY, WHY did Harry Potter DO this sort of thing...

Then Harry said, "So that Slytherins will be able to cast the Patronus Charm again."

"*That... doesn't... make... SENSE!*" Draco was aware that he was losing control of his voice, but he didn't seem able to stop himself. "*What does*

that have to do with Granger?"

"Patterns," Harry said. His face was very serious now, and very grave. "Like a quarter of children born to Squib couples being wizards. A simple, unmistakable pattern you would recognize instantly, if you knew what you were looking at; even though, if you didn't know, you wouldn't even realize it was a clue. The poison in Slytherin House is something that's been seen before in the Muggle world. This is an *advance* prediction, Draco, I could have written it down for you before our first day of school, just from hearing you talk in King's Cross Station. Let me describe some really pathetic sorts of people that hang around at your father's political rallies, pureblood families that would never be invited to dinner at Malfoy Manor. Bearing in mind that *I've* never met them, I'm just predicting it from recognizing the pattern of what's happening to Slytherin House—"

And Harry Potter proceeded to describe the Parkinsons and Montagues and Boles with a calmly cutting accuracy that Draco wouldn't have dared *think* to himself in case there was a Legilimens around, it was *beyond* insult, they would *kill* Harry if they ever heard...

"To sum up," Harry finished, "they don't have any power themselves. They don't have any wealth themselves. If they didn't have Muggleborns to hate, if all the Muggleborns vanished the way they say they *want*, they'd wake up one morning and find they had *nothing.* But so long as they can say purebloods are superior, they can feel superior themselves, they can feel like part of the master class. Even though your father would never dream of inviting them to dinner, even though there's not one Galleon in their vaults, even if they did worse on their owls than the worst Muggleborn in Hogwarts. Even if they can't cast the Patronus Charm any more. Everything is the Muggleborns' fault to them, they have someone besides themselves to blame for their own failures, and that makes them even weaker. That's what Slytherin House is becoming, *pathetic,* and the root of the problem is hating Muggleborns."

"Salazar Slytherin himself said that mudbloods needed to be cast out! That they were weakening our blood—" Draco's voice had risen to a shout.

"*Salazar was wrong as a question of simple fact!* You *know* that, Draco!

And that *hatred* is poisoning your whole House, you couldn't cast the Patronus Charm using a thought like that!"

"Then why could *Salazar Slytherin* cast the Patronus Charm?"

Harry was wiping sweat from his forehead. "Because things have *changed* between then and now! Listen, Draco, three hundred years ago you could find great scientists, as great as Salazar in their own way, who would have told you that some other Muggles were inferior because of their skin color—"

"*Skin color?*" said Draco.

"I know, skin color instead of anything important like blood purity, isn't it ridiculous? But then something in the world changed, and *now* you can't find any great scientists who still think skin color should matter, only loser people like the ones I described to you. Salazar Slytherin made the mistake when everyone else was making it, because he grew up believing it, not because he was *desperate for someone to hate.* There were a few people who did better than everyone else around them, and *they* were exceptionally good. But the ones who just accepted what everyone else thought weren't *exceptionally* evil. The sad fact is that most people just don't notice a moral issue at all unless someone else is pointing it out to them; and once they're as old as Salazar was when he met Godric, they've lost the ability to change their minds. Only *then* Hogwarts was built, and Hogwarts started sending acceptance letters to Muggleborns like Godric insisted, and more and more people began to notice that Muggleborns *weren't* any different. Now it's a big political issue instead of something that everyone just believes without thinking about it. And the *correct* answer is that Muggleborns *aren't* any weaker than purebloods. So *now* the people who end up siding with what Salazar once believed, are either people who grew up in very closed pureblood environments like you, *or* people who are so pathetic themselves that they're desperate for someone to feel superior to, people who love to hate."

"That doesn't... that doesn't sound right..." Draco's voice said. His ears listened, and wondered that he couldn't come up with anything better to say.

"It doesn't? Draco, you *know* now there's nothing wrong with Her-

mione Granger. You had trouble dropping her off a roof, I hear. Even though you knew she'd taken a Feather-Falling Potion, even though you knew she was safe. What sort of person do you think wants to *kill* her, not for any wrong she did to them, just because she's a Muggleborn? Even though she's, she's just a young girl who would help them with their homework in a second, if they ever asked her," Harry's voice broke, "what sort of person wants her to *die?*"

Father—

Draco felt split in two, he seemed to be having a problem with dual vision, *Granger is a mudblood, she should die* and a girl hanging from his hand on the rooftop, like seeing double, seeing double—

"And anyone who *doesn't* want Hermione Granger to die, won't want to hang around the sort of people who *do!* That's all people think Slytherin *is* now, not clever planning, not trying to achieve greatness, just hating Muggleborns! I paid Morag a Sickle to ask Padma why she hadn't gone to Slytherin, we both know she got the option. And Morag told me that Padma just gave her a *look* and said that she wasn't Pansy Parkinson. You see? The *best* students with the virtues of more than one House, the students with *choices,* they go under the Hat thinking *anywhere but Slytherin,* and someone like Padma ends up in Ravenclaw. And... I think the Sorting Hat tries to maintain a balance in the Sorting, so it fills out the ranks of Slytherin with anyone who *isn't* repelled by all the hatred. So instead of Padma Patil, Slytherin gets Pansy Parkinson. She's not very cunning, and she's not very ambitious, but she's the sort of person who doesn't mind what Slytherin is turning into. And the more Padmas go to Ravenclaw and the more Pansies go to Slytherin, the more the process accelerates. *It's destroying Slytherin House, Draco!*"

It had a ring of awful truth, Padma *had* belonged in Slytherin... and instead Slytherin got Pansy... Father rallied lesser families like the Parkinsons because they were convenient sources of support, but Father hadn't realized the *consequences* of associating Slytherin's name with them...

"I can't—" Draco said, but he wasn't even sure what he couldn't do—"What do you *want* from me?"

"I'm not sure how to heal Slytherin House," Harry said slowly. "But

I know it's something you and I will end up having to do. It took centuries for science to dawn over the Muggle world, it only happened slowly, but the stronger science got, the further that sort of hatred retreated." Harry's voice was quiet, now. "I don't know exactly why it worked that way, but that's how it happened historically. As though there's something in science like the shine of the Patronus Charm, driving back all sorts of darkness and madness, not right away, but it seems to follow wherever science goes. The Enlightenment, that was what it was called in the Muggle world. It has something to do with seeking the truth, I think... with being able to change your mind from what you grew up believing... with thinking *logically,* realizing that there's no *reason* to hate someone because their skin is a different color, just like there's no reason to hate Hermione Granger... or maybe there's something to it that even I don't understand. But the Enlightenment is something that you and I belong to now, both of us. Fixing Slytherin House is just one of the things we have to do."

"Let me think," Draco said, his voice coming out in something of a croak, "please," and he rested his head in his hands, and thought.

Draco thought for a while, with his palms over his eyes to shut out the world, no sound but his and Harry's breathing. All the persuasive reasonableness of what Harry said, the evident grains of truth that it contained; and against that, the obvious, the perfectly and entirely obvious hypothesis about what was *really* going on...

After a time, Draco finally raised his head.

"It sounds right," Draco said quietly.

A huge smile broke out on Harry's face.

"So," Draco continued, "is this where you bring me to Dumbledore, to make it official?"

He kept his voice very casual as he said it.

"Oh, yeah," Harry said. "That was the thing I was going to ask you about, actually—"

Draco's blood froze in his veins, froze solid and shattered—

"Professor Quirrell said something to me that got me thinking, and, well, no matter how you answer this question, I'm already stupid for having not asked you a lot earlier. Everyone in Gryffindor thinks Dumbledore is a saint, the Hufflepuffs think he's crazy, the Ravenclaws are all proud of themselves for having worked out that he's only pretending to be crazy, but I never asked anyone in Slytherin. I'm supposed to know better than to make that sort of mistake. But if even *you* think Dumbledore's okay to conspire with on fixing Slytherin House, I guess I didn't miss anything important."

...

...

...

"You know," Draco said, his voice remarkably calm, all things considered, "every time I wonder if you do things like this just to annoy me, I tell myself that it *has* to be accidental, *no one* could possibly do this sort of thing on purpose even if they tried until blood trickled out of their ears. That's the only reason I'm not going to strangle you now."

"Huh?"

And then strangle *himself,* because Harry *had* grown up with Muggles, and then Dumbledore had smoothly diverted him from Slytherin to Ravenclaw, so it was perfectly plausible that Harry might *not* know anything, and Draco had never thought to *tell him.*

Or else Harry had guessed that Draco wouldn't join up with Dumbledore so readily, and this itself was just the next step of Dumbledore's plan...

But if Harry *really* didn't know about Dumbledore, then warning him had to take precedence over *everything.*

"All right," Draco said, after he'd had a chance to organize his thoughts. "I don't know where to start, so I'll just start somewhere." Draco drew a deep breath. This was going to take a while. "Dumbledore murdered his little sister, and got away with it because his brother wouldn't testify against him—"

Harry listened with increasing worry and dismay. Harry had been prepared, he'd thought, to take the blood purist side of the story with a grain of salt. The trouble was that even after you added an enormous amount of salt, it *still* didn't sound good.

Dumbledore's father had been convicted of using Unforgivable Curses on children, and died in Azkaban. That was no sin of Dumbledore's, but it would be a matter of public record. Harry could check that part, and see whether all of this had been made up out of thin air by the blood purists.

Dumbledore's mother had died mysteriously, shortly before his younger sister died in what the Aurors had ruled to be murder. Supposedly that sister had been brutalized by Muggles and never spoken again after that; which, Draco had observed, sounded remarkably like a botched Obliviation.

After Harry's first few interruptions, Draco had seemed to pick up on the general principle, and was now presenting the observations first and the inferences afterward.

"—so you don't have to take my word for it," said Draco, "you can *see* it, right? Anyone in Slytherin can. Dumbledore waited to fight his duel with Grindelwald until the exact moment when it would look best for Dumbledore, *after* Grindelwald had ruined most of Europe and built up a reputation as the most terrible Dark Wizard in history, and just when Grindelwald had lost the gold and blood sacrifices he was getting from his Muggle pawns and was about to start heading downhill. If Dumbledore was really the noble wizard he pretended to be, he'd have fought Grindelwald long before that. Dumbledore probably *wanted* Europe ruined, it was probably part of their plan together, he only attacked Grindelwald after his puppet *failed* him. And that big flashy duel wasn't real, there's no way two wizards would be so exactly matched that they'd fight for twenty whole hours until one of them fell over from exhaustion, that was just Dumbledore making it look more spectacular." Here Draco's voice became more indignant. "And that got Dumbledore made *Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot!* The Line of Merlin Unbroken, cor-

rupted after fifteen hundred years! And *then* he became Supreme Mugwump on top of that, and he *already* had Hogwarts to use as an invincible fortress—Headmaster *and* Chief Warlock *and* Supreme Mugwump, no normal person would try to do all that at once, *how can anyone not see that Dumbledore's trying to take over the world?*"

"Pause," Harry said, and closed his eyes to think.

It wasn't any worse than what you would have heard about the West in Stalin's Russia, and none of that would have been true. Though the blood purists wouldn't be able to get away with making stuff up entirely... or would they? The *Daily Prophet* had shown a pronounced tendency to make stuff up... but then again, when they stuck out their neck too far on the Weasley betrothal, they *had* been called on it and they *had* been embarrassed...

Harry opened his eyes, and saw that Draco was watching him with a steady, waiting gaze.

"So when you asked me if it was time to join up with Dumbledore, that was just a test."

Draco nodded.

"And before that, when you said it sounded right—"

"It *sounds* right," said Draco. "But I don't know if I can trust you. Are you going to complain about my *testing* you, Mr. Potter? Are you going to say that I *fooled* you? That I *led you on?*"

Harry knew he should smile like a good sport, but he couldn't really, it was too much of a disappointment.

"You're right, it's fair, I can't complain," Harry said instead. "So what about He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named? Not as bad as he was made out to be?"

Draco looked bitter, at that. "So you think it's all just making Father's side look good and Dumbledore's side look bad, and that I believe it all myself just because Father told me."

"It's a possibility I'm considering," Harry said evenly.

Draco's voice was low and intense. "They *knew*. My father knew, his friends knew. They *knew* the Dark Lord was evil. *But he was the only chance anyone had against Dumbledore!* The only wizard anywhere who was powerful enough to fight him! Some of the other Death Eaters were

truly evil too, like Bellatrix Black—Father isn't like that—but Father and his friends *had* to do it, Harry, they *had* to, Dumbledore was taking over everything, the Dark Lord was the only hope anyone had left!"

Draco was staring hard at Harry. Harry met the gaze, trying to think. Nobody ever thought of themselves as the villain of their own story—maybe Lord Voldemort did, maybe Bellatrix did, but Draco certainly didn't. That the Death Eaters were bad guys was not in question. The question was whether they were *the* bad guys; whether there was *one* villain in the story, or *two*...

"You're not convinced," Draco said. He looked worried, and a little angry. Which didn't surprise Harry. He was pretty sure Draco himself believed all this.

"*Should* I be convinced?" Harry said. He didn't look away. "Just because you believe it? Are you a strong enough rationalist now that your belief is strong evidence to me, because you'd be very unlikely to believe it if it weren't true? When I met you, you weren't that strong. Everything you told me, did you rethink it after you awakened as a scientist, or is it just something you grew up believing? Can you look me in the eyes and swear to me upon the honor of House Malfoy that if there's one untruth buried in what you said, one thing that got added on just to make Dumbledore look a little worse, you would have noticed?"

Draco started to open his mouth, and Harry said, "Don't. Don't stain the honor of House Malfoy. You're *not* that strong yet, and you should know it. Listen, Draco, I've started to notice some worrying things myself. But there's nothing *definite,* nothing *certain,* it's all just deductions and hypotheses and untrustworthy witnesses... And there's nothing certain in your story, either. Dumbledore might've had some other good reason not to fight Grindelwald years earlier—though it *would* have to be a pretty good excuse, especially considering what was happening on the Muggle side of things... but still. Is there one clearly evil thing that Dumbledore's done for *certain,* so I don't have to wonder?"

Draco's breathing was harsh. "All right," Draco said in an uneven voice, "I'll tell you what Dumbledore did." From Draco's robes came a wand, and Draco said "Quietus", then "Quietus" again, but he got the

pronunciation wrong a second time, and finally Harry took out his own wand and did it.

"There," said Draco hoarsely, "once upon a time there, there was a girl, and her name was Narcissa, and she was the prettiest, the smartest, the most cunning girl that was ever Sorted into Slytherin, and my father loved her, and they married, and she wasn't a Death Eater, she wasn't a fighter, *all she ever did was love Father*—" Draco stopped there, because he was crying.

Harry felt sick to his stomach. Draco had never talked about his *mother*, not once, he should have noticed that earlier. "She... got in the way of a curse?"

Draco's voice came out in a scream. "*Dumbledore burned her to death in her own bedroom!*"

⁂

In a classroom filled with soft silver light, one boy is staring at another boy, who is sobbing, wiping frantically at his eyes with the sleeves of his robes.

It was hard for Harry to stay balanced, to keep withholding judgment, it was too emotional, there was something that either wanted to start tears from his own eyes in sympathy with Draco, or *know* that it wasn't true...

Dumbledore burned her to death in her own bedroom!

That...

...didn't sound like Dumbledore's style...

...but you could only think that thought so many times, before you started to wonder about the trustworthiness of that whole 'style' concept.

"It, it must have hurt horribly," Draco said, his voice shaking, "Father never talks about it at all, you don't ever talk about it in front of him, but Mr. Macnair told me, there were scorch marks all over the bedroom, from how Mother must have struggled while Dumbledore *burned her alive*. That is the debt Dumbledore owes to House Malfoy and *we will have his life for it!*"

"Draco," Harry said, he let all of the hoarseness into his own voice, it would be *wrong* to sound calm, "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry for asking, but I *have* to know, *how* do you know it was Dumble—"

"Dumbledore *said* he did it, he told Father it was a *warning!* And Father couldn't testify under Veritaserum because he was an Occlumens, he couldn't even get Dumbledore put on trial, Father's own allies didn't believe him after Dumbledore just denied everything in public, but we know, the Death Eaters know, Father wouldn't have any reason to lie about that, Father would want us to take revenge on the *right person,* can't you see that Harry?" Draco's voice was wild.

Unless Lucius did it himself, of course, and found it more convenient to blame Dumbledore.

Although... it also didn't seem like *Lucius's* style. And if he *had* murdered Narcissa, it would have been smarter to pin the blame on an easier victim instead of losing political capital and credibility by going after Dumbledore...

In time, Draco stopped crying, and looked at Harry. "*Well?*" said Draco, sounding like he wanted to spit the words. "Is that *evil* enough for you, Mr. Potter?"

Harry looked down at where his arms rested on the back of his chair. He couldn't meet Draco's eyes any more, the pain in them was too raw. "I wasn't expecting to hear that," Harry said softly. "I don't know what to think any more."

"You *don't know?*" Draco's voice rose to a shriek, and he stood up abruptly from his desk—

"I remembered the Dark Lord killing my parents," Harry said. "When I went in front of the Dementor the first time, that was what I remembered, the worst memory. Even though it was so long ago. I heard them dying. My mother begged the Dark Lord not to kill me, *not Harry, please no, take me, kill me instead!* That's what she said. And the Dark Lord mocked her, and laughed. Then, I remember, the flash of green light—"

Harry looked up at Draco.

"So we could fight," Harry said, "we could just keep on with the same fight. You could tell me that it was right for my mother to die,

because she was the wife of James, who killed a Death Eater. But bad for *your* mother to die, because *she* was innocent. And I could tell you that it was right for your mother to die, that Dumbledore must have had some *reason* that made it *okay* to burn her alive in her own bedroom; but bad for *my* mother to die. But you know, Draco, either way, wouldn't it be *obvious* that we were just being biased? Because the rule that says that it's wrong to kill innocent people, that rule can't switch on for my mother and off for yours, and it can't switch on for your mother and off for mine. If you tell me that Lily was an enemy of the Death Eaters and it's right to kill your enemies, then the same rule says that Dumbledore was right to kill Narcissa, since she was *his* enemy." Harry's voice went hoarse. "So if the two of us are going to agree on anything, it's going to be that *neither* of their deaths were right and that *no one's* mother should die any more."

The fury boiling inside Draco was so great that he could barely stop himself from storming out of the room; all that halted him was the recognition of a critical moment; and a small remnant of friendship, a tiny flash of sympathy, for he had forgotten, he'd *forgotten,* that Harry's mother *and* father were dead by the Dark Lord's hand.

The silence stretched.

"You can talk," Harry said, "Draco, talk to me, I won't get angry—are you thinking, I don't know, that Narcissa dying was much worse than Lily dying? That it's wrong for me even to make the comparison?"

"I guess I was stupid too," Draco said. "All this time, all this time I forgot that you must hate the Death Eaters for killing your parents, hate Death Eaters the way I hate Dumbledore." And Harry had never said anything, never reacted when Draco talked about Death Eaters, kept it *hidden*—Draco was a fool.

"No," Harry said. "It's not—it's not like that, Draco, I, I don't even know how to explain to you, except to say that a thought like that, wouldn't," Harry's voice choked, "you wouldn't ever be able to use it, to cast the Patronus Charm..."

Draco felt a sudden wrench in his heart, unwanted but he felt it. "Are you pretending you're just going to *forget* about your own parents? Are you saying I should just *forget* about Mother?"

"So you and I *have* to be enemies then?" Now Harry's voice was growing equally wild. "What have *we* ever done to *each other* that means we have to be enemies? I refuse to be trapped like that! Justice can't mean that *both* of us should attack *each other,* it doesn't make sense!" Harry stopped, took a deep breath, ran his fingers back through the deliberate mess of his hair—the fingers came away sweaty, Draco could see it. "Draco, listen, we can't expect to meet on everything right away, you and I. So I won't ask you to say that the Dark Lord was *wrong* to kill my mother, just say that it was... *sad*. We won't talk about whether or not it was *necessary*, whether it was *justified*. I'll just ask you to say that it was sad that it happened, that my mother's life was valuable too, you'll just say that for now. And I'll say it was sad that Narcissa died, because her life was also worth something. We can't expect to agree on everything right away, but if we start out by saying that every life is precious, that it's sad when *anyone* dies, then I know we'll meet someday. That's what I want you to say. Not who was right. Not who was wrong. Just that it was sad when your mother died, and sad when my mother died, and it would be sad if Hermione Granger died, every life is precious, can we agree on that and let the rest go by for now, is it enough if we just agree on that? Can we, Draco? That seems... more like a thought someone could use to cast the Patronus Charm."

There were tears in Harry's eyes.

And Draco was getting angry again. "Dumbledore *killed* Mother, it's not enough to just say it's *sad!* I don't understand what you think *you* have to do, but the Malfoys *have* to take revenge!" Not avenging the deaths of family went *beyond* weakness, beyond dishonor, you might as well not *exist.*

"I'm not arguing with that," Harry said quietly. "But will you say that Lily Potter's death was sad? Just say that one thing?"

"That's..." Draco was having difficulty finding words again. "I know, I know how you feel, but don't you see Harry, even if I just say that Lily Potter's death was *sad,* that's *already* going against the Death Eaters!"

Harry's voice was pleading. "Draco, you've *got* to be able to say the Death Eaters were wrong about some things. You *have* to, you can't progress as a scientist otherwise, there'll be a roadblock in your way, an authority you can't contradict. Not every change is an improvement, but every improvement is a change, you can't do anything *better* unless you can manage to do it *differently*, *you've got to let yourself do better than other people!* Even your father, Draco, even him. You've got to be able to point to something your father did and say it was mistaken, because he wasn't *perfect*, and if you can't say that, you can't do better."

Father had warned him, every night before he went to sleep for a month before he went to Hogwarts, that there would be people with this goal.

"You're trying to break me loose of Father."

"Trying to break a *part* of you loose," said Harry. "Trying to let you fix some things your father got mistaken. Trying to let you *do better*. But not... trying to break your *Patronus!*" Harry's voice got softer. "I wouldn't want to break something bright like that. Who knows, fixing Slytherin House might need *that*, too..."

It was getting to Draco, that was the thing, despite everything it was getting to him, you had to be really careful around Harry because his arguments sounded so convincing *even when he was wrong.* "And what you're *not* admitting is that Dumbledore told you that you could avenge your parents' deaths by taking Lord Malfoy's son from him—"

"*No.* No. That part's just wrong." Harry took a deep breath. "I did not know who Dumbledore was, or who the Dark Lord was, or who the Death Eaters were, or how my parents died, until three days before I came to Hogwarts. The day you and I first met in the clothes shop, that was the day I learned. And Dumbledore doesn't even *like* Muggle science, or he says he doesn't, I got a chance to probe him on it once. The thought of taking revenge on the Death Eaters through you has *never* crossed my mind, not even *once* until now. I didn't know who the Malfoys were when I met you in the clothes shop, and then I *liked* you."

There was a long silence.

"I wish I could trust you," Draco said. His voice was shaking. "If I could just *know* you were telling the truth, everything would be so much

simpler—"

And then suddenly it came to Draco.

The way to know whether Harry Potter really meant everything he said, about wanting to fix Slytherin House, about being sad that Mother had died.

It would be illegal, and since he'd have to do it without Father's help, it would be *dangerous*, he couldn't even trust Harry Potter to *help,* but...

"All right," Draco said. "I've thought of a definitive experiment."

"What is it?"

"I want to give you a drop of Veritaserum," Draco said. "Just one drop, so you can't lie, but not enough to *make* you answer anything. I don't know where I'll get it, but I'll make *certain* it's safe—"

"Um," Harry said. There was a helpless look on his face. "Draco, um—"

"Don't say it," Draco said. His voice was firm and calm. "If you say no, that's my experimental result right there."

"Draco, I'm an Occlumens—"

"OH THAT IS SUCH A LIE—"

"I was trained by Mr. Bester. Professor Quirrell set it up. Look, Draco, I'll *take* one drop of Veritaserum if you can get it, I'm just *warning* you that I'm an Occlumens. Not a perfect Occlumens, but Mr. Bester said I was putting up a complete block, and I could probably beat Veritaserum."

"*You're in your first year at Hogwarts! That's just crazy!*"

"Know a Legilimens you can trust? I'll be happy to demonstrate—look, Draco, I'm sorry, but doesn't the fact that I *told* you count for something? I *could* have just let you do it, you know."

"*WHY? Why are you always like this, Harry? Why do you have to mess everything up even when it's IMPOSSIBLE? And stop smiling, this isn't funny!*"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I *know* it's not funny, I—"

It took a while for Draco to get himself under control.

But Harry was right. Harry *could* have just let Draco administer the Veritaserum. If he really was an Occlumens... Draco didn't know who he could ask to try Legilimency, but he could at least ask Professor

Quirrell if it was true... Could Draco trust *Professor Quirrell?* Maybe Professor Quirrell would just say anything Harry asked him to.

Then Draco remembered the other thing Harry had told him to ask Professor Quirrell, and thought of a different test.

"You *know*," said Draco. "You *know* what it costs me, if I agree that the poison in Slytherin's House is hating Muggleborns, and say that Lily Potter's death was sad. And that's *part of your plan,* don't tell me it's not."

Harry said nothing, which was wise of him.

"There's something I want from you in return," said Draco. "And before then, an experimental test I want to try—"

⁂

Draco pushed open the door to which the portraits had directed them, and this time it was the right door. Before them was a small empty place of stone set against the night sky. Not a roof like the one he'd dropped Harry from, but a tiny and proper courtyard, far above the ground. With proper railings, elaborate traceries of stone that flushed seamlessly into the stone floor... How so much *artistry* had been infused into the creation of Hogwarts was something that still awed Draco every time he thought about it. There must have been some way to do it all at once, no one could have detailed so much piece by piece, the castle *changed* and every new piece was like that. It was so far beyond the wizardry of these fading days that no one would have believed it if they hadn't seen the proof in Hogwarts itself.

Cloudless and cold, the winter night sky; it got dark long before students' curfew, in the final days of January.

The stars shining brightly, in the clear air.

Harry had said that being under the stars would help him.

Draco touched his chest with his wand, slid his fingers in a practiced motion, and said, "*Thermos.*" A warmth spread through him, starting from his heart; the wind went on blowing on his face, but he was no longer cold.

"*Thermos,*" Harry's voice said behind him.

They went together to the railing, to look down at the ground a long way below. Draco tried to figure if they were in one of the towers that could be seen from outside, and found that right now he couldn't quite seem to picture how Hogwarts looked from outside. But the ground below was always the same; he could see the Forbidden Forest as a vague outline, and moonlight glittering from the Hogwarts Lake.

"You know," Harry's voice said quietly from beside him where his arms leaned on the railing next to Draco's, "one of the things that Muggles get really wrong, is that they don't turn all their lights out at night. Not even for one hour every month, not even for fifteen minutes once a year. The photons scatter in the atmosphere and wash out all but the brightest stars, and the night sky doesn't look the same at all, not unless you go far away from any cities. Once you've looked up at the sky over Hogwarts, it's hard to imagine living in a Muggle city, where you wouldn't be able to see the stars. You certainly wouldn't want to spend your whole life in Muggle cities, once you'd seen the night sky over Hogwarts."

Draco glanced at Harry, and found that Harry was craning his neck to stare up at where the Milky Way arched across the darkness.

"Of course," Harry went on, his voice still quiet, "you can't ever see the stars properly from *Earth,* either, the air always gets in the way. You have to look from somewhere else, if you want to see the real thing, the stars burning hard and bright, like their true selves. Have you ever wished that you could just whisk yourself up into the night sky, Draco, and go look at what there is to see around other Suns than ours? If there were no limit to the power of your magic, is that one of the things you would do, if you could do anything?"

There was a silence, and then Draco realized that he was expected to answer. "I didn't think of it before," Draco said. Without any conscious decision, his voice came out as soft and hushed as Harry's. "Do you really think anyone would ever be able to do that?"

"I don't think it'll be that easy," said Harry. "But I know I don't mean to spend my whole life on Earth."

It would have been something to laugh at, if Draco hadn't known that some Muggles had already left, without even using magic.

"To pass your test," Harry said, "I'm going to have to say what it means to *me,* that thought, the whole thing, not the shorter version I tried to explain to you before. But you should be able to see it's the same idea, only more general. So *my* version of the thought, Draco, is that when we go out into the stars, we might find other people there. And if so, they certainly won't *look* like we do. There might be things out there that are grown from crystal, or big pulsating blobs... or they might be made of magic, now that I think about it. Yeah, actually, now that I know about magic, I have to expect that things might *really* be strange out there. So with all that strangeness, how do you recognize a *person?* Not by the shape, not by how many arms or legs it has. Not by the sort of substance it's made out of, whether that's flesh or crystal or stuff I can't imagine. You would have to recognize them as people from their *minds*. And even their minds wouldn't work just like ours do. But anything that lives and thinks and knows itself and doesn't want to die, it's sad, Draco, it's sad if that person has to die, because it doesn't want to. Compared to what might be out there, every human being who ever lived, we're all like brothers and sisters, you could hardly even tell us apart. The ones out there who met *us,* they wouldn't see British or French, they wouldn't be able to tell the difference, they'd just see a human being. Humans who can love, and hate, and laugh, and cry; and to *them*, the ones out there, that would make us all as alike as peas in the same pod. *They* would be different, though. *Really* different. But that wouldn't stop us, and it wouldn't stop them, if we both wanted to be friends together."

Harry raised his wand then, and Draco turned, and looked away, as he had promised; looked toward the stone floor and stone wall in which the door was set. For Draco had promised not to look, and not to tell anyone of what Harry had said, or anything at all of what happened here this night, though he didn't know why it was to be so secret.

"I have a dream," said Harry's voice, "that one day sentient beings will be judged by the patterns of their minds, and not their color or their shape or the stuff they're made of, or who their parents were. Because if we can get along with crystal things someday, how silly would it be not to get along with Muggleborns, who are shaped like us, and think

like us, as alike to us as peas in a pod? The crystal things wouldn't even be able to tell the difference. How impossible is it to imagine that the hatred poisoning Slytherin House would be worth taking with us to the stars? Every life is precious, everything that thinks and knows itself and doesn't want to die. Lily Potter's life was precious, and Narcissa Malfoy's life was precious, even though it's too late for them now, it was sad when they died. But there are other lives that are still alive to be fought for. Your life, and my life, and Hermione Granger's life, all the lives of Earth, and all the lives beyond, to be defended and protected, EXPECTO PATRONUM!"

And there was light.

Everything turned to silver in that light, the stone floor, the stone wall, the door, the railings, so dazzling just in the reflection that you could hardly even see them, even the air seemed to shine, and the light grew brighter, and brighter, and brighter—

When the light ended it was like a shock, Draco's hand went automatically to his robe to bring out a handkerchief, and it was only then that he realized he was crying.

"There is your experimental result," Harry's voice said quietly. "I really did mean it, that thought."

Draco slowly turned toward Harry, who had lowered his wand now.

"That, that's got to be a trick, right?" Draco said. He couldn't take many more of these shocks. "Your Patronus—can't *really* be that bright—" And yet it *had* been Patronus light, once you knew what you were looking at, you couldn't mistake it for anything else.

"That was the *true* form of the Patronus Charm," Harry said. "Something that lets you put all your strength into the Patronus, without hindrance from within yourself. And before you ask, I did not learn it from Dumbledore. He does not know the secret, and could not cast the true form if he did. I solved the puzzle for myself. And I knew, once I understood, that this spell must not be spoken of. For your sake, I undertook your test; but you must not speak of it, Draco."

Draco didn't know any more, he didn't know where the true strength lay, or the right of things. Double vision, double vision. Draco wanted to call Harry's ideals weakness, Hufflepuff foolishness, the sort of lie that

rulers told to placate the populace and that Harry had been silly enough to believe for himself, foolishness taken seriously and raised up to insane heights, projected out onto the stars themselves—

Something beautiful and hidden, mysterious and bright—

"Will I," whispered Draco, "be able to cast a Patronus like that, someday?"

"If you always keep seeking the truth," Harry said, "and if you don't refuse the warm thoughts when you find them, then I'm sure you will. I think a person could get anywhere if they just kept going long enough, even to the stars."

Draco wiped his eyes with his handkerchief again.

"We should go back inside," Draco said in an unsteady voice, "someone could've seen it, all that light—"

Harry nodded, and moved to and through the door; and Draco looked up at the night sky one last time before he followed.

Who *was* the Boy-Who-Lived, that he was already an Occlumens, and could cast the true form of the Patronus Charm, and do other strange things? What was Harry's Patronus, why must it stay unseen?

Draco didn't ask any of those questions, because Harry might have *answered*, and Draco just couldn't take any more shocks today. He just *couldn't*. One more shock and his head was going to just fall right off his shoulders and go bounce, bounce, bounce down the corridors of Hogwarts.

They'd ducked into a small alcove, instead of going all the way back to the classroom, at Draco's request; he was feeling too nervous to put it off any longer.

Draco put up a Quieting barrier, and then looked at Harry in silent question.

"I've been thinking about it," Harry said. "I'll do it, but there are five conditions—"

"*Five?*"

"Yes, five. Look, Draco, a pledge like this is just *begging* to go terribly wrong somehow, you *know* it would go wrong if this were a play—"

"Well, it's not!" Draco said. "Dumbledore killed Mother. He's evil. It's one of those things you talk about that *doesn't* have to be complicated."

"Draco," Harry said, his voice careful, "all I *know* is that *you* say that *Lucius* says that *Dumbledore* says he killed Narcissa. To believe that unquestioningly, I have to trust you *and* Lucius *and* Dumbledore. So like I said, there are conditions. The first one is that at any point *you* can release me from the pledge, if it no longer seems like a good idea. It has to be a deliberate and intended decision on your part, of course, not a trick of wording or something."

"Okay," said Draco. That sounded safe enough.

"Condition two is that I'm pledging to take as an enemy whoever actually did kill Narcissa, as determined to the honest best of my ability as a rationalist. Whether that's Dumbledore, or someone else. And you have my word that I'll exercise my best ability as a rationalist to keep that judgment honest, as a question of simple fact. Agreed?"

"I don't like it," said Draco. He didn't, the whole point was to make sure Harry never went with Dumbledore. Still, if Harry *was* honest, he'd catch on to Dumbledore soon enough; and if dishonest, he'd already broken his word... "But I'll agree."

"Condition three is that Narcissa has to have been *burned alive*. If that part of the story turns out to be something exaggerated just to make it sound a little worse, then I get to decide for myself whether or not to still go through with the pledge. Good people sometimes have to kill. But they don't ever torture people to death. It's because Narcissa was *burned alive* that I know whoever did that was evil."

Draco was frowning fiercely now.

"Condition four is that if Narcissa got her own hands dirty, and, say, *Crucioed* someone's child into insanity, and that person burned Narcissa for revenge, the deal might be off again. Because then it was still wrong for them to burn her, they still should've just killed her without pain; but it wasn't *evil* the same way as if she was just Lucius's love who never did anything herself, like you said. Condition five is that if whoever

killed Narcissa was tricked somehow into doing it, then my enemy is whoever tricked them, not the person who was tricked."

"All this *really* sounds like you're planning to weasel out of it—"

"Draco, I won't take a good person as an enemy, not for you or anyone. I have to really believe they're in the wrong. But I've thought about it, and it seems to me that if Narcissa didn't do any evil with her own hands, just fell in love with Lucius and chose to stay his wife, then whoever burned her alive in her own bedroom isn't likely to be a good guy. And I'll pledge to take as my enemy whoever made that happen, whether it's Dumbledore or anyone else, unless you deliberately release me from that pledge. Hopefully *that* won't go wrong the way it would if this were a play."

"I'm not happy," said Draco. "But okay. You pledge to take my mother's murderer as your enemy, and I'll—"

Harry waited, with a patient look on his face, while Draco tried to make his voice work again.

"I'll help you fix the problem with Slytherin House hating Muggleborns," Draco finished in a whisper. "And I'll say it was sad that Lily Potter died."

"So be it," said Harry.

"So be it," said Draco.

And it was done.

The break, Draco knew, had just widened a little more. No, not a little, a *lot.* There was a sensation of drifting away, of being lost, further and further from shore, further and further from home...

"Excuse me," Draco said. He turned away from Harry, and then tried to calm himself, he had to do this test, and he didn't want to fail it from being nervous or ashamed.

Draco raised his wand into the starting position for the Patronus Charm.

Remembered falling from his broomstick, the pain, the fear, imagined it coming from a tall figure in a cloak, looking like a dead thing left in water.

And then Draco closed his eyes, the better to remember Father holding his small, cold hands in his own warm strength.

Don't be frightened, my son, I'm here...

The wand swung up in a broad brandish, to drive the fear away, and Draco was surprised at the strength of it; and he remembered in that moment that *Father* wasn't lost, would never be lost, would always be there and strong in his own person, no matter what happened to Draco, and his voice cried, *"Expecto Patronum!"*

Draco opened his eyes.

A shining snake looked back at him, no less bright than before.

Behind him, he heard *Harry* exhale a breath, as though in relief.

Draco gazed into the white light. It seemed he wasn't lost completely, after all.

"That reminds me," said Harry after a while. "Can we test my hypothesis about how to use a Patronus to send messages?"

"Is it going to surprise me?" said Draco. "I don't want any more surprises today."

⁂

Harry had claimed that the idea wasn't all that strange and he didn't see how it could possibly shock Draco in any way, which made Draco feel even more nervous, somehow; but Draco could see how important it was to have a way of sending messages in emergencies.

The trick—or so Harry hypothesized—was wanting to spread the good news, wanting the recipient to know the truth of whatever happy thought you'd used to cast the Patronus Charm. Only instead of telling the recipient in words, the Patronus itself was the message. By wanting them to see that, the Patronus would go to them.

"Tell Harry," said Draco to the luminous snake, even though Harry was standing only a few paces away on the other side of the room, "to, um, beware the green monkey," this being a sign from a play Draco had once seen.

And then, just like at King's Cross station, Draco wanted Harry to know that Father had always cared for him; only this time he didn't try to say it in words, but wanted to say it with the happy thought itself.

The bright snake slithered across the room, looking more like it was slithering through the air rather than the stone itself; it got to Harry after traveling that short distance—

—and said to Harry, in a strange voice that Draco recognized as how he himself probably sounded to other people, "Beware the green monkey."

"*Hssss ssss sshsshssss,*" said Harry.

The snake slithered back across the floor to Draco.

"Harry says the message is received and acknowledged," said the shining Blue Krait in Draco's voice.

"Huh," Harry said. "Talking to Patronuses feels odd."

...

...

...

...

"Why are you looking at me like that?" said the Heir of Slytherin.

AFTERMATH:

Harry stared at Draco.

"You mean just *magical* snakes, right?"

"N-no," said Draco. He was looking rather pale, and was still stammering, but had at least stopped the incoherent noises he'd been making earlier. "You're a Parselmouth, you can speak Parseltongue, it's the language of all snakes everywhere. You can understand any snake when it talks, and they can understand when you talk to them... Harry, you can't *possibly* believe you were Sorted into Ravenclaw! *You're the Heir of Slytherin!*"

...

...

...

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...

"SNAKES ARE SENTIENT?"

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

UTILITARIAN PRIORITIES

It was Saturday, the first morning of February, and at the Ravenclaw table, a boy bearing a breakfast plate heaped high with vegetables was nervously inspecting his servings for the slightest trace of meat.

It *might* have been an overreaction. After he'd gotten over the raw shock, Harry's common sense had woken up and hypothesized that "Parseltongue" was probably just a linguistic user interface for controlling snakes...

...after all, snakes couldn't *really* be human-level intelligent, *someone* would have noticed by now. The smallest-brained creatures Harry had ever heard of with anything like linguistic ability were the African grey parrots taught by Irene Pepperberg. And that was unstructured protolanguage, in a species that played complex games of adultery and needed to model other parrots. While according to what Draco had been able to remember, snakes spoke to Parselmouths in what sounded like normal human language—i.e., full-blown recursive syntactical grammar. That had taken *time* for hominids to evolve, with huge brains and strong social selection pressures. Snakes didn't have much society at all that Harry had ever heard. And with thousands upon thousands of different species of snakes all over the world, how could they all use the *same* version of their supposed language, "Parseltongue"?

Of course that was all merely common sense, in which Harry was starting to lose faith entirely.

But Harry was sure he'd heard snakes hissing on the TV at some point—after all, he knew what that sounded like from *somewhere*—and *that* hadn't sounded to him like language, which had seemed a good deal more reassuring...

...at first. The problem was that Draco had also asserted that Parselmouths could send snakes on extended complex missions. And if that was true, then Parselmouths had to *make snakes persistently intelligent* by talking to them. In the worst-case scenario that would make the snake self-aware, like what Harry had accidentally done to the Sorting Hat.

And when Harry had offered *that* hypothesis, Draco had claimed that he could remember a story—Harry hoped to Cthulhu that *this one* story was just a fairy tale, it had that ring to it, but there *was* a story—about Salazar Slytherin sending a brave young viper on a mission to *gather information from other snakes.*

If any snake a Parselmouth had talked to, could make *other* snakes self-aware by talking to *them,* then...

Then...

Harry didn't even know why his mind was going all "then... then..." when he knew perfectly well how the exponential progression would work, it was just the sheer moral horror of it that was blowing his mind.

And what if someone had invented a spell like that to talk to cows?

What if there were Poultrymouths?

Or for that matter...

Harry froze in sudden realization just as the forkful of carrots was about to enter his mouth.

That couldn't, couldn't possibly be true, surely no wizard would be stupid enough to do THAT...

And Harry knew, with a dreadful sinking feeling, that *of course* they would be that stupid. Salazar Slytherin had probably never considered the moral implications of snake intelligence for even one second, just like it hadn't ever occurred to Salazar that *Muggleborns* were intelligent enough to deserve personhood rights. Most people just didn't see moral issues at all unless someone else was pointing them out...

"Harry?" said Terry from beside him, sounding like he was afraid he would regret asking. "Why are you staring at your fork like that?"

"I'm starting to think magic should be illegal," said Harry. "By the way, have you ever heard any stories about wizards who could speak with plants?"

Terry hadn't heard of anything like that.

Neither had any seventh-year Ravenclaws that Harry had asked.

And now Harry had returned to his place, but not yet sat down again, staring at his plate of vegetables with a forlorn expression. He was getting hungrier, and later in the day he would be visiting Mary's Place for one of their incredibly tasty dishes... Harry was finding himself sorely tempted to just revert back to yesterday's eating habits and be done with it.

You've got to eat something, said his inner Slytherin. *And it's not all that much* more *likely that anyone sneezed self-awareness onto poultry than onto plants, so as long as you're eating food of questionable sentience either way, why not eat the delicious deep-fried Diracawl slices?*

I'm not quite sure that's valid utilitarian logic, there—

Oh, you want utilitarian logic? One serving of utilitarian logic coming up: Even in the unlikely chance that some moron did *manage to confer sentience on chickens, it's* your *research that stands the best chance of discovering the fact and doing something about it. If you can complete your work even slightly faster by* not *messing around with your diet, then, counterintuitive as it may seem, the* best *thing you can do to save the greatest number of possibly-sentient who-knows-whats is* not *wasting time on wild guesses about what might be intelligent. It's not like the house elves haven't prepared the food already, regardless of what you take onto your plate.*

Harry considered this for a moment. It was a rather seductive line of reasoning—

Good! said Slytherin. *I'm glad you see now that the most moral thing to do is to sacrifice the lives of sentient beings for your own convenience, to feed your dreadful appetites, for the sick pleasure of ripping them apart with your teeth—*

What? Harry thought indignantly. *Which side are you* on *here?*

His inner Slytherin's mental voice was grim. *You too will someday embrace the doctrine... that the end justifies the meats.* This was followed by some mental snickering.

Ever since Harry had started worrying that plants might also be sen-

tient, his non-Ravenclaw components had been having trouble taking his moral caution seriously. Hufflepuff was shouting *Cannibalism!* every time Harry tried to think about any food item whatsoever, and Gryffindor would visualize it screaming while he ate it, even if it was, say, a sandwich—

Cannibalism!

AIIIEEEE DON'T EAT ME—

Ignore the screams, eat it anyway! It's a safe place to compromise your ethics in the service of higher goals, everyone else *thinks it's okay to eat sandwiches so you can't use your usual rationalization about a small probability of a large downside if you get caught—*

Harry gave a mental sigh, and thought, *Just so long as you're okay with* us *being eaten by giant monsters that didn't do enough research into whether* we *were sentient.*

I'm okay with that, said Slytherin. *Is everyone else okay with that?* (Internal mental nods.) *Great, can we go back to deep-fried Diracawl slices now?*

Not until I've done some more research into what's sentient and what isn't. Now shut up. And Harry turned firmly away from his plate full of oh-so-tempting vegetables to head toward the library—

Just eat the students, said Hufflepuff. *There's no doubt about whether* they're *sentient.*

You know you want to, said Gryffindor. *I bet the young ones are the tastiest.*

Harry was starting to wonder if the Dementor had somehow damaged their imaginary personalities.

"*Honestly*," said Hermione. The young girl's voice sounded a little acerbic as her gaze scanned the bookshelves of the Herbology stacks in the Hogwarts library. Harry had left her a message asking if she could come to the library after she'd finished breakfast, which Harry had skipped; but then when Harry had introduced the day's topic she'd seemed a bit

nonplussed. "You know your problem, Harry? You've got no sense of priorities. An idea gets into your head and you just go running straight off after it."

"I've got a *great* sense of priorities," said Harry. His hand reached out and grabbed *Vegetable Cunning* by Casey McNamara, and began to flip through the starting pages, searching for the table of contents. "That's why I want to find out whether plants can talk *before* I eat my carrots."

"Don't you think that maybe the two of us have more *important* things to worry about?"

You sound just like Draco, Harry thought, but of course didn't say out loud. Out loud he said, "What could *possibly* be more important than plants turning out to be sentient?"

There was a pregnant silence from beside him, as Harry's eyes went down the table of contents. There was indeed a chapter on Plant Language, causing Harry's heart to skip a beat; and then his hands began to rapidly turn the pages, heading for the appropriate page number.

"There are days," said Hermione Granger, "when I really, truly, have absolutely no idea what goes on inside that head of yours."

"Look, it's a question of multiplication, okay? There's a *lot* of plants in the world, if they're *not* sentient then they're not important, but if plants *are* people than they've got more moral weight than all the human beings in the world put together. Now, of course your brain doesn't realize that on an intuitive level, but that's because the brain can't multiply. Like if you ask three separate groups of Canadian households how much they'll pay to save two thousand, twenty thousand, or two hundred thousand birds from dying in oil ponds, the three groups will respectively state that they're willing to pay seventy-eight, eighty-eight, and eighty dollars. No difference, in other words. It's called scope insensitivity. Your brain imagines a single bird struggling in an oil pond, and that image creates some amount of emotion that determines your willingness to pay. But no one can visualize even two thousand of anything, so the *quantity* just gets thrown straight out the window. Now try to *correct* that bias with respect to a *hundred trillion* sentient blades of grass, and you'll realize that this could be thousands of times more important than we used to think the whole human species was... oh thank

Azathoth, this says it's just a few magical plants that can talk and they speak regular human language out loud, not that there's a spell you can use to talk with *any* plant—"

"Ron came to me at breakfast yesterday morning," Hermione said. Now her voice sounded a little quiet, a little sad, maybe even a little scared. "He said he'd been dreadfully shocked to see me kiss you. That what you said while you were Demented should've shown me how much evil you were hiding inside. And that if I was going to be a follower of a Dark Wizard, then he wasn't sure he wanted to be in my army anymore."

Harry's hands had stopped turning pages. It seemed that Harry's brain, for all its abstract knowledge, was still incapable of appreciating scope on any real emotional level, because it had just forcibly redirected his attention away from trillions of possibly-sentient blades of grass who might be suffering or dying even as they spoke, and toward the life of a single human being who happened to be nearer and dearer.

"Ron is the world's most gigantic prat," Harry said. "They won't be printing that in the newspaper anytime soon, because it's not news. So after you fired him, how many of his arms and legs did you break?"

"I tried to tell him it wasn't like that," Hermione went on in the same quiet voice. "I tried to tell him *you* weren't like that, and that it wasn't like that between the two of us, but it just seemed to make him even more... more like he was."

"Well, yes," Harry said. He was surprised that he wasn't feeling angrier at Captain Weasley, but his concern for Hermione seemed to be overriding that, for now. "The more you try to justify yourself to people like that, the more it acknowledges that they have the *right* to question you. It shows you think they get to be your inquisitor, and once you grant someone that sort of power over you, they just push more and more." This was one of Draco Malfoy's lessons which Harry had thought was actually pretty smart: people who *tried* to defend themselves got questioned over every little point and could never satisfy their interrogators; but if you made it clear from the start that you were a celebrity and above social conventions, people's minds wouldn't bother tracking most violations. "That's why when Ron came over to *me* as I was sitting down at the Ravenclaw table, and told me to stay away from

you, I held my hand out over the floor and said, 'You see how high I'm holding my hand? Your intelligence has to be at least this high to talk to me.' Then he accused me of, quote, sucking you into the darkness, unquote, so I pursed my lips and went *schluuuuurp*, and after that his mouth was still making those talking noises so I put up a Quieting Charm. I don't think he'll be trying his lectures on me again."

"I understand why you did that," Hermione said, her voice tight, "I *wanted* to tell him off too, but I really wish you hadn't, it will make things harder for *me,* Harry!"

Harry looked up from *Vegetable Cunning* again, he wasn't getting any reading done at this rate; and he saw that Hermione was still reading whatever book she had, not looking up at him. Her hands turned another page even as he watched.

"I think you're taking the wrong approach by trying to defend yourself at all," Harry said. "I really do think that. You are who you are. You're friends with whoever you choose. Tell anyone who questions you to shove it."

Hermione just shook her head, and turned another page.

"Option two," Harry said. "Go to Fred and George and tell them to have a little talk with their wayward brother, *those* two are genuine good guys—"

"It's not just Ron," Hermione said in almost a whisper. "Lots of people are saying it, Harry. Even Mandy is giving me worried looks when she thinks I'm not looking. Isn't it funny? I keep worrying that Professor Quirrell is sucking *you* into the darkness, and now people are warning me just the same way I try to warn you."

"Well, *yeah,*" said Harry. "Doesn't that reassure you a bit about me and Professor Quirrell?"

"In a word," said Hermione, "no."

There was a silence that lasted long enough for Hermione to turn another page, and then her voice, in a real whisper this time, "And, and Padma is going around telling everyone that, that since I couldn't cast the P-Patronus Charm, I must only be p-pretending to be n-nice..."

"Padma didn't even *try* herself!" Harry said indignantly. "If you *were* a Dark Witch who was just pretending, you wouldn't have *tried* in front

of everyone, do they think you're *stupid?*"

Hermione smiled a little, and blinked a few times.

"Hey, *I* have to worry about *actually* going evil. *Here* the worst case scenario is that people think you're more evil than you really are. Is that going to kill you? I mean, is it all *that* bad?"

The young girl nodded, her face screwed up tight.

"Look, Hermione... if you worry that much about what other people think, if you're unhappy whenever other people don't picture you exactly the same way you picture yourself, that's *already* dooming yourself to always be unhappy. No one ever thinks of us just the same way we think of ourselves."

"I don't know how to explain to you," Hermione said in a sad soft voice. "I'm not sure it's something you could ever understand, Harry. All I can think of to say is, how would you feel if *I* thought you were evil?"

"Um..." Harry visualized it. "Yeah, that *would* hurt. A lot. But you're a good person who thinks about that sort of thing intelligently, you've *earned* that power over me, it would *mean* something if you thought I'd gone wrong. I can't think of a single other student, besides you, whose opinion I'd care about the same way—"

"You can live like that," whispered Hermione Granger. "I can't."

The girl had gone through another three pages in silence, and Harry had returned his eyes to his own book and was trying to regain his focus, when Hermione finally said, in a small voice, "Are you really sure I mustn't know how to cast the Patronus Charm?"

"I..." Harry had to swallow a sudden lump in his throat. He suddenly saw himself *not* knowing why the Patronus Charm didn't work for him, *not* being able to show Draco, just being told that there was a reason, and nothing more. "Hermione, your Patronus would shine with the same light but it wouldn't be *normal,* it wouldn't look like people think Patronuses should look, anyone who saw it would know there was something strange going on. Even if I told you the secret you couldn't *demonstrate* to anyone, unless you made them face the other way so they could only see the light, and... and the most important part of any secret is the knowledge that a secret exists, you could only show one or two

friends if you swore them to secrecy..." Harry's voice trailed off helplessly.

"I'll take it." Her voice was still small.

It was very hard not to just blurt out the secret, right there in the library.

"I, I shouldn't, I *really* shouldn't, it's *dangerous,* Hermione, it could do a lot of harm if that secret got out! Haven't you heard the saying, three can keep a secret if two are dead? That telling just your closest friends is the same as telling everyone, because you're not just trusting them, you're trusting everyone they trust? It's too important, too much of a risk, it's not the sort of decision that should be made for the sake of fixing someone's reputation at school!"

"Okay," Hermione said. She closed the book and put it back on the shelf. "I can't concentrate right now, Harry, I'm sorry."

"If there's *anything* else I can do—"

"Be nicer to everyone."

The girl didn't look back as she walked out of the stacks, which might have been a good thing, because the boy was frozen in place, unmoving.

After a while, the boy started turning pages again.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

PRIOR INFORMATION

A boy waits at a small clearing at the edge of the non-forbidden forest, beside a dirt trail that runs back to the gates of Hogwarts in one direction, and off into the distance in another. There is a carriage nearby, and the boy is standing well away from it, looking at it, his eyes seldom wavering from its direction.

In the distance, a figure is approaching along the dirt path: A man wearing professorial robes, trudging slowly with his shoulders slumped low, his formal shoes kicking up small clouds of dust as he walks.

Half a minute later, the boy darts another quick glance before returning to his surveillance; and this glimpse shows that the man's shoulders have straightened, his face unslackened, and that his shoes are now walking lightly across the dirt, leaving not a trace of dust in the air behind.

"Hello, Professor Quirrell," Harry said without letting his eyes move again from the direction of their carriage.

"Salutations," said the calm voice of Professor Quirrell. "You seem to be keeping your distance, Mr. Potter. I don't suppose you see something odd about our conveyance?"

"Odd?" Harry echoed. "Why no, I can't say I see anything odd. There seem to be even numbers of everything. Four seats, four wheels, two huge skeletal winged horses..."

A skin-wrapped skull turned to look at him and flashed teeth, solid and white in that black cavernous mouth, as though to indicate that it was just about as fond of him as he was of it. The other black leathery horse-skeleton tossed its head like it was whickering, but there was no sound.

"They are Thestrals, and they have always drawn the carriage," Professor Quirrell said, sounding quite undisturbed as he climbed into the front bench of the carriage, sitting down as far to the right as possible. "They are visible only to those who have seen death and comprehended it, a useful defense against most animal predators. Hm. I suppose that the first time you went in front of the Dementor, your worst memory proved to be the night of your encounter with He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named?"

Harry nodded grimly. It was the right guess, even if for the wrong reasons. *Those who have seen Death...*

"Did you recall anything of interest, thereby?"

"Yes," Harry said, "I did," only that and nothing more, for he was not ready as yet to make accusations.

The Defense Professor smiled one of his dry smiles, and beckoned with an impatient finger.

Harry closed the distance and climbed into the carriage, wincing. The sense of doom had grown significantly stronger after the day of the Dementor, even though it had been slowly weakening before then. The greatest distance that the carriage allowed him from Professor Quirrell no longer seemed like nearly far enough.

Then the skeletal horses trotted forward and the carriage started in motion, taking them toward the outer bounds of Hogwarts. As it did, Professor Quirrell slumped back down into zombie-mode, and the sense of doom retreated, though it still hovered at the edge of Harry's perceptions, unignorable...

The forest scrolled by as the carriage rolled along, the trees moving past at a speed that seemed positively glacial by comparison to broomsticks or even cars. There was something oddly relaxing, Harry thought, about traveling that slowly. It had certainly relaxed the Defense Professor, who was slumped over with a small stream of drool coming out of his slack mouth and puddling on his robes.

Harry still hadn't decided what he was allowed to eat for lunch.

His library research hadn't turned up any sign of wizards speaking to nonmagical plants. Or any other nonmagical animals besides snakes,

although *Spell and Speak* by Paul Breedlove had recounted the probably-mythical tale of a sorceress called the Lady of Flying Squirrels.

What Harry *wanted* to do was ask Professor Quirrell. The problem was that Professor Quirrell was *too smart*. Judging by what Draco had said, the Heir of Slytherin business was a major bombshell, and Harry wasn't sure he wanted anyone else to know. And the instant Harry asked about Parseltongue, Professor Quirrell would fix him with those pale blue eyes and say, 'I see, Mr. Potter, so you taught Mr. Malfoy the Patronus Charm and accidentally spoke to his snake.'

It wouldn't *matter* that it shouldn't be enough evidence to locate the true explanation as a hypothesis, let alone overcome its burden of prior improbability. Somehow the Defense Professor would deduce it *anyway*. There were times when Harry suspected that Professor Quirrell had way more background information than he was telling, his priors were simply too good. Sometimes he got his amazing deductions right even when his *reasons* were wrong. The problem was that Harry couldn't see how Professor Quirrell could've snuck in an extra clue about half the stuff he guessed. Just *once* Harry would have liked to make some sort of incredible deduction from something Professor Quirrell said which would catch *him* completely off guard.

"I shall have a bowl of green lentil soup, with soy sauce," Professor Quirrell said to the waitress. "And for Mr. Potter, a plate of Tenorman's family chili."

Harry hesitated in sudden dismay. He'd resolved to stick to vegetarian dishes for the moment, but he'd forgotten in his deliberations that Professor Quirrell did the *actual ordering* —and it would be awkward if he protested now—

The waitress bowed to them, and turned to go—

"Erm, excuse me, any meat in that from snakes or flying squirrels?"

The waitress didn't so much as blink an eye, only turned back to Harry, shook her head, bowed politely to him again, and resumed her walk toward the door.

(The other parts of Harry were snickering at him. Gryffindor was making sardonic comments about how a little social discomfort was enough to get him to resort to *Cannibalism!* (shouted by Hufflepuff), and Slytherin was remarking on how nice it was that Harry's ethics were flexible when it came to important goals like maintaining his relationship with Professor Quirrell.)

After the waitress had closed the door behind her, Professor Quirrell waved a hand to slide home the locking bar, spoke the usual four Charms to ensure privacy, and then said, "An interesting question, Mr. Potter. I wonder why you asked it?"

Harry kept his face steady. "I was looking up some facts about the Patronus Charm earlier," he said. "According to *The Patronus Charm: Wizards Who Could and Couldn't,* it turns out that Godric couldn't and Salazar could. I was surprised, so I looked up the reference, in *Four Lives of Power.* And *then* I discovered that Salazar Slytherin could supposedly talk to snakes." (Temporal sequence wasn't the same as causation, it wasn't Harry's fault if Professor Quirrell missed that.) "Further research turned up an old story about a mother goddess type who could talk to flying squirrels. I was a bit worried about the prospect of eating something that could talk."

And Harry took a casual sip of his water—

—just as Professor Quirrell said, "Mr. Potter, would I be correct in guessing that you are also a Parselmouth?"

When Harry was done coughing, he set his glass of water back down on the table, fixed his gaze on Professor Quirrell's chin rather than looking him in the eyes, and said, "So you are able to perform Legilimency through my Occlumency barriers, then."

Professor Quirrell was grinning widely. "I shall take that as a compliment, Mr. Potter, but no."

"I'm not buying this anymore," Harry said. "There's no *way* you came to that conclusion based on that evidence."

"Of course not," Professor Quirrell said equably. "I had planned to ask you that question today in any case, and simply chose an opportune moment. I have suspected since December, in fact—"

"*December?*" said Harry. "I found out *yesterday!*"

"Ah, so you did not realize the Sorting Hat's message to you was in Parseltongue?"

The Defense Professor had timed it exactly right the second time, too, just as Harry was taking a gulp of water to clear out his throat from the first coughing fit.

Harry *hadn't* realized, not until just now. Of course it was obvious the instant Pofessor Quirrell said it. Right, Professor McGonagall had even *told* him not to talk to snakes where anyone could see him, but he'd thought she'd meant not to be seen talking to any statues or architectural features in Hogwarts that looked like snakes. Double illusion of transparency, he'd thought he'd understood her, she'd thought he'd understood her—but *how* the *hell*—

"So," Harry said, "you performed Legilimency on me during my first Defense class, to find out what happened with the Sorting Hat—"

"Then I would not have found out in December." Professor Quirell leaned back, smiling. "This is not a puzzle you can solve on your own, Mr. Potter, so I will reveal the answer. Over the winter holiday, I was alerted to the fact that the Headmaster had filed a request for a closed judicial panel to review the case of one Mr. Rubeus Hagrid, whom you know as the Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts, and who was accused of the murder of Abigail Myrtle in 1943."

"Oh, of course," said Harry, "that makes it downright *obvious* that I'm a Parselmouth. Professor, *what* the sweet slithering snakes—"

"The *other* suspect for that murder was Slytherin's Monster, the legendary inhabitant of Slytherin's Chamber of Secrets. Which is why certain sources alerted me to the fact, and why it caught my attention sufficiently that I spent a good deal of bribe money to learn the details of the case. Now in point of fact, Mr. Potter, Mr. Hagrid is innocent. Ridiculously obviously innocent. He is the most blatantly innocent bystander to be convicted by the magical British legal system since Grindelwald's Confunding of Neville Chamberlain was pinned on

Amanda Knox. Headmaster Dippet prompted a student puppet to accuse Mr. Hagrid because Dippet needed a scapegoat to take the blame for the death of Miss Myrtle, and our marvelous justice system agreed that this was plausible enough to warrant Mr. Hagrid's expulsion and the snapping of his wand. Our current Headmaster needs merely provide some new item of evidence significant enough to reconvene the case; and with Dumbledore applying pressure instead of Dippet, the result is a foregone conclusion. Lucius Malfoy has no particular reason to fear Mr. Hagrid's vindication; thus Lucius Malfoy will only resist to the extent that he can do so costlessly in order to impose costs on Dumbledore, and Dumbledore is clearly willing to prosecute the case regardless."

Professor Quirrell took a sip of his water. "But I digress. The new evidence that the Headmaster promises to provide is to exhibit a previously undetected spell on the Sorting Hat, which, the Headmaster asserts, he has personally determined to respond only to Slytherins who are also Parselmouths. The Headmaster further argues that this favors the interpretation that the Chamber of Secrets was indeed opened in 1943, approximately the right time frame for He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, a known Parselmouth, to have attended Hogwarts. It is a rather questionable logic, but a judicial panel may rule that it swings the case far enough to bring Mr. Hagrid's guilt into doubt, if they can manage to keep a straight face as they say it. And now we come to the key question: *how* did the Headmaster discover this hidden spell on the Sorting Hat?"

Professor Quirrell was smiling thinly now. "Well now, let us suppose that there was a Parselmouth in this year's crop of students, a potential Heir of Slytherin. You must admit, Mr. Potter, that you stand out as a possibility whenever extraordinary people are considered. And if I then further ask myself which new Slytherin would be most likely to have his mental privacy invaded by the Headmaster, specifically hunting the memories of his Sorting, why, you stand out even more." The smile vanished. "So you see, Mr. Potter, it was not *I* who invaded your mind, though I will not ask you to apologize. It is not your fault that you believed Dumbledore's protestations of respecting your mental privacy."

"My sincere apologies," Harry said, keeping his face expressionless.

The rigid control was a confession in its own right, as was the sweat beading his forehead; but he didn't think the Defense Professor would take any evidence from that. Professor Quirrell would just think Harry was nervous at having been discovered as the Heir of Slytherin. Rather than being nervous that Professor Quirrell might realize that Harry had deliberately betrayed Slytherin's secret... which itself was no longer seeming like such a smart move.

"So, Mr. Potter. Any progress on finding the Chamber of Secrets?"

No, thought Harry. But to maintain plausible deniability, you needed a general policy of sometimes evading questions even when you had nothing to hide... "With respect, Professor Quirrell, if I had made such progress, it is not *quite* obvious to me that I should tell you about it."

Professor Quirrell sipped from his own waterglass again. "Well then, Mr. Potter, I shall freely tell you what I know or suspect. First, I believe the Chamber of Secrets is real, as is Slytherin's Monster. Miss Myrtle's death was not discovered until hours after her demise, even though the wards should have alerted the Headmaster instantly. Therefore her murder was performed either by Headmaster Dippet, which is unlikely, or by some entity which Salazar Slytherin keyed into his wards at a higher level than the Headmaster himself. Second, I suspect that contrary to popular legend, the purpose of Slytherin's Monster was *not* to rid Hogwarts of Muggleborns. Unless Slytherin's Monster were powerful enough to defeat the Headmaster of Hogwarts and all the teachers, it could not triumph by force. Multiple murders in secrecy would result in the school's closure, as nearly happened in 1943, or in the placing of new wards. So why Slytherin's Monster, Mr. Potter? What true purpose does it serve?"

"Ah..." Harry dropped his gaze to his waterglass and tried to think. "To kill anyone who got into the Chamber and didn't belong there—"

"A monster powerful enough to defeat a team of wizards that had broken past the best wards Salazar could place on his Chamber? Unlikely."

Harry was feeling a bit pressured now. "Well, it's called the Chamber of Secrets, so maybe the Monster has a secret, or *is* a secret?" For that

matter, just what sort of secrets were in the Chamber of Secrets in the first place? Harry hadn't done a lot of research on the subject, in part because he'd gotten the impression that nobody knew anything—

Professor Quirrell was smiling. "Why not just write the secret down?"

"Ahhh..." said Harry. "Because if the Monster spoke Parseltongue, that would ensure that only a true descendant of Slytherin could hear the secret?"

"Easy enough to key the wards on the Chamber to a phrase spoken in Parseltongue. Why go to the trouble of creating Slytherin's Monster? It cannot have been easy to create a creature with a lifespan of centuries. Come, Mr. Potter, it should be obvious; what are the secrets that can be told from one living mind to another, but never written down?"

Harry saw it then, with a burst of adrenaline that started his heart racing, his breath coming faster. "*Oh.*"

Salazar Slytherin had been very cunning indeed. Cunning enough to come up with a way to bypass the Interdict of Merlin.

Powerful wizardries couldn't be transmitted through books or ghosts, but if you could create a long-lived enough sentient creature with a good enough memory—

"It seems very probable to me," said Professor Quirrell, "that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named began his climb to power with secrets obtained from Slytherin's Monster. That Salazar's lost knowledge is the source of You-Know-Who's extraordinarily powerful wizardry. Hence my interest in the Chamber of Secrets and the case of Mr. Hagrid."

"I *see*," Harry said. And if *he,* Harry, could find Salazar's Chamber of Secrets... then all of the lost knowledge that Lord Voldemort had obtained would be *his* as well.

Yes. That was *just* how the story should go.

Add in Harry's superior intelligence and some original magical research and some Muggle rocket launchers, and the resulting fight would be completely one-sided, which was exactly how Harry wanted it.

Harry was grinning now, a very evil grin. *New priority: Find everything in Hogwarts that looks remotely like a snake and try speaking to it. Starting with everything you've already tried, only this time be sure to*

use Parseltongue instead of English—get Draco to let you into the Slytherin dorms—

"Don't become too excited, Mr. Potter," said Professor Quirrell. His own face had become expressionless, now. "You must *continue* thinking. What were the Dark Lord's parting words to Slytherin's Monster?"

"*What?*" Harry said. "How could either of us possibly know that?"

"Visualize the scene, Mr. Potter. Let your imagination fill in the details. Slytherin's Monster—probably some great serpent, so that only a Parselmouth may speak to it—has finished imparting all of the knowledge it possesses to He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. It conveys to him Salazar's final benediction, and warns him that the Chamber of Secrets must now remain closed until the next descendant of Salazar should prove cunning enough to open it. And he who will become the Dark Lord nods, and says to it—"

"Avada Kedavra," said Harry, suddenly feeling sick to his stomach.

"Rule Twelve," Professor Quirrell said quietly. "Never leave the source of your power lying around where someone else can find it."

Harry's gaze dropped to the tablecloth, which had decorated itself in a mournful pattern of black flowers and shadows. Somehow that seemed... too sad to be imagined, Slytherin's great snake had only wanted to help Lord Voldemort, and Lord Voldemort had just... there was something unbearably sorrowful about it, what sort of person would *do* that to a being who'd offered them nothing but friendship... "*Do* you think the Dark Lord would have—"

"Yes," Professor Quirrell said flatly. "He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named left quite a trail of bodies behind him, Mr. Potter; I doubt he would have omitted that one. If there were any artifacts left there that could be moved, the Dark Lord would have taken those with him as well. There might still be something worth seeing in the Chamber of Secrets, and to find it would prove yourself the true Heir of Slytherin. But do not raise your hopes too high. I suspect that all you will find is the remains of Slytherin's Monster resting quietly in its grave."

They sat in silence for a while.

"I could be wrong," said Professor Quirrell. "In the end it is only a guess. But I did wish to warn you, Mr. Potter, so that you would not be

too sorely disappointed."

Harry nodded shortly.

"One might even regret your infant self's victory," said Professor Quirrell. His smile twisted. "If only You-Know-Who had lived, you might have persuaded him to teach you some of the knowledge that would have been your heritage, from one Heir of Slytherin to another." The smile twisted further, as though to mock the obvious impossibility, even given the premise.

Note to self, thought Harry, with a slight chill and an edge of anger, *make sure to extract my heritage out of the Dark Lord's mind, one way or another.*

There was another silence. Professor Quirrell was looking at Harry as though waiting for him to ask something.

"Well," said Harry, "so long as we're on the topic, can I ask how you think the whole Parselmouth business actually—"

There came a knock at the door, then. Professor Quirrell raised a cautionary finger, then opened the door with a wave. The waitress entered, balancing a huge platter with their meals as though the whole assembly weighed nothing (which was in fact probably the case). She gave Professor Quirrell his bowl of green soup, and a glass of his usual Chianti; and set down before Harry a plate of small meat strips smothered in a heavy-looking sauce, plus a glass of his accustomed treacle soda. Then she bowed, managing to make it seem like sincere respect rather than perfunctory acknowledgment, and departed.

When she was gone, Professor Quirrell held up a finger for silence again, and drew his wand.

And then Professor Quirrell began performing a certain series of incantations that Harry recognized, making him take a sharp breath. It was the series and ordering that Mr. Bester had used, the full set of twenty-seven spells that you would perform before discussing anything of truly great import.

If the discussion of the Chamber of Secrets *hadn't* counted as important—

When Professor Quirrell was done—he'd performed *thirty* spells, three of which Harry hadn't heard before—the Defense Professor said,

"Now we shall not be interrupted for a time. Can you keep a secret, Mr. Potter?"

Harry nodded.

"A serious secret, Mr. Potter," Professor Quirrell said. His eyes were intent, his face grave. "One which could potentially send me to Azkaban. Think about it before you reply."

For a moment Harry didn't even see why the question should be hard, given his growing collection of secrets. Then—

If this secret could send Professor Quirrell to Azkaban, that means he's done something illegal...

Harry's brain performed a few calculations. Whatever the secret, Professor Quirrell did not think his illegal act would reflect badly on him in Harry's eyes. There was no advantage to be gained from *not* hearing it. And if it did reveal something wrong with Professor Quirrell, then it was very much to Harry's advantage to know it, even if he had promised not to tell anyone.

"I never had very much respect for authority," Harry said. "Legal and governmental authority included. I will keep your secret."

Harry didn't bother asking whether the revelation was worth the danger it would pose to Professor Quirrell. The Defense Professor wasn't stupid.

"Then I must test whether you are truly a descendant of Salazar," said Professor Quirrell, and stood up from his chair. Harry, prompted more by reflex and instinct than calculation, shoved himself up out of his own chair as well.

There was a blur, a shift, a sudden motion.

Harry aborted his panicked backward leap halfway through, leaving him windmilling his arms and trying not to fall over, a frantic flush of adrenaline running through him.

At the other end of the room swayed a snake a meter high, bright green and intricately banded in white and blue. Harry didn't know enough snakelore to recognize it, but he knew that 'brightly colored' meant 'poisonous'.

The constant sense of doom had diminished, ironically enough, after the Defense Professor of Hogwarts had turned into a venomous snake.

Harry swallowed hard and said, "Greetings—ah, hssss, no, ah, *greetingss.*"

"*Sso,*" hissed the snake. "*You sspeak, I hear. I sspeak, you hear?*"

"*Yess, I hear,*" hissed Harry. "*You are an Animaguss?*"

"*Obvioussly,*" hissed the snake. "*Thirty-sseven ruless, number thirty-four: Become Animaguss. All ssensible people do, if can. Thuss, very rare.*" The snake's eyes were flat surfaces ensconced within dark pits, sharp black pupils in dark gray fields. "*This iss mosst ssecure way to sspeak. You ssee? No otherss understand uss.*"

"*Even if they are ssnake Animagi?*"

"*Not unlesss heir of Sslytherin willss.*" The snake gave a series of short hisses which Harry's brain translated as sardonic laughter. "*Sslytherin not sstupid. Ssnake Animaguss not ssame as Parsselmouth. Would be huge flaw in sscheme.*"

Well *that* definitely argued that Parseltongue was personal magic, not snakes being sentient beings with a learnable language—

"*I am not regisstered,*" hissed the snake. The dark pits of its eyes stared at Harry. "*Animaguss musst be regisstered. Penalty is two yearss imprissonment. Will you keep my ssecret, boy?*"

"*Yess,*" hissed Harry. "*Would never break promisse.*"

The snake seemed to hold still, as though in shock, and then began to sway again. "*We come here next in sseven dayss. Bring cloak to passs unsseen, bring hourglasss to move through time—*"

"*You know?*" hissed Harry in shock. "*How—*"

Again the series of short quick hisses that translated as sardonic laughter. "*You arrive in my firsst classs while sstill in other classs, sstrike down enemy with pie, two ballss of memory—*"

"*Never mind,*" hissed Harry. "*Sstupid question, forgot you were ssmart.*"

"*Foolissh thing to forget,*" said the snake, but the hiss did not seem offended.

"*Hourglasss is resstricted,*" Harry said. "*Cannot usse until ninth hour.*"

The snake twitched its head, a snakish nod. "*Many resstrictionss. Locked to your usse only, cannot be sstolen. Cannot transsport other humanss. But ssnake carried in pouch, I ssuspect will go with. Think posssi-*

ble to hold hourglasss motionlesss within sshell, without dissturbing wardss, while you turn sshell around it. We will tesst in sseven dayss. Will not sspeak of planss beyond thiss. You ssay nothing, to no one. Give no ssign of expectancy, none. Undersstand?"

Harry nodded.

"*Ansswer in sspeech.*"

"*Yess.*"

"*Will do as I ssaid?*"

"*Yess. But,*" Harry gave a wobbling rasp that was how his mind had translated a hesitant 'Ahhh' into snakish, "*I do not promisse to do whatever thiss iss, you have not ssaid—*"

The snake performed a shiver that Harry's mind translated as a severe glare. "*Of coursse not. Will disscusss sspecificss at next meeting.*"

The blur and motion reversed itself, and Professor Quirrell was standing there once more. For a moment the Defense Professor himself seemed to sway, as the snake had swayed, and his eyes seemed cold and flat; and then his shoulders straightened and he was human once more.

And the aura of doom had returned.

Professor Quirrell's chair scooted back for him, and he sat down in it. "No sense in letting this go to waste," Professor Quirrell said as he picked up his spoon, "though at the moment I would much prefer a live mouse. One can never quite disentangle the mind from the body it wears, you see..."

Harry slowly took his seat and began eating.

*

"So the line of Salazar did not die with You-Know-Who after all," said Professor Quirrell after a time. "It would seem that rumors have already begun to spread, among our fine student body, that you are Dark; I wonder what they would think, if they knew that."

"Or if they knew that I had destroyed a Dementor," Harry said, and shrugged. "I figure all the fuss will blow over over the next time I do

something interesting. Hermione is having trouble, though, and I was wondering if you might have any suggestions for her."

The Defense Professor ate several spoonfuls of soup in silence, then; and when he spoke again, his voice was oddly flat. "You really care about that girl."

"Yes," Harry said quietly.

"I suppose that is why she was able to bring you out of your Dementation?"

"More or less," Harry said. The statement was true in a way, just not exact; it was not that his Demented self had cared, but that it had been confused.

"I did not have any friends like that when I was young." Still the same emotionless voice. "What would have become of you, I wonder, if you had been alone?"

Harry shivered before he could stop himself.

"You must be feeling grateful to her."

Harry just nodded. Not quite exact, but true.

"Then here is what I might have done at your age, if there had been anyone to do it for—"

CHAPTER FIFTY

SELF CENTEREDNESS

Padma Patil had finished her dinner a little late, getting on toward seven-thirty, and was now striding quickly out of the Great Hall on her way to the Ravenclaw dorm and the study rooms. Gossiping was fun and destroying Granger's reputation was more fun, but it could distract from schoolwork. She'd put off a six-inch essay on *lomillialor* wood due in next morning's Herbology class, and she needed to finish it tonight.

It was while she was passing through a long, twisting, narrow stone corridor that the whisper came, sounding like it was coming from right behind her.

"*Padma Patil...*"

She spun around quick as lightning, her wand already snatched up from a pocket of her robes and leaping into her hands, if Harry Potter thought he could sneak up on and scare *her* that easily—

There was no one there.

Instantly Padma spun around and looked in the other direction, if it had been a Ventriloquism Charm—

There was no one there, either.

The whispering sigh came again, soft and dangerous with a slight hissing undertone.

"*Padma Patil, Slytherin girl...*"

"Harry Potter, Slytherin boy," she said out loud.

She'd fought Potter and his Chaos Legion a dozen times over, and she *knew* that this was Harry Potter doing this somehow...

...even though the Ventriloquism Charm was only line-of-sight, and in the winding corridor, she could easily see all the way to the nearest twist both forward and backward, and there was no one there...

...it didn't matter. She knew her enemy.

There was a whispery chuckle, now coming from beside her, and she spun around and pointed her wand at the whisper and shouted "*Luminos!*"

The red bolt of light shot out and struck the wall, which lit with a crimson glow that soon faded.

She hadn't really expected it to work. Harry Potter couldn't *possibly* be invisible, not really invisible, that was magic most *grownups* couldn't do, and she'd never believed nine-tenths of the stories about him.

The whispery voice laughed again, now on her other side.

"Harry Potter stands on the precipice," whispered the voice, now sounding very close to her ear, "he is wavering, but you, you are already falling, Slytherin girl..."

"The hat never called out Slytherin for *my* name, Potter!" She backed up against the wall, so she wouldn't have to watch behind herself, and raised her wand in an attack stance.

Again the soft laugh. "Harry Potter has been in the Ravenclaw common room for the last half-hour, helping Kevin Entwhistle and Michael Corner rehearse Potions recipes. But it matters not. I am here to deliver a warning to you, Padma Patil, and if you choose to ignore it, that is your own affair."

"Fine," she said coldly. "Go ahead and warn me, Potter, I'm not afraid of you."

"Slytherin was a great House, once," said the whisper; it sounded sadder, now. "Slytherin was once a House you would have been proud to choose, Padma Patil. But something turned wrong, something turned sour; do you know what went awry in Slytherin House, Padma Patil?"

"No, and I don't care!"

"But you should care," said the whisper, now sounding like it was coming from just behind her head where it stood almost pressed against the wall. "For you are still that girl whom the Sorting Hat offered that choice. Do you think that just choosing Ravenclaw means that you are

not Pansy Parkinson, and will not ever become Pansy Parkinson, no matter how you conduct yourself otherwise?"

Despite everything, now, small chills of fear were spreading out from her spine and running over her skin. She'd heard *those* stories about Harry Potter too, that he was a secret Legilimens. But she still stood straight, and she put all the bite she could into her voice when she said, "The Slytherins went Dark to get power, just like *you* did, Potter. And *I* won't, not ever."

"But you'll spread vicious rumors about an innocent girl," whispered the voice, "even though it will not help you attain any of your own ambitions, and without considering that she has powerful allies who might take offense. That is is not the proud Slytherin of the old days, Padma Patil, that is not the pride of Salazar, that is Slytherin gone rotten, Padma Parkinson not Padma Malfoy..."

She was getting more creeped out than she ever had been in her life, and the possibility was starting to occur to her that this might *really* be a ghost. She hadn't ever heard that ghosts could hide themselves like this, but maybe they just didn't usually do it—not to mention that most ghosts weren't this *eerie,* they were just dead people after all—"Who *are* you? The Bloody Baron?"

"When Harry Potter was bullied and beaten," the voice whispered, "he commanded all his allies to refrain from vengeance; do you remember that, Padma Patil? For Harry Potter is wavering, but not yet lost; he is struggling, he knows himself to be in peril. But Hermione Granger made no such request of her own allies. Harry Potter is angered with you now, Padma Patil, more angered than he would ever be on his own behalf... and *he* has allies of his own."

A shudder went through her, she knew that it was visible and she hated herself for it.

"Oh, don't be afraid," breathed the voice. "I will not hurt you. For you see, Padma Patil, Hermione Granger truly is innocent. *She* does not stand on the precipice, *she* is not falling. She did not ask her allies to refrain from hurting you, because the thought did not even occur to her as a possibility. And Harry Potter knows very well that if he hurt you or caused you to be hurt, for Hermione Granger's sake, then she would

never speak to him again until the Sun burned low and the last star failed in the night sky." The voice was very sad now. "She truly is a kindly girl, a person such as I could only wish to be..."

"Granger can't cast the Patronus Charm!" said Padma. "If she was really as nice as she pretends to be—"

"Can *you* cast the Patronus Charm, Padma Patil? You dared not even attempt it, you feared what the result would be."

"That's not *true!* I didn't have time, that was all!"

The whisper continued. "But Hermione Granger did try, openly before her friends, and when her magic failed she was surprised and dismayed. For there are secrets to the Patronus Charm that few ever knew, and maybe none now know but I." A soft, whispery chuckle. "Let it stand that it is no stain of her spirit that halts her light from coming forth. Hermione Granger cannot cast the Patronus Charm for the very same reason that Godric Gryffindor, who raised these halls, never could."

The corridor *was* becoming colder, she was certain of it, as though someone were using the Chilling Charm.

"And Harry Potter is not Hermione Granger's only ally." Now there was an undertone of dry amusement in that whisper, it reminded her suddenly and frighteningly of Professor Quirrell. "Filius Flitwick and Minerva McGonagall are quite fond of her, I do believe. Did it occur to you that if those two learned what you were doing to Hermione Granger, they might become less fond of you? They might not intervene openly, perhaps; but they might be a little slower to award you House Points, a little slower to steer opportunities your way—"

"Potter *snarked* on me?"

A ghostly chuckle, a dry heh-heh-heh. "Do you think those two are stupid, deaf and blind?" In a sadder whisper, "Do you think Hermione Granger is not precious to them, that they will not see her hurting? As they might have been fond of you once, their bright young Padma Patil, but you are throwing it away..."

Padma's throat was dry. She hadn't thought of that, not at all.

"I wonder how many people will end up caring for you, Padma Patil, on this path that you now tread. Is it worth that much, just to distance

yourself further from your sister? To be the shadow to Parvati's light? Your deepest fear has always been to fall into harmony with her, *back* into harmony with her I should say; but is it worth hurting an innocent girl, just to make yourself that much more different? Must you be the *evil* twin, Padma Patil, can you not find a different good to pursue?"

Her heart was hammering in her chest. She'd, she'd never talked about that with *anyone*—

"I have always wondered at how students bully each other," sighed the voice. "How children make life difficult for themselves, how they turn their schools into prisons even with their own hands. Why do human beings make their own lives so unpleasant? I can give you a part of the answer, Padma Patil. It is because people do not stop and think before causing pain, if they do not imagine that they themselves could also be hurt, that they might also suffer from their own misdeeds. But suffer you will, oh, yes, Padma Patil, suffer you will, if you stay on this road. You will suffer the same pain of loneliness, the same pain of others' fear and distrust, that you now inflict on Hermione Granger. Only for you it will be deserved."

Her wand was shaking in her hand.

"You did not choose sides when you went to Ravenclaw, girl. You choose your side by the way you live your life, what you do to other people and what you do to yourself. Will you illuminate others' lives, or darken them? That is the choice between Light and Dark, not any word the Sorting Hat cries out. And the hard part, Padma Patil, is not saying 'Light', the hard part is deciding which is which, and admitting it to yourself when you begin down the wrong road."

There was silence. It went on for a time, and Padma realized that she had been dismissed.

Padma almost dropped her wand, when she tried to put it back into her pocket. She almost fell, when she took a step forward away from the wall, and turned to go—

"I have not always chosen rightly beween Light and Dark," the whisper said, now loud and harsh directly into her ear. "Do not take my wisdom as a final word, girl, do not fear to question it, for though I tried I have sometimes failed, oh, yes, I have failed. But you are hurting a

true innocent, and you will achieve none of your ambitions by doing so, it is not for any cunning plan. You are inflicting pain purely for the sake of the pleasure it brings you. I have not always chosen rightly between Light and Dark, but that I know for darkness, for certain. You are hurting an innocent girl, and escaping retribution only because she is too kindly to tolerate her allies moving against you. I cannot hurt you for that, so know only that I cannot respect it. You are unworthy of Slytherin; go and do your Herbology homework, Ravenclaw girl!"

The final whisper came out in a louder hiss that sounded almost like a snake, and Padma fled, she fled down the corridors like Lethifolds were chasing her, she ran heedless of the rules about running in the corridors, even when she passed other students who looked at her in surprise, she did not stop, she ran all the way to the Ravenclaw dorms with her pulse pounding in her neck, the door asked her "Why does the Sun shine in the day instead of the nighttime?" and it took her three tries before she could make her answer coherent, and then the door came open and she saw—

—a few girls and boys, some young and some old, all staring at her, and in one corner at the pentagonal table, Harry Potter and Michael Corner and Kevin Entwhistle, looking up from their textbooks.

"Sweet Merlin!" exclaimed Penelope Clearwater, rising from a couch. "What happened to you, Padma?"

"I," she stuttered, "I, I heard—a ghost—"

"It wasn't the Bloody Baron, was it?" said Clearwater. She drew her wand and a moment later she was holding a cup, and then an *Aguamenti* later the cup was filled with water. "Here, drink this, sit down—"

Padma was already striding toward the pentagonal table. She looked at Harry Potter, who was looking at her with his own gaze, calm and grave and a little sad.

"*You* did this!" Padma said. "How—you—how dare you!"

There was a sudden hush in the Ravenclaw dorm.

Harry just looked at her.

And said, "Is there anything I can help you with?"

"Don't deny it," Padma said, her voice shaking, "*you* set that ghost on me, it *said*—"

"I mean it," Harry said. "Can I help you with anything? Get you some food, or go fetch a soda for you, or help you with your homework, or anything like that?"

Everyone was staring at the two of them.

"Why?" Padma said. She couldn't think of anything else to say, she didn't understand.

"Because some of us are standing on the precipice," Harry said. "And the difference is what you do for other people. Will you let me help you with something, Padma, please?"

She stared at him, and knew, in that moment, that he'd gotten his own warning, same as her.

"I..." she said. "I've got to write six inches on *lomillialor*—"

"Let me run up to my dorm room and get my Herbology stuff," Harry said. He rose from the pentagonal table, looked at Entwhistle and Corner. "Sorry, guys, I'll see you later."

They didn't say anything, just stared, along with everyone else in the dorm room, as Harry Potter walked over to the stairs.

And just as he started up, he said, "And no one's to pester her with questions unless *she* wants to talk about it, I hope everyone's *got that?*"

"Got it," said most of the first years and some of the older students, a few of them sounding quite scared.

*

And she talked about a lot of things with Harry Potter besides *lomillialor* wood—even her fear of falling back into harmony with Parvati, which she'd never talked about with *anyone* before, but then Harry's ghostly ally already knew. And Harry had reached into his pouch and pulled out some *odd* books, loaning them to her on condition of complete secrecy, saying that if she could comprehend those books it would change the pattern of her thinking enough that she'd never fall into harmony with Parvati again...

At nine o' clock, when Harry said he had to go, the essay was only half done.

And when Harry paused, and looked at her on the way out, and said that *he* thought she was worthy of Slytherin, it made her feel good for a whole minute before she realized what had just been said to her and who had said it.

⁂

When Padma got down to breakfast, that morning, she saw Mandy see her and whisper something to the girl sitting beside her at the Ravenclaw table.

She saw that girl get up from the bench and walk toward her.

Last night Padma had been glad that girl roomed in the other dorm; but now that she thought about it, this was worse, now she had to do it in front of *everyone*.

But even though Padma was sweating, she knew what she had to do.

The girl came closer—

"I'm sorry."

"What?" said Padma. That was *her* line.

"I'm sorry," repeated Hermione Granger. Her voice was loud so that everyone could hear. "I... I didn't ask Harry to do that, and I was angry with him when I found out, and I made him promise not to do it again to *anyone*, and I'm not talking to him for a week... I'm really, *really* sorry, Miss Patil."

Hermione Granger's back was stiff, her face was stiff, you could see the sweat on her face.

"Um," said Padma. Her own thoughts were pretty much scrambled, now...

Padma's gaze flicked to the Ravenclaw table, where one boy was watching them with tight eyes and his hands clenched in his lap.

⁂

Earlier:

"I told you to be *nicer!*" shrieked Hermione.

Harry was starting to sweat. He'd never actually heard Hermione scream at him before, and it was quite loud in the empty classroom.

"I—but—but I *was* nice!" Harry protested. "I practically *redeemed* her, Padma was going down the wrong path and I turned her off it! I probably changed her whole life to be happier! Besides, you should've heard the *original* version of what Professor Quirrell suggested I do—" at which point Harry realized what he was saying and closed his mouth a second too late.

Hermione clutched at her chestnut curls, a gesture Harry hadn't seen from her before. "What'd *he* say to do? *Kill* her?"

The Defense Professor had suggested that Harry identify all the key influential students inside and outside his year and try to gain control of the entire Hogwarts rumor mill, remarking that this was a generally useful and amusing challenge for any true Slytherin attending Hogwarts.

"Nothing like *that*," Harry said quickly, "he just said in a general way that I should get influence over the people spreading rumors, and *I* decided that the *nice* version of that would be to just inform Padma directly about the meaning of what she was doing, and the possible consequences of her actions, instead of trying to threaten her or anything like that—"

"*You call that not threatening someone?*" Hermione's hands were pulling at her hair now.

"Um..." Harry said. "I guess she might've felt a *little* threatened, but Hermione, people will do whatever they think they can get away with, they don't care about how much it hurts other people if it doesn't hurt themselves, if Padma thinks there's *no* consequences to spreading lies about you then of *course* she'll just go on doing it—"

"And you think there's going to be no consequences to what *you* did?"

Harry got a sudden sick feeling to his stomach.

Hermione had the angriest look on her that he'd ever seen. "What do you think the other students think of you now, Harry? Of *me?* If Harry doesn't like the way you talk about Hermione, you'll get ghosts set on you, is that what you want them to think?"

Harry opened his mouth and no words came out, he just... hadn't thought about it that way, actually...

Hermione reached down to grab her books from the table where she'd slammed them. "I'm not talking to you for a week, and I'll *tell* everyone I'm not talking to you for a week, and I'll tell them *why*, and *maybe* that'll undo some of what you just did. And after that week, I'll—I'll decide then what to do, I guess—"

"*Hermione!*" Harry's own voice rose to a shriek of desperation. "*I was trying to help!*"

The girl turned back and looked at him as she opened the classroom door.

"Harry," she said, and her voice trembled a little beneath the anger, "Professor Quirrell is sucking you into the darkness, he really is, I mean it, Harry."

"This... wasn't him, this wasn't what he said to do, this was just *me*—"

Hermione's voice was almost a whisper now. "Someday you're going to go out to lunch with him, and it will be your dark side that comes back, or maybe even you won't come back at all."

"I promise you," Harry said, "that I *will* come back from lunch."

He wasn't even thinking as he said it.

And Hermione just turned around and strode out and slammed the door behind her.

Way to invoke the laws of dramatic irony, moron, observed Harry's Internal Critic. *Now you're going to die this Saturday, your last words will be 'I'm sorry, Hermione', and she'll always regret that the last thing she did was slam the door—*

Oh, shut up.

When Padma sat down with Hermione for breakfast, and said in a voice loud enough for others to hear that the ghost had just told her things that were important for her to hear, and Harry Potter had been right to do it, there were some people who were less frightened afterward, and some who were frightened more.

And afterward people *did* say fewer nasty things about Hermione, at least in the first year, at least in public where Harry Potter might hear about it.

When Professor Flitwick asked Harry if he was responsible for what had happened to Padma, and Harry said yes, Professor Flitwick told him that he was to serve two days' detention. Even if it had only been a ghost and Padma hadn't been hurt, still, that wasn't acceptable behavior for a Ravenclaw student. Harry nodded and said that he understood why the Professor had to do that, and wouldn't protest; but considering that it *did* seem to have turned Padma around, did Professor Flitwick really think, off the record, that he'd done the wrong thing? And Professor Flitwick paused, seeming to actually think about it, and then said to Harry, in a solemnly squeaky voice, that he needed to learn how to relate to other students the normal way.

And Harry couldn't help but think that this was advice that Professor Quirrell would never give him.

Harry couldn't help but think that if he'd done it Professor Quirrell's way, the normal *Slytherin* way, a mixture of positive and negative incentives to bring Padma and the other rumor-mongers under his explicit control, then Padma wouldn't have talked about it, and Hermione would have never found out...

...in which case Padma wouldn't have been redeemed, she would have stayed on the wrong path, and she herself would have suffered from that eventually. It wasn't as if Harry had *lied* to Padma in any way, when he was Time-Turned and invisible and using the Ventriloquism Charm.

Harry still wasn't sure whether he'd done the right thing, or *a* right thing, and Hermione hadn't relented on not talking to him—though she was talking a lot with Padma. It hurt more than Harry had expected, going back to studying by himself; like his brain had already started to forget its long-honed skill of being alone.

The days until Saturday's lunch with Professor Quirrell seemed to go by very, very slowly.

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

TITLE REDACTED, PART I

Saturday.

Harry had run into trouble falling asleep Friday night, which he had anticipated might happen, and so he had decided to take the obvious advance precaution of buying a sleeping potion; and to prevent it from constituting a visible sign that he was nervous, he had decided to buy it off Fred and George a couple of months earlier. *(Be prepared, that's the Boy Scout's marching song...)*

Thus Harry was fully rested, and his pouch contained almost everything which he owned and might conceivably need. Harry had, in fact, run into the volume limitation on the pouch; and keeping in mind that he would need to store a large snake, and might need to store who-knew-what-else, he had removed some of the bulkier items, like the car battery. He was up to the point now where he could Transfigure something the size of a car battery in four minutes flat, so it wasn't much of a loss.

Harry *had* kept the emergency flares and the oxyacetylene welding torch and fuel tank, since you couldn't just Transfigure things that were to be burned.

(Be prepared, as through life you march along...)

Mary's Place.

After the waitress had taken their order and bowed to them and left the room, Professor Quirrell had performed only four Charms, and then they'd talked about nothing of any vast consequence, just Professor Quirrell's complex thesis about how the Dark Lord's curse on the Defense position had led to the decline of dueling and how this had changed social customs in magical Britain. Harry listened and nodded and said intelligent things, while he tried to control the pounding of his heart.

Then the waitress came in again bearing their food, and this time, a minute after the waitress had departed, Professor Quirrell gestured for the door to close and lock, and began to speak twenty-nine security Charms, one of the ones in Mr. Bester's sequence being left out this time, which somewhat puzzled Harry.

Professor Quirrell finished his Charms—

—stood up from his chair—

—blurred into a green snake, banded in blue and white—

—hissed, "*Hungry, boy? Eat your fill sswiftly, we sshall need both sstrength and time.*"

Harry's eyes were a bit wide, but he hissed, "*I ate well at breakfasst,*" and then rapidly began forking noodles into his mouth.

The snake watched him for a moment, with those flat eyes, and then hissed, "*Do not wissh to explain here. Prefer to be elssewhere firsst. Need to leave unobsserved, without ssign we have ever departed room.*"

"*Sso no one can track uss,*" hissed Harry.

"*Yess. Do you trusst me that much, boy? Think before ansswer. I will have important requesst of you, which requiress trusst; if ssay no regardlesss, then ssay no now.*"

Harry dropped his gaze from the snake's flat eyes, and looked back down at his sauce-coated noodles, and ate another bite, then another, while he thought.

The Defense Professor... was an ambiguous figure, to put it mildly; Harry thought he had unraveled some of his goals, but others remained mysterious.

But Professor Quirrell had knocked down two hundred girls to stop the ones summoning Harry. Professor Quirrell had deduced that the Dementor was draining Harry through his wand. The Defense Professor had saved Harry's life, twice, in a two-week period.

Which could mean that the Defense Professor was just saving Harry *for later,* that there were ulterior motives. Indeed, it was *certain* that there were ulterior motives. Professor Quirrell wasn't doing this on a whim. But then Professor Quirrell had also seen Harry taught Occlumency, he had taught Harry how to lose... if the Defense Professor wanted to make some use of Harry Potter, it was a use that required a strengthened

Harry Potter, not a weakened one. That was what it meant to be used by a friend, that they would want the use to make you stronger instead of weaker.

And if there was sometimes a cold atmosphere about the Defense Professor, bitterness in his voice or emptiness in his gaze, then Harry was the only one who Professor Quirrell allowed to see it.

Harry didn't quite know how to describe in words the sense of kinship he felt with Professor Quirrell, except to say that the Defense Professor was the only *clear-thinking* person Harry had met in the wizarding world. Sooner or later everyone else started playing Quidditch, or not putting protective shells on their time machines, or thinking that Death was their friend. It didn't matter how good their intentions were. Sooner or later, and usually sooner, they demonstrated that something deep inside their brain was confused. Everyone except Professor Quirrell. It was a bond that went beyond anything of debts owed, or even anything of personal liking, that the two of them were alone in the wizarding world. And if the Defense Professor occasionally seemed a little scary or a little Dark, well, that was just the same thing some people said about Harry.

"*I trusst you,*" hissed Harry.

And the snake explained the first stage of the plan.

⁂

Harry took a final forkful of noodles, chewed. Beside him, Professor Quirrell, now in human form again, was eating his soup placidly, as though nothing of special interest were occurring.

Then Harry swallowed, and in the same moment stood up from his chair, already feeling his heart start to hammer hard in his chest. The security precautions they were taking were literally the most stringent possible...

"Are you ready to test it, Mr. Potter?" Professor Quirrell said calmly.

It *wasn't* a test, but Professor Quirrell wouldn't say that, not out loud in human speech, even in this room screened to the limit that Professor Quirrell had secured with further Charms.

"Yep," Harry said as casually as he could.

Step one.

Harry said "Cloak" to his pouch, drew forth the Cloak of Invisibility, and then unstuck the pouch from his belt and threw it toward the other side of the table.

The Defense Professor stood up from his own seat, drew his wand, bent down, and touched his wand to the pouch, murmuring a quiet incantation. The new enchantments would ensure that Professor Quirrell could enter the pouch on his own in snakeform, and leave it on his own, and hear what went on outside while he was in the pouch.

Step two.

As Professor Quirrell stood up from where he'd bent over by the pouch, and put away his wand, his wand happened to point in Harry's direction, and there was a brief crawling sensation on Harry's chest near where the Time-Turner lay, like something creepy had passed very close by without touching him.

Step three.

The Defense Professor turned into a snake again, and the sense of doom diminished; the snake crawled to the pouch and into it, the pouch's mouth opening to admit the green shape, and as the mouth closed again behind the tail, the sense of doom diminished further.

Step four.

Harry drew his wand, being careful to stand still as he did it, so that the Time-Turner would not move from where Professor Quirrell had anchored the hourglass within the shell in its current orientation. "*Wingardium Leviosa*," murmured Harry, and the pouch began to float toward him.

Slowly, slowly, as Professor Quirrell had instructed, the pouch began to float toward Harry, who waited alert for any sign the pouch was opening, in which case Harry was to use the Hover Charm to propel it away from him as fast as possible.

As the pouch came within a meter of Harry, the sense of doom returned.

As Harry reattached the pouch to his belt, the sense of doom was stronger than it had ever been, but still not overwhelming; it was tolerable.

Even with Professor Quirrell's Animagus form lying within the extended space of the pouch resting on Harry's very hip.

Step five.

Harry sheathed his wand. His other hand still held the Cloak of Invisibility, and Harry drew that cloak over himself.

Step six.

And so in that room shielded from every possible scrying, which Professor Quirrell had personally and further secured, it was not until *after* Harry was wearing the true Cloak of Invisibility that he reached beneath his shirt and twisted the outer shell of the Time-Turner just once.

The Time-Turner's inner hourglass stayed anchored and motionless, the setting twisted around it—

The food vanished from the table, the chairs leaped back into place, the door sprang open.

Mary's Room was deserted, as it should have been, because Professor Quirrell had earlier contacted Mary's Place under a false name to inquire whether the room would be available at this hour—not to reserve it, not to place a canceled reservation that might be noted, but only to inquire.

Step seven.

Staying under the Cloak of Invisibility, Harry left through the open door. He navigated the tiled hallways of Mary's Place to the well-stocked bar that greeted new entrants, tended by the owner, Jake. There were only a few people at the bar, in the morning before proper lunchtime, and Harry had to wait invisibly by the door for several minutes, listening to the murmur of conversation and the gurgle of alcohol, before the door opened to admit a huge genial Irishman, and Harry slipped out silently in his wake.

Step eight.

Harry walked for a while. He was well away from Mary's Place when he turned off Diagon Alley into a smaller alley, at the end of which lay a shop that was dark, the windows enchanted to blackness.

Step nine.

"Sword fish melon friend," Harry spoke the passphrase to the lock, and it clicked open.

Within the shop was also darkness, the light from the open door briefly illuminating it to show a wide, empty room. The furniture shop which had once operated here had gone bankrupt a few months ago, according to the Defense Professor, and the shop had been repossessed, but not yet resold. The walls were painted a simple white, the wooden floor scratched and unpolished, a single closed door set in the back wall; this had been a showroom, once, but now it showed nothing.

The door clicked shut behind Harry, and then the darkness was pitch and complete.

Step ten.

Harry took out his wand and said "*Lumos*", lighting the room with white glow; he took his pouch from his belt (the sense of doom growing a little sharper as he grasped it with his fingers) and lightly tossed it to the opposite side of the room (the sense of doom fading almost completely). And then he began to take off the Cloak of Invisibility, even as his voice hissed, *"It iss done."*

Step eleven.

From the pouch poked a green head, followed shortly by a meter-long green body as the snake slithered out. A moment later, the snake blurred into Professor Quirrell.

Step twelve.

Harry waited in silence while the Defense Professor recited thirty Charms.

"All right," Professor Quirrell said calmly, when he had finished. "If anyone is still watching us now, we are in any case doomed, so I will speak plainly and in human form. Parseltongue does not quite suit me, I fear, as I am neither a descendant of Salazar nor a true snake."

Harry nodded.

"So, Mr. Potter," said Professor Quirrell. His gaze intent, his pale blue eyes dark and shadowed in the white light coming from Harry's wand. "We are alone and unobserved, and I have an important question to ask you."

"Go ahead," said Harry, his heart starting to beat faster.

"What is your opinion of the government of magical Britain?"

That wasn't quite what Harry had been expecting, but it was close enough, so Harry said, "Based on my limited knowledge, I would say that both the Ministry and the Wizengamot appear to be stupid, corrupt, and evil."

"Correct," Professor Quirrell said. "Do you understand why I ask?"

Harry took a deep breath, and looked Professor Quirrell straight in the eyes, unflinching. Harry had finally worked out that the way to make amazing deductions from scanty evidence was to know the answer in advance, and he had guessed this answer fully a week ago. It needed only a slight adjustment...

"You are about to invite me to join a secret organization full of interesting people like yourself," said Harry, "one of whose goals is to reform or overthrow the government of magical Britain, and yes, I'm in."

There was a slight pause.

"I'm afraid that is not quite where I intended to direct this conversation," said Professor Quirrell. The corners of his lips were twitching slightly. "I merely planned to ask for your help in doing something extremely treasonous and illegal."

Darn, thought Harry. Still, Professor Quirrell hadn't *denied* it... "Go on."

"Before I do," said Professor Quirrell. There was no levity in his voice, now. "*Are* you open to such requests, Mr. Potter? I say again that if you are likely to say no regardless, you must say no now. If your curiosity impels you otherwise, squash it."

"Treasonous and illegal doesn't bother me," said Harry. "Risks bother me and the stakes would need to be commensurate, but I can't imagine *you* taking risks frivolously."

Professor Quirrell nodded. "I would not. It is a terrible abuse of my friendship with you, and of such trust as is placed in my teaching

position at Hogwarts—"

"You can skip this part," Harry said.

The lips twitched again, and then went flat. "Then I shall skip it. Mr. Potter, you sometimes make a game of lying with truths, playing with words to conceal your meanings in plain sight. I, too, have been known to find that amusing. But if I so much as *tell* you what I hope we shall do this day, Mr. Potter, you will *lie* about it. You will lie straight out, without hesitation, without wordplay or hints, to anyone who asks about it, be they foe or closest friend. You will lie to Malfoy, to Granger, and to McGonagall. You will speak, always and without hesitation, in *exactly* the fashion you would speak if you knew nothing, with no concern for your honor. That also is how it must be."

There was silence, then, for a time.

That was a price measured in a fraction of Harry's soul.

"Without telling me yet..." said Harry. "Can you say if the need is desperate?"

"There is someone in the most terrible want of your help," Professor Quirrell said simply, "and there is no one who can help them but you."

There was another silence, but not a long one.

"All right," Harry said quietly. "Tell me of the mission."

The dark robes of the Defense Professor seemed to blur against the shadow on the wall, cast by his silhouette blocking the white light of Harry's wand. "The ordinary Patronus Charm, Mr. Potter, wards off a Dementor's fear. But the Dementors still see you through it, they know that you are there. Only not your Patronus Charm. It blinds them, or more than blinds them. What I saw beneath the cloak wasn't even looking in our direction as you killed it; as though it had forgotten our existence, even as it died."

Harry nodded. That wasn't surprising, not when you confronted a Dementor on the level of its true existence, beyond anthropomorphism. Death might be the last enemy, but it wasn't a sentient enemy. When humanity had wiped out smallpox, smallpox hadn't fought back.

"Mr. Potter, the central branch of Gringotts is guarded by every spell high and low that the goblins know. Even so those vaults have been successfully robbed; for what wizardry can do, wizardry can undo. And

yet no one has ever escaped from Azkaban. No one. For every Charm there is a counter-Charm, for every ward there is a bypass. How can it be that no one has ever been rescued from Azkaban?"

"Because Azkaban has something invincible," Harry said. "Something so terrible that no one can defeat it."

That was the keystone of their perfect security, it had to be, nothing human. It was Death that guarded Azkaban.

"The Dementors don't like their meals being taken away from them," Professor Quirrell said. Coldness had entered that voice, now. "They know if anyone tries. There are more than a hundred Dementors there, and they speak to the guards as well. It's that simple, Mr. Potter. If you're a powerful wizard then Azkaban isn't hard to enter, and it isn't hard to leave. So long as you don't try to take anything out of it that belongs to the Dementors."

"But the Dementors are *not* invincible," said Harry. He could have cast the Patronus Charm with that thought, in that very moment. "Never believe that they are."

Professor Quirrell's voice was very quiet. "Do you remember what it was like when you went before the Dementor, the first time, when you failed?"

"I remember."

And then with a sudden sickening lurch in his stomach, Harry knew where this was going; he should have seen it before.

"There is an innocent person in Azkaban," Professor Quirrell said.

Harry nodded, there was a burning sensation in his throat, but he didn't cry.

"The one of whom I speak was not under the Imperius Curse," said the Defense Professor, dark robes silhouetted against a greater shadow. "There are surer ways to break wills than the Imperius, if you have the time for torture, and Legilimency, and rituals of which I will not speak. I cannot tell you how I know this, how I know any of this, cannot hint at it even to you, you will have to trust me. But there is a person in Azkaban who never once chose to serve the Dark Lord, who has spent years suffering alone in the most terrible cold and darkness imaginable, and never deserved a single minute of it."

Harry saw it in a single leap of intuition, his mouth racing almost ahead of his thoughts.

There was no hint, no warning, we all thought—

"A person by the name of Black," Harry said.

There was silence. Silence, while the pale blue eyes stared at him.

"Well," said Professor Quirrell after a while. "So much for not telling you the name until after you had accepted the mission. I would ask whether you're reading *my* mind, but that's flatly impossible."

Harry said nothing, but it was simple enough if you *believed* in the processes of modern democracy. The most obvious person in Azkaban to be innocent was the one who hadn't gotten a trial—

"I am *certainly* impressed, Mr. Potter," said Professor Quirrell. His face was grave. "But this is a serious matter, and if there is some way others could make the same deduction, I *must* know. So tell me, Mr. Potter. How in the name of Merlin, of Atlantis, and the void between the stars, did you guess that I was talking about Bellatrix?"

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT, PART II

The adrenaline was already flowing in Harry's veins, his heart already hammering in his chest, there in that darkened and bankrupt store. Professor Quirrell had finished explaining, and in one hand, Harry held a tiny wooden twig that would be the key. This was it, this was the day and the moment when Harry started acting the part. His first true adventure, a dungeon to be pierced, an evil government to be defied, a maiden in distress to be rescued. Harry should have been more frightened, more reluctant, but instead he felt only that it was time and past time to start becoming the people he had read about in his books; to begin his journey toward what he had always known he was meant to be, a hero. To take the first step on the road that led to Kimball Kinnison and Captain Picard and Liono of Thundera and definitely *not* Raistlin Majere. So far as Harry's brain knew from watching early morning cartoons, when you grew up you were supposed to gain amazing powers and save the universe, that was what Harry's brain had seen adults doing and adopted as its role model for the maturation process, and Harry very much wanted to start growing up.

And if the pattern of the story called for the hero to lose some part of his innocence, as the result of his first adventure; then for now, at least, in this still-innocent moment, it seemed time and past time for him to experience that pain. Like casting off clothes too small for him; or like finally advancing to the next stage of the game, after being stuck for eleven years on world 3, level 2 of Super Mario Brothers.

Harry had read enough novels to suspect that he wouldn't feel this enthusiastic afterward, so he was enjoying it while it lasted.

There was a popping sound as something near Harry disappeared, and then there was no more time for heroic brooding.

Harry's hand snapped the small wooden twig.

A hook yanked motionlessly at Harry's abdomen as the portkey activated, feeling like a much harder pull this time than the smaller transports between the Hogwarts grounds and Diagon Alley—

—and dropped him into the middle of a huge roll of thunder dying away, and a lash of cold rain whipping him across the face, the water coating Harry's glasses and blinding him in an instant, turning the world into a blur even as he began to fall toward the raging ocean waves far below.

He had arrived high, high, high above the empty North Sea.

The shock of the blasting storm almost made Harry let go of the broomstick that Professor Quirrell had given him, which would not have been a good idea. It took nearly a full second for Harry to get his wits together and bring his broomstick back up in an easy swoop.

"I'm here," said an unfamiliar voice from a patch of empty air above him; low and gravelly, the voice of the sallow lanky bearded man Professor Quirrell had Polyjuiced into before Disillusioning himself and his broomstick.

"I'm here," Harry said from beneath the Cloak of Invisibility. He hadn't used Polyjuice himself. Wearing a different body hindered your magic, and Harry might need all of his little magic about him; thus the plan called for Harry to stay invisible at nearly all times, instead of Polyjuicing.

(Neither of them had spoken the other's name. You simply didn't use your names at any point during an illegal mission, even invisibly hovering over an anonymous patch of water in the North Sea. You simply didn't. It would be stupid.)

Carefully keeping a grip on the broomstick with one hand, while the rain and wind howled around him, Harry raised his wand in an equally careful grip and Imperviused his glasses.

Then, with the lenses clear, Harry looked around.

He was surrounded by wind and rain, it might have been five degrees Celsius if he was lucky; he'd already had a Warming Charm cast on himself just from being outside in February, but it wasn't standing up to the driving cold droplets. Worse than snow, the rain soaked into every exposed surface. The Cloak of Invisibility turned all of you invisible, but it didn't *cover* all of you, and that meant it didn't protect all of you from rain. Harry's face was exposed to the full force of the driven water, and it was driving straight into his neck and soaking down into his shirt, also the sleeves of his robes and the cuffs of his pants and his shoes, the water took every bit of cloth as an avenue to sneak in.

"This way," said the Polyjuiced voice, and a spark of green light lit up in front of Harry's broomstick, and then darted away in a direction that seemed to Harry like every other direction.

Through the blinding rain, Harry followed. He lost it sometimes, that small green spark, and each time he did, Harry called out, and the spark would reappear in front of him a few seconds later.

When Harry had caught the trick of following the spark, it accelerated, and Harry kicked the broomstick into high gear and followed. The rain whipped him harder, feeling like Harry imagined it must feel to get a faceful of shotgun pellets, but his glasses stayed clear and protected his eyes.

It was only a few minutes later, at the broomstick's full speed, that Harry caught a glimpse of a huge shadow through the rain, towering far across the waters.

And felt a distant, hollow echo of emptiness radiating from where Death waited, washing over Harry's mind and parting around it, like a wave breaking on stone. Harry knew his enemy this time, and his will was steel and all of the light.

"I can already feel the Dementors," said the gravelly voice of the Polyjuiced Quirrell. "I did not expect that, not this soon."

"Think of the stars," Harry said, over a distant rumble of thunder. "Don't allow any anger in you, nothing negative, just think of the stars, what it feels like to forget yourself and fall bodilessly through space. Hold to that thought like an Occlumency barrier across your entire mind. The Dementors will have some trouble reaching past that."

There was silence for a moment, then, "Interesting."

The green spark lifted, and Harry inclined his broomstick slightly upward to follow, even as it steered them into a fogbank, a cloud hovering low on the waters.

Soon they were hovering above and slightly oblique of the huge three-sided metal building, as it loomed far below. The triangle of steel was hollow, not solid, it was a building of three thick solid walls and no center. The Aurors on guard roomed in the top level and southern side of the building, Professor Quirrell had said, protected by their Patronus Charms. The legal entrance into Azkaban was on the roof of the southwest corner of the building. Which the two of them wouldn't use, of course. Instead they would use a corridor that ran directly beneath the northern corner of the building. Professor Quirrell would go down first, and puncture a hole in the roof and its wards right at the northern tip, leaving behind an illusion to cover the gap.

The prisoners were kept in the side of the building, in levels corresponding to their crimes. And at the bottom, in the uttermost center and depth of Azkaban, lay a nest of more than a hundred Dementors. Loads of dirt were occasionally dropped in to keep up the level, as the matter directly exposed to the Dementors broke down into mud and nothingness...

"Wait one minute," said the rough voice, "follow me at speed, and pass through with care."

"Got it," Harry said lowly.

The spark winked out, and Harry began to count, *one one thousand, two one thousand, three one thousand...*

...sixty one thousand, and Harry dived, the wind shrieking around him as he dived, down toward the vast metal structure, down toward where he could feel the shadows of Death waiting for him, draining light and radiating emptiness, as the metal structure grew larger and larger. Plain and featureless loomed the vast grey shape, but for a single raised boxlike structure in the southwest corner. The north corner was simply blank, Professor Quirrell's hole undetectable.

Harry pulled up sharply as he approached the north corner, giving himself more safety margin than he would have bothered with in flying

classes, but not too much. As soon as he'd come to a halt, he began to slowly lower his broomstick again, toward what looked like the solid roof of the tip of the north corner.

Descending through the illusory roof while invisible was a strange experience, and then Harry found himself in a metal corridor lighted with a dim orange light—which, Harry realized after a startled glance, was coming from an old-fashioned mantled gas lamp...

...for magic would fail, be drained away after a time, in the presence of Dementors.

Harry dismounted his broom.

The pull of the emptiness was stronger now, as it parted and flowed around Harry without touching him. They were distant but they were many, the wounds in the world; Harry could have pointed to them with his eyes closed.

"*Casst your Patronuss,*" hissed a snake from the floor, looking more discolored than green in the dim orange light.

The note of stress came through even in Parseltongue. Harry was surprised; Professor Quirrell had said that Animagi in their Animagus forms were much less vulnerable to Dementors. (For the same reason the Patronuses were animals, Harry assumed.) If Professor Quirrell was in this much trouble in his snake form, what had been happening to him while he was in the human form that let him use his magic...?

Harry's wand was already rising in his hand.

This would be the beginning.

Even if it was only one person, just one person that he could save from the darkness, even if he wasn't powerful enough yet to teleport *all* of Azkaban's prisoners to safety and burn the triangular hell down to bedrock...

Even so it was a start, it was a beginning, it was a down payment on everything that Harry meant to accomplish with his life. No more waiting, no more hoping, no more mere promising, it would all begin here. Here and *now.*

Harry's wand slashed down to point at where the Dementors waited far below.

"*Expecto Patronum!*"

The glowing humanoid figure blazed up into existence. It wasn't the sun-bright thing that it had been before... probably because Harry hadn't quite been able to stop himself from thinking about all the *other* prisoners in their cells, the ones that he *wasn't* here to save.

It might be for the best, though. Harry would need to keep this Patronus going for a while, and it might be better if it wasn't quite so bright.

The Patronus dimmed a little further, at that thought; and then further again, as Harry tried to put a little less of his magic into it, until finally the brilliant humanoid figure was glowing only slightly brighter than the brightest animal Patronus, and Harry felt that he could dim it no further without risking losing it entirely.

And then, "*It iss sstable,*" Harry hissed, and began feeding his broomstick into his pouch. His wand stayed in his hand, and a slight, sustainable flow of magic replaced the slight losses from his Patronus.

The snake blurred into the form of a lanky, sallow man, holding Professor Quirrell's wand in one hand and a broomstick in the other. The lanky man staggered as he came back into existence, and went to lean against the wall for a moment.

"Well done, if perhaps a trifle slow," murmured the gravelly voice. Professor Quirrell's dryness was in it, even though it didn't fit the voice, nor did the grave look on the thickly bearded face. "I cannot feel them at all, now."

A moment later, the broomstick went into the man's robes and vanished. Then the man's wand rose and tapped on his head, and with a sound like a cracking eggshell he disappeared once more.

Within the air blossomed a faint green spark, and Harry, still enshrouded in the Cloak of Invisibility, followed after.

If you had been watching from outside, you would have seen nothing but a small green spark drifting through the air, and a brilliantly silver humanoid walking after it.

They went down, and down, and down, passing gas lamp after gas lamp, and the occasional huge metal door, descending into Azkaban within what seemed like utter silence. Professor Quirrell had set up some type of barrier by which *he* could hear what went on nearby, but no sounds could pass outward, and no sounds could reach Harry.

Harry hadn't quite been able to stop his mind from wondering *why* the silence, or stop his mind from giving the answer. The answer he'd already known on some wordless level of anticipation that had prompted him to futilely try not to think about it.

Somewhere behind those huge metal doors, people were screaming.

The silver humanoid figure wavered, brightening and dimming, every time Harry thought about it.

Harry had been told to cast a Bubble-Head Charm on himself, as they approached the prisoner levels. To prevent himself from smelling anything.

All the enthusiasm and heroism had worn off already, as Harry had known it would, it hadn't taken long even by his standards, the process had completed itself the very first time they passed one of those metal doors. Every metal door was locked with a huge lock, a lock of simple unmagical metal that wouldn't have stopped a first-year Hogwarts student—if you still had a wand, if you still had your magic, which the prisoners didn't. Those metal doors were not the doors of individual cells, Professor Quirrell had said, each one opened into a corridor in which there would be a group of cells. Somehow that helped a little, not thinking that each door corresponded directly to a prisoner who was waiting right behind it. Instead there might be *more* than one prisoner, which diminished the emotional impact; just like the study showing that people contributed more when they were told that a given amount of money was required to save one child's life, than when told the same total amount was needed to save eight children...

Harry was finding it increasingly hard not to think about it, and every time he did, the light of his Patronus fluctuated.

They came to the place where the passageway turned left, at the corner of the triangular building. Once again there were descending metal steps, another flight of stairs; once again they went down.

Mere murderers were not put into the lowest of cells. There was always a lower place you could go, an even worse punishment to fear. No matter how low you had already sunk, the government of magical Britain had some threat remaining against you if you did even worse.

But Bellatrix Black had been the Death Eater who inspired more fear than anyone save Lord Voldemort himself, a beautiful and deadly sorceress absolutely loyal to her master; she had been, if such a thing were possible, more sadistic and evil even than You-Know-Who, as though she were trying to outdo her master...

...that was what the world knew of her, what the world believed of her.

But before then, Professor Quirrell had told Harry, before the debut of the Dark Lord's most terrible servant, there had been a girl in Slytherin who had been quiet, keeping mostly to herself, harming no one. Afterward there had been made-up stories told about her, memories changing in retrospect (Harry knew well the research on that). But at the time, while she still attended school, the most talented witch in Hogwarts had been known as a gentle girl (Professor Quirrell had said). Her few friends had been surprised when she'd joined the Death Eaters a year after her graduation, and more surprised that she'd been hiding so much darkness behind that sad, wistful smile.

That was who Bellatrix had once been, the most promising witch of her own generation, before the Dark Lord stole her and broke her, shattered her and reshaped her, binding her to him on a deeper level and with darker arts than any Imperius.

Ten years Bellatrix had served the Dark Lord, killing who he bade her kill, torturing who he bade her torture.

And then the Dark Lord had finally been defeated.

And Bellatrix's nightmare had continued.

Somewhere inside Bellatrix there might be something that was still screaming, that had been screaming the whole time, something that could be brought back, or there might not be, Professor Quirrell had no way of knowing. But either way, they could...

...they could at least get her out of Azkaban...

Bellatrix Black had been put into the lowest level of Azkaban.

Harry was having trouble not imagining what he would see when they got to her cell. Bellatrix must have had almost no fear of death, in the beginning, if she was still alive at all.

They descended another flight of stairs, coming that much closer to Death and Bellatrix, the clacking of their invisible shoes the only sound that Harry could hear. Dim orange light coming from the gas lights, the faint green spark drifting through the air, the shining figure following with its silver light fluctuating from time to time.

After descending many times, they came in time to a corridor that did not end in stairs, and a final metal door, and the green spark halted before it.

Harry's heart had calmed a little, as they descended far into the depths of Azkaban without anything happening. But now it was hammering his chest once more. They were at the bottom, and the shadows of Death were very close at hand.

A soft metal click came from the lock, as Professor Quirrell opened the way.

Harry took a deep breath and remembered everything that Professor Quirrell had told him. The hard part wouldn't just be getting the pretended personality right enough to fool Bellatrix Black herself, the hard part would be keeping his Patronus going at the same time...

The green spark winked out, and a moment later a meter-high snake shimmered into existence, no longer invisible.

The metal door moved with a slow creaking sound as Harry pushed on it with his invisible hand, opened it just a crack, and peered through.

He saw a straight corridor that terminated in solid stone. There was no light there but what crept in from Harry's Patronus. That was bright enough for him to see the outer bars of the eight cells set into the corridor, but he couldn't see the insides; more importantly, though, he didn't see anyone in the corridor itself.

"*I ssee nothing,*" hissed Harry.

The snake darted on ahead, swiftly twisting across the floor.

A moment later—

"*Sshe iss alone,*" hissed the snake.

Stay, Harry thought to his Patronus, which took up a position just to one side of the door, as though guarding it; and then Harry pushed the door open further, and followed within.

The first cell Harry looked at contained a dessicated corpse, skin gone grey and mottled, flesh worn through in places to expose the bone beneath, no eyes—

Harry shut his eyes. He could still do that, he was still invisible, he wasn't betraying anything by shutting his eyes.

He'd known it already, he'd read it on page six of his Transfiguration book, that you stayed in Azkaban until your prison term was done. If you died before it was up they kept you there until they released your corpse. If your term was for life, they just left the body in the cell until the cell was needed, at which point they threw your body into the Dementors' pit. But it was still a shock to see, that corpse had been a *person* who'd just been *left* there—

The light in the room wavered.

Steady, thought Harry in his core. It wouldn't be good for Professor Quirrell if that Patronus went out from his thinking sad thoughts. This near to the Dementors the Defense Professor might just fall dead where he stood, if he were as sensitive as he seemed to be. *Steady, Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres, steady!*

With that thought, Harry opened his eyes again, there wasn't time to waste.

The second cell he looked at contained only a skeleton.

And behind the bars of the third cell he saw Bellatrix Black.

Something precious and irreplaceable inside Harry withered like dry grass and vanished forever.

You could tell the woman wasn't a skeleton, that her head wasn't a skull, because the texture of skin was still different from the texture of bone, no matter how white and pale she'd become, waiting in the dark alone. Either they weren't feeding her much, or what she ate, the shadows of Death drained from her; for her eyes seemed shrunken be-

low their lids, her lips looked too shriveled to close over her teeth. The color seemed leached out of the black clothing she had worn into prison, like the Dementors had drained that too. They'd been meant to be daring, those clothes, and now they lay loosely over a skeleton, exposing shriveled skin.

I'm here to save her, I'm here to save her, I'm here to save her, Harry thought to himself, desperately, over and over with an effort like Occlumency, willing his Patronus not to go out, to stay and *protect Bellatrix from the Dementors—*

In his heart, in his core, Harry held to all his pity and his compassion, his will to save her from the darkness; the silver radiance coming in through the open door brightened, even as he thought it.

And in another part of him, like he was just letting another part of his mind carry out a habit without paying much attention to it...

A cold expression came over Harry's face, invisibly beneath the hood.

"Hello, my dear Bella," said a chill whisper. "Did you miss me?"

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT, PART III

The corpse of a woman opened her eyes, and the dull sunken orbs gazed out at nothing.

"Mad," Bellatrix muttered in a cracked voice, "It seems that little Bella is going mad..."

Professor Quirrell had instructed Harry, calmly and precisely, how he was to act in Bellatrix's presence; how to form the pretense he would maintain in his mind.

You found it expedient, or perhaps just amusing, to make Bellatrix fall in love with you, to bind her to your service.

That love would have persisted through Azkaban, Professor Quirrell had said, because to Bellatrix it would not be a happy thought.

She loves you utterly, completely, with her whole being. You do not return her love, but consider her useful. She knows this.

She was the deadliest weapon you possessed, and you called her your dear Bella.

Harry remembered it from the night the Dark Lord killed his parents: the cold amusement, the contemptuous laughter, that high-pitched voice of deathly hate. It didn't seem at all difficult to guess what the Dark Lord would say.

"I hope you are *not* mad, Bella dear," said the chill whisper. "Mad is not useful."

Bellatrix's eyes flickered, tried to focus on empty air.

"My... Lord... I went where you said to await you, but you did not come... I looked for you but I could not find you... you are alive..." All

her words came out in a low mutter, if there was emotion in it, Harry could not tell.

"*Sshow her your face,*" hissed the snake at Harry's feet.

Harry cast back the hood of the Cloak of Invisibility.

The part of him that Harry had placed in control of his facial expressions looked at Bella without the slightest trace of pity, only cool, calm interest. (While in his core, Harry thought, *I will save you, I will save you no matter what...*)

"The scar..." muttered Bellatrix. "That child..."

"So they all still think," said Harry's voice, and gave a thin little chuckle. "You looked for me in the wrong place, Bella dear."

(Harry had asked why Professor Quirrell couldn't be the one to play the part of the Dark Lord, and Professor Quirrell had pointed out that there was no plausible reason for *him* to be possessed by the shade of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.)

Bellatrix's eyes remained fixed on Harry, she said no word.

"Ssay ssomething in Parsseltongue," hissed the snake.

Harry's face turned to the snake, to make it clear that he was addressing it, and hissed, "*One two three four five ssix sseven eight nine ten.*"

There was a pause.

"Those who do not fear the darkness..." murmured Bellatrix.

The snake hissed, "*Will be conssumed by it.*"

"Will be consumed by it," whispered the chill voice. Harry didn't particularly want to think about how Professor Quirrell had gotten that password. His brain, which thought about it anyway, suggested that it had probably involved a Death Eater, a quiet isolated place, and some lead-pipe Legilimency.

"Your wand," murmured Bellatrix, "I hid it in the graveyard, my lord, before I left... under the tombstone to the right of your father's grave... will you kill me, now, if that was all you wished of me... I think I must have always wanted you to be the one to kill me... but I can't remember now, it must have been a happy thought..."

Harry's heart wrenched inside him, it was unbearable, and—and he couldn't cry, couldn't let his Patronus fade—

Harry's face showed a flicker of annoyance, and his voice was sharp as it said, "Enough foolishness. You're to come with me, Bella dear, unless you prefer the company of the Dementors."

Bellatrix's face twitched in brief puzzlement, the shrunken limbs did not stir.

"*You'll need to float her out,*" Harry hissed to the snake. "*Sshe can no longer think of esscaping.*"

"*Yess,*" hissed the snake, "*but do not underesstimate her, sshe wass the deadliesst of warriorss.*" The green head dipped in warning. "*One would be wisse to fear me, boy, even were I sstarved and nine-tenthss dead; be wary of her, allow no ssingle flaw in your pretensse.*"

The green snake smoothly glided out of the door.

And shortly after, a man with sallow skin and a fearful expression on his bearded face cringed into the room with his wand in hand.

"My Lord?" the servant said falteringly.

"Do as you were instructed," the Dark Lord whispered in that chill voice, sounding even more terrible coming from a child's body. "And do not let your Patronus falter. Remember, if I do not return there will be no reward for you, and it will be long before your family is allowed to die."

Having spoken those dreadful words, the Dark Lord pulled his invisibility cloak over his head, and disappeared.

The cringing servant opened the door to Bellatrix's cage, and pulled a tiny needle from his robes with which he poked the human skeleton. The single drop of red blood produced was soon absorbed into a small doll, which was laid upon the floor, and the servant began to chant in a whisper.

Soon another living skeleton lay upon the floor, motionless. Afterward the servant seemed to hesitate for a moment, until from the empty air hissed an impatient command. Then the servant pointed his wand at Bellatrix and spoke a word, and the living skeleton lying on the bed was naked, and the skeleton lying on the floor was clothed in her faded dress.

The servant tore a small strip of cloth from the dress, as it lay upon the seeming corpse; and from his own robes, the fearful man then pro-

duced an empty glass flask with small traces of golden fluid clinging to its inside. This flask was concealed in a corner, the strip of skirt laid over it, the leached cloth nearly blending with the gray metal wall.

Another wave of the servant's wand floated the human skeleton lying on the bed into the air, and in almost the same motion clothed her in new black robes. An ordinary-looking bottle of chocolate milk was put into her hand, and a chill whisper ordered Bellatrix to grasp the bottle and begin drinking it, which she did, her face still looking only puzzled.

Then the servant turned Bellatrix invisible, and turned himself invisible, and they left. The door closed behind them all and clicked as it locked, plunging the corridor into darkness once more, unchanged but for a small flask concealed in the corner of one cell, and a fresh corpse lying upon its floor.

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Earlier, in the deserted shop, Professor Quirrell had told Harry that they were going to commit the perfect crime.

Harry had unthinkingly started to repeat back the standard proverb that there was no such thing as a perfect crime, before he actually thought about it for two-thirds of a second, remembered a wiser proverb, and shut his mouth in midsentence.

What do you think you know, and how do you think you know it?

If you *did* commit the perfect crime, nobody would ever find out—so how could anyone possibly *know* that there weren't perfect crimes?

And as soon as you looked at it that way, you realized that perfect crimes probably got committed *all the time*, and the coroner marked it down as death by natural causes, or the newspaper reported that the shop had never been very profitable and had finally gone out of business...

When Bellatrix Black's corpse was found dead in her cell the next morning, there within the prison of Azkaban from which (everyone knew) no one had ever escaped, nobody bothered doing an autopsy. Nobody thought twice about it. They just locked up the corridor and left, and the *Daily Prophet* reported it in the obituary column the next day...

...that was the perfect crime which Professor Quirrell had planned.

And it wasn't Professor Quirrell who screwed it up.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT, PART IV

A faint green spark moved forward to set the pace, and behind it followed a brilliant silver figure, all other entities invisible. They had traversed five legs of corridor, turned right five times and gone up five flights of stairs; and when Bellatrix had finished her second bottle of chocolate milk, she had been given solid bars of chocolate to eat.

It was after her third bar of chocolate that strange noises began to come from Bellatrix's throat.

It took a moment for Harry to understand, to process the sounds, it didn't sound like anything he'd ever heard before; the rhythm of it was shattered, almost unrecognizable, it took him that long to realize that Bellatrix was crying.

Bellatrix Black was crying, the Dark Lord's most terrible weapon was crying, she was invisible but you could hear it, tiny pathetic sounds she was trying to suppress, even now.

"It's real?" said Bellatrix. Tonality had returned into her voice, no longer a dead mutter, it rose up at the end to form the question. "It's real?"

Yes, thought the part of Harry simulating the Dark Lord, *now be silent—*

He couldn't make those words pass his lips, he just couldn't.

"I knew—you would—come to me—someday," Bellatrix's voice quavered and fractured as she drew breath for quiet sobs, "I knew—you were alive—that you would come—to me—my Lord..." there was a long inhalation like a huge gasp, "and that even—when you came—

you still wouldn't love me—never—you would never love me back—that was why—they couldn't take—my love from me—even though I can't remember—can't remember so many other things—though I don't know what I forgot—but I remember how much I love you, Lord—"

There was a knife stabbing through Harry's heart, he'd never heard anything so terrible, he wanted to hunt down the Dark Lord and kill him just for this...

"Do you still—have use for me—my Lord?"

"No," hissed Harry's voice, without him even thinking, it just seemed to be operating on automatic, "I entered Azkaban on a whim. Of course I have use for you! Don't ask foolish questions."

"But—I'm weak," said Bellatrix's voice, and a full sob escaped her, it sounded much too loud in the corridors of Azkaban, "I can't kill for you, my Lord, I'm sorry, they ate it all, ate me all up, I'm too weak to fight, what good am I to you now—"

Harry's brain cast about desperately for some way to reassure her, from the lips of a Dark Lord who would never speak a single word of caring.

"Ugly," said Bellatrix. Her voice said that word like it was the final nail in her coffin, the last despair. "I'm ugly, they ate that too, I'm, I'm not pretty any more, you won't even, be able, to use me, as a reward, for your servants—even the Lestranges, won't want, to hurt me, any more—"

The brilliant silver figure stopped walking.

Because Harry had stopped walking.

The Dark Lord, he... The part of Harry's self that was soft and vulnerable was screaming in disbelieving horror, trying to reject reality, refuse the understanding, even as a colder and harder part completed the pattern: *She obeyed him in that as she obeyed him in all things.*

The green spark bobbed urgently, darted forward.

The silver humanoid stayed in place.

Bellatrix was sobbing harder.

"I'm, I'm not, I can't be, useful, any more..."

Giant hands were squeezing Harry's chest, wringing him like a washcloth, trying to crush his heart.

"Please," whispered Bellatrix, "just kill me..." Her voice seemed to calm, once she said that. "Please Lord, kill me, I've no reason to live if I'm no use to you... I only want it to stop... please hurt me one last time, my Lord, hurt me until I stop... I love you..."

It was the saddest thing Harry had ever heard.

The bright silver shape of Harry's Patronus flickered—

Wavered—

Brightened—

The fury that was rising in Harry, his rage against the Dark Lord who had done this, the rage against the Dementors, against Azkaban, against the world that allowed such horror, it all seemed to be pouring straight through his arm and into his wand without there being any way of blocking it, he tried willing it to stop and nothing happened.

"My Lord!" whispered the disguised voice of Professor Quirrell. "My spell is going out of control! Help me, my Lord!"

Brighter the Patronus, brighter and brighter, it was waxing faster than on the day that Harry had destroyed a Dementor.

"My Lord!" the silhouette said in a terrified whisper. "Help me! Everyone will feel it, my Lord!"

Everyone will feel it, thought Harry. His imagination could picture it clearly, the prisoners in their cells stirring as the cold and darkness fell away, replaced by healing light.

Every exposed surface now burned like a white sun in the reflections, the silhouette of Bellatrix's skeleton and the sallow man now clearly visible in the blaze, the Disillusionment spells unable to keep pace with the unearthly brilliance; only the Cloak of Invisibility out of the Deathly Hallows withstood it.

"My Lord! *You must stop it!*"

But Harry could no longer will it to stop, he no longer wanted it to stop. He could sense it, more and more of the sparks of life in Azkaban being sheltered by his Patronus, *as it unfolded like spreading wings of sunlight, the air turned to absolute silver as he thought it, Harry knew what he had to do.*

"*Please, my Lord!*"

The words went unheard.

They were far from him, the Dementors in their pit, but Harry knew that they could be destroyed even at this distance if the light blazed bright enough, he knew that Death itself could not face him if he stopped holding back, so he unsealed all the gates inside him and sank the wells of his spell into all the deepest parts of his spirit, all his mind and all his will, and gave over absolutely everything to the spell—

And in the interior of the Sun, an only slightly dimmer shadow moved forward, reaching out an entreating hand.

WRONG
DON'T

The sudden sense of doom clashed with Harry's steel determination, dread and uncertainty striving against the bright purpose, nothing else might have reached him but that. The silhouette took another step forward and another, the sense of doom rising to a point of terrible catastrophe; and in the drench of cold water, Harry saw it, he realized the consequences of what he was doing, the danger and the trap.

If you had been watching from outside you would have seen the interior of the Sun brightening and dimming...

Brightening and dimming...

...and finally fading, fading, fading into ordinary moonlight that seemed like pitch darkness by contrast.

Within the darkness of that moonlight stood a sallow man with his hand outstretched in entreaty, and the skeleton of a woman, lying upon the floor, a puzzled look upon her face.

And Harry, still invisible, fallen to his knees. The greater danger had passed, and now Harry was just trying not to collapse, to keep the spell going at the lower level. He'd drained something, hopefully not lost something—he should have known, should have remembered, that it wasn't mere magic that fueled the Patronus Charm—

"Thank you, my Lord," whispered the sallow man.

"Fool," said the hard voice of a boy pretending to be a Dark Lord. "Did I not warn you that the spell could prove fatal if you failed to control your emotions?"

Professor Quirrell's eyes did not widen, of course.

"Yes, my Lord, I understand," said the Dark Lord's servant in a faltering voice, and turned to Bellatrix—

She was already pushing herself off the floor, slowly, like an old, old Muggle woman. "How funny," Bellatrix whispered, "you were almost killed by a Patronus Charm..." A giggle that sounded like it was blowing dust out of her giggle pipes. "I could punish you, maybe, if my Lord froze you in place and I had knives... maybe I can be useful after all? Oh, I feel a little better now, how strange..."

"Be silent, dear Bella," Harry said in a chill voice, "until I give you leave to speak."

There was no reply, which was obedience.

The servant levitated the human skeleton, and made her invisible once more, followed shortly by his own disappearance with the sound of another cracking egg.

They passed on through the corridors of Azkaban.

And Harry knew that as they passed, the prisoners were stirring in their cells as the fear lifted for one precious moment, maybe even feeling a small touch of healing as his light passed them by, and then collapsing down again as the cold and darkness pressed back in.

Harry was trying very hard not to think about it.

Otherwise his Patronus would wax until it burned away every Dementor in Azkaban, blazing bright enough to destroy them even at this distance...

Otherwise his Patronus would wax until it burned away every Dementor in Azkaban, taking all of Harry's life as fuel.

In the Auror's quarters at the top of Azkaban, one Auror trio was snoring in the barracks, one Auror trio was resting in the breakroom, and one Auror trio was on duty in the command room, keeping their watch. The command room was simple but large, with three chairs at back where

three Aurors sat, their wands always in hand to sustain their three Patronuses, as the bright white forms paced in front of the open window, sheltering them all from the Dementors' fear.

The three of them usually stuck to the back, and played poker, and didn't look out the window. You could have seen some sky there, sure, and there was even an hour or two every day where you could've seen some sun, but that window also looked down on the central pit of hell.

Just in case a Dementor wanted to float up and talk to you.

There was no way that Auror Li would have agreed to serve duty here, triple pay or no triple pay, if he hadn't had a family to support. (His real name was Xiaoguang, and everyone called him Mike instead; he'd named his children Su and Kao, which hopefully would serve them better.) His only consolation, besides the money, was that at least his mates played an excellent game of Dragon Poker. Though it would be hard *not* to, at this point.

It was their 5,366th game and Li had what would probably be his best hand of the 5300s. It was a Saturday in February and there were three players, which let him shift the suit of any one hole card except a two, three, or seven; and that was enough to let him build a Corps-a-Corps with Unicorns, Dragons, and sevens...

Across the table from him, Gerard McCusker looked up from the table cards toward the direction of the window, staring.

The sinking feeling came over Li's stomach with surprising speed.

If his seven of hearts got hit by a Dementor Modifier and turned into a six, he was going straight down to two pair and McCusker might beat that—

"Mike," said McCusker, "what's with your Patronus?"

Li turned his head and looked.

His soft silver badger had turned away from its watch over the pit and was staring downward at something only it could see.

A moment later, Bahry's moonlit duck and McCusker's bright anteater followed suit, staring in the same downward direction.

They all exchanged glances, and then sighed.

"I'll tell them," said Bahry. Protocol called for sending the three Aurors who were off-duty but not sleeping to investigate anything anoma-

lous. "Maybe relieve one of them and take the C spiral, if you two don't mind."

Li exchanged a glance with McCusker, and they both nodded. It wasn't too hard to break into Azkaban, if you were wealthy enough to hire a powerful wizard, and well-intentioned enough to recruit someone who could cast the Patronus Charm. People with friends in Azkaban would do that, break in just to give someone a half-day's worth of Patronus time, a chance at some real dreams instead of nightmares. Leave them a supply of chocolate to conceal in their cell, to increase the chance they lived through their sentence. And the Aurors on guard... well, even if you got caught, you could probably convince the Aurors to overlook it, in exchange for the right bribe.

For Li, the right bribe tended to be in the range of two Knuts and a silver Sickle. He hated this place.

But Bahry One-Hand had a wife and the wife had healer's bills, and if you could afford to hire someone who could break into Azkaban, then you could afford to grease Bahry's remaining palm pretty hard, if he was the one who caught you.

By unspoken agreement, none of them giving them anything away by being the first to propose it, the three of them finished out their poker hand first. Li won, since no Dementors had actually shown up. And by then the Patronuses had stopped staring and gone back to their normal patrol, so it was probably nothing, but procedure was procedure.

After Li raked in the pot, Bahry gave them all formal nods, and stood up from the table. The older man's long white locks brushed against his fancy red robes, his robes brushed the metal floor of the command room, as Bahry went through the separating door that led to the formerly off-duty Aurors.

Li had been Sorted into Hufflepuff, and he sometimes felt a little queasy about this kind of business. But Bahry had shown them all the pictures, and you had to let a man do what he could for his poor sick wife, especially when he only had seven months left before his retirement.

The faint green spark floated through the metal corridors, and the silver humanoid, seeming a little dimmer now, followed after it. Sometimes the bright figure would flare, especially when they passed one of the huge metal doors, but it always died back down again.

Mere eyes could not have seen the invisible others: the eleven-year-old Boy-Who-Lived, and the living skeleton that was Bellatrix Black, and the Polyjuiced Defense Professor of Hogwarts, all traveling together through Azkaban. If that was the beginning of a joke, Harry didn't know the punchline.

They'd gone up another four flights of stairs before the rough voice of the Defense Professor said, simply and without emphasis, "Auror coming."

It took too long, a whole second maybe, for Harry to understand, for the jolt of adrenaline to pump into his blood, and for him to remember what Professor Quirrell had already discussed with him and told him to do in this case, and then Harry spun on his heel and flew back the way they'd come.

Harry reached the flight of stairs, and frantically laid himself down on the third step from the top, the cold metal feeling hard even through his cloak and robes. Trying to move his head up, to peer over the lip of the stairs, showed that he couldn't see Professor Quirrell; and that meant that Harry was out of the line of any stray fire.

His shining Patronus followed after him, and lay down beside him on the step just beneath him; for it too must not be seen.

There was a faint sound as of wind or whooshing, and then the sound of Bellatrix's invisible body coming to rest on a stair further below, she had no place in this except—

"Stay still," said the cold high whisper, "stay silent."

There was stillness, and silence.

Harry pressed his wand against the side of the metal step just above him. If he was anyone else he would have needed to take a Knut out of his pocket... or rip off a bit of cloth from his robe... or bite off one of his nails... or find a speck of rock large enough that he could see it and solid enough to stay in one place and orientation while it touched his wand. But with Harry's almighty power of partial Transfiguration, this

was not necessary; he could skip that particular step of the operation and use any material near to hand.

Thirty seconds later Harry was the proud new owner of a curved mirror, and...

"*Wingardium Leviosa,*" Harry whispered as quietly as he could.

...was levitating it just above the steps, and watching, in that curved surface, almost the whole corridor where Professor Quirrell invisibly waited.

Harry heard it in the distance, then, the sound of footsteps.

And saw the form (a little hard to see in the mirror) of a person in red robes, coming down the stairs, entering the seemingly empty corridor; accompanied by a small Patronus animal that Harry couldn't quite make out.

The Auror was protected by a blue shimmer, it was hard to see the details but Harry could see that much, the Auror had shields already raised and strengthened.

Crap, thought Harry. According to the Defense Professor, the essential art of dueling consisted of trying to put up defenses that would block whatever someone was likely to throw at you, while trying in turn to attack in ways that were likely to go past their current set of defenses. And by far the easiest way to win any sort of real fight—Professor Quirrell had said this over and over—was to shoot the enemy before they raised a shield in the first place, either from behind or from close enough range that they couldn't dodge or counter in time.

Though Professor Quirrell might still be able to get in a shot from behind, if—

But the Auror halted after taking three steps into the corridor.

"Nice Disillusionment," said a hard male voice that Harry didn't recognize. "Now show yourself, or you'll be in *real* trouble."

The form of the sallow, bearded man became visible then.

"And you with the Patronus," said the hard voice. "Come out too. *Now.*"

"Wouldn't be smart," said the gravelly voice of the sallow man. It was no longer the terrified voice of the Dark Lord's servant; it had suddenly become the professional intimidation of a competent criminal. "You

don't want to see who's behind me. Trust me, you don't. Five hundred Galleons, cold cash up front, if you turn around and walk away. Big trouble for your career if you don't."

There was a long pause.

"Look, whoever you are," said the hard voice. "You seem confused about how this works. I don't care if that's Lucius Malfoy behind you or Albus bloody Dumbledore. You *all* come out, I scan the whole lot of you, and *then* we talk about how much this is going to cost you—"

"Two thousand Galleons, final offer," said the gravelly voice, taking on a warning undertone. "That's ten times the going rate and more than you make in a year. And believe me, if you see something you shouldn't, you're going to regret not taking that—"

"Shut it!" said the hard voice. "You've got exactly five seconds to drop that wand before I drop you. Five, four—"

What are you doing, Professor Quirrell? Harry thought frantically. *Attack first! Cast a shield at least!*

"—three, two, one! *Stupefy!*"

Bahry stared, a chill running down his spine.

The man's wand had moved so fast that it was like it had Apparated into place, and Bahry's stunner was currently sparkling tamely at the end of it, not blocked, not countered, not deflected, *caught* like a fly in honey.

"My offer has gone back down to five hundred Galleons," said the man in a colder, more formal voice. He smiled dryly, and the smile looked wrong on that bearded face. "And you shall need to accept a Memory Charm."

Bahry had already swapped the harmonics on his shields so that his own stunner couldn't pass back through, already tilted his wand back into a defensive position, already raised his hardened artificial hand into position to block anything blockable, and was already thinking wordless spells to put more layers on his shields—

The man wasn't looking at Bahry. Instead he was poking curiously at Bahry's stunner where it still wavered on the end of his wand, drawing out red sparks and flicking them away with his fingers, slowly disassembling the hex like a child's rod puzzle.

The man hadn't raised any shields of his own.

"Tell me," the man said in a disinterested voice that didn't seem to quite fit the rough throat—Polyjuice, Bahry would have called it, if he'd thought that anyone could possibly do magic that delicate from inside someone else's body—"what did you do in the last war? Put yourself in harm's way, or stay out of trouble?"

"Harm's way," said Bahry. His voice kept the iron calm of an Auror with nearly a hundred full years on the force, seven months short of mandatory retirement, Mad-Eye Moody couldn't have said it with any more hardness.

"Fight any Death Eaters?"

Now a grim smile graced Bahry's own face. "Two at once." Two of You-Know-Who's own warrior-assassins, personally trained by their dark master. Two Death Eaters at once against Bahry alone. It had been the toughest fight of Bahry's life, but he'd stood his ground, and walked away with only the loss of his left hand.

"Did you kill them?" The man sounded idly curious, and he continued to draw threads of fire out of the much-diminished stunbolt still captive on the end of his wand, his fingers now weaving small patterns of Bahry's own magic before flicking to disperse them.

Sweat broke out on Bahry's skin beneath his robes. His metal hand flashed downward, ripped the mirror from his belt—"Bahry to Mike, I need backup!"

There was a pause, and silence.

"Bahry to Mike!"

The mirror lay dull and lifeless in his hand. Slowly, Bahry put it back on his belt.

"It's been quite a while since I had a serious fight with a serious opponent," the man said, still not looking up at Bahry. "Try not to disappoint me too much. You can attack whenever you're ready. Or you can walk away with five hundred Galleons."

There was a long silence.

Then the air screamed like metal cutting glass as Bahry slashed his wand downward.

Harry could hardly see it, could hardly make out anything amid the lights and flashes, his mirror's curve was perfect (they'd practiced that tactic before in the Chaos Legion) but the scene was still too small, and Harry had the feeling he wouldn't be able to understand even if he was watching from a meter away, it was all happening too *fast,* red blasts deflecting from blue shields, green bars of light clashing together, shadowy forms appearing and vanishing, he couldn't even tell who was casting what, except that the Auror was shouting incantation after incantation and frantically dodging while Professor Quirrell's Polyjuiced form stood in one place and flicked his wand, mostly silently, but now and then pronouncing words in unrecognizable languages that would white out the whole mirror and show half the Auror's shielding torn away as he staggered back.

Harry had seen exhibition duels between the strongest seventh-year students, and this was so far above it that Harry's mind felt numbed, looking at how far he had left to go. There wasn't a single seventh-year student who could have lasted half a minute against the Auror, all three seventh-year armies put together might not be able to scratch the Defense Professor...

The Auror had fallen to the ground, one knee and one hand supporting himself as the other hand gestured frantically, the few shouted incantations that Harry recognized were all shield spells, as a flock of shadows spun around the Auror like a whirlwind of razors.

And Harry saw Professor Quirrell's Polyjuiced form deliberately point his wand at where the Auror kneeled and fought the last moments of his battle.

"Surrender," said the gravelly voice.

The Auror spat something unspeakable.

"So be it," said the voice. "Avada—"

Time seemed to move very slowly, like there was time to hear the individual syllables, *Ke,* and *Da,* and *Vra,* time to watch the Auror starting to throw himself desperately aside; and even though it was all happening so slowly, somehow there wasn't time to *do* anything, no time for Harry to open his lips and scream NO, no time to move, maybe even not any time to think.

Only time for one desperate wish that an innocent man should not die—

And a blazing silver figure stood before the Auror.

Stood there just a fraction of a second before the green light struck home.

Bahry was twisting frantically aside, not knowing if he was going to make it—

His eyes were focused on his opponent and his onrushing death, so Bahry only briefly saw the outline of the brilliant silhouette, the Patronus brighter than any he'd ever seen, saw it just barely long enough to recognize the impossible shape, before the green and the silver light collided and both lights vanished, it was impossible but both lights vanished, *the Killing Curse had been blocked*, and then Bahry's ears were pierced as he saw his terrible opponent screaming, screaming, screaming, clutching at his head and screaming, starting to fall as Bahry was already falling—

Bahry hit the ground, falling from his own frantic lunge, and his dislocated left shoulder and broken rib screamed in protest. Bahry ignored the pain, managed to scramble back to his knees, brought up his wand to stun his opponent, he didn't understand what was happening but he knew that this was his only chance.

"*Stupefy!*"

The red bolt struck out toward the man's falling body, and was torn apart in midair and dissipated—and not by any shield. Bahry could *see* it, the wavering in the air that surrounded his fallen and screaming opponent.

Bahry could feel it like a deadly pressure on his skin, the flux of magic building and building and building toward some terrible breaking point. His instincts screamed at him to run before the explosion came, this was no Charm, no Curse, this was wizardry run wild, but before Bahry could even finish getting to his feet—

The man threw his wand away from himself (he threw away his wand!) and a second later, his form blurred and vanished entirely.

A green snake lay motionless on the ground, unmoving even before Bahry's next stunner spell, fired in sheer reflex, hit it without resistance.

As the dreadful flux and pressure began to dissipate, as the wild wizardry died back down, Bahry's dazed mind noticed that the scream was continuing. Only it sounded different, like the scream of a young boy, coming from the stairs leading down to the next lower level.

That scream choked off too, and then there was silence except for Bahry's frantic panting.

His thoughts were slow, confused, disarrayed. His opponent had been *insanely* powerful, that hadn't been a duel, it had been like his first year as a trainee Auror trying to fight Madam Tarma. The Death-Eaters hadn't been a tenth that good, Mad-Eye Moody wasn't that good... and who, what, how in the name of Merlin's balls had anyone blocked a *Killing Curse?*

Bahry managed to summon the energy to press his wand against his rib, mutter the healing spell, and then press it again to his shoulder. It took more out of him than it should have, took far too much out of him, his magic was within a bare breath of utter exhaustion; he didn't have anything left for his minor cuts and bruises or even to reinforce the scraps left of his shielding. It was all he could do not to let his Patronus go out.

Bahry breathed deeply, heavily, steadied his breath as much as he could before he spoke.

"You," Bahry said. "Whoever you are. Come out."

There was silence, and it occurred to Bahry that whoever it was might be unconscious. He didn't understand what had just happened, but he'd heard the scream...

Well, there was one way to test that.

"Come out," said Bahry, making his voice harder, "or I start using area-effect curses." He probably couldn't have managed one if he'd tried.

"Wait," said a boy's voice, a *young* boy's voice, high and thin and wavering, like someone was holding back exhaustion or tears. The voice now seemed to be coming from closer to hand. "Please wait. I'm—coming out—"

"Drop the invisibility," growled Bahry. He was too tired to bother with anti-Disillusionment Charms.

A moment later, a young boy's face emerged from within an unfolding invisibility cloak, and Bahry saw the black hair, the green eyes, the glasses, and the angry red lightning-bolt scar.

If he'd had twenty fewer years of experience under his belt he might have blinked. Instead he just spat something that he probably shouldn't ought to say in front of the Boy-Who-Lived.

"He, he," the boy's wavering voice said, his young face looked frightened and exhausted and tears were still trickling down his cheeks, "he kidnapped me, to make me cast my Patronus... he said he'd kill me if I didn't... only I couldn't let him just kill you..."

Bahry's mind was still dazed, but things were slowly starting to click into place.

Harry Potter, the only wizard ever to survive a Killing Curse. Bahry might have been able to dodge the green death, he'd certainly been trying, but if the matter came up before the Wizengamot, they'd rule it was a life debt to a Noble House.

"I see," Bahry said in a much gentler growl. He started to walk toward the boy. "Son, I'm sorry for what you've been through, but I need you to drop the cloak and drop your wand."

The rest of Harry Potter emerged from invisibility, showing the sweat-soaked blue-trimmed Hogwarts robes, and his right hand clutching an eleven-inch holly wand so hard his knuckles were white.

"Your wand," Bahry repeated.

"Sorry," whispered the eleven-year-old boy, "here," and he held out the wand toward Bahry.

Bahry barely stopped himself from snarling at the traumatized boy who'd just saved his life. Instead he overrode the impulse with a sigh,

and just stretched out a hand to take the wand. "Look, son, you're *really* not supposed to point a wand at—"

The wand's end twisted lightly beneath Bahry's hand just as the boy whispered, "*Somnium*."

Harry stared at the Auror's crumpled body, there was no sense of triumph, just a crushing sense of despair.

(Even then it might not have been too late.)

Harry turned to look at where the green snake lay motionless.

"*Teacher?*" hissed Harry. "*Friend? Pleasse, are you alive?*" An awful fear was taking hold in Harry's heart; in that moment he had entirely forgotten that he'd just seen the Defense Professor try to kill a police officer.

Harry pointed his wand at the snake, and his lips even began to shape the word *Innervate*, before his brain caught up with him and screamed at him.

He couldn't use magic on Professor Quirrell.

Couldn't ever use magic on Professor Quirrell.

Harry had felt it, the burning, tearing pain in his head, like his brain was about to split in half. He'd felt it, his magic and Professor Quirrell's magic, matched and anti-harmonized in a fulfillment of doom. That was the mysterious terrible thing that would happen if Harry and Professor Quirrell ever got too close to each other, or if they ever cast magic on each other, or if *their spells ever touched,* their magic would resonate out of control—

Harry stared at the snake, he couldn't tell if it was breathing.

(The last seconds ticked away.)

He turned to stare at the Auror, who had seen the Boy-Who-Lived, who knew.

The full magnitude of the disaster crushed in on Harry like a thousand hundred-ton weights, he'd managed to stun the Auror but now there was nothing left to do, no way to recover, the mission had failed, everything had failed, *he* had failed.

Shocked, dismayed, despairing, he *didn't think of it*, didn't see the obvious, didn't remember where the hopeless feelings were coming from, didn't realize that he still needed to recast the True Patronus Charm—

And then it was already too late.

Auror Li and Auror McCusker had rearranged their chairs around the table, and so they both saw it at the same time, the naked, skeletally thin horror rising up to hover outside the window, the headache already hitting them from seeing it.

They both heard the voice, like a long-dead corpse had spoken words and those words themselves had aged and died.

The Dementor's speech hurt their ears as it said, "Bellatrix Black is out of her cell."

There was a split second of horrified silence, and then Li tore out of his chair, heading for the communicator to call in reinforcements from the Ministry, even as McCusker grabbed his mirror and started frantically trying to raise the three Aurors who'd gone on patrol.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT, PART V

In a scarred and ruined corridor, lit by dim gas lights, a boy slowly crept forward, one hand stretched out, toward the unmoving snake that was the body of his teacher.

Harry was only a meter away from the snake's body when he first felt it, tickling at the edge of his perception.

Ever so weakly, a sense of doom...

Professor Quirrell *was* alive, then.

The thought engendered no feeling of joy, only a sort of empty despair.

Harry would still be caught soon, and no matter how he tried to explain, it still wouldn't look good. No one would trust him again, they would think he was the next Dark Lord, they wouldn't help him when it came time to fight Lord Voldemort, Hermione would give up on him, probably even Dumbledore would look for another hero...

...maybe they'd just send him home to his parents.

He had failed.

Harry looked at the crumpled body of the police officer he'd stunned, the already-drying blood from the minor cuts and slashes, the burned places on the intricately embroidered red robes.

He'd been stupid. He *shouldn't* have stunned the police officer, should have just *stayed* with his original story about being kidnapped by Professor Quirrell...

It might not be too late, whispered a voice inside him. *You might still be able to fix your mistake. The Auror saw you, he remembers that you stunned*

him... but if he were dead, if Professor Quirrell were dead, if Bellatrix were dead, there would be no one to contradict your story.

Slowly, Harry's hand started to rise, pointing his wand at the police officer and—

Harry's hand halted.

He had a distant sense he was behaving uncharacteristically of himself, somehow. Like there was something he'd forgotten, something important, but he was having trouble remembering what it was, exactly.

Oh. That was right. He was someone who believed in the value of human life.

A sense of puzzlement accompanied the thought, he couldn't quite remember *why* other people's lives had seemed valuable...

All right, said the logical part of him, w*hy has my mind changed between then and now?*

Because he was in Azkaban...

And he'd forgotten to recast the Patronus Charm...

Doing anything at all, somehow, seemed like a tremendous effort, like the thought of action itself was a weight too heavy to lift; but it did seem like a good idea to recast the Patronus Charm, for he was still able to be afraid of Dementors. And though he couldn't remember what it was like to be happy, he knew that this wasn't it.

Harry's hand rose to hold his wand level before him, his fingers took the starting positions.

And then Harry paused.

He couldn't... quite remember... what he'd used as his happy thought.

That was odd, it had been something very important, he really ought to be able to remember it... something to do with death? But that wasn't happy...

His body was shivering, Azkaban hadn't seemed so cold before, and it seemed to be getting colder even as he thought. It was too late for him, he'd already sunk too far, he'd never be able to cast the Patronus Charm now—

That may be the Dementation talking rather than an accurate estimate, observed the logical part of himself, habits that had been encoded into

sheer reflex, requiring no energy to activate. *Think of the Dementors' fear as a cognitive bias, and try to overcome it the way you would overcome any other cognitive bias. Your hopeless feelings may not indicate that the situation is actually hopeless. It may only indicate that you are in the presence of Dementors. All negative emotions and pessimistic estimates must now be considered suspect, fallacious until proven valid.*

(If you'd been watching the boy as he thought, you would have seen a distant, abstract, puzzled frown move across his face, below the glasses and the lightning-bolt scar. His hand stayed in the starting position for the Patronus Charm, and did not move.)

The presence of Dementors interferes with the part of you that processes happiness. If you cannot retrieve your happy thought by mnemonic association on the key of happiness, perhaps you can get at the memory some other way instead. When was the last time you talked to someone about the Patronus Charm?

Harry couldn't seem to remember that either.

A crushing wave of despair swept over him, and was dismissed by the logical part of himself as untrustworthy, external, not-Harry, the dull weight still pressed him down but his mind went on thinking, it didn't take much effort to think...

When was the last time you talked to someone about Dementors?

Professor Quirrell had said that he was already able to feel the presence of Dementors, and Harry had said to Professor Quirrell... he'd told Professor Quirrell...

...to hold to the memory of the stars, of falling bodilessly through space, like an Occlumency barrier across his entire mind.

His second Defense class of the year, on Friday, that was when Professor Quirrell had shown him the stars, and again on Christmas.

It didn't take much effort to remember them, the searing points of white against perfect blackness.

Harry remembered the great cloudy wash of the Milky Way.

Harry remembered the peace.

Some of the coldness at the fringes of his limbs seemed to retreat.

There were words he had spoken out loud on the day he'd first cast the Patronus Charm, his mind could remember the sounds and the

speech even as the feelings seemed distant...

...I thought of my absolute rejection of death as the natural order.

You cast the True Patronus Charm by thinking about the value of human life.

...But there are other lives that are still alive to be fought for. Your life, and my life, and Hermione Granger's life, all the lives of Earth, and all the lives beyond, to be defended and protected.

Then the idea of killing everyone... that hadn't been his true self, that had been the Dementation talking...

Despair was the Dementors' influence.

Where there's life, there's hope. The Auror is still alive. Professor Quirrell is still alive. Bellatrix is still alive. I'm still alive. No one's actually died yet...

Harry could picture the Earth, now, in the midst of the starfield, the blue-white orb.

...and I won't let them!

"Expecto Patronum!"

The words came out a litttle halting, and when the human shape burst back into existence it was dim at first, moonlight instead of sunlight, white instead of silver.

But it strengthened, slowly, as Harry breathed in deliberate rhythm, recovering. Letting the light drive back the darkness from his mind. Remembering the things that he had almost forgotten, and channeling them back into the Patronus Charm.

Even when the light blazed full and silver once more, illuminating the corridor more brightly than the gas lamps, banishing fully the cold, Harry's limbs still shook. That had been too close.

Harry took a deep breath. All right. It was time to reconsider the situation now that his thoughts were no longer being artificially darkened by Dementors.

Harry reviewed the situation.

...still looked pretty hopeless, actually.

It wasn't the crushing despair of before, but Harry still felt wobbly, to put it mildly. He didn't dare go dark and it was his dark side that had the ability to take this level of problem in stride. It was his dark side that would have laughed scornfully at the very concept of giving up just

because he'd lost Professor Quirrell and was marooned in the depths of Azkaban and had been seen by a police officer. The ordinary Harry was not able to take that sort of thing in stride.

But there wasn't any option except to keep moving forward anyway. You couldn't get any *more* pointless than giving up before you'd actually lost.

Harry looked around.

Dim gas lights lit a corridor of grey metal, whose sides and floor and ceiling were slashed in places, gouged and melted, telling anyone who cared to look that there had been battle here.

Professor Quirrell could have repaired it easily enough, if he'd...

The sense of betrayal struck Harry with full force, then.

Why... why did he... why...

Because he's evil, said Gryffindor and Hufflepuff, quietly and sadly. *We told you so.*

No! thought Harry desperately. *No, it doesn't make sense, we were going to commit the perfect crime, the Auror could have been Obliviated, the corridor repaired, it wasn't too late but it would have* BEEN *too late if he'd died!*

But Professor Quirrell was never really planning to commit the perfect crime, said the grim voice of Slytherin. *He* wanted *the crime to be noticed. He wanted everyone to know that someone had killed an Auror and broken Bellatrix Black out of Azkaban. He would have prepared some kind of evidence, some proof he could reveal of your involvement, to use as blackmail against you; and you would have been bound to him forever.*

Harry's Patronus almost went out, then.

No... Harry thought.

Yes, said the other three parts of him sadly.

No. It still doesn't make sense. Professor Quirrell had to know I would turn against him the instant I saw him kill an Auror. That I might very well go ahead and confess to Dumbledore, hoping to plead the true fact that I was tricked. And... in terms of blackmail, does his killing an Auror against my will, really add all that *much to breaking Bellatrix out of Azkaban with my willing help? It would have been more cunning to keep the evidence of my*

involvement with the basic crime, but still pretend to be my ally for as long as he could, saving the blackmail to use only if it became necessary...

Rationalization, said Slytherin. *So why* did *Professor Quirrell do it, then?*

And Harry thought with a tinge of desperation—knowing, even as he thought it, that he was motivated in part by a desire to reject reality, and that wasn't how the technique was meant to be wielded—*I notice that I am confused.*

There was internal silence. None of the parts of himself seemed to have anything to add to that.

And Harry continued to take stock of the situation.

Did Harry need to re-evaluate the probability that Bellatrix was evil?

...not in any mission-relevant sense. It was a *given* that Bellatrix was currently evil. Whether she was an innocent who'd been made that way by torture and Legilimency and unspeakable rituals, or whether she'd chosen it of her own will, didn't have much bearing on the current situation. The key fact was that while Bellatrix thought Harry was the Dark Lord, she would obey him.

That was one resource, then. But Bellatrix was starved and nine-tenths dead...

'Oh, I feel a little better now, how strange...'

Bellatrix had said that, in her shattered voice, after Harry's Patronus had blazed out of control.

Harry thought, and he couldn't have quite said *why* he thought this, it might have just been his own mind making things up, but... it seemed likely that what the Dementors had taken from you long ago was lost forever. But what the Dementors had taken from you *recently,* the True Patronus Charm might give back. Like the difference between emptying a cup, and the unused cup fading away. Bellatrix, then, might have got back what she'd lost in just the last week or so. Not any happy memories, those would have been eaten years ago. But whatever strength and magic had been drained from her in just the last week, she might have regained. Like the equivalent of getting a week of rest, a week to build up her magic again...

Harry looked at Professor Quirrel's snake form.

...maybe enough for an *Innervate.*

If awakening Professor Quirrell *was*, in fact, a smart thing to do.

Some of the despair came back to Harry, then. He couldn't trust Professor Quirrell, couldn't trust that reviving him would be wise, not after what had just happened.

Steady, Harry thought to himself, and looked at the crumpled form of the Auror.

Bellatrix might *also* be able to manage a Memory Charm.

That could be step one, anyway. It wasn't exactly getting everyone safely out of Azkaban, and the Aurors *would* know afterward that something strange had happened, they might suspect Bellatrix's body and perform an autopsy. But it was a step.

...and *would* it be all that hard to get out of Azkaban? If they could get to the top of Azkaban quickly enough, before the Auror was supposed to report back in, before anyone noticed him missing, then they could just fly out through the hole Professor Quirrell had made, and get far enough away from Azkaban to activate the portkey Harry already had in his possession. (Both Professor Quirrell and Harry had portkeys, and both were powerful enough to transport two humans, plus or minus a snake. As with their doubly-concealed departure from Mary's Room, Professor Quirrell had put enough safety margin in his plans to impress even Harry.)

Bellatrix could carry Professor Quirrell's snake form, which Harry dared not touch or levitate.

Harry turned and strode quickly toward where Bellatrix was waiting on the stairs. He could feel his spirits reviving a little. It *was* starting to look like a good plan, and there was no time to waste in going about it.

What to do with Professor Quirrell, or for that matter Bellatrix, after the portkey took them to where they were supposed to hand Bellatrix over to Professor Quirrell's trusted psychiatric healer... well, Harry could work that out along the way. Harry would probably have to bamboozle the healer into doing something—which was going to take one hell of a bamboozling, and Harry wasn't even sure what he *wanted* done—but he and Bellatrix had to get moving *now.*

The main problem Harry saw, as he quickly ran the whole process forward in his imagination, would come when they reached the roof. Professor Quirrell had been supposed to sneak around invisibly and Confund the monitors that would notice visitors in the aerial surroundings of Azkaban, causing them to see a repeating loop of scenery for a few minutes. Professor Quirrell had said that he couldn't Disillusion Harry's Patronus; and if they switched *off* the Patronus, the Dementors would notice Bellatrix was missing, and alert the Aurors...

Harry's train of thought stumbled.

There were times when 'Aw, crap' just didn't seem to cover it.

Li's hands were sure despite the adrenaline, as he unlocked the bars on the Vanishing Cabinet that linked Azkaban to a well-guarded room in the interior of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. (A one-way Vanishing Cabinet, of course. The wards permitted a few fast ways *into* Azkaban, all of them well-guarded, and *no* fast ways out.)

Li stepped well back, pointed his wand at the Cabinet, spoke the incantation "*Harmonia Nectere Passus*", and not a second later—

The door of the Cabinet burst open with a bang, and into the room strode a heavy-set, square-jawed witch with greyed hair cropped close around her head. She wore no rank signs as she wore no jewelry or other ornamentation, it was only an ordinary Auror's robes that she deemed fit to grace herself: Director Amelia Bones, head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and said to be the only witch in the DMLE who could take Mad-Eye Moody in a fair fight (not that either of those two were the sort to fight fairly). Li had heard rumors that Amelia could Apparate within the bounds of the DMLE, and this was the sort of thing that gave rise to rumors like that, he'd called in the alarm not fifty seconds ago.

"Get into the air, now!" Amelia barked over her shoulder at the female Auror trio following behind her with police broomsticks, they

must have all been crushed in there, waiting for Li to activate the Cabinet. "I want more aerial coverage on this place! And make sure you keep up your anti-Disillusionment Charms!" Then her head turned toward him. "Report, Auror Li! Do we know how they got in yet?"

Another Auror trio holding broomsticks materialized in the Vanishing Cabinet and strode out after them even as Li began talking.

They were followed by a trio of Hit Wizards in full battle gear.

Then another trio of Hit Wizards.

Then another broomstick team.

The emaciated form that was Bellatrix Black was resting motionless on the stairs when Harry got there, eyes closed, and when Harry asked in a cold, high whisper whether she was awake, he got no response.

A brief twitch of panic was countered by the thought that Professor Quirrell had knocked her out to prevent her from hearing the Dark Lord's cringing servant suddenly turn into a hardened criminal and then an expert battlemage. Which was good, because she wouldn't have heard Harry's voice saying 'Expecto Patronum'.

Harry drew back the hood of the Cloak, pointed his wand at Bellatrix, and whispered as gently as he could, "*Innervate.*"

From the way Bellatrix's body jerked a little, Harry didn't think he'd managed to get it quite gentle enough.

The sunken dark eyes opened.

"Bella dear," Harry said in his cold, high voice, "I am afraid we've run into a bit of a problem. Have you recovered enough to do small magics?"

There was a pause, and then Bellatrix's pale head nodded.

"Very good," Harry said dryly. "I won't ask you to walk unaided, Bella dear, but I am afraid you must walk." He pointed his wand at her. "*Wingardium Leviosa.*"

Harry kept the flow of force down to something he could sustain for a while, and it was still probably lifting two-thirds of her current body weight. She was... thin.

Slowly, as though for the first time in years, Bellatrix Black pushed herself to her feet.

⁂

Amelia strode into the duty room, Auror Li and his silver badger following behind her. She'd spun her Time-Turner the moment she'd heard the alarm, and then spent a tense hour preparing her forces for entry. You couldn't *loop* time within Azkaban itself, Azkaban's future couldn't interact with its past, so she hadn't been able to arrive before the DMLE had gotten the message, but she should have arrived in time...

Her eyes went straight to the corpse, uncloaked and looking very dead, floating beyond the viewing window.

"Where is Bellatrix Black?" Amelia demanded, showing no fear before the creature of fear.

Even her own blood froze for an instant, as the corpse parted its lips, and gurgled, "*Do not know.*"

⁂

Harry watched, now fully invisible once more, as Bellatrix slowly leaned down, took Professor Quirrell's wand (which Harry dared not touch), and slowly straightened again.

Then Bellatrix pointed the wand at the snake, and said, her voice precise though it was still a whisper, "*Innervate.*"

The snake did not stir.

"Shall I try again, my Lord?" she whispered.

"No," Harry said. He swallowed the sick feeling. Harry had decided to say the hell with it and try to revive Professor Quirrell after he'd realized that the Dementors had probably alerted the Aurors by now. His high, cold voice went on, unperturbed, "Do you think you are able to perform a Memory Charm, dear Bella?"

Bellatrix paused, and then said, hesitantly, "I think so, my Lord."

"Eliminate that Auror's last half-hour of memory," Harry commanded. He'd thought a bit about whether he wanted to provide any justification for that, what he would say if Bellatrix asked why they weren't just killing him, in which case Harry would explain that they were pretending to be a different power group and then tell her to shut up—

But Bellatrix simply pointed her wand at the Auror, stood silently for a time, and finally whispered, "*Obliviate.*"

She swayed, then, but did not fall.

"Very good, my dear Bella," Harry said, and chuckled thinly. "And I will ask you to carry that snake."

Again, the woman said nothing, demanded no explanations, didn't ask why Harry or the apparently-invisible Patronus caster couldn't do it. She only staggered to where the long snake lay, slowly bent over, picked it up, draped it over her shoulder.

(A tiny little part of Harry observed that it was very *relaxing* to have a minion that would just follow orders so unquestioningly, and even got as far as thinking that he could totally get used to having a minion like Bellatrix, before that mind-fraction was screamed into silence by his mortally offended remainder.)

"Follow," the boy commanded his minion, and began to walk.

⁂

It was starting to get crowded in the duty room, almost too crowded to breathe, though there was still space around Amelia herself; if needing to breathe meant that you had to crowd Director Bones, it was better not to breathe.

Amelia looked at where Ora was fiddling with Auror McCusker's mirror. "Specialist Weinbach," she barked, causing the young witch to start. "Any response from One-Hand's mirror?"

"None," Ora said nervously, "it's... I mean it has to be jammed, not dead, carefully jammed because it didn't set off the alarms, but the line is so blank the mirror might as well be broken..."

Amelia didn't let her expression change, though the part of her that was already mourning One-Hand got a little sadder and a lot more angry. Seven months, he'd had seven months left until his retirement after a full century of service. She remembered him as an eager young Auror, so very long ago, and his whole career he'd served the DMLE with perfect loyalty, at least when it came to anything really important...

Someone would *burn* for this.

The Dementor still hovered outside the window, casting its useless shadow of dread over their operations; all the creature could do was gurgle its lack of knowledge or fail to reply at all, when asked questions like 'Did Bellatrix Black escape?' and 'Why can't you find her?' and 'How is she being hidden?' Amelia was starting to worry that the criminals were already gone, when—

"We found a hole in the roof over C spiral!" someone shouted from the doorway. "Still open, ward circumventions still active!"

Amelia's lips peeled back in a smile like a wolf opening its jaws to eat.

Bellatrix Black was still in Azkaban.

And in Azkaban, Bellatrix Black would stay, forever.

She took a stride toward the window, ignoring the Dementor now, and looked up at the sky above, to check with her own eyes the patrolling broomsticks. She couldn't see the whole sky from here, but she saw ten brooms go past on a patrol pattern and that already ought to be enough to catch anyone, though she fully meant to put every broom she could in the air. Her Aurors were equipped with the fastest racing broom currently on the market, the Nimbus 2000; no unsuccessful chases for *her* people.

Amelia turned back from the window, and frowned. The room was getting ridiculously crowded, and two thirds of these people didn't *need* to be here, they just *wanted* to be close to the center of the action. If there was one thing Amelia couldn't tolerate, it was people who did what they wanted instead of what was needed.

"All right, you lot!" Amelia bellowed at them. "Stop hanging around here and start securing the top level of each spiral! That's right," she said to the looks of surprise, "all three! They could tunnel through a floor

or a ceiling to go between them, in case you hadn't worked that out! We're going down level by level until we catch them! I'll take C spiral, Scrimgeour, you're on B..." She paused, then, remembering that Mad-Eye had retired last year, who could she... "Shacklebolt, you're on the A spiral, take with the strongest other fighters here! Check every set of cells you pass, look under blankets, do the full set of detection Charms in every corridor! Nobody leaves Azkaban until the criminals are caught, nobody! And..." People looked at Amelia in surprise as her voice trailed off.

The criminals had invented some way to prevent the Dementors from finding Bellatrix Black.

That ought to have been *impossible.*

It chilled her blood, contemplating that. It was like...

Amelia took a deep breath, and spoke once more, in a voice of steel command. "And when you catch them, make bloody sure they're the real criminals and not our own people forced to take Polyjuice. Anyone behaves oddly, check them for the Imperius Curse. Keep each other in sight at all times. Don't assume an Auror uniform is friendly if you don't recognize the face." She turned to the communications specialist. "Tell the broomsticks. If one of the brooms peels off for no reason, *half* of them are to hunt it down while the *rest* keep patrolling. And change the harmonics on everything changeable, they may have stolen our keys." Then back to the rest of the room. "No Auror is above suspicion unless they have no family left to threaten."

She saw it, the cold looks that came over the older faces, saw some of the younger Aurors flinch, and knew that they understood.

But she said it out loud, just to be sure.

"We're fighting the old Wizarding War today, everyone. Just because You-Know-Who is dead doesn't mean the Death Eaters have forgotten his tricks. Now *go!*"

Harry walked in silence through the gas-lit grey corridor, invisible beside Bellatrix and the silver shape following them, trying to think of a better plan.

At first, when he'd realized that the Aurors probably knew already, and that moreover, Professor Quirrell wasn't waking up...

His thoughts *had* frozen up there, for a second.

And then stayed frozen, even as he'd gotten himself and Bellatrix heading downward, to buy as much time as possible; the Aurors, Harry figured, would start at the top and move down level by level. The Aurors could afford to move slowly and securely; they knew their prey had no way out.

Harry hadn't been able to think of any way out.

Until Harry had said to himself, *well, if it was just a war game, what would General Chaos do?*

From which an answer had followed instantly.

And then Harry had thought, *but if it's* that *easy, why hasn't anyone broken out of Azkaban before?*

And after he'd realized the possible problem: *Fine, what would General Chaos do about* that?

Whereupon General Chaos had come up with an amendment to his first plan.

It was...

It was the most insanely *Gryffindor* thing Harry had ever...

So now he was trying to think of a *better* plan, and not having much luck.

Picky picky picky, said Gryffindor. *Who was complaining about not having* any *plan one minute earlier? You should be glad we came up with anything at all, Mister Now-We're-Doomed.*

"My Lord," Bellatrix whispered haltingly, as she navigated the next flight of stairs downward, "am I going back to my cell, my Lord?"

Harry's brain was distracted, so it took him that long to process the words, and then another moment to process the horror, while Bellatrix continued speaking.

"I would... please, my Lord, I would very much rather die," her voice said. And then, in a smaller voice, a whisper that was barely there, "but I will go back if you ask it of me, my Lord..."

"We are not going back to your cell," hissed Harry's voice, on automatic. Nothing of what he felt was allowed to reach his face.

Um... said Hufflepuff. *Did you seriously just think, 'You ought to work for me,* I *would appreciate you?'*

A stone would respond to that kind of loyalty, Harry thought. *Even if I'm only getting it by mistake, I can't help but—*

She's the Dark Lord's loyal killer and torturer, and the supposed reason she's loyal is because an innocent girl was broken into pieces and used as raw material to make her, said Hufflepuff. *Did you forget?*

If someone shows me that much loyalty, even by mistake, there's a part of me that can't help but feel something. The Dark Lord must have been... evil *doesn't seem like a strong enough word, he must have been* empty... *to not appreciate her loyalty, artificial or not.*

The better parts of Harry didn't have much to say to that.

And that was when Harry heard it.

It was faint, and it grew louder with every step they took forward.

A woman's voice, distant, indistinct.

His ears, automatically, strained to make out the words.

"...please don't..."

"...didn't mean..."

"...don't die..."

Then his brain knew *who* he was hearing, and in almost the same moment, figured out *what* he was hearing.

Because Professor Quirrell wasn't there to keep the silence any more, and Azkaban was not, in fact, silent.

Faint the woman's voice, repeating, over and over:

"No, I didn't mean it, please don't die!"

"No, I didn't mean it, please don't die!"

It got louder with every step Harry took, he could hear the emotion in the words now, the horror, the remorse, the desperation of...

"No, I didn't mean it, please don't die!"

...the woman's worst memory, rehearsing over and over again...

"No, I didn't mean it, please don't die!"

...the murder that had sent her to Azkaban...

"No, I didn't mean it, please don't die!"

...where she was sentenced by the Dementors to watch whoever she'd killed, die over and over again, in an infinite repeating loop. She must have been put in Azkaban recently, from the amount of life left in her voice.

The thought came to Harry, then, that Professor Quirrell had passed those doors, heard those sounds, and given not the slightest sign of disturbance; and Harry would have called it a positive proof of evil, if Harry's own lips hadn't remained silent in the presence of Bellatrix, his breathing regular, while something inside him screamed and screamed and screamed.

The Patronus brightened, not out of control, but it brightened, with every step Harry took forward.

It brightened further as Harry and Bellatrix descended the stairs, she stumbled and Harry offered her his left arm thrust outside the Cloak, braving the sense of doom from being that close to the snake draped around her neck. There was a surprised look on her face, but she accepted it, and said nothing.

It helped Harry, being able to help Bellatrix, but it wasn't enough.

Not when he saw the huge metal door in the center of that level's corridor.

Not when they came closer, and the woman's voice fell silent, because there was a Patronus near her now, and she wasn't reliving her worst memory any more.

Good, said a voice inside him. *That was step one.*

Harry's steps carried him inevitably forward toward the metal door.

And...

Now unlock the door—

...Harry kept walking...

What do you think you're doing? Go back and get her out of there!

...kept walking...

Save her! What are you doing? You have to save her!

The portkey Harry was carrying could transport two humans, only two, plus or minus a snake. If they'd had Professor Quirrell's portkey too... but they *didn't*, Professor Quirrell's human form was carrying that, there was no way to get it... Harry could only save one person today, and there was only one person on the lowest level of Azkaban, in the most desperate need...

"DON'T GO!" The voice came in a scream from behind the metal door. "No, no, no, don't go, don't take it away, don't don't don't—"

There was a light in the corridor and it grew brighter.

"Please," sobbed the woman's voice, "please, I can't remember my children's names any more—"

"Sit down, Bella," Harry's voice said, somehow he kept his voice in a cold whisper, "I must deal with this," the Hover Charm diminishing and switching off even as Bella obediently sat down, her skeletal form dark against the brightening air.

I'll die, thought Harry.

The air went on brightening.

After all, it wasn't a *certainty* that Harry would die.

It was just a probability of death, and weren't some things worth a probability of dying?

The air went on brightening, the greater Patronus was beginning to form around him, the brilliant human shape was becoming indistinct within the burning air, as Harry's life went to feed the fire.

If I wipe out the Dementors, then even if I live, they'll know it was me, that I was the one who did this... I'll lose my support, lose the war...

Yeah? said the inner voice that was urging him on. *After you destroy all the Dementors in Azkaban? I'd think that'd tend to prove your credentials as a Light Lord, actually, so* DESTROY THE ABOMINATIONS, DESTROY THEM ALL NOW—

The humanoid shape could no longer be seen as a separate entity.

The corridor couldn't be seen.

Harry's own body was invisible within the Cloak.

There was only a bodiless viewpoint within an infinite expanse of silver light.

Harry could feel the life leaving him, fueling the spell; far away, he could feel the shadows of Death begin to fray.

I meant to accomplish more with my life than this... I was going to fight the Dark Lord, I was going to merge the wizarding and Muggle worlds...

Lofty goals seemed very distant, very abstract, compared to one woman begging him for help, it wasn't *certain* that Harry would ever do anything more important than this one thing, this one thing that he could do now and here.

And with what might have been his last breath, Harry thought:

There are other Dementors, probably other Azkabans... if I'm going to do this, I should do it when I'm closer to the central pit, it will take less of my life that way, which increases the probability that I'll survive to destroy other Dementors... even assuming this is the optimal thing to do, if there's a right time and place to do this, it isn't now and here, IT ISN'T NOW AND HERE!

What? said the other part of him indignantly, as it searched for a counterargument that didn't exist—

Slowly the light died back down, as Harry concentrated on that one indisputable fact, the one obvious truth that they weren't in the optimal place, the time *couldn't* be *now*...

Slowly the light died back down.

Part of Harry's life flowed back into him.

Part had been lost as radiation.

But Harry had enough left to stay on his feet, and keep the silver human shape bright; and when his wand arm raised and his voice whispered "Wingardium Leviosa", the magic flowed obediently out of him and helped Bellatrix to her feet. (For it wasn't his magic he had expended, it had never been his magic that fueled the Patronus Charm.)

I swear, Harry thought, breathing as regularly as he could in Bellatrix's presence, while tears streamed down his invisible cheeks, *I swear upon my life and my magic and my art as a rationalist, I swear by everything I hold sacred and all my happy memories, I give my oath that someday I will end this place, please, please may I be forgiven...*

And the two of them walked on, as a murderess's voice screamed and begged someone to come back and save her.

There should have been more time, there should have been a ceremony, for Harry's sacrifice of that piece of himself, but Bellatrix was beside him and so Harry just had to keep on walking without a pause, saying nothing, breathing evenly.

So Harry walked on, leaving another piece of himself behind. It would dwell in this place and time forever, he knew. Even after Harry came back someday with a company of other True Patronus casters and they destroyed all the Dementors here. Even if he melted the triangular building and burned the island low enough that the sea would wash over it, leaving no trace that such a place as this had ever once existed. Even then he wouldn't get it back.

The flock of luminous creatures stopped staring downward, and began patrolling the metal corridor as if nothing had happened.

"Just like last time?" Director Bones snapped in the direction of Auror Li, and the young Auror replied, "Yes, ma'am."

The Director fired off another query to see if the Dementors could now find their target, and looked unsurprised to hear a negative reply a few seconds later.

Emmeline Vance was feeling torn between her loyalties.

Emmeline wasn't a member of the Order of the Phoenix any more, they had disbanded after the end of the last war. And during the war, she'd known, they'd all known, that Director Crouch had quietly approved of their off-the-books battle.

Director Bones wasn't Crouch.

But they were hunting Bellatrix Black now, who had been a Death Eater, and who was certainly being rescued by Death Eaters. Their Patronuses were behaving oddly—all the bright creatures stopping and staring off downward, before they'd gone back to following their masters. And the Dementors couldn't find their target.

It seemed to her that this would be an extremely good time to consult Albus Dumbledore.

Should she just *suggest* to Director Bones that they contact Dumbledore? But if Director Bones hadn't contacted him already...

Emmeline wavered for a while, probably too long, and then finally decided. *The hell with it,* she thought. *We're all on the same side, we need to stick together whether Director Bones likes it or not.*

At a thought, her silver sparrow fluttered onto her shoulder.

"Drop behind us to guard our rear," Emmeline murmured very softly, almost without moving her lips, "wait until no one is looking directly at you, then go to Albus Dumbledore. If he is not already by himself, wait until he is. And tell him this: Bellatrix Black is breaking out of Azkaban, the Dementors cannot find her, Director Bones is hunting her, and our Patronuses are behaving oddly."

CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT, PART VI: CONSTRAINED OPTIMIZATION

Silent, it was thankfully silent, the metal door on the next level down. Either there wasn't someone behind there, or they were hurting quietly, maybe they were screaming but their voice had given out already, or they were just muttering quietly to themselves in the dark...

I'm not sure I can do this, Harry thought, and he couldn't blame the despairing thought on the Dementors either. It would be better to be lower, safer to be lower, his plan would take time to implement and the Aurors were probably already working their way down. But if Harry had to pass any more of those metal doors while staying silent and keeping his breathing perfectly regular, he might go mad; if he had to leave a piece of himself behind at each one, soon there wouldn't be anything left of him—

A luminous moonlit cat leaped into existence and landed in front of Harry's Patronus. Harry almost screamed, which wouldn't have helped his image with Bellatrix.

"Harry!" said the voice of Professor McGonagall, sounding as alarmed as Harry had ever heard from her. "Where are you? Are you all right? This is my Patronus, answer me!"

With a convulsive effort, Harry cleared his mind, repurposed his throat, forced calm, swapped in a different personality like an Occlumency barrier. It took a few seconds and he hoped like hell that Professor McGonagall didn't notice a problem with that thanks to the communications delay, just as he hoped like hell that Patronuses didn't report on their surroundings.

A young boy's innocent voice said, "I'm in Mary's Place, Professor, in Diagon Alley. Going to the restroom actually. What's wrong?"

The cat leaped away, and Bellatrix began to chuckle softly, dusty appreciative laughter, but she cut herself off abruptly at a hiss from Harry.

A moment later the cat returned, and said in Professor McGonagall's voice, "I'm coming to pick you up right now. Don't go *anywhere*, if you're not around the Defense Professor don't go back to him, don't say anything to anyone, I'll be there as quickly as I can!"

And the bright cat blurred forward and vanished.

Harry glanced down at his watch, noting down the time, so that after he got everyone out of here, and Professor Quirrell anchored the Time-Turner again, he could go back and be in the restroom of Mary's Place at the appropriate time...

You know, said the problem-solving part of his brain, *there's a limit to how many constraints you can add to a problem before it* really is *impossible, you know that?*

It shouldn't have mattered, and it didn't really, it didn't compare to the suffering of a single prisoner in Azkaban, and yet Harry still found himself feeling very aware that if his plan didn't end with him being picked up from Mary's Place just like he'd never left, and the Defense Professor looking completely innocent of any and all wrongdoing, Professor McGonagall was going to *kill him.*

As their team prepared to eat another bite of territory out of C spiral, shielding and scanning before dispelling the previous shield to their rear,

Amelia was tapping her fingers on her hip and wondering if she ought to consult the obvious expert. If only he wasn't so—

Amelia heard the familiar crack of fire and knew what she would see as she turned.

A third of her Aurors were spinning around and leveling their wands on the old wizard in half-moon glasses and a long silver beard who had appeared directly within their midst, a bright red-golden phoenix on his shoulder.

"Hold your fire!" Polyjuice made it easy to forge the face, but faking the phoenix travel would have been rather more difficult—the wards permitted it as one of the fast ways into Azkaban, though there were no fast ways out.

The old witch and the old wizard stared at each other for a long moment.

(Amelia wondered, in the back of her mind, which of her Aurors had sent the word, there were several former members of the Order of the Phoenix with her; she tried to remember, in the back of her mind, if she'd seen Emmeline's sparrow or Andy's cat missing from the flock of bright creatures; but she knew that it was futile. It might not even be any of her people, for the old meddler often knew things he had no way at all of knowing.)

Albus Dumbledore inclined his head to Amelia in a courteous gesture. "I hope I am not unwelcome here," the wizard said calmly. "We are all on the same side, are we not?"

"That depends," Amelia said in a hard voice. "Are you here to help us catch criminals, or to protect them from the consequences of their actions?" *Are you going to try to stop the killer of my brother from getting her well-deserved Kiss, old meddler?* From what Amelia heard, Dumbledore had gotten smarter toward the end of the war, mostly due to Mad-Eye's nonstop nagging; but had relapsed into his foolish mercies the instant Voldemort's body was found.

A dozen small points of white and silver, reflections of the shining animals, gleamed off the old wizard's half-moon glasses as he spoke. "Even less than you would I see Bellatrix Black freed," the old wizard said. "She *must* not leave this prison alive, Amelia."

Before Amelia could speak again, even to express her surprised gratification, the old wizard gestured with his long black wand and a blazing silver phoenix sprang into existence, brighter perhaps than all their other Patronuses put together. It was the first time she'd seen that spell cast wordlessly. "Order all your Aurors to cancel their Patronus Charms for ten seconds," said the old wizard. "What darkness cannot find, the light may."

Amelia snapped off the order to the communications officer, who would notify all Aurors through their mirrors, commanding Dumbledore's will to be done.

That took a few moments, and it became a period of awful silence, none of the Aurors daring to speak, while Amelia tried to weigh her own thoughts. *She must not leave this prison alive...* Albus Dumbledore wouldn't turn into Bartemius Crouch without a strong reason. If he'd meant to tell her *why*, he already would have; but it certainly wasn't a positive sign.

Still, it was good to know they'd be able to work together on this one.

"Now," said a chorus of mirrors, and all the Patronus Charms winked out except that blazing silver phoenix.

"Is there another Patronus still present?" the old wizard said clearly to the bright creature.

The bright creature dipped its head in a nod.

"Can you find it?"

The silver head nodded again.

"Will you remember it, should it depart and come again?"

A final nod from the blazing phoenix.

"It is done," Dumbledore said.

"Over," said all the mirrors a moment later, and Amelia raised her wand and began recasting her own Patronus. (Though it took some extra concentration, with that wolfish smile already on her face, to think of the first time Susan had kissed her cheek, instead of dwelling on the looming fate of Bellatrix Black. That other Kiss was a happy thought indeed, but not quite the right kind for the Patronus Charm.)

They hadn't even gotten to the end of that corridor before Harry's Patronus raised its hand, politely, as though in a classroom.

Harry thought quickly. The question was how to—no, that was also obvious.

"It seems," Harry said in a coldly amused voice, "that someone has instructed this Patronus to speak its message only to me." He chuckled. "Well then. Pardon me, dear Bella. *Quietus.*"

At once the silver humanoid said in Harry's own voice, "There is another Patronus which seeks this Patronus."

"*What?*" said Harry. And then, without pausing to think about what was happening, "Can you block it? Stop it from finding you?"

The silver humanoid shook its head.

No sooner did Amelia and the other Aurors finish recasting their Patronus Charms, when—

The blazing silver phoenix flew off, and the true red-golden phoenix followed it, and the old wizard calmly strode after both of them with his long wand gripped low.

The shields around their territory parted around the old wizard like water, and closed behind him with hardly a ripple.

"*Albus!*" shouted Amelia. "What do you think you're doing?"

But she already knew.

"Do not follow me," the old wizard's voice said sternly. "I can protect myself, I cannot protect others."

The curse Amelia shouted after him made even her own Aurors flinch.

This isn't fair, isn't fair, isn't fair! There's a limit to how many constraints you can add to a problem before it really is impossible!

Harry blocked off the useless thoughts, ignored the fatigue he was feeling, and forced his mind to confront the new requirements, he had to think *fast,* use the adrenaline on following the chains of logic quickly and without hesitation, instead of wasting it on despair.

For the mission to succeed,

(1) Harry would have to dispel his Patronus.

(2) Bellatrix needed to be hidden from the Dementors after the Patronus was dispelled.

(3) Harry needed to resist the Dementors' drain after his Patronus was dispelled.

...

If I solve this one, said Harry's brain, *I want a cookie afterward, and if you make the problem any more difficult than this, I mean the slightest bit more difficult, I am climbing out of your skull and heading for Tahiti.*

Harry and his brain considered the problem.

Azkaban had stood invincible for centuries, relying upon the impossibility of evading the Dementors' gaze. So if Harry found *another* way to hide Bellatrix from the Dementors, it would rely on either his scientific knowledge or his realization that the Dementors were Death.

Harry's brain suggested that an obvious way to stop the Dementors from seeing Bellatrix was to make her stop existing, i.e., kill her.

Harry congratulated his brain on thinking outside the box and told it to continue searching.

Kill her and then bring her back, came the next suggestion. *Use Frigideiro to cool Bellatrix down to the point where her brain activity stops, then warm her up afterward using Thermos, just like people who fall into very cold water can be successfully revived half-an-hour later without noticeable brain damage.*

Harry considered this. Bellatrix might not survive in her debilitated state. *And* it might not stop Death from seeing her. *And* he'd have trouble carrying a cold unconscious Bellatrix very far. *And* Harry couldn't remember the research on which exact body temperature was supposed to be nonfatal but temporarily-brain-halting.

It was another good outside-the-box idea, but Harry told his brain to keep thinking of...

...ways to hide from Death...

A frown moved over Harry's face. He'd heard something about that, somewhere.

One of the requisites for becoming a powerful wizard is an excellent memory, Professor Quirrell had said. *The key to a puzzle is often something you read twenty years ago in an old scroll, or a peculiar ring you saw on the finger of a man you met only once...*

Harry focused as hard as he could, but he couldn't remember, it was on the tip of his tongue but he couldn't remember; so he told his subconscious to go on trying to recollect it, and refocused his attention on the other half of the problem.

How can I protect myself from the Dementors without a Patronus Charm?

The Headmaster had been repeatedly exposed to a Dementor from a few steps away, over and over throughout a whole day, and had come out of it looking merely tired. How had the Headmaster done that? Could Harry do it too?

It could just be some random genetic thing, in which case Harry was screwed. But assuming the problem *was* solvable...

Then the obvious answer was that Dumbledore wasn't afraid of death.

Dumbledore *really* wasn't afraid of death. Dumbledore honestly, truly believed that death was the next great adventure. Believed it in his core, not just as convenient words used to suppress cognitive dissonance, not just pretending to be wise. Dumbledore had decided that death was the natural and normative order, and whatever tiny lingering fear was still in him, it had taken a long time and repeated exposures for the Dementor to drain him through that small flaw.

That avenue was closed to Harry.

And then Harry thought of the flip side, the obvious inverse question:

Why am I so much more vulnerable than average? Other students didn't fall over when they faced the Dementor.

Harry meant to destroy Death, to end it if he could. He meant to live forever, if he could; he had hope of it, the thought of Death brought him

no sense of despair or inevitability. He was not blindly attached to his own life, did not value himself above others; indeed it had taken an effort *not* to burn away all of his own life on the need to protect others from Death. Why did the shadows of Death have such power over Harry? He would not have thought himself so afraid.

Was it Harry, all along, who'd been rationalizing? Who was secretly so afraid of death that it was twisting his own thoughts, as Harry had accused Dumbledore?

Harry considered this, preventing himself from flinching away. It felt uncomfortable, but...

But...

But uncomfortable thoughts weren't always *true*, and this one didn't sound exactly right. Like there was a grain of truth in it, but it wasn't hiding *where* the hypothesis said it was—

And that was when Harry realized.

Oh.

Oh, I understand now.

The one who is afraid, is...

Harry asked his dark side what it thought of death.

And Harry's Patronus wavered, dimmed, almost went out upon the instant, for that desperate, sobbing, screaming terror, an unutterable fear that would do anything not to die, throw everything aside not to die, that couldn't think straight or feel straight in the presence of that absolute horror, that couldn't look into the abyss of nonexistence any more than it could have stared straight into the Sun, a blind terrified thing that only wanted to find a dark corner and hide and not have to think about it any more—

The silver figure had darkened to moonlight, was flickering like a failing candle—

It's all right, thought Harry, *it's all right.*

Visualizing himself cradling his dark side like a frightened child in his arms.

It's right and proper to be horrified, because death is horrible. You don't have to hide your horror, you don't have to feel ashamed of it, you can wear it as a badge of honor, openly in the Sun.

It was strange, to feel himself split in two like this, the track of his thoughts that gave the comfort, the track of his thoughts that followed his dark side's incomprehension at the alienness of the ordinary Harry's thoughts; of all the things that his dark side associated with its own fear of death, the one thing it had never expected or imagined that it might find, was acceptance and praise and help...

You don't have to fight alone, Harry said silently to his dark side. *The rest of me will back you up on this. I won't let myself die, and I won't let my friends die either. Not you/I, not Hermione, not Mum or Dad, not Neville or Draco or anyone, this is the will to protect...* Visualizing wings of sunlight, like the wings of the Patronus he had spread, to give shelter to that frightened child.

The Patronus brightened again, the world spun around Harry or it was his own mind that was spinning?

Take my hand, Harry thought and visualized, *come with me, and we will do this thing together...*

There was a lurch in Harry's mind, like his brain had taken one step to the left, or the universe had taken one step to the right.

And in a brightly lit corridor in Azkaban, the dim gas lights far outshone by the steady and unwavering light of a human-shaped Patronus, an invisible boy stood with a strange small smile on his face, shaking only slightly.

Harry knew, somehow, that he'd just done something significant, something that went beyond just strengthening his resistance to Dementors.

And more than that, he'd *remembered*. Thinking of Death as an anthropomorphic figure had done the trick, ironically enough. Now Harry could remember it, what was reputed to hide someone from the gaze of Death himself...

In a corridor of Azkaban, a wizard's striding legs came to an abrupt halt; for the bright silver thing that was his guide, had halted in midair,

fluttering its wings in distress. The brilliant white phoenix craned its head, looking backward and forward as though confused; and then it turned to its master and shook its head in apology.

Without another word, the old wizard turned and strode back the way he came.

Harry stood straight and upright, feeling the fear wash over him and around him. Some tiny part of him might have been eroded a little by the waves of emptiness that broke continually upon his unmoving stone, but his limbs were not cold, and his magic was with him. In time those waves might corrode him and consume him, sneaking through whatever tiny part of him still cowered before Death instead of using its fear to energize itself for battle. But that doom would take time, with the shadows of Death far away and uncaring of him. The flaw, the crack, the fault-line that was in him had been repaired, and the stars blazed brightly in his mind, vast and unafraid, eternal and peaceful, and brilliant in the midst of the cold and darkness.

To anyone else's eyes, it would have seemed that the boy stood alone in the dimly lit metal corridor, wearing that strange smile.

For Bellatrix Black and the snake draped around her shoulders were concealed by the Cloak of Invisibility, one of the three Deathly Hallows and reputed to hide its wearer from the gaze of Death himself. The riddle whose answer had been lost, and which Harry had found anew.

And Harry knew, now, that the concealment of the Cloak was more than the mere transparency of Disillusionment, that the Cloak kept you *hidden* and not just invisible, as unseeable as were Thestrals to the unknowing. And Harry also knew that it was Thestral blood which painted the symbol of the Deathly Hallows on the inside of the Cloak, binding into the Cloak that portion of Death's power, enabling the Cloak to confront the Dementors on their own level and block them. It had felt like guessing, and yet a certain guess, the knowledge coming to him in the instant of solving the riddle.

Bellatrix was still transparent within the Cloak, but to Harry she was no longer hidden, he knew that she was there, as obvious to him as a Thestral. For Harry had only loaned his Cloak, not given it; and he had comprehended and mastered the Deathly Hallow that had been passed down through the Potter line.

Harry gazed directly at the invisible woman, and said, "Can the Dementors reach you, Bella?"

"No," said the woman in a soft, wondering voice. Then, "But my Lord... *you*..."

"If you say anything foolish, it will annoy me," Harry said coldly. "Or are you under the impression that I would sacrifice myself for you?"

"No, my Lord," the Dark Lord's servant replied, sounding puzzled, and perhaps awed.

"Follow," spoke Harry's cold whisper, and they continued their journey downward, as the Dark Lord reached into his pouch, and retrieved and ate a cookie. If Bellatrix had asked, Harry would have claimed it was for the chocolate, but she didn't ask.

⁂

The old wizard strode back into the midst of the Aurors, the silver and the red-golden phoenixes now following behind.

"*You*—" Amelia began to bellow.

"They have dismissed their Patronus," said Dumbledore. The old wizard didn't seem to raise his voice but his calm words somehow overrode her own. "I cannot find them now."

Amelia gritted her teeth, and put a number of scathing remarks on hold, and turned to the communications officer. "Tell the duty room to ask the Dementors *again* if they can sense Bellatrix Black."

The communications specialist spoke to her mirror for a moment, and a few seconds later, looked up, surprised. "No—"

Amelia was already cursing violently in her mind.

"—but they can see someone else on the lower levels who isn't a prisoner."

"Fine!" snapped Amelia. "Tell the Dementor that a dozen of its kind are authorized to enter Azkaban and seize whoever that is and anyone in their company! And if they see Bellatrix Black, they're to Kiss her immediately!"

Amelia turned and glared toward Dumbledore, then, daring him to argue; but the old wizard only looked at her a bit sadly, and held his peace.

Auror McCusker finished speaking to the corpse that drifted outside the window, conveying the Director's orders.

The corpse gave him a deathly smile that almost unstrung his limbs, and then floated downward.

Soon after, a dozen Dementors arose from where they had drifted in the central pit of Azkaban, and headed outward, toward the walls of the vast metal structure that towered above them.

Entering through holes set into the base of Azkaban, the darkest of all creatures began their march of horror.

CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN

THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT, PART VII: CONSTRAINED COGNITION

Harry had *hoped* that he'd just achieved fusion with his mysterious dark side and would be enabled to draw on all of its benefits with none of its drawbacks, call up the crystal clarity and indomitable will on demand, without needing to go cold or angry.

Once again, he'd overestimated how much progress he'd made. *Something* had happened, but Harry still had a mysterious dark side, it was still separate from him, and his ordinary self was still domitable. And despite the repair work he'd done on his dark side's fear of death, he didn't dare go dark while unshielded in Azkaban, that was tempting fate way too much.

Which was unfortunate, because a bit of nondomitability would have *sure come in handy about now.*

What made it harder was that he couldn't slump against a wall, couldn't break into tears, couldn't even heave a sigh. His dear Bella was watching him and that wasn't the sort of thing her Dark Lord would do.

"My Lord—" Bellatrix said. Her low voice was strained. "The Dementors—they are coming—I can feel them, my Lord—"

"Thank you, Bella," said a dry voice, "I already know that."

Harry couldn't sense the holes in the world the same way as when he'd been wearing the Deathly Hallow, but he could feel the empty pull increasing in intensity. At first he'd mistaken it for the result of descending a stairwell, until he and Bellatrix had finished descending and the pull

had gone on increasing. Then decreased, as the Dementors moved away along the spiral, then increased as they went up another flight of stairs... There were Dementors within Azkaban itself now, and they were coming for him. Of course they were. Harry might be resistant now, but he was not *hidden.*

New requirement, Harry told his brain. *Find a way of defeating Dementors that doesn't invoke my Patronus Charm. Alternatively, find yet another way of hiding someone from Dementors, besides the Cloak of Invisibility—*

I quit, said his brain. *Find yourself another piece of computing substrate to solve your ridiculously overconstrained problems.*

I mean it, thought Harry.

So do I, said his brain. *Put up your Patronus Charm and wait for the Aurors to find you. Be sensible. It's over.*

Give up...

The sucking emptiness seemed to pull harder, as he thought it; and Harry realized what was happening, concentrated more intensely on the stars, turned his mind away from the despair—

You know, observed the logical side of him, *if you're not allowed to think* any *negative thoughts because that will open your mind to the Dementors,* that's *a cognitive bias too, how would you know if it actually* was *time to give up?*

A desperate sobbing scream rose up from below, words mixed in like "no" and "away". The prisoners knew, the prisoners could feel it.

The Dementors were coming.

"My Lord, you—you should not risk yourself for me—take back your Cloak—"

"Be silent, fool," hissed an angry voice. "When I decide to sacrifice you I will tell you so."

She's got a valid point, said Slytherin. *You* shouldn't *risk yourself for her, there's no way her life is as valuable as yours.*

For an instant Harry considered sacrificing Bellatrix to save himself—

And in that moment, some of the dim orange gas-light seemed to flee the corridor, a touch of cold crept over Harry's fingertips. And he knew, then, that to think of leaving Bellatrix to the shadows of Death,

would make him vulnerable once more. Even in the moment of making the decision, he might become unable to cast the Patronus Charm, for he would have given up the thought that had saved him before.

It occurred to Harry that he could still take the Cloak from Bellatrix afterward, even if he couldn't cast the Patronus Charm; and then he had to wrench his thoughts away from that option, focus firmly on his decision *not* to do it, or he might have just fallen over where he stood. For the whirlpool of emptiness swirling around him was now deadly strong; there were screams coming from *above*, and the screams below had stopped.

This is ridiculous, said his logical side. *Rational agents shouldn't have to put up with this sort of censored reasoning process, all the theorems assume that how you think doesn't affect reality apart from your actual actions, which is why you're free to choose an optimal algorithm without worrying about how your thoughts interact with Dementors—*

...

That is a really dumb idea, said Gryffindor. *Even I think it's a dumb idea and I'm your Gryffindor side. You're not seriously going to just stand there and—*

⁂

"We have a fix!" shouted Ora, holding up her magic mirror as though in triumph. "The Dementor outside the inner wall pointed to level seven, C spiral, that's where they are!"

Her Aurors were looking at her expectantly.

"No," Amelia said in a level voice. "That's where *one* of them is. The Dementors still can't find Bellatrix Black. We are not running down there and letting her through in the confusion, and we are not dividing our forces to be ambushed. So long as we move with caution, we can't lose. Tell Scrimgeour and Shacklebolt to keep going down level by level, same as before—"

The old wizard was already striding forward. Amelia didn't even bother cursing him, this time, as once again their carefully constructed

shields parted like water and rippled gently in his wake.

Harry waited at the beginning of the corridor, just next to the stairs leading upward. Bellatrix and the snake were behind him, concealed by the Deathly Hallow that Harry had mastered; he knew, though he could not see, that the emaciated sorceress was sitting upon the stairs, slumped back, since Harry had withdrawn his Hover Charm to free up his mind and magic.

Harry's eyes were fixed on the far end of the corridor, next to the stairs that led downward. Not in his mind now, but in true reality, the light in the corridor had dimmed, the temperature had fallen. The fear thundered over him and around him like a sea whipped by hurricane winds, and the sucking emptiness had become a howling draw toward some approaching black hole.

Up the stairs at the far end, floating smoothly through the dying air, came the voids, the absences, the wounds in the world.

And Harry expected them to stop.

With all the will and focus he could muster, Harry *expected them to stop.*

Anticipated their stopping.

Believed they would stop.

...that was the idea, anyway...

Harry shut down the dangerous stray thought, and *expected the Dementors to halt.* They had no intelligence of their own, they were just wounds in the world, their form and structure was borrowed from others' expectations. People had been able to negotiate with them, offer them victims in exchange for cooperation, only because they *believed Dementors would bargain.* So if Harry believed hard enough that the voids would turn and go, they would turn and go.

But the wounds in the world kept coming, the swirling fear seemed like a solid thing now, the emptiness tearing at matter as well as mind,

substance as well as spirit, you could see the metal beginning to tarnish as the holes in the world passed.

A small sound came from behind him, from Bellatrix, but she said no word, for she had been instructed to remain silent.

Don't think of them as creatures, think of them as psychosensitive objects, they can be controlled if I can control myself—

The problem was that he *couldn't* control himself so easily, couldn't make himself believe blue was green by an act of will. Couldn't suppress all those thoughts about how irrational it was to *make* yourself believe something. How *impossible* it was to trick yourself into believing something if you *knew* that was what you were doing. All the training Harry had given himself against self-deception was refusing to switch off *no matter how harmful it was in this unique special case—*

The shadows of Death crossed the halfway point of the corridor, and Harry held up his hand, fingers spread, and said in a voice of firm and confident command, "Stop."

The shadows of Death stopped.

Behind Harry, Bellatrix gave a strangled gasp, like it was being torn out of her.

Harry gestured to her, the signal he had set up in advance which meant, *repeat what you heard the Dementors say.*

"They say," Bellatrix said, her voice was shaking, "they said, 'Bellatrix Black was promised us. Tell us where she hides, and you will be spared.'"

"Bellatrix?" Harry said, making his voice sound amused. "She escaped a while ago."

A moment later, Harry realized that he should have said that Bellatrix was among the Aurors in the top level, that would have caused more confusion—

No, it was wrong to think of the Dementors as trickable, they were merely *things,* they were controlled only by *expectations—*

"They say," Bellatrix said in a cracked voice, "they say they know you're lying."

The voids began to move forward again.

Her anticipations are more solidly believed than mine; she is controlling them, unwittingly—

"Don't resist," Harry said, pointing his wand behind him.

"I, I love you, farewell, my Lord—"

"*Somnium.*"

It had helped, strangely enough, hearing those particular awful words, understanding Bellatrix's mistake; it reminded Harry why he was fighting.

"Stop," Harry said again. Bellatrix was asleep; now only his own will, his own expectations rather, should control those spheres of annihilation—

But they kept on gliding forward, and Harry couldn't stop himself from worrying that the previous experience had damaged his confidence, which meant that he *wouldn't* be able to stop them, and as he noticed himself thinking that, he doubted even more—he needed more time to prepare, really ought to practice controlling just one Dementor in a cage first—

There was only a quarter of corridor now between Harry and the shadows of death, the empty winds were so strong that Harry could feel the erosion beginning in the cracks of himself.

And the thought came to Harry that maybe he was wrong, maybe Dementors *did* have their own desires and planning capability. Or maybe they were controlled by how *everyone* thought they worked, not just whoever was closest to them. And in either case—

Harry drew up his wand into the starting position for the Patronus Charm, and spoke.

"One of your number went to Hogwarts and did not return. It no longer exists; that Death is dead."

The Dementors halted, a dozen wounds in the world stood motionless, while the emptiness screamed around them like a deadly wind to nowhere.

"Turn and go and do not speak of this to anyone, little shadows, or I will destroy you as well."

Harry's fingers slid into the starting position for the Patronus Charm, and readied himself to cast it; in his mind, the Earth shone

among the stars, the day side bright and blue with reflected sunlight, the night side glimmering with the light of human cities. Harry wasn't bluffing, wasn't trying to do anything tricky with his thoughts. The shadows of Death would move forward and be annihilated, or they would depart, he was equally ready for either...

And the voids retreated back as smoothly as they came, the winds of nothingness lessening with each meter they traversed, as they slid back down the stairs, and departed.

Whether they truly had their own pseudo-intelligence, or whether Harry had finally succeeded in *expecting* them to go... that, Harry didn't know.

But they were gone.

Harry took a moment to sit down beside the unconscious Bellatrix on the stairs, and slumped down as she was slumped, closing his eyes for a moment, only a moment, he sure as hell wasn't planning to sleep in Azkaban, but he needed to take that moment. The Aurors would still be going down the stairs slowly, Harry hoped, so it wouldn't hurt to take just five minutes to rest. Harry was careful to keep his thoughts positive, cheerful, *my, I'll just have some nice regenerative rest here, and then I'll feel better,* rather than, say, *my, I'll just collapse in emotional and physical exhaustion,* because the Dementors hadn't yet retreated very far.

And by the way, Harry said to his brain, *you're fired.*

⁂

"I found him!" cried the old wizard's voice.

Who? thought Amelia, as she turned to see Dumbledore's return, carrying in his arms—

—the one sight, the one person, she would never have expected to behold—

—a man in torn red robes, looking scorched like he'd fought a small war, blood dried on many cuts. His eyes were open, and he was chewing on a bar of chocolate, held in his one living hand.

Bahry One-Hand was *alive.*

A glad cry went up, her Aurors lowering their wands, some of them already starting to rush forward.

"*Stay on guard!*" bellowed Amelia. "Check them both for Polyjuice—scan Bahry for small Animagi or traps—"

⁂

"*Innervate. Wingardium Leviosa.*"

There was a pause. Harry sensed, though he could not quite see, that the invisible woman was pushing herself to her feet, and turning her head to look around. "I'm... alive...?"

Harry was sorely tempted to say no, just to see what she made of that. Instead he hissed, "Don't ask stupid questions."

"What happened?" whispered Bellatrix.

And the Dark Lord gave a wild, high-pitched laugh, and said, "I scared the Dementors away, my dear Bella."

There was a pause. Harry wished he could see Bellatrix's face; had he said the wrong thing?

After a time, in a quavering voice, "Could it be, my Lord, that in your new form, you have begun to care for me—"

"No," Harry said coldly, and turned from her (though he kept his wand on her), and began walking. "And take care that you do not offend me again, or I will abandon you here, use or no use. Now follow, or be left behind; I have work to do."

Harry strode forward, not listening to the gasping sounds that came from behind him; he knew Bellatrix was following.

...because the last thing that woman needed, the very last thing she needed to start thinking before the psychiatric healer began trying to deprogram her, was to believe that her Dark Lord could ever love her back.

⁂

The old wizard smoothed his silver beard contemplatively, looking at where Auror Bahry was being carried out of the room by two strong Aurors.

"Do you understand this, Amelia?"

"No," she said simply. She suspected some trap they hadn't yet been able to fathom, which was why Auror Bahry was going to be kept outside the main party and guarded.

"Perhaps," the old wizard said at length, "whichever of their number can cast the Patronus Charm, is more than a simple hostage. Someone who was tricked into this, mayhap? For whatever reason, they left your Auror alive; let us not be the first to wield deadly curses, when we find them—"

"I see," said the old witch in sudden realization, "*that* was their plan. It costs them nothing to Oblivate him and leave him alive, and makes *us* hesitate—" Amelia nodded decisively, and said to her people, "We carry on as before."

The old wizard sighed. "Any news from the Dementors?"

"If I tell you," Amelia snapped, "will you run off again?"

"It costs you nothing, Amelia," the old wizard said quietly, "and may save one of your own people the fight."

Costs me nothing except my chance at vengeance—

But that was nothing compared to the other, the annoying old wizard was often right in the end, it was part of what made him so annoying.

"The Dementors have ceased to answer questions about the other person they said they saw," Amelia told him, "and they will not say why, nor where."

Dumbledore turned to the blazing silver phoenix on his shoulder, whose light illuminated the whole corridor, and received a silent headshake in reply. "I cannot detect them either," said Dumbledore. Then he shrugged. "I suppose I shall just walk the whole spiral from top to bottom and see if anything turns up, shall I?"

Amelia would have ordered him not to do it, if she thought that would have made the tiniest difference.

"Albus," said Amelia as the old wizard turned to depart, "even you can be ambushed."

"Nonsense, my dear," the old wizard said cheerfully as he strode off yet again, waving as though in admonition his fifteen-inch wand of unidentifiable dark-grey wood, "I'm invincible."

There was a pause.

("He didn't just really say that—" whispered the newest Auror present, a still-prim young lady by the name of Noelle Curry, to the senior member of her trio, Auror Brooks. "Did he?")

("He can get away with it," Isabel whispered back to her, "he's *Dumbledore,* not even Fate takes him seriously anymore.")

"And that," Amelia said heavily, for the benefit of the younger Aurors, "is why we never call him in on anything unless we absolutely must."

Harry lay very still on the hard bench that served as the bed of this cell, a blanket pulled over him, staying as absolutely motionless as he could while he waited for the fear to return. There was a Patronus approaching, and a powerful one. Bellatrix was hidden by a Deathly Hallow, no easy Charm would penetrate that; but Harry did not know what other arts the Aurors might employ to detect his own self, and dared not reveal his ignorance by asking her. So Harry lay on a hard bed, in a cell with a locked door, and the mighty metal door locked behind him, in absolute darkness, with a thin blanket pulled over him, hoping that whoever it was wouldn't look in, or wouldn't look too closely if they did—

That wasn't a point Harry could affect, really, that part of his fate lay entirely in the hands of the Hidden Variables. Most of his mind was concentrating on the ongoing Transfiguration he was performing.

Listening in the silence, Harry heard the quick footsteps approach; they paused outside his door, and then—

—continued onward.

Soon the fear returned.

Harry didn't allow himself to notice his own relief, any more than he allowed himself to notice the fear. He was holding in his mind the form of a Muggle device rather larger than a car battery, and slowly applying

that Form to the substance of an ice cube (which Harry had frozen using *Frigideiro* on water from a bottle in his pouch). You weren't supposed to Transfigure things to be burned, but between the original substance being water, and the Bubble-Head Charm to protect their air supply, Harry hoped that this wouldn't make him or anyone else sick.

Now it was just a question of whether there would be enough time before the Aurors did a detailed check on this cell block, for Harry to finish this Transfiguration, and the partial Transfiguration he would do after that—

⁂

When the old wizard strode back empty-handed, even Amelia began to feel a twinge of worry. She and the other two Auror teams had worked a third of the way down the three spirals, in synchrony so as not to allow any gap in their coverage that could be jumped by cutting through a ceiling, and they'd yet to find any sign.

"Might I ask you to report?" Amelia said, keeping the edge out of her voice.

"First a simple walk from top to bottom," said the old wizard. He was frowning, wrinkling his face even more than usual. "I examined Bellatrix's cell, and found a death doll left in her place. This escape was meant to go unremarked, I think. There is something hidden in the corner beneath a scrap of cloth; I left that undisturbed for your Aurors to examine. On the return trip, I opened each door and looked within the cells. I saw nothing Disillusioned, only the prisoners—"

They were interrupted by a scream from the red-golden phoenix, and all her Aurors flinched from it. Condemnation was in it, and an urgent demand that almost started Amelia running from the corridor on the spot.

"—in rather distressing condition," Dumbledore said quietly. For a moment the blue eyes were very cold beneath the half-moon glasses. "Will any of you speak to me of the consequences of their actions?"

"*I* did not—" Amelia began.

"I know," said the old wizard. "My apologies, Amelia." He sighed. "Some of the more recent prisoners had scraps of their magic left, when I looked upon them, but I sensed no uneaten power; the strongest had only as much magic left as a first-year child. I heard Fawkes scream in distress many times, but never challenge. It seems you shall have to continue your search; they can hide well enough to escape my mere glance."

When Harry finished his first Transfiguration, he sat up, pulled back the blanket that had covered him, cast a quick *Lumos,* glanced at his watch, and was shocked to see that nearly an hour and thirty minutes had passed. How much of that time had gone by since someone had opened the door and then closed it again—Harry hadn't been looking in that direction, of course—that, Harry couldn't guess.

"My Lord...?" whispered Bellatrix's voice, soft and very tentative.

"You may speak now," Harry said. He'd told her to remain silent while he worked.

"That was Dumbledore who looked upon us."

Pause.

"Interesting," Harry said neutrally. He was glad he had not noticed this at the time. That sounded like a *rather close shave.*

Harry said a word to his pouch, and began drawing forth the magical device that he would mate to the product of his hour's labor. Then, when that was drawn forth, another word brought forth a tube of industrial-strength glue; before using it, Harry cast the Bubble-Head Charm on himself and Bellatrix, and had Bellatrix cast the same Charm on the snake, so that the glue fumes in the enclosed cell would not harm them.

When the glue had begun to set, binding technology to magic, Harry laid it down upon the bed, and sat down on the floor, resting his magic and will for a moment before essaying the next Transfiguration.

"My Lord..." Bellatrix said hesitantly.

"Yes?" said the dry voice.

"What is that device you made?"

Harry thought rapidly. It seemed like a good chance to check his plans with her, under the guise of leading questions.

"Consider, my dear Bella," said Harry smoothly. "How difficult is it for a powerful wizard to cut the walls of Azkaban?"

There was a pause, and then Bellatrix's voice came, slow and puzzled, "Not difficult at all, my Lord...?"

"Indeed," said the dry, high voice of Bella's master. "Suppose one were to do this, and fly through the hole on a broomstick, and soar up and away. Rescuing a prisoner from Azkaban would seem easy then, would it not?"

"But my Lord..." said Bella. "The Aurors would—they have their own broomsticks, my Lord, fast ones—"

Harry listened, it was as he had thought. The Dark Lord replied, again in tones of smoothly Socratic inquiry, and Bellatrix asked a further question, which Harry had not expected, but Harry's own counterquestion showed that it should not matter in the end. And in response to Bellatrix's last question, the Dark Lord only smiled, and said that it was time for him to resume his work.

And then Harry got up from the floor of the cell, went to the far end of the cells, and touched his wand to the hard surface of the wall—the wall of Azkaban, the solid metal that separated them from direct exposure to the Dementors' pit.

And Harry began a partial Transfiguration.

This spell would go faster, Harry hoped. He'd spent hours and hours practicing the unique magic, which had made it routine, not much more difficult for him than ordinary Transfiguration. The shape he was changing had not all that much total volume, the Transfigured shape might be tall and wide and long, but it was very thin. Half a millimeter, Harry had thought, would be enough, considering the perfect smoothness...

On the long bench that served as a prison bed, where Harry had set down the Transfigured technological device and the mated magic item for the glue to dry, tiny letters in golden script gleamed on the Muggle artifact. Harry hadn't really *planned* for them to be there, but they'd kept

running through the back of his mind, and so seemed to have become part of the Transfigured form.

Ther were many different things Harry could have said before using this particular triumph of technological ingenuity. Any number of things that would be, in one sense or another, appropriate. Or at least things that Harry *could* have said, *would* have said, if Bellatrix had not been there.

But there was only one thing to say, that Harry would only get the chance to say just this once, and probably never get a better chance to say ever again. (Or *think*, anyway, if he couldn't say it.) He hadn't seen the actual movie, but he'd seen a preview, and for some reason the phrase had stuck in his mind.

The tiny golden letters upon the Muggle device said,

All right, you primitive screwheads! Listen up!

CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT

THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT, PART VIII: CONSTRAINED COGNITION

In darkness absolute, a boy stood holding his wand to the solid metal wall of Azkaban, essaying a magic that only three other people in the world would have believed possible, and that none save he alone could wield.

Of course a powerful wizard could've cut through the wall in seconds, with a gesture and a word.

For an average adult it might have been a matter of a few minutes' work, and afterward they would have been winded.

But to accomplish the same end as a first-year Hogwarts student, you had to be *efficient.*

Luckily—well, not *luckily*, luck had nothing to do with it—*conscientiously*, Harry had practiced Transfiguration for an extra hour every day, to the point where he was ahead of even Hermione in that one class; he'd practiced partial Transfiguration to the point where his thoughts had begun taking the true universe for granted, so that it required only slightly more effort to keep its timeless quantum nature in mind, even as he kept a firm mental separation between the concept of Form and the concept of substance.

And the *problem* with that art having become so routine...

...was that Harry could think about other things while he was doing it.

Somehow his thoughts had managed to not go there, to not confront the obvious, until he was faced with the prospect of *really actually doing it in just a few minutes*.

What Harry was about to do...

...was dangerous.

Really dangerous.

Someone-might-actually-genuinely-get-killed dangerous.

Facing down twelve Dementors without a Patronus Charm had been *scary*, but merely scary. Harry could have cast the Patronus Charm, *would* have cast it as soon as he thought he was in danger of not being able to do so, as soon as he felt his resistance beginning to fail. And even if that hadn't worked... even so, unless the Dementors had been instructed to Kiss anyone they found, failure shouldn't have been *fatal.*

This was different.

The Transfigured Muggle device could explode and kill them.

The interface between the technology and the magic could fail in any number of ways and kill them.

The Aurors could get in a lucky shot.

It was just, well...

Seriously dangerous.

Harry had caught his mind trying to argue itself into believing that it was safe.

And sure, the whole thing *could* work, but...

But even leaving out that rationalists weren't ever allowed to argue themselves into things, Harry knew he couldn't possibly have argued himself into estimating less than a 20% probability of dying.

Lose, said Hufflepuff.

Lose, said the voice of Professor Quirrell in his mind.

Lose, said his mental model of Hermione and Professor McGonagall and Professor Flitwick and Neville Longbottom and, well, basically everyone Harry knew except for Fred and George, who would have gone for it in a hot second.

He should just go find Dumbledore and turn himself in. He should, he really really should, it was the only *sane* thing to do at this point.

And if it'd been only Harry on the mission, only his own life that'd been at stake, he would have; he surely would have.

The part that was almost causing him to lose his concentration on the partial Transfiguration he was performing, the part that was threatening to open him to the Dementors...

...was Professor Quirrell, still unconscious, still a snake.

If Professor Quirrell went to Azkaban for his part in the escape, he would die. He probably wouldn't last even a week. He was that sensitive.

It was that simple.

If Harry *lost* here...

He lost Professor Quirrell.

Even though he's probably evil, said the Hufflepuff part of him quietly. *Even so?*

It wasn't a decision that Harry had made in any conscious way. He just couldn't do it. Losing was for House points, not *people.*

If you think your own life is valuable enough that you're not willing to take on an eighty percent probability of dying in order to protect all the prisoners in Azkaban, his Slytherin side observed, *there's no way you can justify taking a twenty percent risk to your life to save Bellatrix and Professor Quirrell. The math doesn't add up, you can't be assigning consistent utilities over outcomes here.*

The logical side of him noted that Slytherin had just won the argument.

Harry kept the Form in his mind, kept on casting the spell. He could always just abort the mission when he was *done* with the Transfiguration, he didn't want to lose the effort he'd already invested.

And then Harry thought of something else that suddenly made it very hard to keep the magic going, very hard to keep up his resistance to the Dementors.

What if the portkey doesn't take us where Professor Quirrell said it did?

It was obvious in retrospect the moment he thought about it.

Even if the planned escape went completely right, even if the Muggle device worked and *didn't* explode and *didn't* interact badly with the mated magic item, even if the Aurors didn't get in a lucky shot, even if Harry made it far enough away from Azkaban to use the portkey...

...there might not be a psychiatric healer at the end of it.

That was something Harry had believed when he'd trusted Professor Quirrell, and he'd forgotten to re-evaluate it after Professor Quirrell was no longer to be trusted.

You can't do this, said Hufflepuff. *At this point we're talking mere stupidity.*

Cold seemed to spread through the room, but Harry kept the Transfiguration going, even as his resistance against the Dementors faltered.

I can't lose Professor Quirrell.

He tried to kill a police officer, said Hufflepuff. *You already lost him, in that moment. Bellatrix is probably just what everyone thinks she is. Just take your Cloak back, go find Dumbledore and tell him you were tricked.*

No, thought Harry desperately, *not without talking to Professor Quirrell, there might be an explanation, I don't know, maybe he was standing far enough away from my Patronus that the Dementors got to him... I don't understand, it doesn't make sense on any hypothesis, why he would do that... I can't just...*

Harry turned his mind away from that chain of thought before it completely broke his resistance to the fear, because he couldn't think of feeding Professor Quirrell to Dementors while staying resolved against Death, it was a cognitive impossibility.

Your reasoning is artificially impaired, observed the logical part of him calmly, *find a way to unimpair it.*

All right, let's just generate alternatives, Harry thought. *Not choose, not weigh, certainly not commit... just think about what else I might be able to do besides the original plan.*

And Harry went on cutting the hole in the wall. He was using partial Transfiguration on a thin cylindrical shell of metal, two meters in diameter and half a millimeter thick, running all the way through the wall. He was Transfiguring that half-millimeter thickness of metal into motor oil. Motor oil was a liquid and you weren't to Transfigure liquids because they might evaporate, but he and Bellatrix and the snake all had Bubble-Head Charms. And Harry would cast Finite on the oil immediately after, dispelling his own Transfiguration...

...as soon as the separated and lubricated hunk of metal slid out of the wall and onto the floor of their cell, he'd slanted it so gravity would pull it in, once the Transfiguration was done.

If Harry and Bellatrix *didn't* exit on his broomstick through the resulting hole in the wall...

Harry's brain suggested that he could try to Transfigure a surface cover over the hole in the wall, leaving a space for Bellatrix and Professor Quirrell to hide in, wearing the Cloak, while Harry turned himself in. And Professor Quirrell would eventually wake up, and he and Bellatrix could try to figure out how to exit Azkaban on their own.

It was, first of all, a dumb idea, and second, there would still be a huge hunk of metal on the floor of the cell, which would give it away.

And then Harry's brain saw the obvious.

Let Bellatrix and Professor Quirrell use the escape route you invented. You stay behind, and turn yourself in.

Bellatrix and Professor Quirrell were the ones whose lives were at stake.

They were gaining, not losing, from taking the risk.

And there was no reason, no sane reason at all, for Harry to go with them.

A calm came over Harry as he thought it, the cold and darkness that had been wavering around the fringes of his mind retreated. Yes, that was it, that was the creative outside-the-box route, that was the hidden third alternative. The falseness of the dilemma was obvious in retrospect. If Harry turned himself in, he *didn't* have to turn in Bellatrix and Professor Quirrell. If Bellatrix and Professor Quirrell took a dangerous escape route, Harry *didn't* need to go with them.

Harry didn't even need to face the embarrassment of admitting he'd been tricked, if he ordered Bellatrix to remove the memory. Everyone would just assume he'd been kidnapped, including Harry himself. Admittedly, there was no plausible reason why the Dark Lord would ever ask Bellatrix to do that; but Harry could simply smile and tell Bellatrix she wasn't allowed to know, and that would be that...

Her Auror team had gotten around three-quarters of the way down Azkaban, as had the other two teams on the other two spirals. Amelia was feeling tenser already, though she was betting on the criminals hiding on the second-to-lowest floor, part of her wished Dumbledore had thought to check that specific floor more carefully and part of her was glad he hadn't.

And then there was a distant sound, like a tiny 'tink' noise coming from far away. Like a very loud sound coming from the second-to-lowest floor, say.

Amelia looked at Dumbledore before she realized, before she managed to stop herself.

The old wizard shrugged, gave her a small smile, said, "Since you asked it, Amelia," and went off yet again.

⁂

"*Finite Incantatem,*" Harry said to the oil coating the giant chunk of metal on the floor. He hardly heard himself speak, his ears were still ringing from the gigantic thud of the solid metal sliding out of the wall and falling. (He should have put up a Quieting Charm, in retrospect, though that wouldn't have stopped the noise from spreading through the solid metal floor.) And then Harry said it again, "*Finite Incantatem*" to the oil coating the two-meter hole in the wall, spreading the effect wide; it was his own magic Harry was canceling, which made the spell almost effortless. Harry was feeling a bit tired now, but that was the last use of magic he would need. He hadn't even *needed* to do it, really, but Harry didn't want to leave Transfigured liquid lying around, and he didn't want to betray the secret of partial Transfiguration either.

It seemed very... *inviting,* that two-meter hole leading to freedom.

The light from outside coming in... wasn't exactly the Sun shining on his face, but it was brighter than anything of Azkaban's interior.

Harry *was* tempted to just go with, just hop on the broomstick with Bellatrix and the snake. Chances were that they *would* get out safely.

And if they *did* get out safely, and Harry came with, then he and Professor Quirrell could go back in time and look perfectly innocent, everything could go back to normal.

If Harry stayed behind and turned himself in... then even if everyone assumed Harry had been a hostage, assumed Harry had lied to Professor McGonagall's Patronus at wandpoint... even if Harry himself got off lightly, well...

It wasn't likely that the Defense Professor would go on teaching at Hogwarts.

Professor Quirrell would have reached the predestined end of his career, in February of the school year.

And yes, Professor McGonagall would kill Harry, and yes, it would be slow and painful.

But staying behind was the sensible, safe, *sane* thing to do, and Harry was feeling more relaxed than regretful.

Harry turned to Bellatrix; he opened his mouth to instruct her a final time—

And there was a hiss, a weak hiss, a hiss that sounded slow and confused, and the hiss said,

"*What wass... that noisse?*"

⁂

Through the corridor the old wizard strode. He came to a metal door and opened it, already knowing from memory that the cells within were empty.

Seven mighty and discerning incantations the wizard spoke then, before he moved on; it would be little enough exertion in total, with so few cells left to check.

⁂

"*Teacher,*" Harry hissed. So many emotions bubbling up in him, all at once. He knew, though he could not see, that the green snake around

Bellatrix's shoulders, was slowly lifting its head to look around. "*Are you... all right, teacher?*"

"*Teacher?*" came the weak, confused hiss. "*Where iss thiss?*

"*Prisson,*" Harry hissed, "*the prisson with life-eaterss, we were to resscue a woman, you and I. You tried to sslay the protector man, I blocked your killing cursse, there was a ressonance between uss... you fell unconssciouss, I had to defeat the protector man mysself... my guardian Charm wass dispelled, the life-eaterss could tell the protectorss that the woman had esscaped. There iss ssomeone here who can ssensse my guardian Charm, probably the sschoolmasster... so had to disspell my guardian Charm, find different way to hide you and the woman from life-eaterss without guardian Charm, learn to protect mysself without guardian Charm, sscare off life-eaterss without guardian Charm, then devisse new esscape plan for you and the woman, and finally, cut hole in thick metal wall of prisson even though I am only firsst-year sstudent. No time to explain, you musst go now. If we never meet again, teacher, then I was glad to know you for a time, even though you are probably evil. It iss good to have the chance to ssay thiss much: Goodbye.*"

And Harry took the broomstick and presented it to Bellatrix, saying simply, "Get on."

He had decided to keep the memories. For one thing, they were important. For another, he and the Defense Professor had started planning this a week ago, and Harry wasn't about to obliterate the whole last week, *or* explain to Bellatrix exactly what needed to be Obliviated. Harry could probably fool Veritaserum, and if Dumbledore insisted that Harry drop his Occlumency shields for a deeper examination... well, Harry had acted heroically throughout.

"*Sstop!*" said the snake. Its voice was stronger now. "*Sstop, sstop, sstop! What do you mean, goodbye?*"

"*Esscape plan iss rissky,*" said Harry. "*My life iss not at sstake, only yourss and herss. Sso I am sstaying, turning mysself in—*"

"*No!*" said the snake. The hiss was forceful. "*Musst not! Not permitted!*"

Bellatrix mounted the broomstick; Harry could sense (but never see) her head turning to look at him, she said no word. Awaiting him, perhaps, or merely awaiting his orders.

"*No longer trusst you,*" Harry said simply. "*Not ssince you tried to sslay the protector man.*"

And the snake hissed, "*I did not sseek to sslay the protector man! Are you fool, boy? Sslaying him would not make ssensse, evil or no!*"

The Earth ceased to turn on its axis, paused in its orbit around the Sun.

The snake's hiss was now more furious than anything Harry had ever heard from the human Professor Quirrell. "*Sslay him? Had I ssought to sslay him he would have been dead within sseconds, fool boy, he wass no match for me! I ssought to ssubdue, to dominate, force him to drop sshieldss upon hiss mind, needed to read him, to know who awaited hiss reply, learn detailss for memory sspell—*"

"*You casst killing cursse!*"

"*Knew he would dodge!*"

"*Wass hiss life worth sso little? What if he did not dodge?*"

"*Would have pusshed him out of the way with own magic, fool boy!*"

Again the pause in the planet's spin. Harry hadn't thought of that.

"*Witlesss dunce of a plotter,*" hissed the snake, so angrily that the hisses seemed to overlap and slither over each other's tails, "*clever imbecile, cunning idiot, fool of an untrained Sslytherin, your missplaced misstrust hass ruined—*"

"*Thiss iss not a fair time to argue,*" Harry observed mildly. The surge of relief trying to flood through him was canceled by the increased tension. "*Ssince I cannot get angry at you properly, without opening mysself to life-eaterss. Musst russh, ssomeone may have heard noisse—*"

"*Explain esscape plan,*" the snake said imperiously. "*Sswiftly!*"

Harry explained. Parseltongue didn't have words for the Muggle technology, but Harry described the function and Professor Quirrell seemed to understand.

There were a few short hisses, the snakish equivalent of a bark of surprised laughter, and then, snapped commands. "*Tell woman to look away, casst sspell of ssilence, sset guardian Charm outside door. Will transsform mysself, make few sswift improvementss to your invention, give woman emergency potion sso sshe can sshield uss, transsform back before you disspell Charm. Plan will be ssafer, then.*"

"*And am I to believe,*" Harry hissed, "*that healer for woman truly awaitss uss?*"

"*Usse ssensse, boy! Ssupposse I am evil. To end usse of you here iss obvioussly not what I planned. Misssion iss target of opportunity, invented after ssaw your guardian Charm, whole affair meant to be unnoticed, hid when left eating-place. Obvioussly you will ssee persson pretending to be healer on arrival! Go back to eating-place afterward, original plan carriess on undisturbed!*"

Harry stared at the invisible snake.

On the one hand, saying it like that made Harry feel rather dumb.

And on the other hand, it wasn't exactly reassuring.

"*Sso,*" Harry hissed, "*what iss your plan for me, precissely?*"

"*You ssaid no time,*" came the snake's hiss, "*but plan iss for you to rule country, obvioussly, even your young noble friend hass understood that by now, assk him on return if you wissh. Will ssay no more now, iss time to fly, not sspeak.*"

The old wizard reached out toward another metal door, from behind which came a endless dead mutter, "I'm not serious, I'm not serious, I'm not serious..." The red-golden phoenix on his shoulder was already screaming urgently, and the old wizard was already wincing, when—

Another cry pierced the corridor, phoenix-like but not the true phoenix's call.

The wizard's head turned, looked at the blazing silver creature on his other shoulder, even as ephemeral and substanceless talons launched the spell-entity into the air.

The false phoenix flew down the corridor.

The old wizard raced off after, legs churning like a spry young man of sixty.

The true phoenix screamed once, twice, and a third time, hovering before the metal door; and then, when it became clear that its master would not return for all its calling, flew reluctantly after.

Professor Quirrell had assumed his true form, this time—Polyjuice only lasted for an hour without redosing—and though the Defense Professor was pale, leaning against the metal bars of the nearest cell, his magic was strong enough to seize his wand without a word, even as Bellatrix doffed the Cloak and placed it obediently in Harry's waiting hand. The sense of doom was building once more, though not in full force, as the Defense Professor's power returned, the fringes of its vast force clashing with Harry's slight childish aura.

Harry said aloud the description of his Muggle device, naming it to the observing wizard, and then a Finite from Harry turned all his hard work back into an ice cube. Professor Quirrell could not cast spells on something Harry had Transfigured, for that would be an interaction, however slight, between their magics, but—

Three seconds after, Professor Quirrell was holding his own Transfigured version of the Muggle device. A single barked word and a sweep of his wand, and the residue of glue was gone from the magical item; three more incantations later, the magical and technological were fused together as though into a single thing, and Charms of Unbreakability and flawless function had been cast upon the Muggle device.

(Harry felt a lot better about doing this under adult supervision.)

A potion was thrown to Bellatrix, and Professor Quirrell and Harry both commanded, "Drink," as though speaking in the same voice. The emaciated woman had already been lifting it to her lips, without waiting; for it was evident to anyone that this snake Animagus was a servant of the Dark Lord, and a powerful and trusted one.

Harry finished pulling the hood of the Cloak of Invisibility over his head.

A brief and terrible magic lashed out from the Defense Professor's wand, scouring the hole in the wall, scarring the huge chunk of metal that lay in the room's midst; as Harry had requested, saying that the method he'd used might identify him.

"Left-hand glove," Harry said to his pouch, and drew it forth, and put it on.

A gesture from the Defense Professor made a harness appear upon Bellatrix's shoulders, and another, smaller cloth device upon her hand, and something like handcuffs on her wrists, even as the woman finished drinking the potion.

A strange, unhealthy color seemed to come over Bellatrix's pale face, she straightened, her sunken eyes seemed brighter and far more dangerous...

...small wisps of steam were coming out of her ears...

(Harry decided not to think about that part.)

...and Bellatrix Black laughed, then, sudden mad laughter that rang much too loudly amid the small prison cells of Azkaban.

(Very soon, the Defense Professor had said, Bellatrix would fall unconscious and stay that way for quite awhile, the price of the potion she had taken; but for just a few moments she would regain perhaps a twentieth part of the power she had once wielded.)

The Defense Professor threw his wand toward Bellatrix, and an instant later blurred into a green snake.

An instant after *that* the Dementors' fear returned to the room.

Bellatrix flinched only slightly, caught the wand, and gestured without a word; the snake flew up and was inserted into the harness on her back.

Harry said "Up!" to the broomstick.

Bellatrix attached the wand to the holster on her hand.

Harry leaped onto the two-person broomstick in the lead position.

Bellatrix followed behind him, she took the cufflike devices on her wrists and chained her hands to the grips of the broomstick, even as Harry's right hand shoved his wand into his pouch.

And the three shot forward through the hole in the wall—

—emerging into the open air, directly above the Dementors' pit, in the interior of the vast triangular prism that was Azkaban, the blue sky now clearly visible above them, shining down its daylight.

Harry angled the broomstick and began accelerating, upward and toward the center of the triangular space. His left hand, gloved to prevent

direct contact between his skin and something which Professor Quirrell had Transfigured, held the switch of the control on the Muggle device.

Far above them, distant shouts rang out.

All right, you primitive screwheads!

Aurors on fast racing broomsticks angled out of the sky, diving straight down toward them, faint sparks of light already blazing downward as the first shots were fired.

Listen up!

"Protego Maximus!" shouted Bellatrix in a mighty, cracked voice, followed by a cackling laugh as a shimmering blue field surrounded them.

You see this?

From the decaying pit in the center of Azkaban, over a hundred Dementors rose into the air, appearing to some as a great mass of corpses, a flying graveyard; appearing to another as a conglomerate of absences that seemed to form one vast rip in the world as they slid upward.

This...

The voice of an ancient and powerful wizard bellowed a terrible incantation, and a great blast of white-golden fire shot out of the hole in Azkaban's wall, shapeless for only a moment before it began to form wings.

Is...

And the Aurors activated the Anti-Anti-Gravity Jinx that had been built into the wards of Azkaban, disabling all flying spells whose enchantment had not been cast with the recently changed passphrase.

The lift on Harry's broom switched off.

Gravity, on the other hand, stayed on.

Their broom's upward rise slowed, started to decelerate, began the process of turning into a fall.

My...

But the enchantments that kept the broom pointed in a direction and allowed steering, the enchantments that kept the riders attached and somewhat protected them from acceleration, *those* enchantments were still functioning.

BROOMSTICK!

Harry hit the ignition switch on the General Technics made, model *Berserker* PFRC, N-class, ammonium perchlorate composite propellant, solid-fuel rocket that had been mated to his Nimbus X200 two-person broomstick.

And there was noise.

CHAPTER FIFTY-NINE

THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT, PART IX: CURIOSITY

Broomsticks had been invented during what a Muggle would have called the Dark Ages, supposedly by a legendary witch named Celestria Relevo, allegedly the great-great-granddaughter of Merlin.

Celestria Relevo, or whichever person or group had really invented those enchantments, hadn't known a darned thing about Newtonian mechanics.

Broomsticks, therefore, worked by Aristotelian physics.

They went where you pointed them.

If you wanted to move straight forward, you pointed them straight forward; you didn't worry about keeping some of the thrust going downward to cancel out the effect of gravity.

If you turned a broomstick, all of its new velocity was in the new direction of pointing, it didn't go sideways based on its old momentum.

Broomsticks had maximum speeds, not maximum accelerations. Not because of anything to do with air resistance, but because a broomstick had some maximum Aristotelian impetus its enchantments could exert.

Harry had never explicitly *noticed* that before, despite being dextrous enough to get the best grades in flying class. Broomsticks worked so much like the human mind *instinctively expected them to work* that his brain had managed to *entirely overlook their physical absurdity.* Harry, on his first Thursday of broomstick lessons, had been distracted by more

interesting-seeming phenomena, words written on paper and a glowing red ball. So his brain had simply suspended its disbelief, marked the reality of broomsticks as accepted, and proceeded to have its fun, without ever once *thinking of the question* whose answer would have been obvious. For it is a sad fact that we only ever *think* about a tiny fraction of all the phenomena we encounter...

That is the story of how Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres was almost killed by his own lack of curiosity.

Because rockets did *not* work by Aristotelian physics.

Rockets did *not* work like a human mind instinctively thought a flying thing should work.

A rocket-assisted broomstick, therefore, did *not* move like the magical broomsticks upon which Harry was such a very good flyer.

None of this actually went through Harry's mind at the time.

For one thing, the loudest noise he'd ever heard in his life was preventing him from hearing himself think.

For another thing, accelerating upward at four gravities meant that he had around two and a half seconds, total, to go from the bottom to the top of Azkaban.

And even if they were two and a half of the *longest* seconds in the history of Time, that wasn't enough room to do much thinking.

There was time only to see the lights of the Aurors' curses arrowing down at him, slightly angle the broomstick to avoid them, realize that the broomstick was simply continuing on with mostly the same momentum instead of going in the direction he pointed it, and activate the wordless concepts

crap

and

Newton

whereupon Harry angled the broomstick much harder and then they started to very quickly approach the wall so he angled it back the other way and there were more lights coming down and the Dementors were sliding smoothly up toward them along with some kind of giant winged creature of white-golden flame so Harry wrenched the broomstick back toward the sky but now he was still sliding toward another wall so he

tilted the broom slightly and he stopped approaching but he was too close so he tilted it again and then the distant Aurors on their broomsticks weren't very distant at all and he was going to crash into that woman so he spun his broomstick straight away from her and then in another instant he realized his rocket was an extremely powerful flamethrower and in a fraction of a second it would be pointing directly at the Auror so he spun the broomstick sideways as he kept going up and he couldn't remember if it was pointing at any Aurors now but at least it wasn't pointing at *her*

Harry missed another Auror by about a meter, zipping past him on a sideways-pointed flamethrower moving upward at, Harry would later guess, around 300 kilometers per hour.

If there were any screams of roasted Aurors he didn't hear them, but this was not evidence one way or another, because all that Harry was hearing at the moment was an extremely loud noise.

A couple of *calmer if not quieter* seconds later, there didn't seem to be any Aurors around, or any Dementors, or any giant winged flame creatures, and the vast and terrible edifice of Azkaban looked surprisingly tiny from this height.

Harry got the broomstick pointed toward the Sun, faintly visible through the clouds, it wasn't high in the sky at this time of day and month of winter, and the broomstick accelerated for another two seconds in that direction and picked up an amazing amount of speed very quickly before the solid-fuel rocket burned itself out.

After that, once Harry could hear himself think again, when there was only the howling wind from their ridiculous speed, and Harry's enchantment-assisted fingers gripping the broomstick were merely resisting the decelerating drag of moving way faster than terminal velocity, *that* was when Harry actually thought all that stuff about Newtonian mechanics and Aristotelian physics and broomsticks and rocketry and the importance of curiosity and how he was never going to do anything this Gryffindor ever again or at least not until after he learned the Dark Lord's secret of immortality and *why* had he listened to Professor Quirinus "*I asssure you, boy, I would not attempt thisss if I did not anticipate my own ssurvival*" Quirrell instead of Professor Michael "Son, if you try

anything to do with rockets on your own, I mean *anything whatsoever* without a trained professonal watching, you will die and that will make Mum sad" Verres-Evans.

⁂

"WHAT?" shrieked Amelia at the mirror.

⁂

The wind had died down to a bearable level as the air resistance slowed them, giving Harry plenty of opportunity to listen to the buzzing, ringing sound that seemed to fill his whole brain.

Professor Quirrell had been supposed to cast a Quieting Charm on the rocket exhaust... apparently there were limits to what Quieting Charms could do... in retrospect, Harry should have Transfigured a pair of earplugs, not just trusted to the Quieting Charm, though that probably wouldn't have been enough either...

Well, magical healing probably had something to treat permanent hearing damage.

No, really, magical healing probably had something to treat that. He'd seen students go to Madam Pomfrey with injuries that sounded a lot worse...

Is there some way of transplanting an imaginary personality to someone else's head? asked Hufflepuff. *I don't want to live in yours anymore.*

Harry shoved it all into the back of his mind, there really wasn't anything he could do about it right now. Was there anything he *should* be worrying about—

Then Harry glanced behind him, remembering for the first time to check whether Bellatrix or Professor Quirrell had been blown off the broomstick.

But the green snake was still in its harness, and the emaciated woman was still clinging to the broomstick, her face still charged with unhealthy color and her eyes still bright and dangerous. Her shoulders

were shaking like she was laughing hysterically, and her lips were moving as though to shout, but no sound was coming out—

Oh, right.

Harry took off the hood of his cloak, tapped his ears to let her know he couldn't hear.

Whereupon Bellatrix grasped her wand, pointed it at Harry, and suddenly the ringing in his ears diminished, he could hear her.

A moment later he regretted it; the imprecations she was screaming at Azkaban, Dementors, Aurors, Dumbledore, Lucius, Bartemy Couch, something called the Order of the Phoenix, and all who stood in the way of her Dark Lord, et cetera, were not suitable for younger and more sensitive listeners; and her laughter was hurting his newly healed ears.

"Enough, Bella," Harry finally said, and her voice stopped on the instant.

There was a pause. Harry pulled the Cloak back over his head, just on general principles; and realized in the same instant that they might have telescopes down there or something, in retrospect pulling down his hood for even a moment had been an incredibly dumb move, he hoped the whole mission didn't end up failing because of that one error...

We're not really cut out for this, are we? observed Slytherin.

Hey, Hufflepuff objected in sheer reflex, *we can't expect to do anything perfectly the first time, we probably just need more practice* FORGET I SAID THAT.

Harry looked back again, saw Bellatrix looking around with a puzzled, wondering look on her face. Her head kept turning, turning.

And finally Bellatrix said, her voice now lower, "My Lord, where are we?"

What do you mean? was what Harry wanted to say, but the Dark Lord would never admit to not understanding anything, so Harry replied, dryly, "We are on a broomstick."

Does she think she's dead, that this is Heaven?

Bellatrix's hands were still chained to the broomstick, so it was only a finger that came up and pointed when she said, "What is *that?*"

Harry followed the direction of her finger and saw... nothing in particular, actually...

Then Harry realized. After they'd gone up high enough, there hadn't been any clouds to obscure it any more.

"That is the Sun, dear Bella."

It came out remarkably controlled, the Dark Lord sounding perfectly calm and maybe a little impatient with her, even as the tears started down Harry's cheeks.

In the endless cold, in the pitch blackness, the Sun would surely have been...

A happy memory...

Bellatrix's head kept turning.

"And the fluffy things?" she said.

"Clouds."

There was a pause, and then Bellatrix said, "But what *are* they?"

Harry didn't answer her, there was no way his voice could have been steady, would have been steady, it was all he could do to keep his breathing perfectly regular while he cried.

After a while, Bellatrix breathed, so softly Harry almost didn't hear, "Pretty..."

Her face slowly relaxed, the color leaving its paleness almost as quickly as it had arrived.

Her skeletal body slumped down against the broomstick.

The borrowed wand dangled lifelessly from the strap attached to her unmoving hand.

YOU HAVE GOT TO BE KIDDING—

Harry's mind remembered then, the Pepper-Up potion came at a cost; Bellatrix would *ssleep for a conssiderable time,* Professor Quirrell had said.

And in the same instant another part of Harry became utterly convinced, looking back at the chalk-white emaciated woman, seeming deader in the bright sunlight than anything Harry had ever seen alive, that she *was* dead, that she had just uttered her last word, that Professor Quirrell had misjudged the dosage—

—or deliberately sacrificed Bellatrix to guard their own escape—

Is she breathing?

Harry couldn't see if she was breathing.

There was no way, on the broomstick, to reach back and take her pulse.

Harry looked ahead to make sure they weren't about to run into any flying rocks, kept on steering the broomstick toward the Sun, the invisible boy and the possibly dead woman riding off into the afternoon, while his fingers gripped the wood so hard they turned white.

He couldn't reach back and perform artificial respiration.

He couldn't use anything from his healer's kit.

Trust Professor Quirrell to have not endangered her?

Strange, it was strange, that even genuinely believing that Professor Quirrell hadn't meant to kill the Auror (for it *would* have been stupid), thinking of the Defense Professor's reassurances no longer felt reassuring.

Then it occurred to Harry that he had yet to check—

Harry looked back, and hissed, "*Teacher?*"

The snake did not stir within its harness, and said no word.

...maybe the snake, not being an actual rider, hadn't been protected from the acceleration. Or maybe coming that close to the Dementors without a shield, even for a moment in Animagus form, had knocked out the Defense Professor.

That wasn't good.

It was to have been Professor Quirrell who told Harry when it was safe to use the portkey.

Harry steered the broomstick with whitened fingers, and thought, he thought very hard for a small unmeasured length of time, during which Bellatrix might or might not have been breathing, during which Professor Quirrell himself might have already been not-breathing for a while.

And Harry decided that while it was possible to recover from the error of wasting the portkey in his possession, it was not possible to recover from the error of letting a brain go too long without oxygen.

So Harry took the next portkey in the sequence from his pouch, as he slowed his broomstick to a halt in the bright blue air (Harry didn't know, when he thought about it, whether a portkey's ability to adjust for the Earth's rotation also included the ability to match velocity in gen-

eral with its new surroundings), touched the portkey to the broomstick, and...

Harry paused, still holding the twig, the mate of the twig he had snapped what seemed like two weeks ago. He was feeling a sudden reluctance; his brain seemed to have learned the rule, by some purely neural process of negative reinforcement, that Snapping Twigs Is A Bad Idea.

But that wasn't actually logical, so Harry snapped the twig anyway.

⁂

There was a thunderous boom from behind the nearby metal door, causing Amelia to drop the mirror she was holding and spin around with her wand in hand, and then that door burst open to reveal Albus Dumbledore, standing there in front of a great smoking hole in the prison wall.

"Amelia," said the old wizard. There was no trace of any of his customary levity, his eyes were hard as sapphires beneath his half-moon glasses. "I must leave Azkaban and I must do so *now*. Is there any faster way than a broomstick to get beyond the wards?"

"No—"

"Then I require your fastest broomstick, at once!"

The place where Amelia *wanted* to be was with the Auror who had been injured by that Fiendfyre or whatever it had been.

What she *needed* to do was find out what Dumbledore knew.

"You!" the old witch barked at the team around her. "Keep clearing the corridors until you're at bottom, they may not all have escaped yet!" And then, to the old wizard, "Two broomsticks. You can brief me once we're in the air."

There was a match of stares, but not a long one.

⁂

A sickeningly hard yank caught at Harry's abdomen, considerably harder than the yank that had transported him to Azkaban, and this

time the distance traversed was great enough that he could hear an instant of silence, watch the unseeable space between spaces, in the crack between one place and another.

⁂

The Sun, which had shone on the two only briefly, was swiftly occluded by a raincloud as they shot away from Azkaban, in the direction of the wind and faster than the wind.

"Who's behind it?" shouted Amelia to the broomstick flying a pace away from her.

"One of two people," Dumbledore said back, "I know not, at this instant, who. If the first, then we are in trouble. If the second, we are all in far greater trouble."

Amelia didn't spare any breath for sighs. "When will you know?"

The old wizard's voice was grim, quiet and yet somehow rising above the wind. "Three things they need for perfection, if it is that one: The flesh of the Dark Lord's most faithful servant, the blood of the Dark Lord's greatest foe, and access to a certain grave. I had thought Harry Potter safe, with their attempt on Azkaban all but failed—though I still set guards upon him—but now I am fearful indeed. They have access to Time, someone with a Time-Turner is sending messages for them; and I suspect the kidnap attempt on Harry Potter has already taken place some hours ago. Which is why *we* have not heard about it, being in Azkaban where Time cannot knot itself. That past came after our own future, you see."

"And if it is the other?" shouted Amelia. What she had heard already was worrying enough; that sounded like the darkest of Dark rituals, and centering on the dead Dark Lord himself.

The old wizard, his face now even grimmer, said nothing, only shook his head.

⁂

When the portkey's yank had subsided, the Sun was only just peeking over the horizon, looking more like dawn than sunset, as their broom hovered low above a brief expanse of dark-orange rock and sand, arranged into lumpy hills like someone had kneaded the land's dough a few times and then forgotten to roll it flat. In the near distance, waves rolled past in an endless vista of water, though the ground over which the broomstick hovered was above sea level by meters at the least.

Harry blinked at the dawn colors, and then realized the portkey had been international.

"Oy!" came a brisk, female shout from behind him, and Harry spun the broomstick to look. A middle-aged lady was holding up one hand to her mouth in a deliberate calling gesture, and bustling forward. Her kindly features, narrow eyes, and umber skin marked a race unfamiliar to Harry; she was clad in brilliant purple robes of a style Harry had never seen before; and when her lips opened again she spoke with an accent that Harry couldn't place, for he was not widely traveled. "Where were you? You're two hours late! I almost gave up on the lot of you... hello?"

There was a brief pause. Harry's thoughts seemed to be moving oddly, too slow, everything felt distant, like there was a thick pane of glass between himself and the world, and another thick pane of glass between himself and his feelings, so that he could see, but not touch. It had come over him upon seeing the dawn's light and the kindly witch, and thinking that it all seemed like a proper end to the adventure.

Then the witch was rushing forward and drawing her wand; a muttered word severed the cuffs that bound the emaciated woman to the broomstick, and Bellatrix was being floated down onto the sandy rock with her skeletal arms and pale legs dangling like lifeless things. "Oh, Merlin," whispered the witch, "Merlin, Merlin, Merlin..."

She appears concerned, thought an abstract, distant thing between two panes of glass. *Is that what a real healer would say, or is it what someone told to put on a performance would say?*

As though it wasn't Harry who spoke, but some other part of himself behind yet another pane of glass, a whisper came from his lips. "The green snake on her back is an Animagus." Not high the whisper, not cold, only quiet. "He is unconscious."

The witch's head twitched up, to look at where that voice had seemed to speak out of empty air, and then looked back down at Bellatrix. "You're not Mister Jaffe."

"That would be the Animagus," whispered Harry's lips. *Oh,* thought the Harry behind glass, listening to the sound of his own lips, *that makes sense; Professor Quirrell must have used a different name.*

"Since when is *he* a—bah, forget it." The witch laid her wand on the snake's nose for a moment, then shook her head sharply. "Nothing wrong with him that a day's rest won't cure. *Her...*"

"Can you wake him up now?" whispered Harry's lips. *Is that a good idea?* thought Harry, but his lips definitely seemed to think so.

Again the sharp headshake. "If an Innervate didn't work on him—" began the witch.

"I did not attempt one," whispered Harry's lips.

"What? Why—oh, never mind. *Innervate.*"

There was a pause, and then a snake slowly crawled out of its harness. Slowly the green head came up, looked around.

A blur later, Professor Quirrell was standing, and a moment later had sagged to his knees.

"Lie down," said the witch without looking up from Bellatrix. "That you in there, Jeremy?"

"Yes," said the Defense Professor rather hoarsely, as he carefully laid himself down on a relatively flat patch of sandy orange rock. He was not so pale as Bellatrix, but his face was bloodless in the dim dawn light. "Salutations, Miss Camblebunker."

"I told you," said the witch, sharpness in her voice and a slight smile on her face, "call me Crystal, this isn't Britain and we'll have none of your formality here. *And* it's Doctor now, not Miss."

"My apologies, Doctor Camblebunker." This was followed by a dry chuckle.

The witch's smile grew a little wider, her voice that much sharper. "Who's your friend?"

"You don't need to know." The Defense Professor's eyes were closed, where he lay on the ground.

"How wrong did it go?"

Very dryly indeed: "You can read about it tomorrow in any newspaper with an international section."

The witch's wand was tapping here, there, poking and prodding all over Bellatrix's body. "I missed you, Jeremy."

"Truly?" said the Defense Professor, sounding slightly surprised.

"Not even a tiny little bit. If I didn't owe you—"

The Defense Professor started to laugh, and then it turned into more of a coughing fit.

What do you think? said Slytherin to the Inner Critic, while Harry listened from behind the glass walls. *Performance, or reality?*

Can't tell, said Harry's Inner Critic. *I'm not in top critical form right now.*

Can anyone think of a good probe to gather more information? said Ravenclaw.

Again that whisper from the empty air above the broomstick: "What is the chance of undoing all that was done to her?"

"Oh, let's see. Legilimency and unknown Dark rituals, ten years for that to set in place, followed by ten years of Dementor exposure? Undo *that?* You're out of your skull, Mister Whoever-You-Are. The question is whether there's anything *left,* and I'd call that maybe one chance in three—" The witch suddenly cut herself off. Her voice, when it spoke again, was quieter. "If you were her friend, before... then no, you're never getting her back. Best understand that now."

I'm voting that this is a performance, said the Inner Critic. *She wouldn't just blurt all that out in response to one question unless she was looking for an opportunity.*

Noted, but I'm putting a low weight of confidence on that, said Ravenclaw. *It's very hard not to let your suspicions control your perceptions when you're trying to weigh evidence that subtle.*

"What potion did you give her?" the witch said after opening Bellatrix's mouth and peering inside, her wand flashing multiple colors of illumination.

The man lying on the ground calmly said, "Pepper-Up—"

"*Were you out of your mind?*"

Again the coughing laugh.

"She'll sleep for a week if she's lucky," the witch said, and clucked her tongue. "I'll owl you when she opens her eyes, I suppose, so you can come back and talk her into that Unbreakable Vow. Have you got anything to stop her from killing me on the spot, if she manages to even move for another month?"

The Defense Professor, eyes still closed, took a sheet of paper from his robes; a moment later, words began to appear on it, accompanied by tiny wisps of smoke. When the smoke had stopped rising, the paper floated over toward the woman.

The woman looked over the paper with raised eyebrows, gave a sardonic snort. "This had better work, Jeremy, or my last will and testament says that my whole estate goes into putting a bounty on your head. Speaking of which—"

The Defense Professor reached again into his robes and tossed the witch a bag that made a clinking sound. The witch caught it, weighed it, made a pleased sound.

Then she stood up, and the pale skeletal woman floated off the ground beside her. "I'm heading back," said the witch. "I can't start my work here."

"Wait," said the Defense Professor, and with a gesture retrieved his wand from Bellatrix's hand and harness. Then his hand pointed the wand at Bellatrix, and moved in a small circular gesture, accompanied by a quiet, "*Obliviate*."

"*That's it*," snapped the witch, "I'm taking her out of here before anyone does her any more damage—" One arm came around to hug the bony form of Bellatrix Black to her side, and they both disappeared with the loud POP! of Apparition.

And there was silence in that lumpy place, but for the gentle rush of the passing waves, and a little breath of wind.

I think the performance is finished, said the Inner Critic. *I give it two and a half out of five stars. She's probably not a very experienced actor.*

I wonder if a real healer would seem more fake than an actor told to play one? mused Ravenclaw.

Like watching a television show, that was how it felt, like watching a television show whose characters you didn't particularly empathize with, that was all that could be seen and felt from behind the glass walls.

Somehow, Harry managed to move his lips himself, send his own voice out into the still dawn air, and then was surprised to hear his own question. "How many different people are you, anyway?"

The pale man lying on the ground didn't laugh, but from the broomstick Harry's eyes saw the sides of Professor Quirrell's lips curling up, the edge of that familiar sardonic smile. "I cannot say that I bothered keeping count. How many are you?"

It shouldn't have shaken the inner Harry so much, hearing that response, and yet he felt—he felt—unstable, like his own center had been subtracted—

Oh.

"Excuse me," said Harry's voice. It now sounded as distant and detached as the fading Harry felt. "I'm going to faint in a few seconds, I think."

"Use the fourth portkey I gave you, the one I said was our fallback refuge," said the man lying on the ground, calmly but swiftly. "It will be safer there. And continue wearing your cloak."

Harry's free hand retrieved another twig from his pouch and snapped it.

There was another portkey yank, internationally long, and then he was somewhere black.

"*Lumos*," said Harry's lips, some part of him looking out for the safety of the whole.

He was inside what looked like a Muggle warehouse, a deserted one.

Harry's legs climbed off the broomstick, lay on the floor. His eyes closed, and some tidy fraction of self willed his light to fail, before the darkness took him.

"Where will you go?" yelled Amelia. They were almost at the edge of the wards.

"Backward in time to protect Harry Potter," said the old wizard, and before Amelia could even open her lips to ask if he wanted help, she felt the boundary of the wards as they crossed them.

There was a pop of Apparition, and the wizard and the phoenix vanished, leaving behind the borrowed broomstick.

CHAPTER SIXTY

THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT, PART X

"Wake."

Harry's eyes flew open as he came awake with a choking gasp, a jerking start of his prone body. He couldn't remember any dreams, maybe his brain had been too exhausted to dream, it seemed like he'd only closed his eyes and then heard that word spoken a moment after.

"You must awaken," said the voice of Quirinus Quirrell. "I gave you as much time as I could, but it would be wise to reserve at least one use of your Time-Turner. Soon we must go backward four hours to Mary's Place, appearing in every way as though we have done nothing interesting this day. I wished to speak to you before then."

Harry slowly sat up in the midst of darkness. His body ached, and not only in the places where it had laid on the hard concrete. Images tumbled over each other in his memory, everything his unconscious brain had been too tired to discharge into a proper nightmare.

Twelve terrible voids floating down a metal corridor, tarnishing the metal around them, light dimmed and temperature falling as the emptiness tried to suck all life out of the world—

Chalk-white skin, stretched just above the bone that had remained after fat and muscle faded—

A metal door—

A woman's voice—

No, I didn't mean it, please don't die—

I can't remember my children's names any more—

Don't go, don't take it away, don't don't don't—

"What was that place?" Harry said hoarsely, in a voice pushed out of his throat like water forced through a too-thin pipe, in the darkness it sounded almost as shattered as Bellatrix Black's voice had been. "*What was that place? That wasn't a prison, that was* HELL*!*"

"Hell?" said the calm voice of the Defense Professor. "You mean the Christian punishment fantasy? I suppose there is a similarity."

"How—" Harry's voice was blocking, there was something huge lodged in his throat. "How—how could they—" *People* had built that place, someone had *made* Azkaban, they'd made it on *purpose,* they'd done it *deliberately,* that woman, she'd had children, children she wouldn't remember, some judge had *decided* for that to happen to her, someone had needed to *drag* her into that cell and lock its door while she screamed, someone fed her every day and walked away *without letting her out—*

"HOW COULD PEOPLE DO THAT?"

"Why shouldn't they?" said the Defense Professor. A pale blue light lit the warehouse, then, showing a high, cavernous concrete ceiling, and a dusty concrete floor; and Professor Quirrell sitting some distance away from Harry, leaning his back against a painted wall; the pale blue light turned the walls to glacier surfaces, the dust on the floor to speckled snow, and the man himself had become an ice sculpture, shrouded in darkness where his black robes lay over him. "What use are the prisoners of Azkaban to them?"

Harry's mouth opened in a croak. No words exited.

A faint smile twitched on the Defense Professor's lips. "You know, Mr. Potter, if He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named had come to rule over magical Britain, and built such a place as Azkaban, he would have built it because he enjoyed seeing his enemies suffer. And if instead he began to find their suffering distasteful, why, he would order Azkaban torn down the next day. As for those who did make Azkaban, and those who do not tear it down, while preaching lofty sermons and imagining themselves *not* to be villains... well, Mr. Potter, I think if I had my choice of taking tea with them, or taking tea with You-Know-Who, I should find my sensibilities less offended by the Dark Lord."

"I don't understand," Harry said, his voice was shaking, he'd read about the classic experiment on the psychology of prisons, the ordinary college students who had turned sadistic as soon as they were assigned the role of prison guards; only now he realized that the experiment hadn't examined the right question, the one most important question, they hadn't looked at the key people, not the prison guards but *everyone else,* "I really don't understand, Professor Quirrell, how can people just stand by and let this happen, *why* is the country of magical Britain *doing this*—" Harry's voice stopped.

The Defense Professor's eyes appeared to be the same color as always, in the pale blue light, for that light was the same color as Quirinus Quirrell's irises, those never-thawing chips of ice. "Welcome, Mr. Potter, to your first encounter with the realities of politics. What do the wretched creatures in Azkaban have to offer any faction? Who would benefit from aiding them? A politician who openly sided with them would associate themselves with criminals, with weakness, with distasteful things that people would rather not think about. Alternatively, the politician could demonstrate their might and cruelty by calling for longer sentences; to make a display of strength requires a victim to crush beneath you, after all. And the populace applauds, for it is their instinct to back the winner." A coldly amused laugh. "You see, Mr. Potter, no one ever quite believes that *they* will go to Azkaban, so they see no harm in it for themselves. As for what they inflict on others... I suppose you were once told that people care about that sort of thing? It is a lie, Mr. Potter, people don't care in the slightest, and if you had not led a vastly sheltered childhood you would have noticed that long ago. Console yourself with this: those now prisoner in Azkaban voted for the same Ministers of Magic who pledged to move their cells closer to the Dementors. I admit, Mr. Potter, that I see little hope for democracy as an effective form of government, but I admire the poetry of how it makes its victims complicit in their own destruction."

Harry's recently cohered self was threatening to shatter into fragments again, the words falling like hammerstrikes on his consciousness, driving him back, step by step, over the precipice where lurked some vast abyss; and he was trying to find something to save himself, some

clever retort that would refute the words, but it did not come.

The Defense Professor watched Harry, the gaze reflecting more curiosity than command. "It is very simple, Mr. Potter, to understand how Azkaban was built, and how it continues to be. Men care for what they, themselves, expect to suffer or gain; and so long as they do not expect it to redound upon themselves, their cruelty and carelessness is without limit. All the other wizards of this country are no different within than he who sought to rule over them, You-Know-Who; they only lack his power and his... frankness."

The boy's hands were clenched into fists so tightly that the nails cut into his palm, if his fingers were white or his face was pale you couldn't have seen that, for the dim blue light cast all into ice or shadow. "You once offered to support me if my ambition were to be the next Dark Lord. Is that why, Professor?"

The Defense Professor inclined his head, a thin smile on his lips. "Learn all that I have to teach you, Mr. Potter, and you will rule this country in time. Then you may tear down the prison that democracy made, if you find that Azkaban still offends your sensibilities. Like it or not, Mr. Potter, you have seen this day that your own will conflicts with the will of this country's populace, and that you do not bow your head and submit to their decision when that occurs. So to them, whether or not they know it, and whether or not you acknowledge it, you are their next Dark Lord."

In the monochromatic light, unwavering, the boy and the Defense Professor both seemed like motionless ice sculptures, the irises of their eyes reduced to similar colors, looking very much the same in that light.

Harry stared directly into those pale eyes. All the long-suppressed questions, the ones he'd told himself he was putting on hold until the Ides of May. That had been a lie, Harry now knew, a self-deception, he had kept silent for fear of what he might hear. And now everything was coming forth from his lips, all at once. "On our first day of class, you tried to convince my classmates I was a killer."

"You are." Amusedly. "But if your question is why I *told* them that, Mr. Potter, the answer is that you will find ambiguity a great ally on your road to power. Give a sign of Slytherin on one day, and contradict

it with a sign of Gryffindor the next; and the Slytherins will be enabled to believe what they wish, while the Gryffindors argue themselves into supporting you as well. So long as there is uncertainty, people can believe whatever seems to be to their own advantage. And so long as you appear strong, so long as you appear to be winning, their instincts will tell them that their advantage lies with you. Walk always in the shadow, and light and darkness both will follow."

"And," said the boy, his voice level, "just what do *you* want out of all this?"

Professor Quirrell had leaned further back against the wall from where he sat, casting his face into shadow, his eyes changing from pale ice into dark pits like those of his snake form. "I wish for Britain to grow strong under a strong leader; that *is* my desire. As for my reasons why," Professor Quirrell smiled without mirth, "I think they shall stay my own."

"The sense of doom that I feel around you." The words were becoming harder and harder to say, as the subject danced closer and closer to something terrible and forbidden. "You always knew what it meant."

"I had several guesses," said Professor Quirrell, his expression unreadable. "And I will not yet say all I guessed. But this much I will tell you: it is *your* doom which flares when we come near, not mine."

For once Harry's brain managed to mark this as a questionable assertion and possible lie, instead of believing everything it heard. "Why do you sometimes turn into a zombie?"

"Personal reasons," said Professor Quirrell with no humor at all in his voice.

"What was your ulterior motive for rescuing Bellatrix?"

There was a brief silence, during which Harry tried hard to control his breathing, keep it steady.

Finally the Defense Professor shrugged, as though it were of no account. "I all but spelled it out for you, Mr. Potter. I told you everything you needed to deduce the answer, if you had been mature enough to consider that first obvious question. Bellatrix Black was the Dark Lord's most powerful servant, her loyalty the most assured; she was the single

person most likely to be entrusted with some part of the lost lore of Slytherin that should have been yours."

Slowly the anger crept over Harry, slowly the wrath, something terrible beginning to boil his blood, in just a few moments he would say something that he really shouldn't say while the two of them were alone in a deserted warehouse—

"But she *was* innocent," said the Defense Professor. He was not smiling. "And the degree to which all her choices were taken away from her, so that she never had a chance to suffer for her *own* mistakes... it struck me as *excessive*, Mr. Potter. If she tells you nothing of use—" The Defense Professor gave another small shrug. "I shall not consider this day's work a waste."

"How altruistic of you," Harry said coldly. "So if all wizards are like You-Know-Who inside, are you an exception to that, then?"

The Defense Professor's eyes were still in shadow, dark pits that could not be met. "Call it a whim, Mr. Potter. It has sometimes amused me to play the part of a hero. Who knows but that You-Know-Who would say the same."

Harry opened his mouth a final time—

And found that he couldn't say it, he couldn't ask the last question, the last and most important question, he couldn't make the words come out. Even though a refusal like that was forbidden to a rationalist, for all that he'd ever recited the Litany of Tarski or the Litany of Gendlin or sworn that whatever could be destroyed by the truth should be, in that one moment, he could not bring himself to say his last question out loud. Even though he knew he was thinking wrongly, even though he knew he was supposed to be better than this, he still couldn't say it.

"Now it is my turn to inquire of you." Professor Quirrell's back straightened from where it had leaned back against the glacier wall of painted concrete. "I was wondering, Mr. Potter, if you had anything to say about nearly killing me and ruining our mutual endeavor. I am given to understand that an apology, in such cases, is considered a sign of respect. But you have not offered me one. Is it just that you have not yet gotten around to it, Mr. Potter?"

The tone was calm, the quiet edge so fine and sharp that it would slice all the way through you before you realized you were being murdered.

And Harry just looked at the Defense Professor with cool eyes that would never flinch from anything; not even death, now. He was no longer in Azkaban, no longer fearful of the part of himself that was fearless; and the solid gemstone that was Harry had rotated to meet the stress, turning smoothly from one facet to another, from light to darkness, warm to cold.

A calculated ploy on his part, to make me feel guilty, put me in a position where I must submit?

Genuine emotion on his part?

"I see," said Professor Quirrell. "I suppose that answers—"

"No," said the boy in a cool, collected voice, "you do not get to frame the conversation that easily, Professor. I went to considerable lengths to protect you and get you out of Azkaban safely, *after* I thought you had tried to kill a police officer. That included facing down twelve Dementors without a Patronus Charm. I wonder, if I had apologized when you demanded it, would you have said thank-you in turn? Or am I correct in thinking that it was my submission you demanded there, and not only my respect?"

There was a pause, and then Professor Quirrell's voice came in reply, openly icy with danger no longer veiled. "It seems you still cannot bring yourself to lose, Mr. Potter."

Darkness stared out of Harry's eyes without flinching, the Defense Professor himself reduced to a mortal thing within them. "Oh, and are *you* pondering now, whether *you* should pretend to lose to me, and pretend to humble yourself before my own anger, in order to preserve your own plans? Did the thought of a calculated false apology even *cross your mind?* Me neither, Professor Quirrell."

The Defense Professor laughed, low and humorless, emptier than the void between the stars, dangerous as any vacuum filled with hard radiation. "No, Mr. Potter, you have not learned your lesson, not at all."

"I thought of losing many times, in Azkaban," said the boy, his voice level. "That I ought to simply give up, and turn myself over to the Au-

rors. Losing would have been the sensible thing to do. I heard your voice saying it to me, in my mind; and I would have *done* it, if I had been there by myself. But I could not bring myself to lose *you*."

There was silence, then, for a time; as though even the Defense Professor could not quite think of what to say to that.

"I am curious," said Professor Quirrell at last. "What do you think that I should apologize for, precisely? I gave you explicit instructions in the event of a fight. You were to stay down, stay out of the way, cast no magic. You violated those instructions and brought down the mission."

"I made no decision," the boy said evenly, "there was no choice in it, only a wish that the Auror should not die, and my Patronus was there. For that wish to have never occurred, you should have warned me that you might bluff using a Killing Curse. By default, I assume that if you point your wand at someone and say Avada Kedavra, it is because you want them dead. Shouldn't that be the first rule of Unforgivable Curse Safety?"

"Rules are for duels," said the Defense Professor. Some of the coldness had returned to his voice. "And dueling is a sport, not a branch of Battle Magic. In a real fight, a curse which cannot be blocked and *must* be dodged is an indispensable tactic. I would have thought this obvious to you, but it seems I misjudged your intellect."

"It also seems to me imprudent," said the boy, continuing as though the other had not spoken, "to not *tell me* that my casting any spell on you might kill us both. What if you had suffered some mishap, and I had tried an Innervate, or a Hover Charm? That ignorance, which you permitted for purposes I cannot guess, played also some part in this catastrophe."

There was another silence. The Defense Professor's eyes had narrowed, and there was a faintly puzzled look on his face, as though he had encountered some completely unfamiliar situation; and still the man spoke no word.

"Well," said the boy. His eyes had not wavered from the Defense Professor's. "I certainly regret hurting you, Professor. But I do not think the situation calls for me to submit to you. I never really did understand the concept of apology, still less as it applies to a situation like this; if

you have my regrets, but not my submission, does that count as saying sorry?"

Again that cold, cold laugh, darker than the void between the stars.

"I wouldn't know," said the Defense Professor, "I, too, never understood the concept of apology. That ploy would be futile between us, it seems, with both of us knowing it for a lie. Let us speak no more of it, then. Debts will be settled between us in time."

There was silence for a time.

"By the way," said the boy. "Hermione Granger would never have built Azkaban, no matter who was going to be put in it. And she'd die before she hurt an innocent. Just mentioning that, since you said before that all wizards are like You-Know-Who inside, and that's just false as a point of simple fact. Would've realized it earlier if I hadn't been," the boy gave a brief grim smile, "stressed out."

The Defense Professor's eyes were half-lidded, his expression distant. "People's insides are not always like their outsides, Mr. Potter. Perhaps she simply wishes others to think of her as a good girl. She cannot use the Patronus Charm—"

"Hah," said the boy; his smile seemed realer now, warmer. "She's having trouble for exactly the same reason I did. There's enough light in her to destroy Dementors, I'm sure. She wouldn't be able to *stop* herself from destroying Dementors, even at the cost of her own life..." The boy trailed off, and then his voice resumed. "*I* might not be such a good person, maybe; but they do exist, and she's one of them."

Dryly. "She is young, and to make a show of kindness costs her little."

There was a pause at this. Then the boy said, "Professor, I have to ask, when you see something all dark and gloomy, doesn't it ever occur to you to try and *improve* it somehow? Like, yes, something goes terribly wrong in people's heads that makes them think it's great to torture criminals, but that doesn't mean they're truly evil inside; and maybe if you taught them the right things, showed them what they were doing wrong, you could change—"

Professor Quirrell laughed, then, and not with the emptiness of before. "Ah, Mr. Potter, sometimes I do forget how very young you are.

Sooner you could change the color of the sky." Another chuckle, this one colder. "And the reason it is easy for you to forgive such fools and think well of them, Mr. Potter, is that you yourself have not been sorely hurt. You will think less fondly of commonplace idiots after the first time their folly costs you something dear. Such as a hundred Galleons from your own pocket, perhaps, rather than the agonizing deaths of a hundred strangers." The Defense Professor was smiling thinly. He took a pocket-watch out of his robes, looked at it. "Let us depart now, if there is nothing more to say between us."

"You don't have any questions about the impossible things I did to get us out of Azkaban?"

"No," said the Defense Professor. "I believe I have solved most of them already. As for the rest, it is too rare that I find a person whom I cannot see through immediately, be they friend or foe. I shall unravel the puzzles about you for myself, in due time."

The Defense Professor shoved himself up, pushing back on the wall with both hands and rising to his feet, smoothly if too slowly. The boy, less gracefully, did the same.

And the boy blurted out the last most terrible question which he had earlier been unable to ask; as though to say it aloud would make it real, and as though it were not, already, vastly obvious.

"Why am I not like the other children my own age?"

In a deserted side-road of Diagon Alley, where scraps of un-Vanished trash could be seen lodged into the edges of the brick street and the blank brick building-sides that surrounded it, along with scattered dirt and other signs of neglect, an ancient wizard and his phoenix Apparated into existence.

The wizard was already reaching within his robes for his hourglass when, in habit, his eyes jumped to a random spot between the road and the wall, to memorize it—

And the old wizard blinked in surprise; there was a scrap of parchment in that spot.

A frown crossed Albus Dumbledore's face as he took a step forward and took the crumpled scrap, unfolding it.

On it was the single word "No", and nothing more.

Slowly the wizard let it flutter from his fingers. Absently he reached down to the pavement, and picked up the nearest scrap of parchment, which looked remarkably similar to the one he had just taken; he touched it with his wand, and a moment later it was inscribed with the same word "No", in the same handwriting, which was his own.

The old wizard had planned to go back three hours to when Harry Potter first arrived in Diagon Alley. He had already watched, upon his instruments, the boy leaving Hogwarts, and that could not be undone (his one attempt to fool his own instruments, and so control Time without altering its appearance to himself, had ended in sufficient disaster to convince him to never again try such trickery). He had hoped to retrieve the boy at the first possible moment after his arrival, and take him to another safe location, if not Hogwarts (for his instruments had not shown the boy's return). But now—

"A paradox if I retrieve him immediately after he arrives in Diagon Alley?" murmured the old wizard to himself. "Perhaps they did not set in motion their plan to rob Azkaban, until after they had confirmed his arrival here... or else... perhaps..."

Painted concrete, hard floor and distant ceilings, two figures facing off across from each other. One entity who wore the shape of a man in his late thirties and already balding, and another mind that wore the form of an eleven-year-old boy with a scar upon his forehead. Ice and shadow, pale blue light.

"I don't know," said the man.

The boy just looked at him. And then said, "Oh, really?"

"Truly," said the man. "I know nothing, and of my guesses I will not speak. Yet I will say this much—"

CHAPTER SIXTY-ONE

THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT, PART XI: SECRECY AND OPENNESS

Through green flame they whirled, through the Floo network they spun, Minerva's heart racing with a pounding horror that she hadn't felt in ten years and three months, the corridors between space coughed and spit them out into the lobby of Gringotts (the safest Floo receiver in Diagon Alley, the connection most difficult to intercept, the fastest way out of Hogwarts without a phoenix). A goblin attendant turned toward them, his eyes widened, he began a slightly respectful bow—

Determination, Destination, Deliberation!

And the two of them were in the alley just in back of Mary's Place, wands already out and raised, spinning around back-to-back and the words of an Anti-Disillusionment Charm already rising to Severus's lips.

The alley was empty.

When she turned back to look at Severus, his wand was already cracking down on his own head with a sound like smashing an egg, as his lips chanted words of invisibility; he took on the colors of his surroundings, became a blur of his surroundings, the blur moved and matched what was behind him and then there was nothing there.

She lowered her wand and stepped forward to receive her own Disillusionment—

From behind her, the unmistakable sound of a burst of flame.

She spun and saw Albus there, his long wand already drawn and raised in his right hand. His eyes were grim beneath the half-circles of his glasses, and Fawkes upon his shoulder had spread his fire-colored wings in readiness for flight and fight.

"Albus!" she said. "I thought—" She'd just seen him depart for Azkaban, and she'd thought not even phoenixes could return from there so easily.

Then she realized.

"She escaped," said Albus. "Did your Patronus reach him?"

The pounding in her heart grew stronger, the horror in her veins solidified. "He said he was here, in the washroom—"

"Let us hope he spoke true," said Albus, the wand tapped her head with a sensation like water trickling over her, and a moment later the four of them (even Fawkes had been rendered invisible, though sometimes you saw a flicker of something like fire in his air) were racing to the front of the restaurant. They paused before the door while Albus whispered something, and a moment later one of the customers visible through the windows stood up with a vague look on his face and opened the door as though taking a quick look outside for some friend; and the three of them were through, racing past the unwitting customers (Severus was marking their faces, Minerva knew, and Albus would see any Disillusioned) toward the sign that pointed to the washroom—

An old wooden door marked with the sign of a toilet burst open with a slam, and four invisible rescuers stormed through it.

The small but clean wooden room was empty, fresh droplets of water showed in the sink but there was no sign of Harry, only a sheet of paper left on the closed lid of the toilet.

She couldn't breathe.

The sheet of paper rose up into the air as Albus took it, and a moment later was thrust in her own direction.

M: What did the hat tell me to tell you?

—H

"Ah," Minerva said aloud in surprise, her mind taking a moment to place the question, it wasn't the sort of thing you'd forget but she hadn't

been thinking in that *mode,* really—"I'm an impudent youngster and I should get off its lawn."

"*Eh?*" said the air in Albus's voice, as if even he could be shocked.

And then Harry Potter's head appeared, suspended next to the air beside the toilet, his face was cold and alert, the too-adult Harry she'd seen sometimes, eyes darting back and forth and around.

"What's going on—" the boy began.

Albus, now visible once more along with her and Fawkes, was moving forward in an instant, his left hand reached forward and plucked a hair from Harry's head (producing a startled yelp from the boy), Minerva accepted the hair in her own hand, and a moment later Albus swept up the mostly-invisible boy in his arms and there was a flash of red-golden fire.

And Harry Potter was safe.

Minerva took a few steps forward, leaned against the wall where Albus and Harry had been, trying to recover her poise.

She'd... lost some habits, in the ten years since the Order of the Phoenix had disbanded.

Beside her, Severus shimmered into visibility. His right hand was already drawing forth the flask from his robes, his left hand already stretching forth in demand. She gave him Harry's hair, and a moment later, it dropped into the flask of unfinished Polyjuice, which at once began fizzing and bubbling as it settled into the potency that would enable Severus to act his part as bait.

"That was unexpected," the Potions Master said slowly. "Why did our Headmaster not retrieve Mr. Potter *earlier*, I wonder, if he was going so far as to twist Time? There should have been nothing preventing him from doing so... indeed, your Patronus should have found Mr. Potter already safe..."

She hadn't thought of that, a different realization having jumped to the forefront of her mind. It wasn't nearly as horrifying as Bellatrix Black having escaped from Azkaban, but still—

"Harry has an *invisibility cloak?*" she said.

The Potions Master did not answer; he was shrinking.

CHAPTER SIXTY-ONE

Tick-snick, drip-blip, ding-ring-ting—

It still annoyed her, though it faded past attention after a while; and when and if she became Headmistress, she intended to Silence the whole lot. Which Head of Hogwarts, she wondered, had first been so inconsiderate as to create a device that made *noise*, to pass on to their successors?

She was sitting in the Headmaster's office with a quickly Transfigured desk of her own, doing some of the hundred little pieces of necessary paperwork that kept Hogwarts from grinding to a halt; she could lose herself in it easily, and it prevented her from thinking about other things. Albus had once remarked, sounding rather wry, that Hogwarts seemed to run even more smoothly when there was an outside crisis for her to avoid thinking about...

...ten years ago, that was the last time Albus had said that.

There was the chime that indicated an approaching visitor.

Minerva kept reading her current parchment.

The door slammed open, revealing Severus Snape, who took three steps inward and demanded without the slightest pause, "Any word from Mad-Eye?"

Albus was already rising from his chair, even as she tucked away her parchments and dispelled the desk. "Moody's Patronus is reporting to the me in Azkaban," Albus said. "His Eye saw nothing; and if the Eye of Vance does not see a thing, then that thing does not exist. Yourself?"

"No one has tried to forcibly take my blood," Severus said. He gave a quick grimace of a smile. "Except the Defense Professor."

"*What?*" said Minerva.

"He saw me for an impostor before I could even open my lips, and quite reasonably attacked me on the spot, demanding to know the whereabouts of Mr. Potter." Another grimace of a smile. "Shouting that I was Severus Snape did not seem to reassure him, for some reason. I do believe that man would kill me for a Sickle and give back five Knuts change. I had to stun our good Professor Quirrell, which was not easy, and then he

reacted poorly to the hex. 'Harry Potter', naturally alarmed, ran out and told the owner, and the Defense Professor was taken to St. Mungo's—"

"*St. Mungo's?*"

"—which said he had probably been overworking himself for weeks before he collapsed, such was his state of exhaustion. Your precious Defense Professor is fine, Minerva, the stunner may have helped him by forcing him to take a few days off. Afterward I declined the offer of a Floo to Hogwarts, and went back to Diagon Alley and wandered; but no one seems to have wanted Mr. Potter's blood today."

"Our Defense Professor is in the best of hands, I am sure," said Albus. "Greater matters command our attention, Minerva."

It took considerable effort for her to wrench her attention back, but she sat back down, and Severus gestured up a chair for himself as well, and the three of them drew together to begin their council.

She felt like a Polyjuiced impostor, sitting with those two. War was not her art, nor plotting. She had to strain to keep one step ahead of the Weasley twins, and sometimes she failed at that. She was sitting here, ultimately, only because she had heard the prophecy...

"We are faced," the Headmaster spoke first, "with a rather alarming mystery. I can think of only two wizards who might have engineered this escape."

Minerva drew in her breath sharply. "There is a chance it is *not* You-Know-Who?"

"I'm afraid so," said the Headmaster.

She glanced to her side and saw that Severus looked as puzzled as herself. *Afraid* the Dark Lord was not rising again? She would have given almost anything for that to be true.

"So," Albus said heavily. "Our first suspect is Voldemort, risen again and seeking to resurrect himself. I have studied many books I wish I had not read, seeking his every possible avenue of return, and I have found only three. His strongest road to life is the Philosopher's Stone, which Flamel assures me that not even Voldemort could create on his own; by that road he would rise greater and more terrible than ever before. I would not have thought Voldemort able to resist the temptation of the Stone, still less because such an obvious trap is a challenge to his wit. But

his second avenue is nearly as strong: The flesh of his servant, willingly given; the blood of his foe, forcibly taken; and the bone of his ancestor, unknowingly bequeathed. Voldemort is a perfectionist—" Albus glanced at Severus, who nodded agreement, "—and he would certainly seek the most powerful combination: the flesh of Bellatrix Black, the blood of Harry Potter, and the bone of his father. Voldemort's final avenue is to seduce a victim and drain the life from them over a long period; in which case Voldemort would be weak compared to his former power. His motive to spirit away Bellatrix is clear. And if he is keeping her in reserve, to use only in case he cannot attain the Stone, that would explain why no kidnap attempt was made on Harry this day."

Minerva glanced again at Severus, saw him listening attentively but without surprise.

"What is *not* clear," the Headmaster continued, "is *how* Voldemort could have engineered this escape. A death doll was left in Bellatrix's place, her escape was meant to be undetected; and even though that went wrong, the Dementors could not find her after their first warning. Azkaban has stood impenetrable for centuries, and I cannot imagine any means by which Voldemort could have accomplished this."

"That may mean little," Severus said, expressionless. "For the Dark Lord to do what we cannot imagine requires only that he has a better imagination."

Albus nodded grimly. "Unfortunately there is now another wizard who laughs at impossibilities. A wizard who, not long ago, developed a new and powerful Charm which could have blinded the Dementors to Bellatrix Black's escape. And he is implicated for other reasons, as well."

Minerva's heart was skipping beats, she didn't know *how,* or *why,* but a terrible apprehension was dawning on her as to *who*—

"Who would *that* be?" said Severus, sounding puzzled.

Albus leaned back and said the fatal words, even as she had feared them: "Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres."

"*Potter?*" demanded the Potions Master, as much shock in that usually-silken voice as she had ever heard from him. "Headmaster, is this one of your jokes? He is in his first year at Hogwarts! A temper

tantrum and a few childish pranks with an invisibility cloak does not make him—"

"It is no joke," said Minerva, her voice barely above a whisper. "Harry is already making original discoveries in Transfiguration, Severus. Though I did not know he was researching Charms as well."

"Harry is no ordinary first-year," the Headmaster said solemnly. "He is marked as the Dark Lord's equal, and he has power the Dark Lord knows not."

Severus was looking at her, and you would have needed to know him well to recognize that his glance was pleading. "Am I to take this seriously?"

Minerva simply nodded.

"Does anyone *else* know of this... new and powerful Charm?" Severus demanded.

The Headmaster glanced at her apologetically—

Somehow she knew, she knew before he even said it, and she wanted to scream at the top of her lungs.

—and said, "Quirinus Quirrell."

"*Why,*" she said, in a voice that should have melted half the devices in the office, "*did Mr. Potter even TELL our Defense Professor about his brilliant new Charm for breaking out of prisons—*"

The Headmaster passed a weary wrinkled hand across his equally wrinkled forehead. "Quirinus just happened to be there, Minerva. Even I saw no harm in it at the time." The Headmaster hesitated. "And Harry said his Charm was too dangerous to be explained to either of us; and when I asked him again, this day, he insisted he had still not explained it to Quirinus, nor had he ever dropped his Occlumency barriers in the Defense Professor's presence—"

"Mr. Potter is an *Occlumens?* You gave him an invisibility cloak and he is immune to Veritaserum *and he is friends with the Weasley twins?* Albus, do you have any idea what you have unleashed upon this school?" Her voice was nearly shrieking, now. "By his seventh year there won't be anything left of Hogwarts but a smoking hole in the ground!"

Albus leaned back in his great cushioned chair, and said, smiling, "Don't forget the Time-Turner."

She did scream then, but quietly.

Severus drawled, "Should I teach him to brew Polyjuice, Headmaster? I ask only for the sake of completeness, in case you are not satisfied with the magnitude of your pet disaster."

"Perhaps next year," said Albus. "My dearest friends, the question before us is whether Harry Potter has spirited Bellatrix Black out of Azkaban, which is more than youthful high spirits even by my tolerant standards."

"Excuse me, Headmaster," Severus said with one of the dryer smiles she had ever seen him deliver to Albus, "but I will register my opinion that the answer is no. This is the Dark Lord's work, pure and simple."

"Then why," Albus said, and now there was no humor at all in his voice, "when I planned to retrieve Harry immediately after his arrival in Diagon Alley, did I find that this would result in paradox?"

Minerva sank further back into her chair, dropped her left elbow onto the hard uncushioned armrest, leaned her head into her hand, and shut her eyes in despair.

There was a narrowly circulated proverb to the effect that only one Auror in thirty was qualified to investigate cases involving Time-Turners; and that of those few, the half who weren't *already* insane, soon would be.

"So you suspect," Severus's voice was saying, "that Harry went from Diagon Alley to Azkaban, then looped back to Diagon Alley afterward to be picked up by us—"

"Precisely," said Albus's voice. "Though it is also possible that Voldemort or his servants watched to make sure Harry did arrive in Diagon Alley, before they began their attempt on Azkaban. And that they had someone with a Time-Turner who would send back the message of their success, to trigger the abduction. Indeed, it was my suspicion of this possibility that caused me to dispatch you and Minerva on your own mission, before I myself went to Azkaban. I thought then that their breakout would fail, but if retrieving Harry Potter meant observing the fact of their eventual failure, then I myself could not have gone to Azkaban after I had interacted with him, for Azkaban's future cannot touch its past. When, in Azkaban, I received no report from you or Minerva,

nor from Flitwick whom I told to try contacting you, I knew that your interaction with Harry Potter had been an interaction with Azkaban's future, meaning that someone was sending messages through Time—"

Then Albus's voice stopped.

"But Headmaster," said Severus, "*you* came back from Azkaban's future and interacted with us..."

The Potions Master's voice trailed off.

"But Severus, if I had *received* reports from you and Minerva of Harry's safety, I would not, in the first place, have gone backward in time to—"

"Headmaster, I think we must draw diagrams for this."

"I agree, Severus."

There was the sound of parchment being spread on a table, and then quills scratching, and more arguing.

Minerva sat in her chair, head resting in her hand, eyes shut.

There was a story she'd once heard about a criminal who had possessed a Time-Turner which the Department of Mysteries had sealed to him, in a case of extremely bad judgment as to who needed one; and there had been an Auror assigned to track down this unknown time-criminal, who had also been given a Time-Turner; and the story ended with both of them in St. Mungo's ward for Total Unrecoverable Nutcases.

Minerva sat there with her eyes shut, trying not to listen, trying not to think about it, and trying not to go insane.

After awhile, when the argument seemed to have wound down, she said aloud, "Mr. Potter's Time-Turner is restricted to the hours of nine PM through midnight. Was the shell tampered with, Albus?"

"Not to my most discerning Charms," said Albus. "But the shells are new things; and to defeat the Unspeakables' precautions and leave no trace of the defeat... might *not* be impossible."

She opened her eyes, and saw Severus and the Headmaster staring intently at a parchment covered with tangled squiggles that would have no doubt driven her mad to comprehend.

"Have you come to any *conclusions*?" Minerva said. "And please don't tell me how you arrived at them."

Severus and the Headmaster looked at each other, then turned to look at her.

"We have concluded," the Headmaster said gravely, "that either Harry was involved or he was not; that either Voldemort has access to a Time-Turner or he does not; and that regardless of what could have happened within Azkaban, nobody would have visited the Little Hangleton graveyard during the period Moody has already watched over it within my own past."

"In short," Severus drawled, "we know nothing, dear Minerva; though it seems at least *likely* that another Time-Turner was involved, somehow. My own suspicion is that Potter has been bribed, tricked, or threatened into conveying messages backward in time, perhaps even regarding this very prison break. I shall not make the obvious suggestion as to who is pulling his strings. But I suggest that at nine o' clock tonight, we test whether Potter is able to travel the full six hours backward to three o' clock, to see if he has yet used his Time-Turner."

"That seems wise to do in any case," said Dumbledore. "See that done, Minerva, and tell Harry to stop in my office at his convenience, afterward."

"But you still suspect Harry of direct involvement in the prison break itself?" Minerva said.

"Possible but unlikely," said Severus, at the same time Albus said, "Yes."

Minerva pinched the bridge of her nose, took a deep breath, let it out. "Albus, Severus, what possible *reason* has Mr. Potter to do such a thing!"

"None that I can think of," said Albus, "but it remains that Harry's magics alone, of all the means known to me, might have—"

"Hold," said Severus. All expression vanished from his face. "A thought occurs to me, I must check—" The Potions Master seized a pinch of Floo powder, strode across the room toward the fireplace—Albus hastily waved his wand to light it—and then in a flare of green flame, and the words "Slytherin Head of House office", Severus was gone.

She and Albus looked at each other and both shrugged; and then Albus turned back to studying the parchment.

It was only a few minutes later that Severus spun back out of the Floo, brushing traces of ash from himself.

"Well," said the Potions Master. Again the expressionless face. "I am afraid that Mr. Potter does have a motive."

"Speak!" said Albus.

"I found Lesath Lestrange in the Slytherin common room, studying," Severus said. "He was not reluctant to meet my eyes. And it seems that Mr. Lestrange did not like to think of his parents in Azkaban, in the cold and the darkness, with the Dementors sucking away their life, hurting every second of every day, and he told Mr. Potter so in as many words, and begged him to get them out. Since, you see, Mr. Lestrange had heard that the Boy-Who-Lived could do anything."

She and Albus exchanged glances.

"Severus," Minerva said, "*surely*... even *Harry*... has more common sense than *that*..."

Her voice trailed off.

"Mr. Potter thinks he is God," Severus said without expression, "and Lesath Lestrange fell to his knees before him in a heartfelt cry of prayer."

Minerva stared at Severus, feeling sick to her stomach. She had studied Muggle religion—it was the most common reason for needing to Memory-Charm the parents of Muggleborns—and she knew enough to understand what Severus had just said.

"In any case," said the Potions Master. "I looked within Mr. Lestrange to see if he knew anything of his mother's escape. He has heard nothing. But the instant he learns, he will conclude that the person responsible was Harry Potter."

"I see..." Albus said slowly. "Thank you, Severus. That is good news."

"*Good news?*" Minerva burst out.

Albus looked at her, his face as expressionless as Severus's, now; and she remembered, with a shock, that Albus's own—"It is the best reason I can possibly imagine for removing Bellatrix from Azkaban," Albus said quietly. "And if it is *not* Harry, let us recall, then it is certainly Voldemort himself making his first moves. But let us not be hasty in judgment while there is much we do not yet know, but soon will."

Albus once more stood up from behind his desk, strode to the fireplace still alight, cast in another pinch of green powder, and stuck his head into the flames. "Department of Magical Law Enforcement," he said, "Director's office."

After a moment, the voice of Madam Bones came through clear and sharp, "What is it, Albus? I am somewhat busy."

"Amelia," said Albus, "I beg of you to share any discoveries you have made concerning this matter."

There was a pause. "Oh," said the cold voice of Madam Bones from the blazing fire, "and is that a two-way road then, Albus?"

"It may be," the old wizard said calmly.

"If any Auror dies of your reticence, old meddler, I will hold you responsible in full measure."

"I understand, Amelia," Albus said, "but I have no wish to spark needless alarm and incredulity—"

"*Bellatrix Black* has escaped from *Azkaban!* What alarm or incredulity do you think I will call *needless,* in the face of that?"

"I may call on you to remember those words," said the old wizard into the green flames. "For if I learn that my fears are not needless, I *will* tell you. Now, Amelia, I beg you, if you have learned anything whatsoever upon this matter, please share it."

There was another pause, and then Madam Bones's voice said, "I have information which I learned four hours into the future, Albus. Do you still want it?"

Albus paused—

(weighing, Minerva knew, the possibility that he might want to go back more than two hours from this instant; for you couldn't send information further back in time than six hours, not through any chain of Time-Turners)

—and finally said, "Yes, please."

"We had a lucky break," said Madam Bones's voice, "one of the Aurors who witnessed the escape was a Muggleborn, and she told us that the Flying-Fire spell, as we were calling it, might be no spell at all, but a Muggle artifact."

Like a punch in the stomach, that was how it felt, and the sickness in Minerva's belly redoubled. Anyone who'd watched a Chaos Legion battle knew whose hand that showed...

Madam Bones's voice continued. "We brought in Arthur Weasley from Misuse of Muggle Artifacts—he knows more about Muggle artifacts than any wizard alive—and gave him the descriptions from the Aurors on the scene, and he cracked it. It was a Muggle artifact called a rocker, and they call it that because you'd have to be off your rocker to ride one. Just six years ago one of their rockers blew up, killed hundreds of Muggles in a flash and almost set fire to the Moon. Weasley says that rockers use a special kind of science called opposite reaction, so the plan is to develop a jinx which will prevent that science from working around Azkaban."

"Thank you, Amelia," Albus said gravely. "Is that everything?"

"I'll check if we have anything from six hours forward," said the voice of Madam Bones, "if so they wouldn't have told me, but I'll have them tell you. Do *you* have anything you want to tell me, Albus? Which of those two possibilities is it looking like?"

"Not yet, Amelia," Albus said, "but I may have word for you soon."

He straightened up from the fire, then, which faded back to ordinary yellow flames. Every minute of the old wizard's years, every natural second since his birth and every second which Time-Turning had added, all of that plus a few extra decades for stress, was visible on his lined face.

"Severus?" the old wizard said. "What was it actually?"

"A rocket," said the half-blood Potions Master, who had grown up in the Muggle town of Spinner's End. "One of the most impressive Muggle technologies."

"How likely is *Harry* to know such arts?" said Minerva.

Severus drawled, "Oh, a boy like Mr. Potter knows *all* about rockets; that, dear Minerva, is a certainty. You must remember that things are done differently in the Muggle world." Severus frowned. "But rockets *are* dangerous, and expensive..."

"Harry has stolen and hidden an unknown amount of money from his Gringotts vault, perhaps thousands of Galleons," said the Headmaster, and then, to their twin stares, "That was *not* in my plan, but I

made the mistake of sending the Defense Professor to supervise Harry's withdrawal of five Galleons for Christmas presents..." The Headmaster shrugged. "Yes, I agree, sheer folly in retrospect, let us continue."

Minerva quietly thudded her head a few times against the headrest of her chair.

"Nonetheless, Headmaster," Severus said. "Just because the Death Eaters never used Muggle artifacts in the first war, that does not mean *he* is ignorant. Rockets fell on Britain as weapons, in the Muggle side of Grindelwald's war. If he spent the summers of those years in a Muggle orphanage, as you told us, Headmaster... then he, too, has heard of rockets. And if he has been listening to reports of Mr. Potter and his mock battles using Muggle artifacts, he would certainly learn his enemy's strengths and try to redouble them himself. That is *just* how he thinks; any power he sees he will try to take for his own."

The old wizard was standing stock still, utterly motionless, even the hairs of his beard frozen in place like solid wires; and the thought came to Minerva, as frightening as any thought she'd ever had, that Albus Dumbledore was rooted to the spot in horror.

"Severus," Albus Dumbledore said, and his voice almost cracked, "do you realize what you are saying? If Harry Potter and Voldemort fight their war with Muggle weapons there will be nothing left of the world but fire!"

"*What?*" said Minerva. She had heard of guns, of course, but they weren't *that* dangerous to an experienced witch—

Severus spoke as though she weren't in the room. "Then perhaps, Headmaster, he is sending a deliberate warning to Harry Potter of exactly that; saying that any attack with Muggle weapons will be met with retaliation in kind. Command Mr. Potter to cease his use of Muggle technology in his battles; that will show him the message is received... and not give him any more ideas." Severus frowned. "Though, come to think of it, Mr. Malfoy—and of course Miss Granger—well, on second thought a blanket prohibition on technology seems wiser—"

The old wizard pressed both his hands to his forehead, and from his lips came an unsteady voice, "I begin to *hope* that it is Harry behind this

escape... oh, Merlin defend us all, what have I done, what have I done, what will become of the world?"

Severus shrugged. "From the rumors I have heard, Headmaster, Muggle weapons are only slightly worse than the more... *recondite* aspects of wizardry—"

"*Worse?*" gasped Minerva, and then shut her mouth as though by force.

"Worse than any peril I know," said Albus. "But probably not worse than whatever erased Atlantis from Time."

Minerva stared at him, feeling the sweat break out all along her spine.

Severus continued, still addressing Albus. "All the Death Eaters save Bellatrix would have betrayed him, all his supporters turned against him, all the powers of the world converged to destroy him, if he had been reckless with any truly dangerous potency. Is this so different, then?"

Some motion, some color, had returned to the old wizard's face. "Perhaps not..."

"And in any case," Severus said with a slightly condescending smile, "Muggle weapons are not so easy to obtain, not for a thousand Galleons or a thousand thousand."

Doesn't Harry just Transfigure the devices he uses in his battles? thought Minerva, but before she could open her mouth to ask—

The fireplace erupted in green flames, then, and the face of Pius Thicknesse, Madam Bones's assistant, appeared therein. "Chief Warlock?" said Thicknesse. "I have a report for you, transmitted from—" Thicknesse's eyes flickered over Minerva and Severus, "six minutes ago."

"Six hours ahead, you mean," said Albus. "These two are meant to hear it; deliver your report."

"We know how it was done," said Thicknesse. "In Bellatrix Black's cell, hidden in one corner, was a potions vial; and testing the traces of remaining fluid shows that it was an Animagus potion."

There was a long pause.

"I see..." Albus said heavily.

"Pardon me?" said Minerva. She didn't.

Thicknesse's head turned toward her. "Animagi, Madam McGonagall, in their Animagus forms, are of less interest to Dementors. All

prisoners are tested before their arrival at Azkaban; and if they are Animagi, their Animagus form is destroyed. But we had not considered that someone protected by a Patronus Charm while taking the potion and performing the meditation, might be able to become an Animagus *after* they went to Azkaban—"

"I understood," Severus said, having by now put on his customary sneer, "that the Animagus meditation required considerable time."

"Well, Mr. Snape," Thicknesse barked, "records show that Bellatrix Black was an Animagus *before* she was sentenced to Azkaban and her form destroyed; so maybe her *second* meditation didn't take as much time as her first!"

"I would not have thought it possible for any prisoner of Azkaban to do such a thing..." Albus said. "But Bellatrix Black was a most powerful sorceress before her incarceration, and she might have done it if any witch could. Can Azkaban be secured against this method?"

"Yes," said the confident head of Pius Thicknesse. "Our expert says that it is nigh-unimaginable that an Animagus meditation could be performed in less than three hours, regardless of experience. All visits to prisoners allowed to receive them will be limited to two hours henceforth, and the Dementors will inform us if any Patronus Charm is maintained in the prison areas for longer than that."

Albus looked unhappy at that, but nodded. "I see. There will be no further attempts of that sort, of course, but do not relax your vigilance. And when Amelia has been told all this, tell her that I have information for her."

The head of Pius Thicknesse vanished without another word.

"No further attempts...?" said Minerva.

"Because, dear Minerva," Severus drawled, having not quite taken off his habitual sneer, "if the Dark Lord had planned to free any of his other servants from Azkaban, he would not have left behind the vial of potion to tell us how it was done." Severus frowned. "I confess... even so I do not see why that vial was left there."

"It is some kind of message..." Albus said slowly. "And I cannot see what it means, not at all..." He drummed his fingers on his desk.

For a long minute or three, the old wizard stared off into nothingness, frowning; while Severus also sat in silence.

Then Albus shook his head in dismay, and said, "Severus, do *you* comprehend this?"

"No," said the Potions Master, and with a sardonic smile, "which is probably all the better for us; whatever we are *intended* to conclude from it, that part of his plan has misfired."

"You are certain, now, that it *is* You-Know... that it is Voldemort?" said Minerva. "It could not be that some other Death Eater conceived this clever notion?"

"And they knew about rockets, too?" Severus said dryly. "I don't believe the other Death Eaters were so fond of Muggle Studies. It is he."

"Aye, it is he," Albus said. "Azkaban has endured impenetrable for ages, only to fall to an ordinary Animagus potion. It is too clever and too impossible, which was ever Voldemort's signature since the days he was known as Tom Riddle. Anyone who wished to forge that signature must needs be as cunning as Voldemort himself to do so. And there is no one else in the world who would accidentally overestimate my wit, and leave me a message I cannot understand at all."

"Unless he has gauged you exactly," Severus said tonelessly, "in which case all that is just what he intended you to think."

Albus sighed. "Indeed. But even if he has tricked me perfectly, we may at least rely on the conclusion that it was not Harry Potter."

It should have come as a relief, and yet Minerva felt the chill spreading through her spine and her veins, her lungs and her bones.

She remembered conversations like this.

She remembered conversations like this from ten years ago, from a time when blood had run through Britain in wide rivers, when wizards and witches she had once taught in class had been slaughtered by the hundreds, she remembered burning homes and screaming children and flashes of green light—

"What will you tell Madam Bones?" she whispered.

Albus stood from his desk and paced to the center of the room, his hand lightly touching the devices, here an instrument of light, there an instrument of sound; he adjusted his glasses with one hand, used the

other to center the long silver beard against his robes, and then finally that ancient wizard turned back and faced them.

"I will tell her what little I know of the Dark Art called horcrux, by which a soul is deprived of death," said Albus Dumbledore, in a soft voice that seemed to fill the whole room, "and I will tell her what may be done with the flesh of the servant."

"I will tell her that I am reconstituting the Order of the Phoenix."

"I will tell her that Voldemort has returned."

"And that the Second Wizarding War is begun."

Some hours later...

The antique old clock upon the wall of the Deputy Headmistress's office had golden hands, and silver numerals to make the clock-face; it ticked and jerked soundlessly through its motions, for there was a Quieting enchantment on it.

The golden hour hand approached the silver numeral of nine, the golden minute hand did the same, the two linked components of Time nearing each other, soon to be in the same place and never to collide.

It was 8:43PM, and the time approached when Harry's Time-Turner would open, to be tested in the one way that no imaginable spell could fool, unless that spell could bypass the laws of Time itself. No body or soul, no knowledge or substance, could stretch an extra seven hours in a single day. She would make up a message on the spot, and tell Harry to take that message back six hours to Professor Flitwick at 3PM, and she would ask Professor Flitwick if he had received it in that hour.

And Professor Flitwick would tell her that he had indeed received it at 3PM.

And she would tell Severus and Albus to have a *little* more faith in Harry next time.

Professor McGonagall cast the Patronus Charm, and told her shining cat, "Go to Mr. Potter, and tell him this: Mr. Potter, please come to my

office as soon as you hear this, without doing anything else along the way."

CHAPTER SIXTY-TWO

THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT, PART XII

Minerva gazed up at the clock, the golden hands and silver numerals, the jerking motion. Muggles had invented that, and until they had, wizards had not bothered keeping time. Bells, timed by a sanded hourglass, had served Hogwarts for its classes when it was built. It was one of the things that blood purists wished not to be true, and therefore Minerva knew it.

She had received an Outstanding on her Muggle Studies N.E.W.T., which now seemed to her a mark of shame, considering how little she knew. Her younger self had realized, even then, that the class was a sham, taught by a pureblood, supposedly because Muggleborns could not appreciate what wizardborns needed to be told, and actually because the Board of Governors did not approve of Muggles at all. But when she was seventeen the Outstanding grade had been the main thing that mattered to her, she was saddened to remember...

If Harry Potter and Voldemort fight their war with Muggle weapons there will be nothing left of the world but fire!

She couldn't imagine it, and the reason she couldn't imagine it was that she couldn't imagine Harry fighting You-Know-Who.

She had encountered the Dark Lord four times and survived each one, three times with Albus to shield her and once with Moody at her side. She remembered the damaged, snakelike face, the faint green scales scattered over the skin, the glowing red eyes, the voice that laughed in a high-pitched hiss and promised nothing but cruelty and torment: the monster pure and complete.

And Harry Potter was easy to picture in her mind, the bright expression on the face of a young boy who wavered between taking the ludicrous seriously and taking the serious ludicrously.

And to think of the two of them facing off at wandpoint was too painful to be imagined.

They had no right, no right at all to set this on an eleven-year-old boy. She knew what the Headmaster had decided for him this day, for she had been told to make the arrangements; and if it had been her at the same age she would have raged and screamed and cried and been inconsolable for weeks, and...

He is no ordinary first-year, Albus had said. *He is marked as the Dark Lord's equal, and he has power the Dark Lord knows not.*

The terrible hollow voice booming from Sybill Trelawney's throat, the true and original prophecy, echoed once more through her mind. She had a feeling it didn't mean what the Headmaster thought it did, but there was no way to put the difference into words.

And even so it still seemed true, that if there were any eleven-year-old within the Earth entire who could bear this burden, that boy approached her office now. And if she said anything at all like 'poor Harry' to his face... well, he wouldn't like it.

So now I've got to find some way to kill an immortal Dark Wizard, Harry had said on the day he had first learned. *I really wish you had told me that before I started shopping...*

She'd been Head of House Gryffindor for long enough, she'd watched enough friends die, to know that there were some people you couldn't save from becoming heroes.

There came a knock at the door, and Professor McGonagall said, "Enter."

When Harry entered, his face had the same cold, alert look she'd seen in Mary's Place; and she wondered for an instant if he'd been wearing that same mask, that same self, this whole day.

The young boy seated himself on the chair before her desk, and said, "So is it time for me to be told what's going on?" Neutral the words, not the sharpness that should have gone with the expression.

Professor McGonagall's eyes rose in surprise before she could stop them, and she said, "The Headmaster told you nothing, Mr. Potter?"

The boy shook his head. "Only that he'd received a warning that I might be in danger, but I was safe now."

Minerva was having trouble meeting his gaze. How could they *do* this to him, how could they lay this upon an eleven-year-old boy, this war, this destiny, this prophecy... and they didn't even *trust* him...

She forced herself to look at Harry directly, and saw that his green eyes were calm as they rested on her.

"Professor McGonagall?" the boy said quietly.

"Mr. Potter," said Professor McGonagall, "I'm afraid it is not my place to explain, but if after this the Headmaster *still* does not tell you anything, you may come back to me and I will go yell at him for you."

The boy's eyes widened, something of the real Harry showing through the crack before the cool mask was set back in place.

"In any case," Professor McGonagall said briskly. "I'm sorry for the inconvenience, Mr. Potter, but I need to ask you to use your Time-Turner to go back six hours to three o'clock, and give the following message to Professor Flitwick: Silver on the tree. Ask the Professor to note down the time at which you gave him that message. Afterward the Headmaster wishes to meet with you at your convenience."

There was a pause.

Then the boy said, "I am suspected of misusing my Time-Turner, then?"

"Not by *me!*" Professor McGonagall said hastily. "I *am* sorry for the inconvenience, Mr. Potter."

There was another pause, and then the young boy shrugged. "It'll play hob with my sleep schedule but I suppose it can't be helped. Please let the house elves know that if I ask for an early breakfast at, say, three A.M. tomorrow morning, I'm to receive it."

"Of course, Mr. Potter," she said. "Thank you for understanding."

The boy rose up from his chair and gave her a formal nod, then slipped out the door with his hand already going under his shirt to where his Time-Turner waited; and she almost called out *Harry!* only she wouldn't have known what to say after.

Instead she waited, her eyes on the clock.

How long did she need to wait for Harry Potter to go back in time?

She didn't need to wait at all, actually; if he had done it, then it had already happened...

Minerva knew, then, that she was delaying because she was nervous, and the realization saddened her. Mischief, yes, unspeakable unthinkable mischief with all the prudence and foresight of a falling rock—she didn't know how the boy had tricked the Hat into not Sorting him to Gryffindor where he obviously belonged—but nothing dark or harmful, not ever. Beneath that mischief his goodness ran as deep and as true as the Weasley twins', though not even the Cruciatus Curse could have gotten her to say that out loud.

"*Expecto Patronum*," she said, and then, "Go to Professor Flitwick, and bear back his reply after you ask him this: 'Did Mr. Potter give you a message from me, what was that message, and when did you receive it?'"

One hour earlier, having used the last remaining spin of his Time-Turner after putting on the Cloak of Invisibility, Harry tucked the hourglass back into his shirt.

And he set out toward the Slytherin dungeons, striding as quickly as his invisible legs could manage, though not running. Thankfully the Deputy Headmistress's office was already on a lower floor of Hogwarts...

A few staircases later, taken two steps but not three steps at once, Harry stopped at a corridor around whose final bend lay the entrance to the Slytherin dorms.

Harry took a piece of parchment (not paper) out of his pouch, took a Quotes Quill (not pen) out of his pouch, and told the quill, "Write these letters exactly as I say them: Z-P-G-B-S-Y, space, F-V-Y-I-R-E-B-A-G-U-R-G-E-R-R."

There were two kinds of codes in cryptography, codes that stopped your little brother from reading your message and codes that stopped major governments from reading your message, and this was the first

kind of code, but it was better than nothing. In theory, no one should read it anyway; but even if they did, they wouldn't remember anything interesting unless they did cryptography first.

Harry then put that parchment in a parchment envelope, and with his wand melted a little green wax to seal it.

In principle, of course, Harry could've done all that hours earlier, but somehow waiting until *after* he heard the message from Professor McGonagall's own lips seemed less like Messing With Time.

Harry then put that envelope inside another envelope, which already contained another sheet of paper with other instructions, and five silver Sickles.

He closed that envelope (which already had a name written on the outside), sealed it with more green wax, and pressed a final Sickle into that seal.

Then Harry put *that* envelope into the very last envelope on which was written in large letters the name "Merry Tavington".

And Harry peeked around the bend to where the scowling portrait that served as the door to the Slytherin dorms waited; and as he did not wish the portrait to recall not-seeing anyone invisible, Harry used the Hover Charm to float the envelope to the scowling man, and tap it against him.

The scowling man looked down at the envelope, peering at it through a monocle, and sighed, and turned around to face toward the inside of the Slytherin dorms, and called, "Message for Merry Tavington!"

The envelope was then allowed to fall to the floor.

A few moments later the portrait door opened, and Merry snatched up the envelope from the floor.

She would open it up and find a Sickle and an envelope addressed to a fourth-year student named Margaret Bulstrode.

(Slytherins did this sort of thing all the time, and a Sickle definitely constituted a rush order.)

Margaret would open *her* envelope, and find five Sickles along with an envelope to be dropped off in an unused classroom...

...*after* she used her Time-Turner to go back five hours...

...whereupon she would find another five Sickles waiting for her, if she got there quickly.

And an invisible Harry Potter would be waiting in that classroom from three PM to three-thirty, just in case someone tried the obvious test.

Well, it had been obvious to Professor Quirrell, anyway.

It had also been obvious to Professor Quirrell that (a) Margaret Bulstrode had a Time-Turner and (b) she wasn't very strict about how she used it, e.g. sharing really good pieces of gossip "before" anyone else had heard.

Some of the tension leaked off Harry as he strode away from the portrait door, still invisible. Somehow his mind had still managed to worry about the plan, even *knowing* that it had already succeeded. Now there remained only the confrontation with Dumbledore, and then he was done for the day... he'd go to the Headmaster's gargoyles at 9PM, since doing it at 8PM would seem more suspicious. This way he could claim that he'd just misunderstood what Professor McGonagall had meant by "afterward"...

The obscure pain clutched at Harry's heart again as he thought of Professor McGonagall.

So Harry retreated a little further into his dark side, which had worn the calm expression and kept the fatigue off his face, and kept walking.

There would come a reckoning, but sometimes you had to borrow everything you could today, and let the payments come due tomorrow.

Even Harry's dark side was feeling the exhaustion by the time the spiraling staircase had delivered him to the great oaken door that was the final gate to Dumbledore's office; but since Harry was now *legally* four hours past his natural bedtime, it was safe to let some of the fatigue show, the physical if not the emotional.

The oaken door swung open—

Harry's eyes had already been focused in the direction of the great desk, the throne behind it; so it took a moment to register that the throne

was empty, the desk barren but for a single leatherbound volume; and then Harry shifted his gaze to see the wizard standing among his fiddly things, the mysterious unknown devices in their scores. Fawkes and the Sorting Hat occupied their respective perches, a bright cheerful blaze crackled in a nook that Harry had not before realized was a fireplace, and there were the two umbrellas and three red slippers for left feet. All things in their place and in their customary appearance except the old wizard himself, standing tall and dressed in robes of the most formal black. It came as a shock to the eyes, those robes on that person, it was as if Harry had seen his father wearing a business suit.

Very ancient was the appearance of Albus Dumbledore, and sorrowful.

"Hello, Harry," said the old wizard.

From within an alternate self maintained like an Occlumency construct, an innocent-Harry who had absolutely no idea what was happening inclined his head coldly, and said, "Headmaster. I expect you've heard back from Deputy Headmistress McGonagall by now, so if it's fine by you, I would *really* like to know what is going on."

"Yes," said the old wizard, "it is time, Harry Potter." The back straightened, only slightly for the wizard had already been standing straight; but somehow even that small change made the wizard seem a foot taller, and stronger if not younger, formidable though not dangerous, his potency gathered about him like a cowl. In a clear voice, then, he spoke: "This day your war against Voldemort has begun."

"What?" said the outer Harry who knew nothing, while something watching from inside thought much the same only with a lot more profanity attached.

"Bellatrix Black has been taken from Azkaban, she has escaped from a prison inescapable," the old wizard said. "It is a feat that bears Voldemort's signature if ever I have seen it; and she, his most faithful servant, is one of three requisites he must obtain to rise again in a new body. After ten years the enemy you once defeated has returned, as was foretold."

Neither part of Harry could think of anything to say to that, at least not for the few seconds before the old wizard continued.

"It need change little for you, for now," said the old wizard. "I have begun reconstituting the Order of the Phoenix that will serve you, I have alerted the few souls who can and should understand: Amelia Bones, Alastor Moody, Bartemius Crouch, certain others. Of the prophecy—yes, there is a prophecy—I have not told them, but they know that Voldemort is returned, and they know that you are to play some vital role. They and I shall fight your war in its lesser beginnings, while you grow stronger, and perhaps wiser, here at Hogwarts." The old wizard's hand came up, as though beseeching. "So to you, for now, there is but one change, and I implore you to understand its necessity. Do you recognize the book on my desk, Harry?"

The inner part of Harry was screaming and banging its head against imaginary walls, while the outer Harry turned and stared at what proved to be—

There was a rather long pause.

Then Harry said, "It is a copy of *The Lord of the Rings* by J. R. R. Tolkien."

"You recognized a quote from that book," said Dumbledore, an intent look in his eyes, "so I assume you remember it well. If I am mistaken, let me be corrected."

Harry just stared at him.

"It is important to understand," said Dumbledore, "that this book is not a realistic depiction of a wizarding war. John Tolkien never fought Voldemort. Your war will not be like the books you have read. Real life is not like stories. Do you understand, Harry?"

Harry, rather slowly, nodded yes; and then shook his head no.

"In particular," said Dumbledore, "there is a certain very foolish thing that Gandalf does in the first book. He makes many mistakes, does Tolkien's wizard; but this one error is the most unforgivable. That mistake is this: When Gandalf first suspected, even for a moment, that Frodo held the One Ring, he should have moved Frodo to Rivendell *at once.* He might have been embarrassed, that old wizard, if his suspicions had proven false. He might have found it awkward to so command Frodo, and Frodo would have been greatly inconvenienced, needing to set aside many other plans and pastimes. But a little embarrassment, and

awkwardness, and inconvenience, is as nothing compared to the loss of your whole war, when the nine Nazgul swoop down on the Shire while you are reading old scrolls in Minas Tirith, and take the Ring at once. And it is not Frodo alone who would have been hurt; all Middle-Earth would have fallen into slavery. If it had *not* been only a story, Harry, they would have lost their war. Do you understand what I am saying?"

"Er..." said Harry, "not exactly..." There was something about Dumbledore when he was like this, which made it hard to stay properly cold; his dark side had trouble with weird.

"Then I will spell it out," said the old wizard. His voice was stern, his eyes were sad. "Frodo should have been moved to Rivendell at once by Gandalf himself—and Frodo should never have left Rivendell without guard. There should have been no night of terror in Bree, no Barrowdowns, no Weathertop where Frodo was wounded, they could have lost their entire war any of those times, for Gandalf's folly! Do you understand now what I am saying to you, son of Michael and Petunia?"

And the Harry who knew nothing did understand.

And the Harry who knew nothing saw that it was the smart, the wise, the intelligent and sane, the *right* thing to do.

And the Harry who knew nothing said just what an innocent Harry *would* have said, while the silent watcher screamed in confusion and agony.

"You're saying," Harry said, his voice shaking as the emotions inside burned through the outer calm, "that I'm not going home to my parents for Easter."

"You *will* see them again," the old wizard said swiftly. "I will beg them to come here to be with you, I will extend them every courtesy during their visits. But you are not going home for Easter, Harry. You are not going home for the summer. You are no longer taking lunches in Diagon Alley, even with Professor Quirrell to watch you. Your blood is the second requisite Voldemort needs to rise as strong as before. So you are never again leaving the bounds of Hogwarts's wards without a vital reason, and a guard strong enough to fend off any attack for long enough to get you to safety. "

Water was beginning at the corners of Harry's eyes. "Is that a request?" said his quavering voice. "Or an order?"

"I'm sorry, Harry," the old wizard said softly. "Your parents will see the necessity, I hope; but if not... I am afraid they have no recourse; the law, however wrongly, does not recognize them as your guardians. I am sorry, Harry, and I will understand if you despise me for it, but it must be done."

Harry whirled, looked at the door, he couldn't look at Dumbledore any more, couldn't trust his own face.

This is the cost to yourself, said Hufflepuff within his mind, *even as you imposed costs on others. Will that change your whole view of the matter, the way Professor Quirrell thinks it will?*

Automatically, the mask of the innocent Harry said exactly what it would have said: "Are my parents in danger? Do *they* need to be moved here?"

"No," said the old wizard's voice. "I do not think so. The Death Eaters learned, toward the end of the war, not to attack the Order's families. And if Voldemort is now acting without his former companions, he still knows that it is I who make the decisions for now, and he knows that I would give him nothing for any threat to your family. I have taught him that I do not give in to blackmail, and so he will not try."

Harry turned back then, and saw a coldness on the old wizard's face to match the shift in his voice, Dumbledore's blue eyes grown hard as steel behind the glasses, it didn't match the person but it matched the formal black robes.

"Is that everything, then?" said Harry's trembling voice. Later he would think about this, later he would think of some cunning countermeasure, later he would ask Professor Quirrell if there was any way to convince the Headmaster he was mistaken. Right now, maintaining the mask was taking all of Harry's attention.

"Voldemort used a Muggle artifact to escape Azkaban," the old wizard said. "He is watching you and learning from you, Harry Potter. Soon a man named Arthur Weasley at the Ministry will issue an edict that all use of Muggle artifacts must cease in the Defense Professor's bat-

tles. In the future, when you have a good idea, keep it closer about yourself."

It didn't seem important by comparison. Harry just nodded, and said again, "Is that everything?"

There was a pause.

"Please," said the old wizard in a whisper. "I have no right to ask your forgiveness, Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres, but please, at least say that you understand why." There was water in the old wizard's eyes.

"I understand," said the voice of the outer Harry who did understand, "I mean... I was sort of thinking about it anyway... wondering whether I could get you and my parents to let me stay over at Hogwarts during the summer like the orphans, so I could read the library here, it's just more interesting at Hogwarts anyway..."

A choking sound came from Albus Dumbledore's throat.

Harry turned again toward the door. It wasn't escape unscathed, but it was escape.

He took a step forward.

His hand reached to the door-handle.

A piercing cry split the air—

As though in slow motion, as Harry spun, he saw the phoenix already launched through the air and winging toward him.

From the true Harry, the one who knew his own guilt, came a flash of panic, he hadn't thought of that, hadn't anticipated it, he'd prepared to face Dumbledore but he'd forgotten about *Fawkes*—

Flap, flap, and flap, three times the phoenix's wings flapped like the flaring up and dying down of a fire, duration seemed to pass too slowly as Fawkes soared over the mysterious devices toward where Harry stood.

And the red-golden bird was hovering in front of him with gentle wing-sweeps, bobbing in the air like a candle-flame.

"What is it, Fawkes?" said the false Harry in puzzlement, looking the phoenix in the eyes, as he would if he were innocent. The real Harry, feeling the same awful sickness inside as when Professor McGonagall had expressed her trust in him, thought, *Did I turn evil today, Fawkes? I didn't think I was evil... Do you hate me now? If I've become something a*

phoenix hates, maybe I should just give it up now, give up everything now and confess—

Fawkes screamed, the most terrible cry Harry had ever heard, a scream that set all the devices vibrating and made all the sleeping figures start within their portraits.

It pierced through all of Harry's defenses like a white-hot sword through butter, collapsed all his layers like a punctured balloon popping, reshuffled his priorities in an instant as he remembered the one most important thing; the tears began pouring freely from Harry's eyes, down his cheeks, his voice choked as the words came out of his throat like coughing up lava—

"Fawkes says," Harry's voice said, "he wants me, to do, something, about, the prisoners, in Azkaban—"

"Fawkes, *no!*" said the old wizard. Dumbledore strode forward, reaching out to the phoenix with a pleading hand. The old wizard's voice was almost as desperate as the phoenix's scream had been. "You cannot ask that of him, Fawkes, he's only a boy still!"

"You went to Azkaban," Harry whispered, "you took Fawkes with you, he saw—*you* saw—you were *there*, you saw—WHY DIDN'T YOU DO ANYTHING? WHY DIDN'T YOU LET THEM OUT?"

When the instruments stopped vibrating, Harry realized that Fawkes had screamed at the same time as his own scream, that the phoenix was now flying next to Harry and facing Dumbledore at his side, the red-golden head level with his own.

"Can you," whispered the old wizard, "can you truly hear the voice of the phoenix so clearly?"

Harry was sobbing almost too hard to speak, for all the metal doors he'd passed, the voices he'd heard, the worst memories, the desperate begging as he walked away, all of it had burst into his mind like fire at the phoenix's scream, all the inner bulwarks smashed. Harry didn't know whether he could truly hear the voice of the phoenix so clearly, whether he would have understood Fawkes without already knowing. All Harry knew was that he had a plausible excuse to say the things Professor Quirrell had told him he must *never* raise in conversation from this day forth; because this was just what an innocent Harry would have

said, would have done, if he *had* heard so clearly. "They're hurting—we have to help them—"

"I *can't!*" cried Albus Dumbledore. "Harry, Fawkes, I *can't*, there's nothing I can do!"

Another piercing scream.

"WHY NOT? JUST GO IN AND TAKE THEM OUT!"

The old wizard wrenched his gaze from the phoenix, his eyes meeting Harry's instead. "Harry, tell Fawkes for me! Tell him it's not that simple! Phoenixes aren't mere animals but they *are* animals, Harry, they can't understand—"

"I don't understand either," Harry said, his voice trembling. "I don't understand why you're *feeding people to Dementors! Azkaban isn't a prison, it's a torture chamber and you're torturing those people to* DEATH!"

"Percival," said the old wizard hoarsely, "Percival Dumbledore, my own father, Harry, my own father died in Azkaban! I know, I know it is a horror! *But what would you have of me?* To break Azkaban by force? Would you have me declare open rebellion against the Ministry?"

CAW!

There was a pause, and Harry's trembling voice said, "Fawkes doesn't know anything about governments, he just wants you—to take the prisoners out—of their cells—and he'll help you fight, if anyone stands in your way—and—and so will I, Headmaster! I'll go with you and destroy any Dementor that comes near! We'll worry about the political fallout afterward, I bet that you and I together could get away with it—"

"Harry," whispered the old wizard, "phoenixes do not understand how winning a battle can lose a war." Tears were streaming down the old wizard's cheeks, dripping into his silver beard. "The battle is all they know. They are good, but not wise. That is why they choose wizards to be their masters."

"Can you bring out the Dementors to where I can get at them?" Harry's voice was begging, now. "Bring them out in groups of fifteen—I think I could destroy that many at a time without hurting myself—"

The old wizard shook his head. "It was hard enough to pass off the loss of one—they might give me one more, but never two—they are considered national possessions, Harry, weapons in case of war—"

Fury blazed in Harry then, blazed up like fire, it might have come from where a phoenix now rested on his own shoulder, and it might have come from his own dark side, and the two angers mixed within him, the cold and the hot, and it was a strange voice that said from his throat, "Tell me something. What does a government have to do, what do the voters have to do with their democracy, what do the *people* of a *country* have to do, before I ought to decide that I'm not on their side any more?"

The old wizard's eyes widened where he stared at the boy with a phoenix upon his shoulder. "Harry... are those your words, or the Defense Professor's—"

"Because there has to be *some* point, doesn't there? And if it's not Azkaban, where is it, then?"

"Harry, listen, please, hear me! Wizards could not live together if they each declared rebellion against the whole, every time they differed! Always there will be *something* —"

"*Azkaban is not just something! It's evil!*"

"Yes, even evil! Even some evils, Harry, for wizards are not perfectly good! And yet it is better that we live in peace, than in chaos; and for you and I to break Azkaban by force would be the beginning of *chaos*, can you not see it?" The old wizard's voice was pleading. "And it is possible to oppose the will of your fellows openly or in secret, without *hating* them, without declaring them evil and enemy! I do not think the people of this country deserve that of you, Harry! And even if some of them did—what of the children, what of the students in Hogwarts, what of the many good people mixed in with the bad?"

Harry looked on his shoulder at where Fawkes had perched, saw the phoenix's eyes gazing back at him, they did not glow and yet they blazed, red flames in a sea of golden fire.

What do you think, Fawkes?

"Caw?" said the phoenix.

Fawkes didn't understand the conversation.

The young boy looked at the old wizard, and said in a thick voice, "Or maybe the phoenixes are wiser than us, smarter than us, maybe they

follow us around hoping that someday we'll *listen* to them, someday we'll *get* it, someday we'll just *take*, the prisoners, *out,* of their *cells*—"

Harry spun and pulled open the oaken door and stepped onto the staircase and slammed the door behind him.

The stairwell began rotating, Harry began descending, and he put his face in his hands, and began to weep.

It wasn't until he was halfway to the bottom that he noticed the difference, noticed the warmth still spreading through him, and realized that—

"Fawkes?" Harry whispered.

—the phoenix was still on his shoulder, perched there as he had seen him a few times upon Dumbledore's.

Harry looked again into the eyes, red flames in golden fire.

"You're not my phoenix now... are you?"

Caw!

"Oh," Harry said, his voice trembling a little, "I'm glad to hear that, Fawkes, because I don't think—the Headmaster—I don't think he deserves—"

Harry stopped, took a breath.

"I don't think he deserves that, Fawkes, he was just trying to be wise..."

Caw!

"But you're angry at him and trying to make a point. I understand."

The phoenix nestled his head against Harry's shoulder, and the stone gargoyle walked smoothly aside to let Harry pass back into the corridors of Hogwarts.

Chapter Sixty-three

The Stanford Prison Experiment, Part XIII: Aftermaths

Aftermath, Hermione Granger:

She was just starting to close up her books and put away her homework in preparation for sleep, Padma and Mandy stacking up their own books across the table from her, when Harry Potter walked into the Ravenclaw common room; and it was only then that she realized, she hadn't seen him at all since breakfast.

That realization was rapidly stomped-on by a much more startling one.

There was a golden-red winged creature on Harry's shoulder, a bright bird of fire.

And Harry looked sad and worn and really *tired* like the phoenix was the only thing keeping him on his feet, but there was still a warmth about him, if you crossed your eyes you might have thought you were looking at the Headmaster somehow, that was the impression that went through Hermione's mind even though it didn't make any sense.

Harry Potter trudged across the Ravenclaw common room, past sofas full of staring girls, past cardgame-circles of staring boys, heading for her.

In theory she wasn't talking to Harry Potter yet, his week wasn't up until tomorrow, but whatever was going on was clearly a *whole* lot more important than that—

"Fawkes," Harry said, just as she was opening her mouth, "that girl over there is Hermione Granger, she's not talking to me right now because I'm an idiot, but if you want to be on a good person's shoulder she's better than me."

So much exhaustion and hurt in Harry Potter's voice—

But before she could figure out what to do about it, the phoenix had glided off Harry's shoulder like a fire creeping up a matchstick on fast-forward, flashing toward her; there was a phoenix flying in front of her and staring at her with eyes of light and flame.

"*Caw?*" asked the phoenix.

Hermione stared at it, feeling like she was facing a question on a test she'd forgotten to study for, the one most important question and she'd gone her whole life without studying for it, she couldn't find anything to say.

"I'm—" she said. "I'm only twelve, I haven't *done* anything yet—"

The phoenix just glided gently around, rotating around one wingtip like the being of light and air that it was, and soared back to Harry Potter's shoulder, where it settled down quite firmly.

"You silly boy," said Padma across from her, looking like she was deciding whether to laugh or grimace, "phoenixes aren't for smart girls who do their homework, they're for idiots who charge straight at five older Slytherin bullies. There's a reason why the Gryffindor colors are red and gold, you know."

There was a lot of friendly laughter in the Ravenclaw common room.

Hermione wasn't one of the laughing ones.

Neither was Harry.

Harry had put a hand over his face. "Tell Hermione I'm sorry," he said to Padma, his voice almost fallen to a whisper. "Tell her I forgot that phoenixes are animals, they don't understand time and planning, they don't understand people who are *going* to do good things later—I'm not sure they understand really the notion of there being something that a person *is*, all they see is what people do. Fawkes doesn't know what twelve means. Tell Hermione I'm sorry—I shouldn't have—it just all goes wrong, doesn't it?"

Harry turned to go, the phoenix still on his shoulder, began slowly trudging toward the staircase that led up to his dorm.

And Hermione couldn't leave it at that, she just *couldn't* leave it at that. She didn't know if it was her competition with Harry or something else. She just couldn't leave it with the phoenix turning away from her.

She *had* to—

Her mind keyed a frantic question to the entirety of her excellent memory, found just one thing—

"I was going to run in front of the Dementor to try and save Harry!" she shouted a little desperately at the red-golden bird. "I mean, I actually did start running and everything! That was stupid and courageous, right?"

With a warbling cry the phoenix launched itself from Harry's shoulder again, back toward her like a spreading blaze, it circled her three times like she was the center of an inferno, and for just a moment its wing brushed against her cheek, before the phoenix soared back to Harry.

There was a hush in the Ravenclaw common room.

"Told you so," Harry said aloud, and then he started climbing the stairs up to his bedroom; he seemed to climb very quickly, like he was very light on his feet for some reason, so that in just a moment he and Fawkes were gone.

Hermione held up a trembling hand to her cheek where Fawkes had brushed her with his wing, a spot of warmth lingering there like that one small patch of skin had been very gently set on fire.

She'd answered the question of the phoenix, she supposed, but it felt to her like she'd just barely squeaked by on the test, like she'd gotten a 62 and she could've gotten 104 if she'd tried harder.

If she'd tried at *all*.

She hadn't really *been* trying, when she thought about it.

Just doing her homework—

Who have you saved?

Aftermath, Fawkes:

Nightmares, the boy had expected, screams and begging and howling hurricanes of emptiness, the discharge of the horrors being laid down into memory, and in that fashion, perhaps, becoming part of the past.

And the boy knew that the nightmares would come.

The next night, they would come.

The boy dreamed, and in his dreams the world was on fire, Hogwarts was on fire, his home was on fire, the streets of Oxford were on fire, all ablaze with golden flames that shone but did not consume, and all the people walking through the blazing streets were shining with white light brighter than the fire, like they were flames themselves, or stars.

The other first-year boys came to bed, and saw it for themselves, the wonder whose rumor they had already heard, that in his bed Harry Potter lay silent and motionless, a gentle smile on his face, while perched on his pillow a red-golden bird watched over him, with bright wings swept above him like a blanket pulled over his head.

The reckoning had been put off one more night.

Aftermath, Draco Malfoy:

Draco straightened his robes, making sure the green trim was straight. He waved his wand over his own head and said a Charm that Father had taught him while other children were still playing in mud, a Charm which ensured that not a single speck of lint or dust would dirty his wizard's robes.

Draco picked up the mysterious envelope that Father had owled him, and tucked it into his robes. He had already used *Incendio* and *Everto* on the mysterious note.

And then he headed off to breakfast, to seat himself on exactly the same tick of the clock where the food appeared, if he could manage it, so that it would seem like all others had been waiting on his appearance to eat. Because when you were the scion of Malfoy you were first in everything, including breakfast, that was why.

Vincent and Gregory were waiting for him outside the door of his private room, up even before he was—though not, of course, dressed quite as sharply.

The Slytherin common room was deserted, anyone who got up this early was heading straight to breakfast anyway.

The dungeon halls were silent but for their own footsteps, empty and echoing.

The Great Hall was a hubbub of alarm despite the relative few arrivals, some younger children crying, students running back and forth between tables or standing in knots shouting at each other, a red-robed prefect was standing in front of two green-trimmed students and yelling at them and Snape was striding toward the mess—

The noise dimmed a little as people caught sight of Draco, as some of the faces turned to stare at him, and fell quiet.

The food appeared on the tables. No one looked at it.

And Snape spun on his heel, abandoning his target, and headed straight toward Draco.

A knot of fear clutched at Draco's heart, had something happened to Father—no, surely Father would have told him—whatever was happening, why hadn't Father told him—

There were bags of fatigue beneath Snape's eyes, Draco saw as their Head of House came close, the Potions Master had never been a sharp dresser (that was an understatement) but his robes were even dirtier and more disarrayed this morning, spotted with extra grease.

"You haven't heard?" hissed their Head of House as he came close. "For pity's sake, Malfoy, don't you have a newspaper delivered?"

"What is it, Profe—"

"Bellatrix Black was taken from Azkaban!"

"*What?*" said Draco in shock, as Gregory behind him said something he really shouldn't have and Vincent just gasped.

Snape was gazing at him with narrowed eyes, then nodded abruptly. "Lucius told you nothing, then. I see." Snape gave a snort, turned away—

"Professor!" said Draco. The implications were just starting to dawn on him, his mind spinning frantically. "Professor, what should I do—Father didn't instruct me—"

"Then I *suggest*," Snape said sneeringly, as he strode away, "that you *tell* them that, Malfoy, as your father intended!"

Draco glanced back at Vincent and Gregory, though he didn't know why he was bothering, of course they looked even more confused than he did.

And Draco walked forward to the Slytherin table, and sat down at the far end, which was still empty of sitters.

Draco put a sausage omelet on his plate, began eating it with automatic motions.

Bellatrix Black had been taken from Azkaban.

Bellatrix Black had been taken from Azkaban...?

Draco didn't know what to make of that, it was as totally unexpected as the Sun going out—well, the Sun would expectedly go out in six billion years but this was as unexpected as the Sun going out *tomorrow*. Father wouldn't have done it, Dumbledore wouldn't have done it, *no one* should have been *able* to do it—what did it *mean*—what *use* would Bellatrix be to anyone after ten years in Azkaban—even if she got strong again, what use was a powerful sorceress who was completely evil and insane and fanatically devoted to a Dark Lord who wasn't around anymore?

"Hey," said Vincent from where he was sitting next to Draco, "I don't understand, boss, why'd we do that?"

"*We* didn't do it, you dolt!" snapped Draco. "Oh, for Merlin's sake, if even *you* think we—didn't your father ever tell you any stories about Bellatrix Black? She tortured Father once, she tortured *your* father, she's tortured *everyone,* the Dark Lord once told her to Crucio *herself* and she *did it!* She didn't do crazy things to inspire fear and obedience in the populace, she did crazy things because she's crazy! She's a *bitch* is what she is!"

"Oh, really?" said an incensed voice from behind Draco.

Draco didn't look up. Gregory and Vincent would be watching his back.

"I would've thought you'd be happy—"

"—to hear that a Death Eater had been freed, Malfoy!"

Amycus Carrow had always been one of the *other* problem people; Father had once told Draco to make sure he was never alone in the same

room with Amycus...

Draco turned around and gave Flora and Hestia Carrow his Number Three Sneer, the one that said that he was in a Noble and Most Ancient House and they weren't and yes, that mattered. Draco said in their general direction, certainly not deigning to address *them* in particular, "There's Death Eaters and then there's Death Eaters," and then turned back to his food.

There were two furious huffs in unison, and then two pairs of shoes stormed off toward the other end of the Slytherin table.

It was a few minutes later that Millicent Bulstrode ran up to them, visibly out of breath, and said, "Mr. Malfoy, did you hear?"

"About Bellatrix Black?" said Draco. "Yeah—"

"No, about Potter!"

"What?"

"Potter was going around with a *phoenix* on his shoulder last night, looking like he'd been dragged through ten leagues of mud, they say that the phoenix took him to Azkaban to try to stop Bellatrix and he fought a duel with her and they blew up half the fortress!"

"*What?*" said Draco. "Oh, there is just no *way* that—"

Draco stopped.

He'd said that a number of times about Harry Potter and had started to notice a trend.

Millicent ran off to tell someone else.

"You don't *really* think—" said Gregory.

"I honestly don't know anymore," said Draco.

A few minutes later, after Theodore Nott had sat down across from him and William Rosier had gone to sit with the Carrow twins, Vincent nudged him and said, "There."

Harry Potter had entered the Great Hall.

Draco watched him closely.

There was no alarm on Harry's face as he saw, no surprise or shock, he just looked...

It was the same distant, self-absorbed look Harry wore when he was trying to figure out the answer to a question Draco couldn't understand yet.

Draco hastily shoved himself up from the bench of the Slytherin table, saying "Stay behind," and walked with all decorous speed toward Harry.

Harry seemed to notice his approach just as the other boy was turning toward the Ravenclaw table, and Draco—

—gave Harry one quick look—

—and then walked right past him, straight out of the Great Hall.

It was a minute later that Harry peered around the corner of the small stony nook where Draco had waited, it might not fool everyone but it would create plausible deniability.

"*Quietus*," said Harry. "Draco, what—"

Draco took the envelope out of his robes. "I have a message for you from Father."

"*Huh?*" said Harry, and took the envelope from Draco, and tore it open in a rather un-neat manner, and drew forth a sheet of parchment and unfolded it and—

Harry gave a sharp intake of breath.

Then Harry looked at Draco.

Then Harry looked back down at the parchment.

There was a pause.

Harry said, "Did Lucius tell you to report on my reaction to this?"

Draco paused for a moment, weighing, and then opened his mouth—

"I see he did," said Harry, and Draco cursed himself, he should've known better, only it *had* been hard to decide. "What are you going to tell him?"

"That you were surprised," said Draco.

"Surprised," Harry said flatly. "Yeah. Good. Tell him that."

"What *is* it?" said Draco. And then, as he saw Harry looking conflicted, "If you're dealing with Father behind my back—"

And Harry, without a word, gave Draco the paper.

It said:

I know it was you.

"WHAT THE—"

"I was going to ask *you* that," said Harry. "Have you got *any* idea what's up with your Dad?"

Draco stared at Harry.

Then Draco said, "*Did* you do it?"

"What?" said Harry. "What *possible* reason would I—*how* would I—"

"Did you do it, Harry?"

"No!" Harry said. "Of course not!"

Draco had listened carefully, but he hadn't detected any hesitation or tremor.

So Draco nodded, and said, "I've got no idea what Father's thinking but it *can't*, I mean it *can't possibly* be good. And, um... people are also saying..."

"What," said Harry warily, "are they saying, Draco?"

"Did a phoenix *really* take you to Azkaban to try to stop Bellatrix Black from escaping—"

Aftermath, Neville Longbottom:

Harry had only just sat down at the Ravenclaw table for the first time, hoping to grab a quick bite of food. He knew he needed to go off and think about things, but there was a tiny remaining bit of phoenix's peace (even after the encounter with Draco) that he still wanted to cling to, some beautiful dream of which he remembered nothing but the beauty; and the part of him that *wasn't* feeling peaceful was waiting for all the anvils to finish dropping on him, so that when he went off to think and be by himself for a while, he could batch-process all the disasters at once.

Harry's hand grasped a fork, lifted a bite of mashed potatoes toward his mouth—

And there was a shriek.

Every now and then someone would shout when they heard the news, but Harry's ears *recognized* this one—

Harry was up from the bench in an instant, heading toward the Hufflepuff table, a horrible sick feeling dawning in the pit of his stomach. It was one of those things he hadn't considered when he'd decided to commit the crime, because Professor Quirrell had planned for no one to know; and now, afterward, Harry just—hadn't *thought* of it—

This, Hufflepuff said with bitter intensity, *is also your fault.*

But by the time Harry got there, Neville was sitting down and eating fried sausage patties with Snippyfig Sauce.

The Hufflepuff boy's hands were trembling, but he cut the food, and ate it, without dropping it.

"Hello, General," Neville said, his voice wavering only slightly. "Did you fight a duel with Bellatrix Black last night?"

"No," Harry said. His own voice was also wavery, for some reason.

"Didn't think so," said Neville. There was a scraping sound as his knife cut the sausage again. "I'm going to hunt her down and kill her, can I count on you to help?"

There were startled gasps from the mass of Hufflepuffs who had gathered around Neville.

"If she comes after you," Harry said hoarsely, *if it was all a terrible mistake, if it was all a lie,* "I'll defend you even with my life," *won't let you get hurt for what I did, no matter what,* "but I won't help you go after her, Neville, friends don't help friends commit suicide."

Neville's fork paused on the way to his mouth.

Then Neville put the bite of food in his mouth, chewed again.

And Neville swallowed it.

And Neville said, "I didn't mean *right now*, I mean after I graduate Hogwarts."

"Neville," Harry said, keeping his voice under very careful control, "I think, even after you graduate, that might still be a *just plain stupid idea.* There's got to be much more experienced Aurors tracking her—" *oh, wait, that's not good—*

"Listen to him!" said Ernie Macmillan, and then an older-looking Hufflepuff girl standing close to Neville said, "Nevvy, please, think about it, he's right!"

Neville stood up.

Neville said, "Please don't follow me."

Neville walked away from all of them; Harry and Ernie reaching out involuntarily toward him, and some of the other Hufflepuffs as well.

And Neville sat down at the Gryffindor table, and distantly (though they had to strain to hear) they heard Neville say, "I'm going to hunt her down and kill her after I graduate, anyone want to help?" and at least

five voices said "Yes" and then Ron Weasley said loudly, "Get in line, you lot, I got an owl from Mum this morning, she says to tell everyone she's called dibs" and someone said "*Molly Weasley* against *Bellatrix Black?* Who does she even think she's kidding—" and Ron reached over to a plate and hefted a muffin—

Someone tapped Harry on the shoulder, and he turned around and saw an unfamiliar green-trimmed older girl, who handed him a parchment envelope and then quickly strode away.

Harry stared at the envelope for a moment, then started walking toward the nearest wall. That wasn't very private, but it should be private enough, and Harry didn't want to give the impression of having much to hide.

That had been a Slytherin System delivery, what you used if you wanted to communicate with someone without anyone else knowing that the two of you had talked. The sender gave an envelope to someone who had a reputation for being a reliable messenger, along with ten Knuts; that first person would take five Knuts and pass the envelope to another messenger along with the other five Knuts, and the second messenger would open up that envelope and find another envelope with a name written on it and deliver that envelope to that person. That way neither of the two people passing the message knew both the sender *and* the recipient, so no one else knew that those two parties had been in contact...

When Harry reached the wall, he put the envelope inside his robes, opened it beneath the folds of cloth, and carefully snuck a peek at the parchment he drew forth.

It said,

Classroom to the left of Transfiguration, 8 in the morning.

—LL.

Harry stared at it, trying to remember if he knew anyone with the initials LL.

His mind searched...

Searched...

Retrieved—

"The *Quibbler* girl?" Harry whispered incredulously, and then shut his mouth. She was only ten years old, she shouldn't be in Hogwarts at all!

AFTERMATH, LESATH LESTRANGE:

Harry was standing in the unused classroom next to Transfiguration at 8AM, waiting, he'd at least managed to get some food into himself before facing the next disaster, Luna Lovegood...

The door to the classroom opened, and Harry saw, and gave himself a really *hard* mental kick.

One more thing he hadn't thought of, one more thing he *really should have.*

The older boy's green-trimmed formal robes were askew, there were red spots on them looking very much like small dots of fresh blood, and one corner of his mouth had the look of a place that had been cut and healed, by *Episkey* or some other minor medical Charm that didn't quite erase all the damage.

Lesath Lestrange's face was streaked with tears, fresh tears and half-dried tears, and there was water in his eyes, a promise of still more on the way. "*Quietus,*" said the older boy, and then "*Homenum Revelio*" and some other things, while Harry thought frantically and without much luck.

And then Lesath lowered his wand and sheathed it in his robes, and slowly this time, formally, the older boy dropped to his knees on the dusty classroom floor.

Bowed his head all the way down, until his forehead also touched the dust, and Harry would have spoken but he was voiceless.

Lesath Lestrange said, in a breaking voice, "My life is yours, my Lord, and my death as well."

"I," Harry said, there was a huge lump in his throat and he was having trouble speaking, "I—" *didn't have anything to do with it,* he should have

been saying, should be saying *right now,* but then again the innocent Harry would have had trouble speaking too—

"Thank you," whispered Lesath, "thank you, my Lord, oh, thank you," the sound of a choked-off sob came from the kneeling boy, all Harry could see of him was the hair on the back of his head, nothing of his face. "I'm a fool, my Lord, an ungrateful bastard, unworthy to serve you, I cannot abase myself enough, for I—I shouted at you after you helped me, because I thought you were refusing me, and I didn't even realize until this morning that I'd been such a fool as to ask you in front of Longbottom—"

"I didn't have anything to do with it," Harry said.

(It was still very hard to tell an outright lie like that.)

Slowly Lesath raised his head from the floor, looked up at Harry.

"I understand, my Lord," said the older boy, his voice wavering a little, "you do not trust my cunning, and indeed I have shown myself a fool... I only wanted to say to you, that I am not ungrateful, that I know it must have been hard enough to save only one person, that they're alerted now, that you can't—get Father—but I am not ungrateful, I will never be ungrateful to you again. If ever you have a use for this unworthy servant, call me wherever I am, and I will answer, my Lord—"

"I was not involved in any way."

(But it got easier each time.)

Lesath gazed up at Harry, said uncertainly, "Am I dismissed from your presence, my Lord...?"

"I am not your Lord."

Lesath said, "Yes, my Lord, I understand," and pushed himself back up from the floor, stood straight and bowed deeply, then backed away from Harry until he turned to open the classroom door.

As Lesath's hand touched the doorknob, he paused.

Harry couldn't see Lesath's face, as the older boy's voice said, "Did you send her to someone who would take care of her? Did she ask about me at all?"

And Harry said, his voice perfectly level, "Please stop that. I was not involved in any way."

"Yes, my Lord, I'm sorry, my Lord," said Lesath's voice; and the Slytherin boy opened the door and went out and shut the door behind him. His feet sped up as he ran away, but not fast enough that Harry couldn't hear him start sobbing.

Would I cry? wondered Harry. *If I knew nothing, if I was innocent, would I cry right now?*

Harry didn't know, so he just kept looking at the door.

And some unbelievably tactless part of him thought, *Yay, we completed a quest and got a minion—*

Shut up. If you ever want to vote on anything ever again... shut up.

Aftermath, Amelia Bones:

"Then his life isn't in danger, I take it," said Amelia.

The healer, a stern-eyed old man who wore his robes white (he was a Muggleborn and honoring some strange tradition of Muggles, of which Amelia had never asked, although privately she thought it made him look too much like a ghost), shook his head and said, "Definitely not."

Amelia looked at the human form resting unconscious on the healer's bed, the burned and blasted flesh, the thin sheet that covered him for modesty's sake having been peeled back at her command.

He might make a full recovery.

He might not.

The healer had said it was too early to say.

Then Amelia looked at the other witch in the room, the detective.

"And you say," Amelia said, "that the burning matter was Transfigured from *water*, presumably in the form of ice."

The detective nodded her head, and said, sounding puzzled, "It could have been much worse, if not for—"

"How *very nice* of them," she spat, and then pressed a weary hand to her forehead. No... no, it *had* been intended as a kindness. By the final stage of the escape there would be no point in trying to fool anyone. Whoever had done this, then, *had* been trying to mitigate the damage—and they'd been thinking in terms of Aurors breathing the smoke, not of

anyone being attacked with the fire. If it had been them still in control, no doubt, they would have steered the rocker more mercifully.

But Bellatrix Black had ridden the rocker out of Azkaban alone, all the watching Aurors had agreed on that, they'd had their Anti-Disillusionment Charms active and there had been only one woman on that rocker, though the rocker had sported two sets of stirrups.

Some good and innocent person, capable of casting the Patronus Charm, had been tricked into rescuing Bellatrix Black.

Some innocent had fought Bahry One-Hand, carefully subduing an experienced Auror without significantly injuring him.

Some innocent had Transfigured the fuel for the Muggle artifact on which the two of them had been to ride out of Azkaban, making it from frozen water for the benefit of her Aurors.

And then their usefulness to Bellatrix Black had ended.

You would have expected anyone capable of subduing Bahry One-Hand to have foreseen that part. But then you wouldn't have expected anyone who could cast the Patronus Charm to try rescuing Bellatrix Black in the first place.

Amelia passed her hand down over her eyes, closing them for a moment in silent mourning. *I wonder who it was, and how You-Know-Who manipulated them... what story they could* possibly *have been told...*

She didn't even realize until a moment later that the thought meant she was starting to believe. Perhaps because, no matter how difficult it was to believe Dumbledore, it was becoming more difficult *not* to recognize the hand of that cold, dark intelligence.

Aftermath, Albus Dumbledore:

It might have been only fifty-seven seconds before breakfast ended and he might have needed four twists of his Time-Turner, but in the end, Albus Dumbledore did make it.

"Headmaster?" squeaked the polite voice of Professor Filius Flitwick, as the old wizard passed him by on his way to his seat. "Mr. Potter left a message for you."

The old wizard stopped. He looked inquiringly at the Charms Professor.

"Mr. Potter said that after he woke up, he realized how unfair had been the things he said to you after Fawkes screamed. Mr. Potter said that he wasn't saying anything about anything else, just apologizing for that one part."

The old wizard kept looking at his Charms Professor, and still did not speak.

"Headmaster?" squeaked Filius.

"Tell him I said thank you," said Albus Dumbledore, "but that it is wiser to listen to phoenixes than to wise old wizards," and sat down at his place three seconds before all the food vanished.

Aftermath, Professor Quirrell:

"No," Madam Pomfrey snapped at the child, "you may *not* see him! You may not *pester* him! You may not ask him *one little question!* He is to rest *in bed* and do *nothing* for at least *three days!*"

Aftermath, Minerva McGonagall:

She was heading toward the infirmary, and Harry Potter was leaving it, when they passed each other.

The look he gave her wasn't angry.

It wasn't sad.

It didn't say much at all.

It was like... like he was looking at her just long enough to make it clear that he *wasn't* deliberately avoiding looking at her.

And then he looked away before she could figure out what look to give him in return; as though he wanted to spare her that, as well.

He didn't say anything as he walked past her.

Neither did she.

What could there possibly be to say?

Aftermath, Fred and George Weasley:

They actually yelped out loud, when they turned the corner and saw Dumbledore.

It wasn't that the Headmaster had popped up out of nowhere and was staring at them with a stern expression. Dumbledore was always doing *that*.

But the wizard was dressed in formal black robes and looking *very* ancient and *very* powerful and he was giving the two of them a SHARP LOOK.

"Fred and George Weasley!" spake Dumbledore in a Voice of Power.

"Yes, Headmaster!" they said, snapping upright and giving him a crisp military salute they'd seen in some old pictures.

"Hear me well! You are the friends of Harry Potter, is this so?"

"Yes, Headmaster!"

"Harry Potter is in danger. He *must not* go beyond the wards of Hogwarts. Listen to me, sons of Weasley, I beg you listen: you know that I am as Gryffindor as yourselves, that I too know there are higher rules than rules. But this, Fred and George, this one thing is of the most terrible importance, there must be no exception this time, small or great! If you help Harry to leave Hogwarts he may *die!* Does he send you on a mission, you may go, does he ask you to bring him items, you may help, but if he asks you to smuggle his own person out of Hogwarts, you *must refuse!* Do you understand?"

"Yes, Headmaster!" They said it without even thinking, really, and then exchanged uncertain looks with each other—

The bright blue eyes of the Headmaster were intent upon them. "No. Not without thinking. If Harry asks you to bring him out, you must refuse, if he asks you to tell him the way, you must refuse. I will not ask you to report him to me, for that I know you would never do. But beg him on my behalf to go to *me,* if it is of such importance, and *I* will guard him as he walks. Fred, George, I am sorry to strain your friendship so, but it is his *life.*"

The two of them looked at each other for a long while, not communicating, only thinking the same things at the same time.

They looked back at Dumbledore.

They said, with a chill running through them as they spoke the name, "Bellatrix Black."

"You may safely assume," said the Headmaster, "that it is at least that bad."

"Okay—"

"—got it."

Aftermath, Alastor Moody and Severus Snape:

When Alastor Moody had lost his eye, he had commandeered the services of a most erudite Ravenclaw, Samuel H. Lyall, whom Moody mistrusted slightly less than average because Moody had refrained from reporting him as an unregistered werewolf; and he had paid Lyall to compile a list of every known magical eye, and every known hint to their location.

When Moody had gotten the list back, he hadn't bothered reading most of it; because at the top of the list was the Eye of Vance, dating back to an era before Hogwarts, and currently in the possession of a powerful Dark Wizard ruling over some tiny forgotten hellhole that wasn't in Britain or anywhere else he'd have to worry about silly rules.

That was how Alastor Moody had lost his left foot and acquired the Eye of Vance, and how the oppressed souls of Urulat had been liberated for a period of around two weeks before another Dark Wizard moved in on the power vacuum.

He'd considered going after the Left Foot of Vance next, but had decided against it after he realized that would be *just what they were expecting.*

Now Mad-Eye Moody was turning slowly, always turning, surveying the graveyard of Little Hangleton. It should have been a lot gloomier, that place, there should have been some mark of all the death which had been planned there in Voldie's meetings, but in the broad daylight it seemed like nothing but a grassy place marked by ordinary tombstones, demarcated by the chained twists of fragile, easily climbable metal that Muggles used instead of wards. (Moody could not comprehend what

the Muggles were thinking on that score, if they were *pretending* to have wards, or what, and he had decided not to ask whether Muggle criminals respected the pretense.)

Moody didn't actually *need* to turn to survey the graveyard, of course.

The Eye of Vance saw the full globe of the world in every direction around him, no matter where it was pointing.

But there was no particular reason to let a former Death Eater like Severus Snape know that.

Sometimes people called Moody 'paranoid'.

Moody always told them to survive a hundred years of hunting Dark Wizards and then get back to him about that.

Mad-Eye Moody had once worked out how long it had taken him, in retrospect, to achieve what he now considered a decent level of caution—weighed up how much experience it had taken him to get *good* instead of *lucky*—and had begun to suspect that most people died before they got there. Moody had once expressed this thought to Lyall, who had done some ciphering and figuring, and told him that a typical Dark Wizard hunter would die, on average, eight and a half times along the way to becoming 'paranoid'. This explained a great deal, assuming Lyall wasn't lying.

Yesterday, Albus Dumbledore had told Mad-Eye Moody that the Dark Lord had used unspeakable dark arts to survive the death of his body, and was now awake and abroad, seeking to regain his power and begin the Wizarding War anew.

Someone else might have reacted with incredulity.

"I can't believe you lot never told me about this resurrection thing," Mad-Eye Moody said with considerable acerbity. "D'you realize how long it'll take me to do the grave of every ancestor of every Dark Wizard I've ever killed who could've been smart enough to make a horcrux? You're not just *now* doing this one, are you?"

"I redose this one every year," Severus Snape said calmly, uncapping the third flask of what the man had *claimed* would be seventeen bottles, and beginning to wave his wand over it. "The other ancestral graves

we've been able to locate were poisoned with only the long-lasting substances, since some of us have less free time than yourself."

Moody watched the fluid spiraling out of the vial and vanishing, to appear within the bones where marrow had once been. "But you think it's worth the effort of the trap, instead of just Vanishing the bones."

"He *does* have other avenues to life, should he perceive this one blocked," Snape said dryly, uncapping a fourth bottle. "And before you ask, it must be the original grave, the place of first burial, the bone removed during the ritual and not before. Thus he cannot have retrieved it earlier; and also there is no point in substituting the skeleton of a weaker ancestor. He would notice it had lost all potency."

"Who else knows about this trap?" Moody demanded.

"You. Me. The Headmaster. No one else."

Moody snorted. "Pfah. Did Albus tell Amelia, Bartemius, and that McGonagall woman about the resurrection ritual?"

"Yes—"

"If Voldie finds out that Albus knows about the resurrection ritual and that Albus told *them*, Voldie'll figure that Albus told *me,* and Voldie *knows* I'd think of this." Moody shook his head in disgust. "What're these other ways Voldie could come back to life?"

Snape's hand paused on the fifth bottle (it was all Disillusioned, of course, the whole operation was Disillusioned, but that meant less than nothing to Moody, it just marked you in his Eye's sight as trying-to-hide), and the former Death Eater said, "You don't need to know."

"You're learning, son," said Moody with mild approval. "What's in the bottles?"

Snape opened the fifth bottle, gestured with his wand to begin the substance flowing toward the grave, and said, "This one? A Muggle narcotic called LSD. A conversation yesterday put me in mind of Muggle things, and LSD seemed the most interesting option, so I hurried to obtain some. If it is incorporated into the resurrection potion, I suspect its effects will be permanent."

"What does it do?" said Moody.

"It is said that the effects are impossible to describe to anyone who has not used it," drawled Snape, "and I have not used it."

Moody nodded approval as Snape opened the sixth flask. "What about that one?"

"Love potion."

"Love potion?" said Moody.

"Not of the standard sort. It is meant to trigger a two-way bond with an unbearably sweet Veela woman named Verdandi who the Headmaster hopes might be able to redeem even him, if they truly loved each other."

"*Gah!*" said Moody. "That bloody sentimental fool—"

"Agreed," Severus Snape said calmly, his attention focused on his work.

"Tell me you've at least got some Malaclaw venom in there."

"Second flask."

"Iocane powder."

"Either the fourteenth or fifteenth bottle."

"Bahl's Stupefaction," Moody said, naming an extremely addictive narcotic with interesting side effects on people with Slytherin tendencies; Moody had once seen an addicted Dark Wizard go to ridiculous lengths to get a victim to lay hands on a certain exact portkey, instead of just having someone toss the target a trapped Knut on their next visit to town; and after going to all that work, the addict had gone to the *further* effort to lay a *second Portus,* on the *same portkey,* which had, on a second touch, transported the victim back to safety. To this day, even taking the drug into account, Moody could not imagine what could have possibly been going through the man's mind at the time he had cast the second Portus.

"Tenth vial," said Snape.

"Basilisk venom," offered Moody.

"*What?*" spat Snape. "Snake venom is a positive component of the resurrection potion, you fool! Not to mention that it would dissolve the bone and all the other substances! And where would *we* even get—"

"Calm down, son, I was just checking to see if you could be trusted."

Mad-Eye Moody continued his (secretly unnecessary) slow turning, surveying the graveyard, and the Potions Master continued pouring.

"Hold on," Moody said suddenly. "How do you know *this* is really where—"

"Because it says 'Tom Riddle' on the easily moved headstone," Snape said dryly. "And I have just won ten Sickles from the Headmaster, who bet you would think of that before the fifth bottle. So much for constant vigilance."

There was a pause.

"How long did it take Albus to reali—"

"Three years after we learned of the ritual," said Snape, in a tone not quite like his usual sardonic drawl. "In retrospect, we should have consulted you earlier."

Snape uncapped the ninth bottle.

"We poisoned all the other graves as well, with long-lasting substances," remarked the former Death Eater. "It *is* possible that we are in the correct graveyard. He may not have planned this far ahead back when he was slaughtering his family, and he cannot move the grave itself—"

"The true location doesn't look like a graveyard any more," Moody said flatly. "He moved all the *other* graves here and Memory-Charmed the Muggles. Not even Bellatrix Black would be told anything about that until just before the ritual started. *No one* knows the true location now except him."

They continued their futile work.

Aftermath, Blaise Zabini:

The Slytherin common room could be accurately and precisely described as a remilitarized zone; the moment you stepped through the portrait hole you would see that the left half of the room was Definitely Not Talking to the right half and vice versa. It was very clear, it did not need to be explained to anyone, that you did *not* have the option of *not taking sides*.

At a table in the exact middle of the room, Blaise Zabini sat by himself, reading a book and smirking. He had a reputation now, and meant to keep it.

Aftermath, Daphne Greengrass and Tracey Davis:

"You doing anything interesting today?" said Tracey.

"Nah," said Daphne, "just some reading."

Aftermath, Harry Potter:

If you went high enough in Hogwarts, you didn't see many other people around, just corridors and windows and staircases and the occasional portrait, and now and then some interesting sight, such as a bronze statue of a furry creature like a small child, holding a peculiar flat spear...

If you went high enough in Hogwarts, you didn't see many other people around, which suited Harry.

There were much worse places to be trapped, Harry supposed. In fact you probably couldn't think of anywhere *better* to be trapped than an ancient castle with a fractal ever-changing structure that meant you couldn't ever run out of places to explore, full of interesting people and interesting books and incredibly important knowledge unknown to Muggle science.

If Harry hadn't been told that he *couldn't* leave, he probably would've *jumped* at the chance to spend more time in Hogwarts, he would've plotted and connived to get it. Hogwarts was literally *optimal,* not in all the realms of possibility maybe, but certainly on the real planet Earth, it was the Maximum Fun Location.

How could the castle and its grounds seem so much smaller, so much more confining, how could the rest of the world become so much more interesting and important, the instant Harry had been told that he wasn't allowed to leave? He'd spent *months* here and hadn't felt claustrophobic *then.*

You know *the research on this,* observed some part of himself, *it's just standard scarcity effects, like that time where as soon as a county outlawed phosphate detergents, people who'd never cared before drove to the next county in order to buy huge loads of phosphate detergent, and surveys showed that they rated phosphate detergents as gentler and more effective and even easier-pouring... and if you give two-year-olds a choice between a toy in*

the open and one protected by a barrier they can go around, they'll ignore the toy in the open and go for the one behind the barrier... salespeople know that they can sell things just by telling the customer it might not be available... it was all in Cialdini's book Influence, *everything you're feeling right now, the grass is always greener on the side that's not allowed.*

If Harry hadn't been told that he couldn't leave, he probably would've *jumped* at the chance to stay at Hogwarts over the summer...

...but not the rest of his life.

That was sort of the problem, really.

Who knew whether there *was* still a Dark Lord Voldemort for him to defeat?

Who knew whether He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named still existed outside of the imagination of a possibly-not-just-pretending-to-be-crazy old wizard?

Lord Voldemort's body had been found burned to a crisp, there couldn't really be such things as souls. How could Lord Voldemort still be alive? How did Dumbledore *know* that he was alive?

And if there wasn't a Dark Lord, Harry couldn't defeat him, and he would be trapped in Hogwarts forever.

...maybe he would be legally allowed to escape after he graduated his seventh year, six years and four months and three weeks from now. It wasn't *that* long as lengths of time went, it only *seemed* like long enough for protons to decay.

Only it wasn't *just* that.

It wasn't *just* Harry's freedom that was at stake.

The Headmaster of Hogwarts, the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, the Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards, was quietly sounding the alarm.

A *false* alarm.

A false alarm which *Harry* had triggered.

You know, said the part of him that refined his skills, *didn't you sort of ponder, once, how every different profession has a different way to be excellent, how an excellent teacher isn't like an excellent plumber; but they all have in common certain methods of not being stupid; and that one of the*

most important such techniques is to face up to your little mistakes before they turn into BIG mistakes?

...although this already seemed to qualify as a BIG mistake, actually...

The point being, said his inner monitor, *it's getting worse literally by the minute. The way spies turn people is, they get them to commit a little sin, and then they use the little sin to blackmail them into a bigger sin, and then they use THAT sin to make them do even bigger things and then the blackmailer owns their soul.*

Didn't you once think about how the person being blackmailed, if they could foresee the whole path, would just decide to take the punch on the first step, take the hit of exposing that first sin? Didn't you decide that you would do that, if anyone ever tried to blackmail you into doing something major in order to conceal something little? Do you see the similarity here, Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres?

Only it wasn't little, it already wasn't little, there would be a lot of very powerful people extremely angry at Harry, not just for the false alarm but for *freeing Bellatrix from Azkaban,* if the Dark Lord *did* exist and did come after him later, that war might already be lost—

You don't think they'll be impressed by your honesty and rationality and foresight in stopping this before it snowballs even further?

Harry did *not*, in fact, think this; and after a moment's reflection, whichever part of himself he was talking to, had to agree that this was absurdly optimistic.

His wandering feet took him near an open window, and Harry went over, and leaned his arms on the ledge, and stared down at the grounds of Hogwarts from high above.

Brown that was barren trees, yellow that was dead grass, ice-colored ice that was frozen creeks and frozen streams... whichever school official had dubbed it 'The Forbidden Forest' really hadn't understood marketing, the name just made you want to go there even more. The sun was sinking in the sky, for Harry had been thinking for some hours now, thinking mostly the same thoughts over and over, but with key differences each time, like his thoughts were not going in circles, but climbing a spiral, or descending it.

He still couldn't believe that he'd gone through the *entire* thing with Azkaban—he'd switched off his Patronus before it took all his life, he'd stunned an Auror, he'd figured out how to hide Bella from the Dementors, he'd faced down twelve Dementors and scared them away, he'd invented the rocket-assisted broomstick, and ridden it—he'd gone through the *entire* thing without ever *once* rallying himself by thinking, *I have to do this... because... I promised Hermione I'd come back from lunch!* It felt like some sort of irrevocably missed opportunity, like, having done it wrong *that* time, he would never be able to get it *right* no matter what sort of challenge he faced the next time, or what sort of promise he'd made to who. Because then he would just be doing it awkwardly and deliberately to make up for having missed it the *first* time around, instead of being able to make the same sort of heroic declarations he'd be able to make if he'd managed to remember his promise to Hermione. Like that one wrong turn was irrevocable, you only got one chance, had to do it right on the first try...

He should've remembered that promise to Hermione *before* going to Azkaban.

Why had he decided to do that, again?

My working hypothesis is that you're stupid, said Hufflepuff.

That is not a useful fault analysis, thought Harry.

If you want a little more detail, said Hufflepuff, *the Defense Professor of Hogwarts was all like 'Let's get Bellatrix Black out of Azkaban!' and you were like 'Okay!'*

Hold on, THAT's not fair—

Hey, said Hufflepuff, *notice how, once you're all the way up here, and the individual trees sort of blur together, you can actually see the shape of the forest?*

Why *had* he done it...?

Not because of any cost-benefit calculation, that was for sure. He'd been too embarrassed to pull out a sheet of paper and start calculating expected utilities, he'd worried that Professor Quirrell would stop respecting him if he said no or even hesitated too much to help a maiden in distress.

He'd thought, somewhere deep inside him, that if your mysterious teacher offered you the first mission, the first chance, the call to adventure, and you said *no*, then your mysterious teacher walked away from you in disgust, and you never got another chance to be a hero...

...yeah, that had been it. In retrospect, that had been it. He'd gone and started thinking his life had a plot and here was a plot twist, as opposed to, oh, say, here was a proposal to *break Bellatrix Black out of Azkaban.* That had been the true and original reason for the decision in the split second where it had been made, his brain perceptually recognizing the narrative where he said 'no' as dissonant. And when you thought about it, that wasn't a rational way to make decisions. Professor Quirrell's ulterior motive to obtain the last remains of Slytherin's lost lore, before Bellatrix died and it was irrevocably forgotten, seemed impressively sane by comparison; a benefit commensurate with what had appeared at the time as a small risk.

It didn't seem fair, it didn't seem *fair*, that *this* was what happened if he lost his grip on his rationality for just a tiny fraction of a second, the tiny fraction of a second required for his brain to decide to be more comfortable with 'yes' arguments than 'no' arguments during the discussion that had followed.

From high above, far enough above that the individual trees blurred together, Harry stared out at the forest.

Harry *didn't* want to confess and ruin his reputation forever and get everyone angry at him and maybe end up killed by the Dark Lord later. He'd rather be trapped in Hogwarts for six years than face that. That was how he felt. And so it was in fact helpful, a relief, to be able to cling to a single decisive factor, which was that if Harry confessed, Professor Quirrell would go to Azkaban and die there.

(A catch, a break, a stutter in Harry's breathing.)

If you phrased it *that* way... why, you could even pretend to be a hero, instead of a coward.

Harry lifted his eyes from the Forbidden Forest, looked up at the clear blue forbidden sky.

Stared out the glass panes at the big bright burning thing, the fluffy things, the mysterious endless blue in which they were embedded, that

strange new unknown place.

It... actually did help, it helped quite a lot, to think that his own troubles were nothing compared to being in Azkaban. That there were people in the world who were *really* in trouble and Harry Potter was not one of them.

What was he going to do about Azkaban?

What was he going to do about magical Britain?

...which side was he on, now?

In the bright light of day, everything that Albus Dumbledore had said certainly *sounded* a lot wiser than Professor Quirrell. Better and brighter, more moral, more *convenient,* wouldn't it be nice if it were true. And the thing to remember was that Dumbledore believed things *because* they sounded nice, but Professor Quirrell was the one who was *sane*.

(Again the catch in his breathing, it happened each time he thought of Professor Quirrell.)

But just because something sounded nice, didn't make it *wrong,* either.

And if the Defense Professor *did* have a flaw in his sanity, it was that his outlook on life was *too negative.*

Really? inquired the part of Harry that had read eighteen million experimental results about people being too optimistic and overconfident. *Professor Quirrell is too pessimistic? So pessimistic that his expectations routinely* undershoot *reality? Stuff him and put him in a museum, he's unique. Which one of you two planned the perfect crime, and* then *put in all the error margin and fallbacks that ended up saving your butt,* just in case *the perfect crime went wrong? Hint hint, his name wasn't Harry Potter.*

But "pessimistic" wasn't the correct word to describe Professor Quirrell's problem—if a problem it truly was, and not the superior wisdom of experience. But to Harry it looked like Professor Quirrell was constantly interpreting everything in the worst possible light. If you handed Professor Quirrell a glass that was 90% full, he'd tell you that the 10% empty part proved that no one *really* cared about water.

That was a very good analogy, now that Harry thought about it. Not all of magical Britain was like Azkaban, that glass was well over

half full...

Harry stared up at the bright blue sky.

...although, *following* the analogy, if Azkaban existed, then maybe it *did* prove that the 90% good part was there for other reasons, people trying to *make a show of kindness* as Professor Quirrell had put it. For if they were truly kind they would not have made Azkaban, they would storm the fortress to tear it down... wouldn't they?

Harry stared up at the bright blue sky. If you wanted to be a rationalist you had to read an awful lot of papers on flaws in human nature, and some of those flaws were innocent logical failures, and some of them looked a lot darker.

Harry stared up at the bright blue sky, and thought of the Milgram experiment.

Stanley Milgram had done it to investigate the causes of World War II, to try to understand why the citizens of Germany had obeyed Hitler.

So he had designed an experiment to investigate *obedience,* to see if Germans were, for some reason, more liable to obey harmful orders from authority figures.

First he'd run a pilot version of his experiment on American subjects, as a control.

And afterward he hadn't bothered trying it in Germany.

Experimental apparatus: A series of 30 switches set in a horizontal line, with labels starting at '15 volts' and going up to '450 volts', with labels for each group of four switches. The first group of four labeled 'Slight Shock', the sixth group labeled 'Extreme Intensity Shock', the seventh group labeled 'Danger: Severe Shock', and the two last switches left over labeled just 'XXX'.

And an actor, a confederate of the experimenter, who had appeared to the true subjects to be someone just like them: someone who had answered the same ad for participants in an experiment on learning, and who had lost a (rigged) lottery and been strapped into a chair, along with the electrodes. The true experimental subjects had been given a slight shock from the electrodes, just so that they could see that it worked.

The true subject had been told that the experiment was on the effects of punishment on learning and memory, and that part of the test was to

see if it made a difference what sort of person administered the punishment; and that the person strapped to the chair would try to memorize sets of word pairs, and that each time the 'learner' got one wrong, the 'teacher' was to administer a successively stronger shock.

At the 300-volt level, the actor would stop trying to call out answers and begin kicking at the wall, after which the experimenter would instruct the subjects to treat non-answers as wrong answers and continue.

At the 315-volt level the pounding on the wall would be repeated.

After that nothing would be heard.

If the subject objected or refused to press a switch, the experimenter, maintaining an impassive demeanor and dressed in a gray lab coat, would say 'Please continue', then 'The experiment requires that you continue', then 'It is absolutely essential that you continue', then 'You have no other choice, you *must* go on'. If the fourth prod still didn't work, the experiment halted there.

Before running the experiment, Milgram had described the experimental setup, and then asked fourteen psychology seniors what percentage of subjects *they* thought would go all the way up to the 450-volt level, what percentage of subjects would press the last of the two switches marked XXX, after the victim had stopped responding.

The most pessimistic answer had been 3%.

The actual number had been 26 out of 40.

The subjects had sweated, groaned, stuttered, laughed nervously, bitten their lips, dug their fingernails into their flesh. But at the experimenter's prompting, they had, most of them, gone on administering what they believed to be painful, dangerous, possibly lethal electrical shocks. All the way to the end.

Harry could hear Professor Quirrell laughing, in his mind; the Defense Professor's voice saying something along the lines of: *Why, Mr. Potter, even I had not been so cynical; I knew men would betray their most cherished principles for money and power, but I did not realize that a stern look also sufficed.*

It was dangerous, to try and guess at evolutionary psychology if you weren't a professional evolutionary psychologist; but when Harry had read about the Milgram experiment, the thought had occurred to him

that situations like this had probably arisen many times in the ancestral environment, and that most potential ancestors who'd tried to disobey Authority were dead. Or that they had, at least, done less well for themselves than the obedient. People *thought* themselves good and moral, but when push came to shove, some evolved switch flipped in their brain, and it was suddenly a lot harder to heroically defy Authority than they thought. Even if you could do it, it wouldn't be easy, it wouldn't be some effortless display of heroism. You would tremble, your voice would break, you would be afraid; would you be able to defy Authority even then?

Harry blinked, then; because his brain had just made the connection between Milgram's experiment and what Hermione had done on her first day of Defense class, she'd refused to shoot a fellow student, even when Authority had told her that she must, she had trembled and been afraid but she had still refused. Harry had seen that happen right in front of his own eyes and he still hadn't made the connection until now...

Harry stared down at the reddening horizon, the Sun was sinking lower, the sky fading, darkening, even if most of it was still blue, soon it would turn to night. The gold and red colors of Sun and sunset reminded him of Fawkes; and Harry wondered, for a moment, if it must be a sad thing to be a phoenix, and call and cry and scream without being heeded.

But Fawkes would never give up, as many times as he died he would always be reborn, for Fawkes was a being of light and fire, and despairing over Azkaban belonged to the darkness just as much as did Azkaban itself.

If you were given a glass half-empty and half-full, then that was the way reality was, that was the truth and it was so; but you still had a choice of how to *feel* about it, whether you would despair over the empty half or rejoice in the water that was there.

Milgram had tried certain other variations on his test.

In the eighteenth experiment, the experimental subject had only needed to call out the test words to the victim strapped into the chair, and record the answers, while someone *else* pressed the switches. It was the same apparent suffering, the same frantic pounding followed by silence; but it wasn't *you* pressing the switch. *You* just watched it happen,

and read the questions to the person being tortured.

37 of 40 subjects had continued their participation in that experiment to the end, the 450-volt end marked 'XXX'.

And if you were Professor Quirrell, you might have decided to feel cynical about that.

But 3 out of 40 subjects had *refused* to participate all the way to the end.

The Hermiones.

They did exist, in the world, the people who wouldn't fire a Simple Strike Hex at a fellow student even if the Defense Professor ordered them to do it. The ones who had sheltered Gypsies and Jews and homosexuals in their attics during the Holocaust, and sometimes lost their lives for it.

And were those people from some other species than humanity? Did they have some extra gear in their heads, some additional chunk of neural circuitry, which lesser mortals did not possess? But that was not likely, given the logic of sexual reproduction which said that the genes for complex machinery would be scrambled beyond repair, if they were not universal.

Whatever parts Hermione was made from, everyone had those same parts inside them somewhere...

...well, that was a nice thought but it wasn't *strictly* true, there was such a thing as literal brain damage, people could *lose* genes and the complex machine could stop working, there were sociopaths and psychopaths, people who lacked the gear to care. Maybe Lord Voldemort had been born like that, or maybe he had known good and yet still chosen evil; at this point it didn't matter in the slightest. But a *supermajority* of the population ought to be capable of learning to do what Hermione and Holocaust resisters did.

The people who had been run through the Milgram experiment, who had trembled and sweated and nervously laughed as they went all the way to pressing the switches marked 'XXX', many of them had written to thank Milgram, afterward, for what they had learned about themselves. That, too, was part of the story, the legend of that legendary experiment.

The Sun had almost sunk below the horizon now, a last golden tip peeking above the faraway tops of trees.

Harry looked at it, that tip of Sun, his glasses were supposed to be proof against UV so he ought to be able to look directly at it without damaging his eyes.

Harry stared directly at it, that tiny fraction of the Light that was not obscured and blocked and hidden, even if it was only 3 parts out of 40, the other 37 parts were there somewhere. The 7.5% of the glass that was full, which proved that people really did care about water, even if that force of caring within themselves was too often defeated. If people truly didn't care, the glass would have been truly empty. If everyone had been like You-Know-Who inside, secretly cleverly selfish, there would have been no resisters to the Holocaust at all.

Harry looked at the sunset, on the second day of the rest of his life, and knew that he had switched sides.

Because he couldn't believe in it any more, he couldn't really, not after going to Azkaban. He couldn't do what 37 out of 40 people would vote for him to do. Everyone might have inside them what it took to be Hermione, and someday they might learn; but *someday* wasn't *now*, not here, not today, not in the real world. If you were on the side of 3 out of 40 people then you weren't a political majority, and Professor Quirrell had been right, Harry would not bow his head in submission when that happened.

There was a sort of awful appropriateness to it. You shouldn't go to Azkaban and come back having not changed your mind about anything important.

So is Professor Quirrell right, then? asked Slytherin. *Leaving out whether he's good or evil, is he* right? *Are you, to them, whether they know it or not, their next Lord? We'll just leave out the Dark part, that's him being cynical again. But is it your intention now to rule? I've got to say, that makes even* me *nervous.*

Do you think you can be trusted with power? said Gryffindor. *Isn't there some sort of rule that people who want power shouldn't have it? Maybe we should make Hermione the ruler instead.*

Do you think you're fit to run a society and not have it collapse into total chaos inside of three weeks flat? said Hufflepuff. *Imagine how loudly Mum would scream if she'd heard you'd been elected Prime Minister, now ask yourself, are you sure she's wrong about that?*

Actually, said Ravenclaw, *I have to point out that all this political stuff sounds overwhelmingly boring. How about if we leave all the electioneering to Draco and stick to science? It's what we're actually good at, and that's been known to improve the human condition too, y'know.*

Slow down, thought Harry at his components, *we don't have to decide everything right now. We're allowed to ponder the problem as fully as possible before coming to a solution.*

The last part of the Sun sank below the horizon.

It was strange, this feeling of not quite knowing who you were, which side you were on, of having *not already made up your mind* about something as major as that, there was an unfamiliar sensation of freedom in it...

And that reminded him of what Professor Quirrell had said to his last question, which reminded him of Professor Quirrell, which made it hard once more to breathe, started that burning sensation in Harry's throat, sent his thoughts around that loop of the climbing spiral once again.

Why was he so sad, now, whenever he thought of Professor Quirrell? Harry was used to knowing himself, and he didn't know why he felt so sad...

It felt like he'd lost Professor Quirrell forever, lost him in Azkaban, that was how it felt. As surely as if the Defense Professor had been eaten by Dementors, consumed in the empty voids.

Lost him! Why did I lose him? Because he said Avada Kedavra and there was in fact a perfectly good reason even though I didn't see it for a couple of hours? Why can't things go back to the way they were?

But then it hadn't *been* the Avada Kedavra. That might have played a part in irreversibly collapsing a structure of rationalizations and flinches and carefully not thinking about certain things. But it hadn't been the Avada Kedavra, that hadn't been the disturbing thing that Harry had seen.

What did I see...?

Harry looked at the fading sky.

He'd seen Professor Quirrell turn into a hardened criminal while facing the Auror, and the apparent change of personalities had been effortless, and complete.

Another woman had known the Defense Professor as 'Jeremy Jaffe'.

How many different people are you, anyway?

I cannot say that I bothered keeping count.

You couldn't help but wonder...

...whether 'Professor Quirrell' was just one more name on the list, just one more person that had been *turned into*, made up in the service of some unguessable goal.

Harry would always be wondering now, every time he talked to Professor Quirrell, if it was a mask, and what motive was behind that mask. With every dry smile, Harry would be trying to see what was pulling the levers on the lips.

Is that how other people will start thinking of me, if I get too Slytherin? If I pull off too many plots, will I never be able to smile at anyone again, without them wondering what I really mean by it?

Maybe there was some way to restore a trust in surface appearances and make a normal human relationship possible again, but Harry couldn't think of what it might be.

That was how Harry had lost Professor Quirrell, not the person, but the... connection...

Why did that hurt so much?

Why did it feel so lonely, now?

Surely there were other people, maybe better people, to trust and befriend? Professor McGonagall, Professor Flitwick, Hermione, Draco, not to mention Mum and Dad, it wasn't like Harry was *alone*...

Only...

A choking sensation grew in Harry's throat as he understood.

Only Professor McGonagall, Professor Flitwick, Hermione, Draco, they all of them sometimes knew things that Harry didn't, but...

They did not excel above Harry *within* his own sphere of power; such genius as they possessed was not like his genius, and his genius was

not like theirs; he might look upon them as peers, but not look *up* to them as his *superiors.*

None of them had been, none of them could ever be...

Harry's mentor...

That was who Professor Quirrell had been.

That was who Harry had lost.

And the manner in which he had lost his first mentor might or might not allow Harry to ever get him back. Maybe someday he would know all Professor Quirrell's hidden purposes and the doubts between them would go away; but even if that seemed possible, it didn't seem very probable.

There was a gust of wind, outside Hogwarts, it bent the empty trees, rippled the lake whose heart was still unfrozen, made a whispering sound as it slid past the window that looked upon the half-twilit world, and Harry's thoughts wandered outward for a time.

Then returned inward again, to the next step of the spiral.

Why am I different from the other children my age?

If Professor Quirrell's answer to that had been an evasion, then it was a very well-calculated one. Deep enough and complex enough, sufficiently full of suggestions of hidden meaning, to serve as a trap for a Ravenclaw who couldn't be diverted by less. Or maybe Professor Quirrell had meant his answer honestly. Who knew what motive might have pulled that lever on those lips?

I will say this much, Mr. Potter: You are already an Occlumens, and I think you will become a perfect Occlumens before long. Identity does not mean, to such as us, what it means to other people. Anyone we can imagine, we can be; and the true difference about you, Mr. Potter, is that you have an unusually good imagination. A playwright must contain his characters, he must be larger than them in order to enact them within his mind. To an actor or spy or politician, the limit of his own diameter is the limit of who he can pretend to be, the limit of which face he may wear as a mask. But for such as you and I, anyone we can imagine, we can be, *in reality and not pretense. While you imagined yourself a child, Mr. Potter, you* were *a child. Yet there are other existences you could support, larger existences, if you wished. Why are you so free, and so great in your circumference, when*

other children your age are small and constrained? Why can you imagine and become *selves more adult than a mere child of a playwright should be able to compose? That I do not know, and I must not say what I guess. But what you have, Mr. Potter, is freedom.*

If that was a snow job it was one heck of a distracting one.

And the still more worrisome thought was that Professor Quirrell hadn't *realized* how disturbed Harry would be, how *wrong* that speech would sound to him, how much damage it would do to his trust in Professor Quirrell.

There ought to always be one real person who you *truly* were, at the center of everything...

Harry stared out at the falling night, the gathering darkness.

...right?

⁂

It was almost bedtime when Hermione heard the scattered intakes of breath and looked up from her copy of *Beauxbatons: A History* to see the missing boy, the boy who had been misplaced at lunch that Sunday, whose dinner nonappearance had been accompanied by rumors—and she hadn't believed them because they were *completely ridiculous*, but she'd felt a little queasiness inside—that he'd withdrawn from Hogwarts in order to hunt down Bellatrix Black.

"*Harry!*" she shrieked, she didn't even realize that she was talking directly to him for the first time in a week, or notice how some other students started at the sound of her yelling all the way across the Ravenclaw common room.

Harry's eyes had already lifted to her, he was already walking toward her, so she stopped halfway out of her chair—

A few moments later, Harry was seated across from her, and he was putting away his wand after casting a Quieting barrier around them.

(And an awful lot of Ravenclaws were trying not to look like they were watching.)

"Hey," Harry said. His voice wavered. "I missed you. You're... going to talk to me again, now?"

Hermione nodded, she just nodded, she couldn't think of what to say. She'd missed Harry too, but she was realizing, with a guilty sort of feeling, that it might've been a lot worse for him. She had other friends, Harry... it didn't feel *fair*, sometimes, that Harry talked to only her like that, so that she *had* to talk to him; but Harry had a look about him like unfair things had been happening to *him*, too.

"What's been going *on?*" she said. "There's all sorts of rumors. There were people saying you'd run off to fight Bellatrix Black, there were people saying you'd run off to *join* Bellatrix Black—" and *those* rumors had said that Hermione had just made up the thing about the phoenix, and she'd yelled that the whole Ravenclaw common room had seen it, so then the next rumor had claimed she'd made up *that* part too, which was stupidity of such an inconceivable level that it left her *completely flabbergasted.*

"I can't talk about it," Harry said in a bare whisper. "Can't talk about a lot of it. I wish I could tell you everything," his voice wavered, "but I can't... I guess, if it helps or anything, I'm not going to lunch with Professor Quirrell any more..."

Harry put his hands over his face, then, covering his eyes.

Hermione felt the queasy feeling all through her stomach.

"Are you crying?" said Hermione.

"Yeah," said Harry, his voice sounding a little breathy. "I don't want anyone else to see."

There was a little silence. Hermione wanted to help but she didn't know what to do about a boy crying, and she didn't know what was happening; she felt like huge things were happening around her—no, around Harry—and if she knew what they were she would probably be scared, or alarmed, or something, but she didn't know anything.

"Did Professor Quirrell do something wrong?" she said at last.

"That's not why I can't go to lunch with him any more," Harry said, still in that bare whisper with his hands pressed over his eyes. "That was the Headmaster's decision. But yeah, Professor Quirrell said some things to me that made me trust him less, I guess..." Harry's voice sounded very shaky. "I'm feeling kind of alone right now."

Hermione put her hand on her cheek, for a moment, where Fawkes had touched her yesterday. She'd kept thinking about that touch, over and over, maybe because she *wanted* it to be important, to mean something to her...

"Is there any way I can help?" she said.

"I want to do something normal," Harry said from behind his hands. "Something very normal for first-year Hogwarts students. Something eleven-year-olds and twelve-year-olds like us are *supposed* to do. Like play a game of Exploding Snap or something... I don't suppose you have the cards or know the rules or anything like that?"

"Um... I *don't* know the rules, actually..." said Hermione. "I know they *explode*."

"I don't suppose Gobstones?" said Harry.

"Don't know the rules and they *spit* at you. Those are *boy* games, Harry!"

There was a pause. Harry ground his hands against his face to wipe it, and then took his hands away; and then he was looking at her, looking a little helpless. "Well," Harry said, "what *do* wizards and witches our age do, when they play, you know, the kind of pointless silly games we're *supposed* to play at this age?"

"Hopscotch?" said Hermione. "Jump-rope? Unicorn attack? *I* don't know, *I* read books!"

Harry started laughing, and Hermione started giggling along with him even though she didn't know quite why, but it *was* funny.

"I guess that helped a little," said Harry. "Actually I think it helped more than playing Gobstones for an hour could've possibly helped, so thanks for being you. And no matter what, I'm *not* having anyone Obliviate everything I know about calculus. I'd sooner die."

"*What?*" said Hermione. "Why—why would you *ever* want to do *that?*"

Harry stood up from the table, and there was a rush of restored background noise as his rise broke the Quieting Charm. "I'm a tad sleepy so I'm going off to bed," Harry said, now his voice was ordinary and wry, "I've got some lost time to make up for, but I'll see you at breakfast, and

then at Herbology, if that's all right. Not to mention it wouldn't be fair to dump all my depression on you. G'night, Hermione."

"Good night, Harry," she said, feeling very confused and alarmed. "Pleasant dreams."

Harry stumbled a little as she said that, and then he continued on toward the stairs that led to the first-year-boys' dorms.

Harry turned the Quieting Charm all the way up, on the head of his bedboard, so that he wouldn't wake anyone else up if he screamed.

Set his alarm to wake him up for breakfast (if he wasn't up already by that hour, if indeed he slept at all).

Got into bed, laid down—

—felt the lump beneath his pillow.

Harry stared up at the canopy above his bed.

Hissed under his breath, "Oh, you've got to be kidding me..."

It took a few seconds before Harry could muster the heart to sit up in bed, pull the blanket over himself and his pillow to obscure the deed from the other boys, cast a low-intensity *Lumos* and see what was under his pillow.

There was a parchment, and a deck of playing cards.

The parchment read,

A little bird told me that Dumbledore has shut the door of your cage.

On this occasion, I've got to admit Dumbles might have a point. Bellatrix Black is loosed upon the world once more, and that's not good news for any good person. Honestly, if it was me in Dumbledore's shoes, I'd probably be doing the same thing right now, no offense.

But just in case there's more to it than that... The Salem Witches' Institute in America accepts boys as well, despite the name. They're

good people and I'm certain they would protect you even from Dumbledore, if you needed it. Britain thinks you need Dumbledore's permission to emigrate to magical America, but magical America disagrees. So in the final extremity, get outside the wards of Hogwarts and tear in half the King of Hearts from this deck of cards.

That you should resort to it only in the final extremity goes without saying.

Be well, Harry Potter.

—Santa Claus

Harry stared down at the pack of cards.

It *couldn't* take him anywhere else, not right now, portkeys didn't work here.

But he still felt unnerved about the prospect of picking it up, even to hide it inside his trunk...

Well, he'd *already* picked up the parchment, which could just as easily have been enchanted with a trap, if a trap was involved.

But still.

"Wingardium Leviosa," Harry whispered, and Hovered the packet of cards to lie next to where his alarm clock rested in a pocket of the headboard. He'd deal with it tomorrow.

And then Harry lay back in bed, and closed his eyes, to dream without any phoenix to protect him, and pay his reckoning.

⁂

He came awake with a gasp of horror, not a scream, he'd yet to scream this night, but his blanket was all tangled around him from where his sleeping form had jerked as he dreamed of running, trying to get away from the gaps in space that were pursuing him through a corridor of metal lit by dim gaslight, an endlessly long corridor of metal lit by dim gaslight, and he hadn't *known*, in the dream, that touching those voids meant he would die horribly and leave his still-breathing body empty

behind him, all he'd known was that he had to run and run and run from the wounds in the world sliding after him—

Harry started to cry again, it wasn't for the horror of the chase, it was that he'd run away while someone behind him was screaming for help, screaming for him to come back and save her, help her, she was being eaten, she was going to die, and in the dream Harry had run away instead of helping her.

"Don't go!" The voice came in a scream from behind the metal door. "No, no, no, don't go, don't take it away, don't don't don't—"

Why had Fawkes ever rested on his shoulder? He'd walked away. Fawkes should hate him.

Fawkes should hate Dumbledore. *He'd* walked away.

Fawkes should hate everyone—

The boy wasn't awake, wasn't dreaming, his thoughts were jumbled and confused in the shadowlands that bordered sleep and waking, unprotected by the safety rails that his aware mind imposed on itself, the careful rules and censors. In that shadowland his brain had woken up enough to think, but something else was too sleepy to act; his thoughts ran free and wild, unconstrained by his self-concept, his waking self's ideals of what he shouldn't think. That was the freedom of his brain's dreams, as his self-concept slept. Free to repeat, over and over, Harry's new worst nightmare:

"No, I didn't mean it, please don't die!"

"No, I didn't mean it, please don't die!"

"No, I didn't mean it, please don't die!"

A rage grew in him alongside the self-loathing, a terrible hot wrath / icy cold hatred, for the world which had done that to her / for himself, and in his half-awake state Harry fantasized escapes, fantasized ways out of the moral dilemma, he imagined himself hovering above the vast triangular horror of Azkaban, and whispering an incantation unlike any syllables that had ever been heard before on Earth, whispers that echoed all the way across the sky and were heard on the other side of the world, and there was a blast of silver Patronus fire like a nuclear explosion that tore apart all the Dementors in an instant and ripped apart the metal walls of Azkaban, shattered the long corridors and all the dim orange

lights, and then a moment later his brain remembered that there were people in there, and rewrote the half-dream fantasy to show all the prisoners laughing as they flew away in flocks from the burning wreck of Azkaban, the silver light restoring the flesh to their limbs as they flew, and Harry started crying harder into his pillow, because he couldn't do it, because he wasn't God—

He'd sworn upon his life and magic and his art as a rationalist, he'd sworn by all he held sacred and all his happy memories, he'd given his oath so now he had to do something, *had to do something, had to do something*—

Maybe it was pointless.

Maybe trying to follow rules was pointless.

Maybe you just burned down Azkaban however.

And in fact he'd sworn he'd do it, so now that was what he had to do.

He'd just do whatever it took to get rid of Azkaban, that was all. If that meant ruling Britain, fine, if that meant finding a spell to whisper that would echo all across the sky, whatever, the important thing was to destroy Azkaban.

That was the side he was on, that was who he was, so there, it was done.

His waking mind would have demanded a lot more details before accepting that as an answer, but in his half-dreaming state it felt like enough of a resolution to let his tired mind fall truly asleep again, and dream the next nightmare.

Final Aftermath:

She came awake with a gasp of horror, a disruption of her breathing that left her feeling deprived of air and yet her lungs didn't move, she woke up with an unvoiced scream on her lips and no words, no words came forth, for she could not understand what she had seen, *she could not understand what she had seen*, it was too large for her to encompass and still taking shape, she could not put words to that formless shape and so

she could not discharge it, could not discharge it and become innocent and unknowing once more.

"What time is it?" she whispered.

Her golden jeweled alarm clock, the beautiful and magical and expensive alarm clock that the Headmaster had given her as a gift upon her employment at Hogwarts, whispered back, "Around two in the morning. Go back to sleep."

Her sheets were soaked in sweat, her nightclothes soaked in sweat, she took her wand from beside the pillow and cleaned herself up before she tried to go back to sleep, she tried to go back to sleep and eventually succeeded.

Sybill Trelawney went back to sleep.

CHAPTER SIXTY-FOUR

OMAKE FILES, PART III: THE OTHER FANFICTIONS YOU COULD'VE BEEN READING

LORD OF THE RATIONALITY

Frodo glanced at all the faces, but they were not turned to him. All the Council sat with downcast eyes, as if in deep thought. A great dread fell on him, as if he was awaiting the pronouncement of some doom that he had long foreseen and vainly hoped might after all never be spoken. An overwhelming longing to rest and remain at peace by Bilbo's side in Rivendell filled all his heart. At last with an effort he spoke, and wondered to hear his own words, as if some other will was using his small voice.

"We cannot," said Frodo. "We must not. Do you not see? It is exactly what the Enemy desires. All of this he has foreseen."

The faces turned to him, puzzled the Dwarves and grave the Elves; sternness in the eyes of the Men; and so keen the gazes of Elrond and of Gandalf that Frodo almost could not withstand it. It was very hard, then, not to grasp the Ring in his hand, and harder still not to put it on, to face them as only Frodo.

"Do you not question it?" Frodo said, thin like the wind his voice, and wavering like a breeze. "You have chosen, of all things, to send

the Ring into Mordor; should you not wonder? How did it come to this? That we might, of all our choices, do that single thing our Enemy most desires? Perhaps the Cracks of Doom are already guarded, strongly enough to hold off Gandalf and Elrond and Glorfindel all together; or perhaps the Master of that place has cooled the lava there, set it to trap the Ring so that he may simply bring it out after it is thrown in..." A memory of awful clarity came over Frodo then, and a flash of black laughter, and the thought came to him that it was *just* what the Enemy would do. Only the thought came to him so: *thus it would amuse me to do, if I meant to rule...*

There were doubtful glances exchanged within the council; Glóin and Gimli and Boromir were now looking at the Elves more skeptically than before, like they had awoken out of a dream of words.

"The Enemy is very wise," said Gandalf, "and weighs all things to a nicety in the scales of his malice. But the only measure that he knows is desire, desire for power; and so he judges all hearts. Into his heart the thought will not enter that any will refuse it, that having the Ring we may seek to destroy it—"

"He *will* think of it!" cried Frodo. He struggled for words, trying to convey things that had once seemed perfect in his comprehension, and then faded like melting snow. "If the Enemy thought that all his foes were moved by desire for power alone—he would guess wrongly, over and over, and the Maker of this Ring would *see* that, he would *know* that somewhere he had made a mistake!" Frodo's hands stretched forth pleadingly.

Boromir stirred, and his voice was doubtful. "You speak fair of the Enemy," said Boromir, "for one of his foes."

Frodo's mouth opened and shut in desperate bewilderment; for Frodo knew, he knew the Man was mad, but he could think of nothing to say.

Then Bilbo spoke, and his withered voice silenced the whole room, even Elrond who had been about to speak. "Frodo is right, I fear," whispered the old hobbit. "I remember, I remember what it was like. To see with the Black Sight. I remember. The Enemy will think that we might not trust one another, that the weaker among us will propose to destroy

the Ring so that the stronger may not have it. He knows that even one not truly good might still cry to destroy the Ring, to make a show of pretended goodness. And the Enemy will *not* think it impossible that such a decision be made by this council, for you see, he does not trust us to be wise." A whispering chuckle rose from the ancient hobbit's throat. "And if he did—why, he would *still* guard the Cracks of Doom. It would cost him little."

Now foreboding was on the faces even of the Elves, and the Wise; Elrond had frowned, and the sharp eyebrows of Gandalf furrowed.

Frodo gazed at them all, feeling a wildness come over him, a despair; and as his heart weakened a shadow came over his vision, a darkness and a wavering. From within the shadow Frodo saw Gandalf, and the wizard's strength was revealed as weakness, and his wisdom folly. For Frodo knew, as the Ring seemed to drag and weigh on his breast, that Gandalf had not thought at all of history and lore, when the wizard spoke of how the Enemy would not understand any desire save power; that Gandalf had not remembered how Sauron had cast down and corrupted the Men of Númenor in the days of their glory. Just as it had not occurred to Gandalf that the Enemy might learn to comprehend foes of goodwill by *looking*...

Frodo's gaze swung to Elrond, but there was no hope there, no answer and no rescue in the shadowy vision; for Elrond had let Isildur go, carrying the Ring from the Cracks of Doom where it should have been destroyed, to the cost of all this war. Not for Isildur's own sake, not for friendship had it been done, for the Ring had killed Isildur in the end, and far worse fates could have followed him. But the Doom that had stemmed from Isildur's deed would have seemed unsure to Elrond then, unsure and distant in time; and yet the cost to Elrond himself of taking his sword's pommel to the back of Isildur's head would have been surer, and nearer...

As though in desperation, Frodo turned to look at Aragorn, the weathered man who had donned his travel-worn clothes for this council, the heir of kings who spoke softly to hobbits. But Frodo's vision seemed to double, and in the shadowy second image Frodo saw a Man who had spent too much of his youth among Elves, who had learned to

wear humble and stained clothes amid the gold and jewels, knowing he could not match them wisdom for wisdom, and hoping to outplay them in a fashion they would not emulate...

In the sight of the Ring, which was the sight of the Ring's own Maker, all noble things faded into stratagems and lies, a world of grey and darkness without any light. They had not made their choices knowingly, Gandalf or Elrond or Aragorn; the impulses had come from the dark hidden parts of themselves, the black secret depths which the Ring had rendered plain in Frodo's vision. Would they outthink the Shadow, when they could not comprehend even their own selves, or the forces that moved them?

"Frodo!" came the sharp whisper of Bilbo's voice, and Frodo came to himself, and halted his hand reaching up toward where the Ring lay on his breast, on its chain, dragging like a vast stone around his neck.

Reaching up to grasp the Ring wherein all answers lay.

"How did you bear this thing?" Frodo whispered to Bilbo, as if the two of them were the only souls in the room, though all the Council watched them. "For years? I cannot imagine it."

"I kept it locked in a room to which only Gandalf had the key," said his uncle, "and when I began to imagine ways to open it, I remembered Gollum."

A shudder went through Frodo, remembering the tales. The horror of the Misty Mountains, thinking, always thinking in the dark; ruling the goblins from the shadows and filling the tunnels with traps; but for Bilbo wearing the ring that first time not a single dwarf would have lived. And now, Legolas the Elf had told them, Gollum had given up on sending his agents against the Shire, had at last found the courage to leave his mountains and seek the Ring himself. That was Gollum, the fate which Frodo would share himself, if the Ring were not destroyed.

Only they had no way to destroy the Ring.

The Shadow had foreseen every move they could make. Had *almost*—Frodo still could not imagine how it had been done, how the Shadow had arranged such a thing—had *almost* maneuvered the Council into sending the Ring straight into Mordor with only a tiny guard set on it, as they would have done if Frodo and Bilbo had not been there.

And having foregone that swiftest of all possible defeats, the only question remaining was how long it would take to lose. Gandalf had delayed too long, delayed far too long to set this march in motion. It could have been so easy, if only Bilbo had set out eighty years earlier, if only Bilbo had been told what Gandalf had already suspected, if only Gandalf's heart had not silently flinched away from the prospect of being embarrassingly wrong...

Frodo's hand spasmed on his breast; without thought, his fingers began to rise again toward the vast weight of the chain on which the Ring hung.

All he had to do was put on the Ring.

Just that, and all would become clear to him, once more the slowness and mud would leave his thoughts, all possibilities and futures transparent to him, he would see through the Shadow's plans and devise an irresistible counterstroke—

—and he would never be able to take off the Ring, not again, not by any will that would be left to him. All Frodo had of those moments were fading memories, but he knew that it had felt like dying, to let all his towers of thought collapse and become only Frodo once more. It had felt like dying, he remembered that much of Weathertop even if he remembered little else. And if he did wear the Ring again, it would be better to die with it on his finger, to end his life while he was still himself; for Frodo knew that he could not withstand the effects of wearing the Ring a second time, not afterward when the limitless clarity was lost to him...

Frodo looked around the Council, at the poor lost leaderless Wise, and he knew they could not defeat the Shadow by their own strength.

"I will wear it one last time," Frodo said, his voice broken and failing, as he had known from the beginning that he would say in the end, "one last time to find the answer for this Council, and then there will be other hobbits."

"*No!*" screamed the voice of Sam, as the other hobbit began to rush forward from where he had hidden; even as Frodo, with movement as swift and precise as a Nazgûl, took out the Ring from beneath his shirt;

and somehow Bilbo was already standing there and had already thrust his finger through.

It all happened before even Gandalf's staff could point, before Aragorn could level the hilt-shard of his sword; the Dwarves shouted in shock, and the Elves were dismayed.

"Of course," said Bilbo's voice, as Frodo began to weep, "I see it now, I understand everything at last. Listen, listen and swiftly, here is what you must do—"

The Witch and The Wardrobe

With a critical eye, Peter looked over the encamped Centaurs with their bows, Beavers with their long daggers, and talking Bears with their chain-mail draped over them. He was in charge, because he was one of the mythical Sons of Adam and had declared himself High King of Narnia; but the truth was he didn't really know much about encampments, weapons, and guard patrols. In the end all he could see was that they all looked proud and confident, and Peter had to hope they were right about that; because if you couldn't believe in your own people, you couldn't believe in anyone.

"They'd scare *me*, if I had to fight 'em," Peter said finally, "but I don't know if it's enough to beat... *her*."

"You don't suppose this mysterious lion will actually show up and help us, d'you?" said Lucy. Her voice was very quiet, so that none of the creatures around them would hear. "Only it'd be nice to really have him, don't you think, instead of just letting people think that he put us in charge?"

Susan shook her head, shaking the magical arrows in the quiver on her back. "If there was really someone like that," Susan said, "he wouldn't have let the White Witch cover the land in winter for a hundred years, would he?"

"I had the strangest dream," Lucy said, her voice even quieter, "where we didn't have to organize any creatures or convince them to fight, we

just walked into this place and the lion was already here, with all the armies already mustered, and he went and rescued Edmund, and then we rode alongside him into this tremendous battle where he killed the White Witch..."

"Did the dream have a moral?" said Peter.

"I don't know," said Lucy, blinking and looking a little puzzled. "In the dream it all seemed pointless somehow."

"I think maybe the land of Narnia was trying to tell you," said Susan, "or maybe it was just your own dreams trying to tell you, that if there was really such a person as that lion, there'd be no use for *us*."

ERDŐS IN CHAINS

"How could you do it, Anita?" said Richard, his voice very tight. "How could you coauthor a paper with Jean-Claude? You *study* the undead, you don't collaborate with them on papers!"

"And what about you?" I spat. "You coauthored a paper with Sylvie! It's all right for *you* to be prolific but not *me*?"

"I'm the *head of her institute*," Richard growled. I could feel the waves of science radiating off him; he was angry. "I *have* to work with Sylvie, it doesn't mean anything! I thought our own research was special, Anita!"

"It *is*," I said, feeling helpless about my inability to explain things to Richard. He didn't understand the thrill of being a polymath, the new worlds that were opening up to me. "I didn't share *our* research with anyone—"

"But you wanted to," said Richard.

I didn't say anything, but I knew that the look on my face said it all.

"God, Anita, you've changed," said Richard. He seemed to slump in on himself. "Do you realize that the monsters are joking about Blake numbers, now? I used to be your partner in everything, and now—I'm just another werewolf with a Blake number of 1."

ThunderSmarts

"I am *sick* of this!" shouted Liono. "Sick of doing this *every single week!* Our species was capable of *interstellar travel*, Panthro, I *know* the quantities of energy involved! There is no *way* you can't build a nuke or steer an asteroid or *somehow* blow up that ever-living idiot's pyramid!"

He-Man and the Masters of Rationality

"Fabulous secret knowledge was revealed to me on the day I held aloft my magic book and said: *By the power of Bayes's Theorem!*"

Fate/Sane Night

I am the core of my thoughts
Belief is my body
And choice is my blood
I have revised over a thousand judgments
Unafraid of loss
Nor aware of gain
Have withstood pain to update many times
Waiting for truth's arrival.
This is the one uncertain path.
My whole life has been...
Unlimited Bayes Works!

⁂

Tengen Toppa Gurren Rationality 40K

I have a truly marvelous story for this crossover which this margin is too narrow to contain.

⁂

Utilitarian Twilight

"Edward," said Bella tenderly. She reached up a hand and stroked his cold, sparkling cheek. "You don't have to protect me from anything. I've listed out all the upsides and all the downsides, assigned them consistent relative weights, and it's just really obvious that the benefits of becoming a vampire outweigh the drawbacks."

"Bella," Edward said, and swallowed desperately. "Bella—"

"Immortality. Perfect health. Awakening psychic powers. Easy enough to survive on animal blood once you do it. Even the beauty, Edward, there are people who would give their lives to be pretty, and

don't you dare call them shallow until you've tried being ugly. Do you think I'm scared of the word 'vampire'? I'm tired of your arbitrary deontological constraints, Edward. The whole human species ought to be in on your fun, and people are dying by the thousands even as you hesitate."

The gun in his lover's hand was cold against his forehead. It wouldn't kill him, but it would disable him for long enough—

CHAPTER SIXTY-FIVE

CONTAGIOUS LIES

Hermione Granger had read somewhere once, that one of the keys to staying thin was to pay attention to the food you ate, to notice yourself eating it, so that you were satisfied with the meal. This morning she'd made herself toast, and put butter on the toast, and cinnamon on the butter, and it really should've been enough to get her to *notice,* this time, the goodness that was in front of her...

Without noticing the cinnamon or the butter, without noticing the food or that she was eating, Hermione swallowed another bite of toast, and said, "Can you try explaining that again? I'm still completely flabbergasted."

"It's pretty straightforward, if you think like a Light-Side Slytherin," said the boy that everyone else in school, excepting only the two of them, now believed to be her true love. Harry Potter's spoon absentmindedly stirred his breakfast cereal; he hadn't taken many bites of it this morning, not that Hermione had seen. "Every good thing in the world brings its own opposition into existence. Phoenixes are no exception."

Hermione took another unnoticed bite out of her buttered and cinnamoned toast, and said, "How can anyone *not understand* that Fawkes thinks you're a good enough person to ride around on your shoulder? He wouldn't do that with a Dark Wizard! He just wouldn't!"

And she hadn't yelled at anyone about Fawkes's touch on her *own* cheek, because she knew it wouldn't be right—that if a phoenix touched you, you weren't supposed to brag about it, that wasn't what a phoenix was *for*.

But she'd really *hoped* that it would squash the rumors about Harry Potter going evil and Hermione Granger following him down.

And it hadn't.

And she truly couldn't understand why not.

Harry ate another bite of his cereal, his eyes going distant now, no longer meeting her own. "Think of it this way: You skip school one day, and you lie and tell your teacher you were sick. The teacher tells you to bring a doctor's note, so you forge one. The teacher says she's going to call the doctor to check, so you have to give her a fake number for the doctor, and get a friend to pretend to be the doctor when she calls—"

"You did *what?*"

Harry looked up from his cereal then, and now he was smiling. "I'm not saying I really *did* that, Hermione..." Then his eyes abruptly dropped back down to his cereal. "No. Just an example. Lies propagate, that's what I'm saying. You've got to tell more lies to cover them up, lie about every fact that's connected to the first lie. And if you *kept on* lying, and you *kept on* trying to cover it up, sooner or later you'd even have to start lying about the general laws of thought. Like, someone is selling you some kind of alternative medicine that doesn't work, and any double-blind experimental study will confirm that it doesn't work. So if someone wants to *go on* defending the lie, they've got to get you to disbelieve in the experimental method. Like, the experimental method is just for merely *scientific* kinds of medicine, not amazing alternative medicine like theirs. Or a good and virtuous person should believe as strongly as they can, no matter what the evidence says. Or truth doesn't exist and there's no such thing as objective reality. A lot of common wisdom like that isn't just *mistaken,* it's anti-epistemology, it's *systematically* wrong. Every rule of rationality that tells you how to find the truth, there's someone out there who needs you to believe the opposite. If you once tell a lie, the truth is ever after your enemy; and there's a lot of people out there telling lies—" Harry's voice stopped.

"What does that have to do with Fawkes?" she said.

Harry withdrew his spoon from his cereal, and pointed in the direction of the Head Table. "The Headmaster has a phoenix, right? And he's Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot? So he's got political opponents, like Lucius. Now, d'you think that opposition is going to just roll over and surrender, because Dumbledore has a phoenix and they don't? Do

you think they'll admit that Fawkes is even *evidence* that Dumbledore's a good person? Of course not. They've got to invent *something* to say that makes Fawkes... *not important.* Like, phoenixes only follow people who charge straight at anyone they think is evil, so having a phoenix just means you're an idiot or a dangerous fanatic. Or, phoenixes just follow people who are pure Gryffindor, so Gryffindor they don't have the virtues of other Houses. Or it just shows how much courage a magical animal thinks you have, nothing else, and it wouldn't be fair to judge politicians based on that. They have to say *something* to deny the phoenix. I bet Lucius didn't even have to make up anything new. I bet it had all been said before, centuries ago, since the first time someone had a phoenix riding on his shoulder, and someone else wanted people not to take that into account as evidence. I bet by the time Fawkes came along it was already common wisdom, it would have just seemed *strange* to take into account who a phoenix liked or disliked. It would be like a Muggle newspaper testing political candidates to rate their level of scientific literacy. Every force for Good that exists in this universe, there's someone else who benefits from people discounting it, or fencing it into a narrow box where it can't get to them."

"But—" Hermione said. "Okay, I see why Lucius Malfoy doesn't want anyone to think that Fawkes matters, but why does anyone who *isn't* a bad guy *believe* it?"

Harry Potter gave a little shrug. His spoon dropped back into his cereal, and went on stirring without a pause. "Why does any kind of cynicism appeal to people? Because it seems like a mark of maturity, of sophistication, like you've seen everything and know better. Or because putting something down feels like pushing yourself up. Or they don't have a phoenix themselves, so their political instinct tells them there's no advantage to be gained from saying nice things about phoenixes. Or because being cynical feels like knowing a secret truth that common people don't know..." Harry Potter looked in the direction of the Head Table, and his voice dropped until it was almost a whisper. "I think maybe that's what *he's* getting wrong—that he's cynical about everything else, but not about cynicism itself."

Without thinking, Hermione looked in the direction of the Head Ta-

ble herself, but the Defense Professor's seat was still empty, as it had been on Monday and Tuesday; the Deputy Headmistress had pronounced, earlier, that Professor Quirrell's classes for today would be canceled.

Afterward, when Harry had eaten a few bites of treacle tart and then left the table, Hermione looked at Anthony and Padma, who had been coincidentally eating nearby but certainly not eavesdropping or anything.

Anthony and Padma looked back at her.

Padma said hesitantly, "Is it just me, or has Harry Potter started talking like a more *complicated* sort of book in the last few days? I mean, I haven't been listening to him very long—"

"It's not just you," said Anthony.

Hermione didn't say anything, but she was becoming increasingly worried. Whatever had happened to Harry Potter on the day of the phoenix, it had changed him; there was something new in him now. Not cold, but *hard.* Sometimes she caught him staring out a window at nothing visible, a look of grim determination on his face. In Herbology class on Monday, a Venus Fire Trap had gone out of control; and Harry had tackled Terry out of the way of a fireball even as Professor Sprout had shouted a Flame-Freezing Charm; and when Harry had risen from the floor he'd just gone back to his place like nothing interesting had happened. And when for once she'd gotten a better test score than Harry in their Transfiguration exam, later that same Monday, Harry had smiled at her as though to congratulate her, instead of gritting his teeth; and... that had bothered her *a lot*.

She was getting the sense that Harry...

...was pulling away from her...

"He seems a lot *older* all of a sudden," said Anthony. "Not like a real grownup, I can't imagine *Harry* as a grownup, but it's like he suddenly turned into a *fourth-year version* of... of *whatever* he is."

"Well," Padma said. She daintily dabbed a chocolate-flavored scone with some scone-flavored frosting. "I think Dragon and Sunshine had better ally during the next battle or Mr. Harry Potter is going to *smash* us. We were allied last time, and even then Chaos almost won—"

"Yeah," said Anthony. "You're right, Miss Patil. Tell the Dragon General that we want to meet with you—"

"No!" said Hermione. "We shouldn't *have* to gang up on General Potter just to stand a chance. That doesn't make sense, especially now that nobody can use Muggle things anymore. It's still twenty-four soldiers in every army."

Neither Padma or Anthony said anything to that.

Knock-knock, knock-knock.

"Come in, Mr. Potter," she said.

The door creaked open, and Harry Potter slipped through the opening into her office; he pushed the door shut behind him with one hand, and wordlessly seated himself in the cushioned chair that now stood in front of her desk. She'd Transfigured that chair so often that it sometimes changed form to reflect her mood, without any wand movement or incantation or even conscious intent. Right now, that chair had become deeply cushioned, so that as Harry sat down he sank into it, as though the chair were hugging him.

Harry didn't seem to notice. There was an air of quiet determination about the boy; his eyes had locked steadily with hers, and not let up for a moment. "You called me?" said the boy.

"I did," said Professor McGonagall. "I have two pieces of good news for you, Mr. Potter. First—have you met Mr. Rubeus Hagrid, at all? The groundskeeper? He was an old friend of your parents."

Harry hesitated. Then, "Mr. Hagrid spoke to me a bit after I got here," Harry said. "I think it was on Tuesday of my first week of school. He didn't say he knew my parents, though. At the time I thought he just wanted to introduce himself to the Boy-Who-Lived... did he have some kind of hidden agenda? He didn't *seem* like the type..."

"Ah..." she said. It took her a moment to pull her thoughts together. "It's a long story, Mr. Potter, but Mr. Hagrid was falsely accused of murdering a student, five decades ago. Mr. Hagrid's wand was snapped, and

he was expelled. Later, when Professor Dumbledore became Headmaster, he gave Mr. Hagrid a place here as Keeper of Grounds and Keys."

Harry's eyes watched her intently. "You said that five decades ago was the last time a student died in Hogwarts, and you were certain that five decades ago was the last time someone heard the Sorting Hat's secret message."

She felt a slight chill—even the Headmaster or Severus might not have made that connection that quickly—and said, "Yes, Mr. Potter. Someone opened the Chamber of Secrets, but this was not believed, and Mr. Hagrid was blamed for the resulting death. However, the Headmaster has located the additional enchantment on the Sorting Hat, and he has shown it to a special panel of the Wizengamot. As a result, Mr. Hagrid's sentence has been revoked—just this morning, in fact—and he will be allowed to acquire a new wand." She hesitated. "We... have not yet told Mr. Hagrid of this, Mr. Potter. We were waiting until the deed was done, so as not to give him false hope after so long. Mr. Potter... we were wondering if we could tell Mr. Hagrid that it was you who helped him...?"

She saw the weighing look in his eyes—

"I remember Mr. Hagrid holding you when you were a baby," she said. "I think he would be very happy to know."

She could see it, though, on Harry's face, the moment when he decided that Rubeus wouldn't be any use to him.

Harry shook his head. "Bad enough that someone might deduce there was a Parselmouth in this year's crop of students," Harry said. "I think it'd be more prudent to just keep it all as secret as possible."

She remembered James and Lily, who'd never hesitated to return the friendship the huge, bluff man had offered them, for all that James was the scion of a Noble House or Lily a budding Charms Mistress, and Rubeus a mere half-giant whose wand had been snapped...

"Because you don't expect him to prove useful, Mr. Potter?"

There was silence. She hadn't intended to say that out loud.

Sadness crossed Harry's face. "Probably," Harry said quietly. "But I don't think he and I would get along, do you?"

Something seemed to be stuck in her throat.

"Speaking of making use of people," Harry said. "It seems I'm going to be thrown into a war with a Dark Lord sometime soon. So while I'm in your office, I'd like to ask that my sleep cycle be extended to thirty hours per day. Neville Longbottom wants to start practicing dueling, there's an older Hufflepuff who offered to teach him, and they invited me to join. Plus there's other things I want to learn too—and if you or the Headmaster think I should study anything in particular, in order to become a powerful wizard when I grow up, let me know. Please direct Madam Pomfrey to administer the appropriate potion, or whatever it is that she needs to do—"

"*Mr. Potter!*"

Harry's eyes gazed directly into her own. "Yes, Minerva? I know it wasn't your idea, but I'd like to survive the use the Headmaster's making of me. Please don't be an obstacle to that."

It almost broke her. "Harry," she whispered in a bare voice, "children shouldn't have to *think* like that!"

"You're right, they shouldn't," Harry said. "A *lot* of children have to grow up too early, though, not just me; and most children like that would probably trade places with me in five seconds. I'm not going to pity myself, Professor McGonagall, not when there are people out there in real trouble and I'm not one of them."

She swallowed, hard, and said, "Mr. Potter, at thirty hours per day, you'll—get *older,* you'll age faster—" *Like Albus.*

"And in my fifth year I'll be around the same physiological age as Hermione," said Harry. "Doesn't seem *that* terrible." There was a wry smile now on Harry's face. "Honestly, I'd probably want this even if there *weren't* a Dark Lord. Wizards live for a while, and either wizards or Muggles will probably push that out even further over the next century. There's no reason *not* to pack as many hours into a day as I can. I've got things I plan to do, and 'twere well they were done quickly."

There was a long pause.

"All right," Minerva said. It came out as almost a whisper. She raised her voice. "All right, Mr. Potter, I shall ask the Headmaster, and if he agrees, it shall be done."

Harry's eyes narrowed for a moment. "I see. Then please remind the Headmaster that Godric Gryffindor, in his last words, said that if it had been the right thing for him to do, then he wouldn't tell anyone else to choose wrongly, not even the youngest student in Hogwarts."

And she knew with a hollow feeling that any chance of Albus stopping this, stopping any of this, had just Vanished into nothingness. That was what Albus had told her when she'd objected that Cameron Edward was too young, and then when she'd objected that Peter Pevensie was too young, and finally she'd given up objecting. "Who told you that, Mr. Potter?" *Not Albus—surely Albus would never* say *that to any student—*

"I've been doing a lot of reading lately," Harry said. His body started to rise from the enveloping chair, then halted. "Dare I ask about the second piece of good news?"

"Oh," she said. "Ah—Professor Quirrell has woken up and says that you may—"

The Hogwarts infirmary was a brilliantly open space, skylit on all four sides despite seeming to be located squarely in the middle of the castle. White beds in long rows stretched out, only three of them occupied at the moment. One older boy and one older girl on opposite sides, both lying motionless with their eyes closed, probably unconscious and spellbound while some healing Charm or Potion reconfigured their bodies in uncomfortable ways; and the third occupant had the curtain drawn around their bed, which was presumably a good thing. Madam Pomfrey had pushed him along with a hard shove and told him not to gawk, and Harry had needed to remind himself sharply that some people still didn't know who the Boy-Who-Lived was—either that, or Madam Pomfrey's identity was bound up with her absolute dominance of her own hospital, etcetera, whatever.

Behind the rows of beds were five doors, leading into the private rooms where they stored the patients who would be staying for days instead of hours, but whose condition didn't warrant a transfer to St. Mungo's.

Windowless, skyless, unlit but for a single smokeless torch on one of the solid stone walls; that was the room behind the middle door. Harry had wondered whether professors could ask Hogwarts to change itself; or if the infirmary always had a room like that available, for people who didn't enjoy the light.

In the center of the room, between two equal bedstands that looked to have been carved from the same grey marble as the walls, rested a white hospital bed, looking vaguely orangish in the unsmoking torchlight; and within that bed, a white sheet pulled up about his thighs and wearing a hospital gown, sat Professor Quirrell with his back slightly propped up against the headboard of the bed.

There was something frightening about seeing Professor Quirrell in one of Madam Pomfrey's beds, even if the Defense Professor appeared uninjured. Even knowing that Professor Quirrell had deliberately arranged his own apparent defeat at Severus's hands, to give himself an excuse to recover his strength from Azkaban. Harry had never *actually* watched anyone dying in a hospital bed, but he'd seen too many movies. It was an intimation of mortality, and the Defense Professor was *not* supposed to be mortal.

Madam Pomfrey had told Harry that he was absolutely forbidden to pester her patient.

Harry had said, "I understand", which technically did not say anything about obedience.

The stern old healer had then turned, and started to say to Professor Quirrell that he was absolutely not to overexert himself or... upset himself...

Madam Pomfrey had trailed off, hurriedly turned around, and fled the room.

"Not bad," Harry observed, after the door had shut behind the escaping medical matron. "I've got to learn how to do that, sometime."

Professor Quirrell smiled a smile with absolutely no humor content, and said, his voice sounding a good deal dryer than its usual dryness, "Thank you for your artistic critique, Mr. Potter."

Harry stared into the pale blue eyes, and thought that Professor Quirrell looked...

...older.

It was subtle, it might have just been Harry's imagination, it might have been the poor lighting. But the hair above Quirinus Quirrell's forehead might have receded a bit, what remained might have thinned and greyed, an advancing of the baldness that had already been visible on the back of his head. The face might have grown a little sunken.

The pale blue eyes had stayed sharp and intense.

"I am glad," Harry said quietly, "to see you in what appears to be good health."

"Appearances can be deceiving, of course," said Professor Quirrell. He gave a flick of his fingers, and when his hand finished the gesture he was holding his wand. "Would you believe that woman thinks she has confiscated this from me?"

Six incantations the Defense Professor spoke then; six of the thirty that he had used to safeguard their important conversations in Mary's Room.

Harry raised his eyebrows, silently quizzical.

"That is all I can manage for now," said the Defense Professor. "I expect it shall prove sufficient. Still, there is a proverb: If you do not wish a thing heard, do not say it. Consider it to apply in full measure. I am told that you were trying to see me?"

"Yes," Harry said. He paused, gathered his thoughts. "Did the Headmaster, or anyone, tell you that we can't go to lunch any more?"

"Something along those lines," said the Defense Professor. And without changing expression, "Of course I was terribly sorry to hear it."

"It's more extreme than that, actually," said Harry. "I'm confined to Hogwarts and its grounds indefinitely. I can't leave without a guard and a good reason. I'm not going home for summer, and maybe not ever again. I was hoping... to speak with you, about that."

There was a pause.

The Defense Professor exhaled a breath like a brief sigh, and said, "We shall just have to rely on the known fact that the Deputy Headmistress will personally murder anyone who tries to report me. Mr. Potter, I intend to keep this conversation on track so that we may conclude it quickly, is that understood?"

Harry nodded, and—

In the light of the single torch, shaded toward the reddish end of the optical spectrum, the snake's green scales were not very reflective, and the blue-and-white banding hardly more so. Dark seemed the snake, in that light. The eyes, which had seemed like gray pits before, now reflected the torchlight, and seemed brighter than the rest of the snake.

"*Sso,*" hissed the venomous creature. "*What did you wissh to ssay?*"

And Harry hissed, "*Sschoolmasster thinkss that woman'ss former Lord iss the one who sstole her from prisson.*"

Harry *had* thought about it this time, and carefully, before he had decided that he would reveal to Professor Quirrell *only* that the Headmaster believed that; and *not* say anything about the prophecy which had set Voldemort on Harry's parents, nor that the Headmaster was reconstituting the Order of the Phoenix... it was a risk, a significant risk, but Harry needed an ally in this.

"*He believess that one iss alive?*" the snake finally said. The divided, two-pronged tongue flickered rapidly from side to side, sardonic snakish laughter. "*Ssomehow I am not ssurprissed.*"

"*Yess,*" Harry hissed dryly, "*very amussing, I am ssure. Except now am sstuck in Hogwartss for next ssix years, for ssafety! I have decided that I will, indeed, sseek power; and confinement iss not helpful for that. Musst convince sschoolmasster that Dark Lord iss not yet awakened, that esscape was work of ssome other power—*"

Again the rapid flickering of the snake's tongue; the snakish laughter was stronger, dryer, this time. "*Amateur foolisshnesss.*"

"*Pardon?*" hissed Harry.

"*You ssee misstake, think of undoing, ssetting time back to sstart. Yet not even with hourglasss can time be undone. Musst move forward insstead. You think of convincing otherss they are misstaken. Far eassier to convince them they are right. Sso conssider, boy: what new happensstance would make schoolmasster decide you were ssafe once more, ssimultaneoussly advance your other agendass?*"

Harry stared at the snake, puzzled. His mind tried to comprehend and unravel the riddle—

"*Iss it not obviouss?*" hissed the snake. Again the tongue flickered sardonic laughter. "*To free yoursself, to gain power in Britain, you musst again be sseen to defeat the Dark Lord.*"

In reddish-orange flickering torchlight, a green snake swayed above a white hospital bed, as the boy stared into the embers of its eyes.

"*Sso,*" Harry said finally. "*Let uss be clear on what iss propossed. You ssuggesst that we sset up imposstor to imperssonate Dark Lord.*"

"*Ssomething like that. Woman we resscued will cooperate, sshould be mosst convincing when sshe iss sseen at hiss sside.*" More sardonic tongue-flickering. "*You are kidnapped from Hogwartss to public location, many witnesssess, wardss keep out protectorss. Dark Lord announcess that he hass at long lasst regained physical form, after wandering as sspirit for yearss; ssayss that he hass gained sstill greater power, not even you can sstop him now. Offerss to let you duel. You casst guardian Charm, Dark Lord laughss at you, ssayss he iss not life-eater. Casstss Killing Cursse at you, you block, watcherss ssee Dark Lord explode—*"

"*Casst Killing Cursse?*" Harry hissed in incredulity. "*At me? Again? Ssecond time? Nobody will believe Dark Lord could posssibly be that sstupid—*"

"*You and I are only two people in country who would notice that,*" hissed the snake. "*Trusst me on thiss, boy.*"

"*What if there iss third, ssomeday?*"

The snake swayed thoughtfully. "*Could write different sscript for play, if you wissh. Whatever sscenario, sshould leave open posssibility Dark Lord might return yet again—nation musst think they are sstill dependent on you to protect them.*"

Harry stared into the red-flickering pits of the snake's eyes.

"*Well?*" hissed the swaying form.

The obvious thought was that going along with the Defense Professor's plots and deceptions a *second* time, spinning an even *more* complicated lie to cover up the first mistake, and creating *another* fatal vulnerability if anyone ever discovered the truth, would be *exactly* the same sort of stupidity as the putative Dark Lord using the Killing Curse again. It didn't even take his Hufflepuff side to point that out, Harry thought it in his very own mental voice.

But there was also a certain question as to whether the appropriate moral to learn from the last experience was to always say *no* immediately to the Defense Professor, or...

"*Will think about it,*" hissed Harry. "*Will not ansswer right away, thiss time, will enumerate risskss and benefitss firsst—*"

"*Undersstood,*" hissed the snake. "*But remember thiss, boy, other eventss proceed without you. Hessitation iss alwayss eassy, rarely usseful.*"

The boy emerged from the private room into the main infirmary, running nervous fingers through his messy black hair as he walked past the white beds, occupied and unoccupied.

Shortly afterward, the boy emerged from the Hogwarts infirmary entirely, passing Madam Pomfrey on the way out with a distracted nod.

The boy walked out into a hallway, then into a larger corridor, and then stopped and leaned against the wall.

The thing was...

...he really *didn't* want to be stuck in Hogwarts for the next six years; and when you thought about it...

...the Incident with Rescuing Bellatrix From Azkaban wasn't *just* imposing costs on Harry. Other people would be worrying, living in fear of the Dark Lord's return, expending unknown resources to take unknown precautions. Harry could demand that they write the script in such fashion as to make it seem *not* plausible that the Dark Lord would return a third time. And then people would relax, it would all be over.

Unless of course there actually *was* a Dark Lord out there to be feared. There *had* been a prophecy.

The boy leaning against the wall vented a soft sigh, and started walking again.

Harry had almost forgotten, but he *had* gotten around to showing Professor Quirrell the deck of cards he'd been given on Sunday night by 'Santa Claus', within which the King of Hearts was allegedly a portkey that would take him to the Salem Witches' Institute in America. Although of course Harry hadn't told Professor Quirrell *who'd* sent him the card, nor what it was *supposed* to do, before he'd asked Professor Quirrell if it was possible to tell where the portkey would send him.

The Defense Professor had transformed back to human form, and examined the King of Hearts, tapping it a few times with his wand.

And according to Professor Quirrell...

...the portkey would send the user somewhere in London, but he couldn't pinpoint it any nearer than that.

Harry had shown Professor Quirrell the note that had accompanied the deck of cards, saying nothing of the earlier notes.

Professor Quirrell had taken it in at a glance, given a dry chuckle, and observed that if you read the note *carefully*, it did not *explicitly* say that the portkey would take him to the Salem Witches' Institute.

You needed to learn to pay attention to that kind of subtlety, Professor Quirrell said, if you wanted to be a powerful wizard when you grew up; or, indeed, if you wanted to grow up at all.

The boy sighed again as he trudged off to class.

He was starting to wonder if all the other wizarding schools were also like this, or if it was only Hogwarts that had a problem.

CHAPTER SIXTY-SIX

SELF-ACTUALIZATION, PART I

Hessitation iss alwayss eassy, rarely usseful.

So the Defense Professor had told him; and while you could quibble about the details of the proverb, Harry understood the weaknesses of Ravenclaws well enough to know that you had to try *answering* your own quibbles. Did some plans call for waiting? Yes, many plans called for *delayed action*; but that was not the same as *hesitating* to *choose*. Not delaying because you knew the right moment to do what was necessary, but delaying because you couldn't make up your mind—there was no cunning plan which called for that.

Did you sometimes need more information to choose? Yes, but that could also turn into an excuse for delaying; and it would be *tempting* to delay, when you were faced with a choice between two painful alternatives, and *not choosing* would avoid the mental pain for a time. So you would pick a piece of information you couldn't easily obtain, and claim that you couldn't possibly decide without it; that would be your excuse. Although if you knew *what* information you needed, knew *when* and *how* you would obtain that information, and knew what you would *do* depending on each possible observation, then that was less suspicious as an excuse for hesitating.

If you *weren't* just hesitating, you ought to be able to choose *in advance* what you would do, once you had the extra information you claimed you needed.

If the Dark Lord were *really* out there, would it be smart to go along with Professor Quirrell's plan to have someone impersonate the Dark Lord?

No. Definitely no. Absolutely not.

And if Harry knew for a *fact* that the Dark Lord *wasn't* really out there... in *that* case...

The Defense Professor's office was a small room, at least today; it had changed since the last time Harry had seen it, the stone of the room becoming darker, more polished. Behind the Defense Professor's desk stood the single empty bookcase that always decorated the room, a tall bookcase stretching almost from the floor to the ceiling, with seven empty wooden shelves. Harry had only once seen Professor Quirrell take a book from those empty shelves, and never seen him put a book back.

The green snake swayed above the seat of the chair behind the Defense Professor's desk, the lidless eyes staring unblinking at Harry from close to his own eye level.

They were warded now by twenty-two spells, all that could be cast within Hogwarts without attracting the Headmaster's attention.

"*No,*" hissed Harry.

The green snake cocked its head, tilting it slightly; no emotion was conveyed by the gesture, not that Harry's Parselmouth talent conveyed to him. "*Reasson not?*" said the green snake.

"*Too rissky,*" Harry said simply. That was true whether or not the Dark Lord was out there. Forcing himself to decide in advance had made him realize that he'd just been using the unanswered question as an excuse to hesitate; the sane decision was the same, either way.

For a moment the dark pitted eyes seemed to gleam blackly, for a moment the scaled mouth gaped to expose the fangs. "*Think you have learned wrong lessson, boy, from previouss failure. My planss are not in habit of failing, and lasst one would have gone flawlesssly, but for your own foolisshnesss. Correct lessson iss to follow ssteps laid down for you by older and wisser Sslytherin, tame your wild impulssess.*"

"*Lessson I learned is not to try plotss that would make girl-child friend think I am evil or boy-child friend think I am sstupid,*" Harry snapped

back. He'd been planning a more temporizing response than that, but somehow the words had just slipped out.

The *sssss*-ing sound that came from the snake was not heard by Harry as words, only as pure fury. A moment later, "*You told them—*"

"*Of coursse not! But know what they would ssay.*"

There was a long pause as the snake-head swayed, staring at Harry; again no detectable emotion came through, and Harry wondered what Professor Quirrell could be thinking that would take Professor Quirrell that long to think.

"*You sserioussly care what thosse two think?*" came the snake's final hiss. "*True younglingss thosse two are, not like you. Could not weigh adult matterss.*"

"*Might have done better than me,*" Harry hissed. "*Boy-child friend would have assked after ssecret motivess before asssenting to resscue woman—*"

"*Glad you undersstand that now,*" the snake hissed coldly. "*Alwayss assk after other'ss advantage. Next learn to alwayss assk after your own. If my plan iss not to your tasste, what iss yours?*"

"*If necesssary—sstay at sschool ssix yearss and sstudy. Hogwartss sseemss fine place to dwell. Bookss, friendss, sstrange but tassty food.*" Harry wanted to chuckle, but there wasn't any gesture in Parseltongue for the kind of laughter he wanted to express.

The pits of the snake's eyes seemed almost black. "*Eassy to ssay that now. Ssuch as you and I, we do not tolerate imprissonment. You will losse patience long before sseventh year, perhapss before end of thiss one. I sshall plan accordingly.*"

And before Harry could hiss another word of Parseltongue, the human-shape of Professor Quirrell was sitting in his chair once more. "So, Mr. Potter," said the Defense Professor, his voice as calm as if they had been discussing nothing important, as if the whole conversation had not occurred at all, "I hear that you have begun to practice dueling. Not the worthless sort with *rules*, I hope?"

Hannah Abbott looked as unnerved as Hermione had ever seen her (except on the day of the phoenix, the day Bellatrix Black had escaped, which shouldn't ought to count for anyone). The Hufflepuff girl had come over to the Ravenclaw table during dinner, and tapped Hermione on her shoulder, and very nearly dragged her away—

"Neville and Harry Potter are learning dueling from Mr. Diggory!" Hannah blurted as soon as they were a few steps away from the table.

"Who?" said Hermione.

"*Cedric Diggory!*" said Hannah. "He's the Captain of our Quidditch Team, and general of an army, and he's taking *all* the electives and getting better grades than anyone, and I hear he learns dueling from professional tutors during the summers, and he once beat *two* seventh-year students, and even some teachers call him the Super Hufflepuff, and Professor Sprout says we should all emu, uh, emudate him or something like that, and—"

After Hannah finally stopped for air (the list had gone on for a while), Hermione managed to insert a word in edgewise.

"Sunshine Soldier Abbott!" said Hermione. "Calm *down*. We're not going to be fighting General Diggory, right? Sure, Neville's studying to beat us, but we can study too—"

"Don't you *see?*" Hannah shrieked, raising her voice a lot louder then it should've been, if they were trying to keep the conversation private from all the Ravenclaws looking at them. "Neville isn't studying to beat *us!* He's practicing so he can fight *Bellatrix Black!* They're going to go through us like a Bludger through a stack of pancakes!"

The Sunshine General gave her soldier a look. "Listen," said Hermione, "I don't think a few weeks of practice is going to make anyone an invincible fighter. Plus we already *know* how to handle invincible fighters. We'll concentrate fire on them and they'll go down just like Draco."

The Hufflepuff girl was looking at her with mixed admiration and skepticism. "Aren't you even, you know, *worried?*"

"Oh, *honestly!*" said Hermione. Sometimes it was hard being the only sensible person in your whole school year. "Haven't you ever heard the saying, the only thing we have to fear is fear itself?"

"*What?*" said Hannah. "That's crazy, what about Lethifolds lurking in the darkness, and being put under the Imperius Curse, and horrible Transfiguration accidents and—"

"I *mean,*" said Hermione, exasperation leaking out into her now-raised voice, she'd been hearing this sort of thing *all week* now, "how about if we wait until *after* the Chaos Legion *actually* crushes us to get so scared of them and *did you just mutter 'Gryffindors' under your voice?*"

A few moments later, Hermione was walking back to her place at the table with a sweet smile plastered onto her young face, it wasn't the terrible cold glare of Harry's dark side but it was the scariest face *she* knew how to make.

Harry Potter was going *down.*

"This is loony," gasped Neville, with what tiny amount of breath he could spare from being completely out of breath.

"This is *brilliant!*" said Cedric Diggory. The eyes of the Super Hufflepuff gleamed with manic enthusiasm, shining like the sweat on his forehead as he stamped his feet through the dance of one of his dueling postures. His usually-light steps had changed to heavier stomps, which might have had something to do with the Transfigured metal weights they'd all attached to their arms and legs and strapped over their chests. "Where do you *get* these ideas, Mr. Potter?"

"A strange old shop... in Oxford... and I'm never... shopping there... again." *Thud.*

CHAPTER SIXTY-SEVEN

SELF-ACTUALIZATION, PART II

In the high reaches of Hogwarts where rooms and corridors changed on a daily basis, where the territory itself was uncertain and not just the map, where the stability of the castle began to fray into dreams and chaos without changing its architectural style or apparent solidity—in the high reaches of Hogwarts, a battle would soon be fought.

The presence of so many students would stabilize the corridors for a time, by dint of constant observation. The rooms and corridors of Hogwarts sometimes *moved* even while people looked directly at them, but they wouldn't *change*. Even after eight centuries, Hogwarts was still a little shy about changing in front of people.

But despite that transient permanence (the Defense Professor had said) the upper reaches of Hogwarts still had a military realism: you had to learn the ground anew each time, and check every closet for secret corridors all over again.

Sunday it was, Sunday the first of March. Professor Quirrell had recovered enough to supervise battles once more, and they were all catching up on the backlog.

The Dragon General, Draco Malfoy, watched two compasses he held in either hand. One compass was the color of the Sun, the other had a multicolored, iridescent sheen to indicate Chaos. The other two generals, Draco knew, had been given their own compasses; only Hermione Granger's hand, and Harry Potter's hand, would hold a compass that was orange-red and flickered in its reflections like fire, pointing always to the direction of the largest active contingent of Dragon Army.

Without those compasses they might have searched for days and never found each other, which was a territorial hazard of fighting in the upper levels of Hogwarts.

Draco had a bad feeling about what would happen when Dragon Army found the Chaos Legion. Harry Potter had changed since Bellatrix Black had escaped; the Heir of Slytherin had begun to seem truly Lordly now (and how had Professor Quirrell known that would happen?) Draco would have felt a lot better with Hermione Granger standing alongside him with her twenty-three Sunshine Soldiers in tow, but no, the Sunshine General was being stupidly proud and refusing to accept aid against General Potter. She wanted to take down Potter herself, she'd told him.

The Noble and Most Ancient House of Malfoy had maintained their influence over Britain for centuries by understanding that you couldn't always be *the* most powerful. Sometimes another Lord was just stronger, and you had to settle for *merely* being his foremost lieutenant. You could build up *quite* a position of wealth and power over a dozen generations of being second in command. You just had to be careful, each time, not to let your House be dragged down with the fall of the Lord you served. That was the Malfoy tradition which centuries of experience had honed...

And so Father had thoroughly explained to Draco that if he ran into someone who was obviously stronger than him, Draco was *not* to resent this and *not* to deny it and *not* to throw a tantrum that could sabotage his potential position, but Draco *was* to make sure that his place in the next generation's power structure wasn't any lower than second.

Granger, apparently, had never gotten this lecture from her own parents, and was still in denial about the obvious fact that Harry Potter was becoming stronger than her.

So Draco had secretly met with Captain Goldstein and Captain Bones and Captain Macmillan and they'd agreed to all do their best to make sure that Dragon and Sunshine didn't engage each other before they engaged the larger threat of Chaos.

It wasn't *really* violating the agreement against traitors, you weren't soliciting traitors if you honestly meant to *help* the other army.

A high ringing tone belled through the corridors to signal the start of the battle, and a moment later Draco shouted "*Go!*" and the Dragons started running. It would tire his soldiers, it would cost them something even after they stopped and caught their breath, but they *had* to put Chaos directly between themselves and the Sunshine Regiment.

⁂

Harry and Neville walked at a leisurely pace through the corridors, Harry watching the yellow-golden compass that pointed toward the location of the Sunshine Regiment, and Neville keeping a lookout just in case they ran into someone else.

Their footsteps sounded a bit thumpy, if you listened closely.

"So," the Chaotic Lieutenant said after a while. "That's why you had us practice dueling with all that weight strapped on?"

Harry nodded, keeping his eyes on the compass that led to Sunshine; if the apparent direction started to change quickly then they were getting close.

"I didn't want to say anything in front of the others, but a couple of weeks isn't a lot of time to put on extra muscle," said Neville. "And the balance is different, and I think this weighs *more* actually, and doesn't this count as Transfiguring a Muggle artifact?"

"Nope," Harry said. "I checked that in advance. You can see it in Hogwarts statues, so some wizards *used* to wear it, even if they were just being fashionable for the Dark Ages." And since nobody would ever try this if they *weren't* fighting first-year students using weak spells like the Sleep Hex, it didn't count as giving away good ideas, either.

They came to a Y-intersection, an annoying one; neither corridor bent in quite the right way to take them on a direct intercept course toward where Sunshine would go as they followed the Chaos Legion following Dragon Army. So Harry chose what seemed like the better of the two options, and Neville followed.

"We'd better try a quick Silencing Charm on this stuff when we get close," Neville said. "It's kind of noisy, they might figure it out."

Harry nodded, and then said "Good idea" in case Neville hadn't been looking at him.

They trudged on through the stone-floored corridor of the upper reach of Hogwarts, lit by windows of plain glass or stained glass, now and then passing statues of witches and dragons and even the occasional wizard-knight in plate armor or chainmail.

The Sunshine Soldiers were striding through a long, wide corridor with their wands out and pointed. They couldn't use the Prismatic Shield while they were maneuvering, but Parvati Patil and Jenny Rustad were currently maintaining *Contegos* around the officer group, who would be the first targets of any ambush.

Their tactic for the next battle, she and her officers had decided, would be to mix directly in with the enemy soldiers as fast as possible—after having practiced among *themselves* how to support one another, avoid hitting each other, and get into positions where enemy soldiers would hesitate to fire. They'd only gotten in four hours practice, but she thought her troops would already be better at that kind of mixed-in fighting than soldiers who hadn't practiced at all. It seemed like the sort of tactic Chaos would use, but they hadn't actually used it yet.

It was a good strategy, she believed. And yet still, no matter how much she'd lectured her soldiers, they'd persisted in whispering fearful rumors about what Harry and Neville were learning to do. Finally she'd gone off and talked with Captain Goldstein, who understood things like Troop Morale, and Anthony had suggested—

"That's weird," Captain Macmillan spoke up suddenly, frowning at the fiery and iridescent compasses he held in either hand. (Ernie was, as Harry would have termed it, "good at spatial visualization", and so had been designated to hold both compasses and try to figure out what their enemies were doing.) "I think... Dragon's not moving fast anymore... I think they got on the other side of Chaos from us first... and it looks

like Chaos is moving to attack them instead of trying to maneuver out from in between?"

Hermione frowned, trying to understand, and she saw similar frowns on the faces of Anthony and Ron. If Chaos and Dragon attacked each other straight out, and spent all their forces fighting each other, that was practically conceding the battle to Sunshine...

"Potter thinks we're allied so he's attacking Malfoy now, before Dragon can link up with us," said Blaise Zabini from the common ranks of soldiers. "Or Potter just thinks he can beat both armies in a row, if he attacks them separately." The Slytherin boy gave a condescending sigh. "Are you going to promote me back to officer now? You lot are hopeless without me, you know."

They all ignored the talking noises coming from Zabini's mouth.

"We still moving in the right direction?" said Anthony.

"Yeah," said Ernie.

"We getting close to them?" said Ron.

"Not yet—"

That was when the huge black-wooden doors at the end of the corridor flew open and crashed into the wall, revealing two figures almost completely enveloped in grey cloaks, grey cloth stretched over the faces beneath the grey hoods, one of those figures already raising a wand and pointing it directly at her.

And then the face of the game changed drastically, as Harry's voice, high and strained with the effort, screamed the word:

"*Stupefy!*"

The dueling-grade stunner blasted toward her, she was so shocked that she didn't start to move until almost too late, as the red jet of light *smashed* right through the *Contego* shield to their front and she just barely dodged, there was a tingle on her arm as the red light went past her, and she saw out of the corner of her eye Susan getting hit and blown off her feet into Ron—

"*Somnium!*" bellowed Anthony's voice, followed a moment later by a dozen voices crying "*Somnium!*"

Hermione frantically pushed herself to her feet, and as she rose, she saw the two figures in the grey cloaks just standing there.

You couldn't *see* Sleep Hexes, the spell was too weak—

But there was no way they all could've *missed*.

"*Stupefy!*" shrieked the voice of Neville Longbottom, and another red jet shot at her, she fell in an undignified heap as she desperately twisted out of the way, and when she scrambled up, panting, she saw that this time the stunbolt had gotten Ron where he'd been rising from the ground.

"Hello there, Sunshine," said Harry's voice from beneath his hood.

"We're the Grey Knights of Chaos," said Neville's voice.

"We'll be your opponents for this battle," said Harry's voice, "while Chaos's *other* army slaughters the Dragons."

"And by the way," said Neville's voice, "we're invincible."

The two boys in their grey cloaks and robes, grey cloth over their faces, stood facing Sunshine's entire army, seemingly unfazed by a dozen Sleep Hexes.

Daphne heard a soft sigh from beside her, and when her head turned she saw that Hannah's lips were parted, and the Hufflepuff girl's eyes were huge, and she was staring at—

It would have been hard to describe the jumble of thoughts that flashed through Daphne's mind as she realized that Hannah was staring at Neville rather than Harry, which in turn seemed to trigger some part of her into noticing that in point of fact Neville *had* been getting pretty interesting lately as boys went, in fact right now the Last Scion of Longbottom was seeming downright *cool,* and something woke up inside her and her own lips parted and everything the Lady her Mother had ever instructed her about demure demeanors and flattery and scented shampoo blew straight out of her mind so hard it should have fluffed her hair about her ears, because she'd watched Hermione and Harry and she knew how she wanted *her* own courtship to go—

Her Lady Mother had also recently instructed her on a few spells it might be embarrassing not to know if you belonged to the Noble and Most Ancient House of Greengrass.

Daphne's wand swung to point to her left, and she shouted "*Tonare!*"

The wand went over her head, and she spoke the incantation "*Ravum Calvaria!*"

And finally she grasped her wand in both hands and shrieked, "*Lucis Gladius!*"

The huge magical drain almost sent her to her knees, but she bore it, and when the blazing shape had fully formed and stabilized the drain was a little less.

Still, she had a feeling she'd better not try to fight with this for long.

That everyone was staring at her went *quite* without saying, and she *should* have leaped forward to confront Neville with her hair billowing around her, but it was all she could do to walk forward steadily to level her Most Ancient Blade at Neville Longbottom. That everyone moved aside and made way for her also went without saying.

"*I hight Daphne, of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Greengrass!*" she cried. "*Greengrass of Sunshine!*" The dueling forms had gone completely out of her mind, she'd seen enough plays to remember death challenges and blood challenges but she couldn't remember at all what was appropriate for this, so she just pointed the incandescent sword toward the object of her crush and yelled, "*Let's see what you got, Nevvy!*"

Once again Harry's voice shrieked "*Stupefy!*", and later on, when she was remembering this, she could never quite believe she'd managed to do it, but she slashed out with her blade of light like it was a Beater's bat, and *hit the stunbolt back at Harry* who just barely managed to twist out of the way.

"*Tonare!*" shouted Neville, of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Longbottom. "*Ravum Calvaria, Lucis Gladius!*"

For a few seconds, no one did anything but stare at Neville and Daphne as they started whacking at each other. They were both moving slowly, and Hermione guessed that the spell was taking a lot of strength out of them. It wasn't very impressive by comparison, if you were a Muggle-born and you'd watched certain movies.

But you still had to give them extra credit for using lightsabers at all.

"Point of order," said Harry's voice. "I know the Defense Professor is watching, but I still have to ask, does anyone know whether they'll slice each other in half if they actually hit—"

"No," Hermione said absently. This had been in one of her history books, though she'd had no idea the magical dueling sword looked like *that*. "They cast it so it'll only stun if it touches."

"You *know* that spell?"

"Oh, no, it's the Charm of the Most Ancient Blade, it's only legal for Noble and Most Ancient Houses to use—"

Hermione stopped talking and looked at Harry, or Harry's grey hood rather.

"Well," said Harry's voice, "I guess I could take down the rest of the Sunshine Regiment by myself, then." She couldn't see his face, but his voice sounded like he was smiling.

"You dodged when Daphne hit your own spell back at you," Hermione said. "So whatever you did, you're *not* invincible. A *Stupefy* can still get you."

"Interesting theory," said Harry's voice from beneath the hood. "Got anyone in your army who can test it?"

"I read about the Stunning Hex once," said Hermione. "A few months ago. I wonder if I can remember the instructions right?" Her wand came up to point at Harry.

There was a slight pause, as nearby a boy and a girl breathing in audible gasps slowly whacked at each other with lightsabers.

"Of course," Harry said, leveling his own wand on her, "*I* can just use Somnium on you. That'll take a lot less effort."

New *Contego* shields sprung into existence in front of her, cast by Jenny and Parvati, even as Harry spoke.

The tip of Hermione's own wand began making small motions in the air, a diamond within a circle, a diamond within a circle, rehearsing the gesture to match exactly what she remembered seeing in the book. It would be a difficult feat even for her, but she *had* to cast the spell right on the first try, she couldn't afford any failed castings that would sap her energy.

"You know," said Hermione Granger, "I understand that it's not really your fault, but I'm getting tired of hearing people talk about the Boy-Who-Lived like you're—like you're some kind of *god* or something."

"Same here, I must say," said Harry Potter. "It's sad how people keep underestimating me."

Her wand kept rehearsing the diamond within the circle, over and over. Harry would be recharging his own strength, she knew, even as she practiced as much as she could before her attack. "I'm starting to think you need taking down a peg, General Chaos."

"You could be right," Harry said equably. His feet began to shuffle through what she recognized as a duelist's dance. "Unfortunately there's nothing left that can defeat me now except another Harry Potter."

"Let me be specific, Mr. Potter. *I'm* taking you down a peg."

"You and what other army?"

"You think you're pretty cool, don't you," said Hermione.

"Why, yes," said Harry. "Yes, I do. Some might call that arrogant, but am I supposed to be the last person in Hogwarts to notice how awesome I am?"

Hermione raised her left hand into the air, and made a fist.

It was a signal. Eight designated soldiers in her army would be pointing their wands at her, and quietly casting *Wingardium Leviosa*.

They'd practiced *this,* too, once Hermione had given up on lecturing her soldiers, and at Anthony's suggestion, tried giving them a Sunshine General who *looked* like she could defeat invincible enemies.

"You pretend you're Superman," said Hermione. She raised her left fist higher in the air, and the eight soldiers supporting her Hovered her off the ground. "*Well here's Super Hermione!*" Her hand pushed forward, and as she shot rapidly through the air toward Harry, regretting only that she couldn't see the look on his face, her wand made a diamond

within a circle and she summoned up all the magic she could, it felt like she imagined touching a live wire would feel as the too-powerful spell poured through her when her voice screamed "*Stupefy!*"

The red bolt burst from her wand, perfectly formed.

Harry dodged it.

And then, because they hadn't practiced doing this part inside of hallways, she crashed into a wall.

"*Somnium!*" shrieked Draco, and then after only a few seconds to recharge, "SOMNIUM, CURSE YOU!"

He *knew* he was hitting Theodore, the other boy wasn't even trying to dodge, but the scion of Nott only grinned as evilly as his father and leveled his wand—

Draco managed to leap aside just as Theodore said "*Somnium!*" but Draco was getting winded, he couldn't keep this up, Theodore wasn't bothering to dodge at all while Draco had to keep moving, this was *crazy.*

He had enough strength now to fire again, but—

Stupidity is doing the same thing and expecting a different result, Harry had said, this was *Harry's* work somehow, it couldn't be a Muggle artifact anymore but Draco couldn't figure out what it *could* be, and he should be thinking of hypotheses and ways to test them but he was too busy frantically dodging as Theodore laughed and shot another Sleep Hex at him, Draco felt a little numbness in his side that time as he twisted, that had been a very very near miss and finally Draco couldn't take it anymore, he didn't bother working out what theory he was testing or why as he just—

"*Luminos!*" shouted Draco, and Theodore was haloed in red light, "*Dulak!*" and it went out again (so Theodore *was* still being affected by magic), "*Expelliarmus!*" and Theodore's wand went flying (that had been a good spell to cast anyway now that Draco realized it) but Theodore was rushing toward Draco with his arms outstretched to grapple so Draco yelled "*Flipendo!*" and the other boy's feet were abruptly yanked up—

—and Theodore's back hit the ground with a surprisingly loud and *metallic*-sounding crash.

Draco's vision was swimming now from casting four spells in such fast succession, and Theodore was already scrambling to his feet, so there wasn't even time to think in words, but Draco still managed to say "*Somnium!*" and *this* time he aimed for Theodore's face instead of the chest.

Theodore dodged (he *dodged!*) and the boy shouted "*Code seven on Malfoy!*"

"*Prismatis!*" cried Padma's voice and there was suddenly a shimmering rainbow wall in front of Draco, just as four Chaotic voices cried "*Somnium!*"

And there was a pause, as everyone looked at the huge Prismatic Sphere protecting the remnants of Dragon Army.

Casting that fifth spell had sent Draco to his hands and knees, but he looked up and managed to say, as clearly as he could, "If the Sleep Hex—doesn't work—aim for the face—I think the Lieutenants are wearing metal shirts."

"You've already lost too many soldiers," Finnigan said loudly from across the barrier, "we'll beat you anyway," and then the Gryffindor boy laughed evilly. He did the evil laughter almost as well as Harry Potter by now, and the other Chaotic Legionnaires started laughing with him soon afterward.

Draco could see from the corner of his eye where Gregory and Vincent lay unconscious. Padma was still sustaining the Prismatic Sphere, the largest one he'd ever seen her cast; but she was breathing hard, still visibly sweaty from when they'd all jogged to get into position, the Ravenclaw girl was a strong witch but not an *athletic* one.

He really hoped General Granger got here soon and hit Chaos from behind. General Potter and Neville of Chaos were missing, and Draco could guess where they'd gone, but two soldiers couldn't delay the whole Sunshine Regiment for too long all by themselves, could they?

She knew it wasn't fair, that the other girl had given all she could, but Hermione still wished that Daphne had lasted longer.

"*Lagann!*" said Neville's voice from behind her as she flew, and there was the sound of a Prismatic Wall shattering, Hannah's voice desperately cried "*Somnium!*" and then a few moments later Neville's voice calmly said "Somnium" and there was the thud of another of her soldiers falling over.

And the force keeping her in the air diminished again, Hermione could feel the grab of the Hover Charms straining at her, but now it just wasn't enough.

Her flight stopped and she began falling in slow motion toward the ground, and she should've signaled her soldiers to just *drop* her, but she was too angry and confused and not thinking fast enough and still trying to muster the strength for one last Stunning Hex, and so there was nowhere to go when Harry pointed his wand at her and said "*Somnium*" and that was the last word that Hermione Granger heard of her battle.

CHAPTER SIXTY-EIGHT

SELF-ACTUALIZATION, PART III

Hermione wasn't feeling very nice right now, or Good either, there was a hot ball of anger burning inside her and she wondered if this was something like Harry's darkness (though it probably wasn't even close) and she shouldn't have felt that way over some silly little game but—

Her whole army. Two soldiers had beaten her whole army. That was what she'd been told after she woke up.

It was a little too much.

"Well," Professor Quirrell said. From up close the Defense Professor didn't look quite as healthy as he had the last time she'd been in his office; his skin looked paler, and he moved a little slower. His expression was as stern as ever, and his gaze as penetrating; his fingers tapped sharply on his desk, rap-rap. "I would guess that of the three of you, only Mr. Malfoy has guessed why I've asked you here."

"Something to do with Noble and Most Ancient Houses?" said Harry from beside her, sounding puzzled. "I didn't violate some kind of crazy law by firing on Daphne, did I?"

"Not quite," the man said with heavy irony. "Since Miss Greengrass did not invoke the correct dueling forms, she is not entitled to demand that you be stripped of your House name. Although of course I would not have permitted a formal duel. Wars do not respect such rules." The Defense Professor leaned forward and rested his chin on steepled hands, as though sitting upright had already tired him. His eyes gazed at them, sharp and dangerous. "General Malfoy. Why did I call you here?"

"General Potter against the two of us isn't a fair fight anymore," Draco Malfoy said in a quiet voice.

"*What?*" blurted Hermione. "We almost *had* them, if Daphne hadn't fainted—"

"Miss Greengrass did not faint from magical exhaustion," Professor Quirrell said dryly. "Mr. Potter shot her in the back with a Sleep Hex while your soldiers were distracted by the sight of their general flying into a wall. But congratulations nonetheless, Miss Granger, on *almost* defeating two Chaotic Legionnaires with a mere twenty-four Sunshine Soldiers."

The blood flaming in her cheeks grew a little hotter. "That—that was just—if I'd only figured out he was wearing armor—"

Professor Quirrell gazed at her from over touched fingers. "Of course there are ways you *could* have won, Miss Granger. There always are, in every lost battle. The world around us redounds with opportunities, explodes with opportunities, which nearly all folk ignore because it would require them to violate a habit of thought; a thousand Hufflepuff bones waiting to be sharpened into spears. If you had thought to try a *Finite Incantatem* on general principles, you would have dispelled Mr. Potter's suit of chainmail and everything else he was wearing except his underwear, which leads me to suspect that Mr. Potter did not quite realize his own vulnerability. Or you could have had your soldiers swarm Mr. Potter and Mr. Longbottom and physically wrest the wands from their hands. Mr. Malfoy's own response was not what I would term *well-reasoned,* but at least he did not wholly ignore his thousand alternatives." A sardonic smile. "But you, Miss Granger, had the misfortune to remember how to cast the Stunning Hex, and so you did not search your excellent memory for a dozen easier spells that might have proved efficacious. And you pinned all your army's hopes on your own person, so they lost spirit when you fell. Afterward they continued to cast their futile Sleep Hexes, governed by the habits of fighting that had been trained into them, unable to break the pattern as Mr. Malfoy did. I cannot quite comprehend what goes through people's minds when they repeat the same failed strategy over and over, but apparently it is an astonishingly rare realization that you can try something else. And so the

Sunshine Regiment was wiped out by two soldiers." The Defense Professor grinned mirthlessly. "One perceives certain similarities to how fifty Death Eaters dominated all of magical Britain, and how our much-loved Ministry continues in its rule."

The Defense Professor sighed. "*Nonetheless,* Miss Granger, the fact remains that this is not the first such defeat for you. In the previous battle, you and Mr. Malfoy united your forces, and yet you were fought to a standstill, so that you and Mr. Malfoy had to pursue Mr. Potter onto the roof. The Chaos Legion has now demonstrated, twice in succession, military strength equal to both other armies combined. This leaves me no choice. General Potter, you will select eight soldiers from your army, including at least one Chaotic Lieutenant, to be divided among Dragon Army and the Sunshine Regiment—"

"*What?*" Hermione burst out again, she glanced over at the other generals and saw that Harry looked as shocked as her, while Draco Malfoy only looked resigned.

"General Potter is stronger than both of you together," Professor Quirrell said with calm precision. "Your contest is over, he has won, and it is time to rebalance the three armies to present him with a renewed challenge."

"*Professor Quirrell!*" said Harry. "I didn't—"

"This is my decision as the Professor of Battle Magic at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry and it is not subject to negotiation." The words were still precise, but the look in Professor Quirrell's eyes chilled Hermione's blood, even though he was glaring at Harry and not at her. "And I find it *suspicious*, Mr. Potter, that the moment you wished to isolate Miss Granger and Mr. Malfoy and force them to chase you onto the roof, you were able to annihilate just exactly as much of their united force as you pleased. Indeed, that is the level of performance I *expected* of you since the start of this year, and I am *annoyed* to discover that you have been holding back in my classes this entire time! I have seen what you can truly do, Mr. Potter. You are far beyond the point where Mr. Malfoy or Miss Granger can fight you on an equal level, and you will not be permitted to pretend otherwise. This, Mr. Potter, I tell you in my capacity as your professor: For you to learn to your full potential,

you must exercise your full abilities and not hold back for *any* reason—particularly not childish frets over what your friends might think!"

She left the Defense Professor's office with a larger army, and less dignity, and feeling a lot like a sad little bug that had just been squished, and trying very very hard not to cry.

"I *wasn't* holding back!" Harry said as soon as they turned the first corner away from Professor Quirrell's office, the moment the wooden door faded out of sight behind the stone walls. "I wasn't pretending, I never *let* either of you win!"

She didn't answer, couldn't answer, it would all break loose if she tried to say a word.

"Really?" said Draco Malfoy. The Dragon General still had that air of resignation. "Because Quirrell's right, you know, it's *suspicious* that you could beat nearly everyone in both our armies as soon as you wanted to make us chase you onto the roof. And didn't you say something then, Potter, about us needing to beat you when you were fighting for real?"

The burning sensation was creeping up her throat, and when it reached her eyes she would burst into tears, and from then on she would be just a crying little girl to both of them.

"That—" Harry's voice said urgently, she wasn't looking at him but his voice sounded like he had his head turned toward her. "That was—I tried a lot harder that time, there was an important reason, I *had* to, so I used a whole bunch of tricks I'd been saving up—and—"

She'd always been trying her hardest, every time.

"—and I, I let out a side of myself I wouldn't usually use for something like Defense class—"

So if she ever got close to winning against Harry when it *really* mattered, he could just go into his dark side and crush her, was that it?

...of course it was. She couldn't even *look* Harry in the eyes when he was being scary, how had she ever thought she could beat him for real?

The corridor forked, and Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy went left toward a staircase that climbed to the second floor, and she went right instead, she didn't even know where that passage went but right now she'd rather be lost in the castle.

"Excuse me, Draco," said Harry's voice, and then there was a pattering of footsteps behind her.

"Leave me alone," she said, it came out sounding stern but then she had to shut her mouth and press her lips together tightly and hold her breath to stop it all from coming out.

That boy just kept on coming, and ran around her and put himself in front of her, because he was stupid that was why, and Harry said, his voice now a high and desperate whisper, "I didn't run away when *you* were beating *me* in all my classes except broomstick riding!"

He didn't understand, and he would never understand, Harry Potter would never understand, because no matter what contest he lost he would still be the Boy-Who-Lived, if you were Harry Potter and Hermione Granger was beating you then it meant everyone was expecting you to rise to the challenge, if you were Hermione Granger and Harry Potter was beating you that meant you were just no one.

"It's not fair," she said, her voice was shaking but she wasn't crying yet, not yet, "*I* shouldn't have to fight your dark side, I'm just—I'm only—" *I'm only twelve,* that was what she thought then.

"I only used my dark side *once* and that was—when I *had* to!"

"So today you beat my *whole army* being just Harry?" She still wasn't crying yet, and she wondered what her face looked like right now, if she looked like an angry Hermione or a sad one.

"I—" Harry said. His voice got a little lower, "I wasn't... really *expecting* to win, that time, I know I said I was invincible but that was just to try to scare you, I really just thought we'd slow you down for a bit—"

She started walking again, walked right past him, and as she passed Harry's face tightened up like *he* was going to cry.

"Is Professor Quirrell right?" came a high desperate whisper from behind her. "If I have you for a friend, will I always be afraid to do better because I know it will hurt your feelings? That's not fair, Hermione!"

She took a breath and held it and ran, her feet pattering across the stone as fast as they could, running as fast as she dared with her vision all blurry, ran so that no one would hear her, and this time Harry didn't follow.

⁂

Minerva was going over the Transfiguration parchment due Monday, and had just marked down to negative two hundred points a fifth-year parchment with an error that could have potentially killed someone. During her first year as a professor she'd been indignant at the folly of older students, now she was just resigned. Some people not only never learned, they never noticed that they were hopeless, they stayed bright and eager and kept on trying. Sometimes they believed you when you told them, before they left Hogwarts, that they must *never* try anything unusual, give up free Transfiguration and use the art only through established Charms; and sometimes... they didn't.

She was in the middle of trying to unravel a particularly convoluted answer when a knock at the door disrupted her thoughts; and it wasn't her office hours, but it had only taken a very short time as Head of Gryffindor House for her to learn to suspend judgment. You could always deduct House points *afterward.*

"Come in," she said in a crisp voice.

The young girl who entered her office had clearly been crying, and then afterward had washed her face in hopes it wouldn't show—

"Miss Granger!" said Professor McGonagall. It had taken her a moment to recognize that face with its eyes reddened and cheeks puffed. "What happened?"

"Professor," said the young girl in a wavering voice, "you said that if I was ever worried or uncomfortable about anything, I should come to you at once—"

"Yes," said Professor McGonagall, "now what *happened?*"

The girl started to explain—

⁂

Hermione stood still and the stairs turned around her, a revolving helix that shouldn't have taken her anywhere at all, and instead bore her continuously *upward.* Hermione thought it seemed like the Enchantment of the Endless Stair, which had been invented in 1733 by the wizard Arram Sabeti who'd lived on top of Mount Everest in the days when no Muggles could climb it. Only that couldn't be right because Hogwarts was much older—maybe the enchantment had been *re*invented?

She should've been frightened, should've been nervous about her second meeting with the Headmaster.

She *was*, in fact, frightened and nervous about her second meeting with the Headmaster.

Only Hermione Granger had been thinking; she'd been thinking a lot, after she hadn't been able to run any further and had slid down against the wall with her lungs on fire, thinking while she curled up in a ball with her back against the chilly stone wall and her legs drawn up and crying.

Even if she lost to Harry Potter she was never, ever going to lose to Draco Malfoy, that was just totally *absolutely* unacceptable, and Professor Quirrell had praised General Malfoy for not ignoring his thousand alternatives; and so after Hermione had cried herself out she'd thought of fourteen other spells she *should've* tried against Harry and Neville, and then she'd started wondering if she might be making the same sort of mistake about other things; and that was how she'd ended up knocking on Professor McGonagall's door. Not asking for help, right now Hermione didn't have any plans she could ask for help *with,* just telling Professor McGonagall everything, because when she'd thought of it that had seemed like one of the thousand alternatives that Professor Quirrell had been talking about.

And she'd told Professor McGonagall about how Harry Potter had changed since the day the phoenix had been on his shoulder, and about how people more and more seemed to see her as just something of Harry's, and how it seemed like Harry was pulling farther and farther away from everyone else in their school year and went around with a sad

air sometimes like he was losing something, and *she didn't know what to do anymore.*

And Professor McGonagall had told her that they needed to talk to the Headmaster.

And Hermione had felt worried, but then the thought had come to her that *Harry Potter* wouldn't have been scared of the Headmaster. Harry Potter would have just barged ahead doing whatever he was trying to do. Maybe (the thought had come to her) it was worth *trying* to be like that, *not* being scared, just doing whatever, and seeing what happened to her, it couldn't really be worse.

The Endless Stair stopped turning.

The great oaken door in front of them with the brass griffin knocker opened without being touched.

Behind a black oaken desk with dozens of drawers facing in every direction, looking like it had drawers set *inside* other drawers, was the silver-bearded Headmaster of Hogwarts upon his throne, Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, into whose gently twinkling eyes Hermione looked for around three seconds before she was distracted by all the other things in the room.

Some time later—she wasn't sure how long but it was while she was trying to count the number of things in the room for the third time and *still* not getting the same answer, even though her memory insisted that nothing had been added or removed—the Headmaster cleared his throat and said, "Miss Granger?"

Hermione's head snapped around, and she felt a little heat in her cheeks; but Dumbledore didn't appear annoyed with her at all, only serene, and with an inquiring look in those mild, half-glassed eyes.

"Hermione," said Professor McGonagall, the older witch's voice was gentle and her hand rested reassuringly on Hermione's shoulder, "please tell the Headmaster what you said to me about Harry."

Hermione began speaking, despite her newfound resolution her voice still stumbled a little with nervousness, as she described how Harry had changed in the last few weeks since Fawkes had been on his shoulder.

When she was done there was a pause, and then the Headmaster sighed. "I am sorry, Hermione Granger," said Dumbledore. Those blue

eyes had grown sadder as she spoke. "That is... unfortunate, but I cannot say it is unexpected. That is a hero's burden, which you see."

"A *hero?*" said Hermione. She looked up nervously at Professor McGonagall and saw that the Transfiguration Professor's face had grown tight, though her hand still squeezed Hermione's shoulder reassuringly.

"Yes," said Dumbledore. "I was a hero myself once, before I was a mysterious old wizard, in the days when I opposed Grindelwald. You have read history books, Miss Granger?"

Hermione nodded.

"Well," said Dumbledore, "that is what heroes have to do, Miss Granger, they have their tasks and they must grow strong to accomplish them, and that is what you see happening to Harry. If there is anything that can be done to gentle his pathway, then *you* will be the one to do it, and not I. For I am not Harry's friend, alas, but only his mysterious old wizard."

"I—" said Hermione. "I'm not sure—I still want to be—" Her voice stopped, it seemed too awful to say aloud.

Dumbledore closed his eyes, and when he opened them, he looked a little older than before. "No one can stop you, Miss Granger, if you choose to stop being Harry's friend. As for what it would do to him, you may know that better than I."

"That—doesn't seem *fair,*" Hermione said, her voice trembling. "That I've *got* to be Harry's friend because he's got no one else? That doesn't seem fair."

"*Being* a friend is not something you can be forced to, Miss Granger." The blue eyes seemed to look right through her. "The feelings are there, or they are not. If they are there, you can accept them or deny them. You *are* Harry's friend—and choosing to deny it would wound him terribly, perhaps beyond healing. But Miss Granger, what would drive you to such extremes?"

She couldn't find words. She'd never been able to find words. "If you get too near Harry—you get *swallowed up,* and no one sees *you* any more, you're just something of *his,* everyone thinks the whole world revolves around him and..." She didn't have the words.

The old wizard nodded slowly. "It is indeed an unjust world we live in, Miss Granger. All the world now knows that it is I who defeated Grindelwald, and fewer remember Elizabeth Beckett who died opening the way so I could pass through. And yet she is remembered. Harry Potter *is* the hero of this play, Miss Granger; the world *does* revolve around him. He is destined for great things; and I ween that in time the name of Albus Dumbledore will be remembered as Harry Potter's mysterious old wizard, more than for anything else I have done. And perhaps the name of Hermione Granger will be remembered as his companion, if you prove worthy of it in your day. For this I tell you true: never will you find more glory on your own, than in Harry Potter's company."

Hermione shook her head rapidly. "But that's *not*—" She'd known she wouldn't be able to explain. "It's not about *glory,* it's about being—something that belongs to someone else!"

"So you think you would rather be the hero?" The old wizard sighed. "Miss Granger, I have *been* a hero, and a leader; and I would have been a thousand times happier if I could have belonged to someone like Harry Potter. Someone made of sterner stuff than I, to make the hard decisions, and yet worthy to lead me. I thought, once, that I knew such a man, but I was mistaken... Miss Granger, you have no idea at *all* how fortunate are those like you, compared to heroes."

The hot burning feeling was creeping up her throat again, along with helplessness, she didn't understand why Professor McGonagall had brought her here if the Headmaster wasn't going to help, and from a glance at Professor McGonagall's face, it looked like Professor McGonagall also wasn't sure now that it had been a good idea.

"I don't want to be a hero," said Hermione Granger, "I don't want to be a hero's companion, I just want to be *me.*"

(The thought came to her a few seconds later that maybe she *did* in fact want to be a hero, but she decided not to change what she'd said.)

"Ah," said the old wizard. "That is a tall order, Miss Granger." Dumbledore rose from his throne, stepped out behind his desk, and pointed to a symbol on the wall, so ubiquitous that Hermione's eyes had glossed right over it; a faded shield on which was inscribed the heraldry of Hogwarts, the lion and snake, and badger and raven, and in Latin engraved

words whose point she'd never understood. Then, as she realized where that shield was, and how old it looked, it suddenly occurred to Hermione that this might be the *original*—

"A Hufflepuff would say," said Dumbledore, tapping his finger on the faded badger and making Hermione wince for the sacrilege (if it *was* the original), "that people fail to become who they are meant to be, because they are too lazy to put in all the work involved. A Ravenclaw," tapping the raven, "would repeat those words that the wise know to be far older than Socrates, *know thyself,* and say that people fail to become who they are meant to be, through ignorance and lack of thought. And Salazar Slytherin," Dumbledore frowned as his finger tapped the faded snake, "why, he said that we become who we are meant to be by following our desires wherever they lead. Perhaps he would say that people fail to become themselves because they refuse to do what is necessary to achieve their ambitions. But then one notes that nearly all of the Dark Wizards to come out of Hogwarts have been Slytherins. Did they become what they were meant to be? I think not." Dumbledore's finger tapped the lion, and then he turned toward her. "Tell me, Miss Granger, what would a Gryffindor say? I do not need to ask whether the Sorting Hat offered you that House."

It didn't seem like a hard question. "A Gryffindor would say that people don't become who they should be, because they're afraid."

"Most people *are* afraid, Miss Granger," said the old wizard. "They live their whole lives circumscribed by crippling fear that cuts off everything they might accomplish, everything they might become. Fear of saying or doing the wrong thing, fear of losing their mere possessions, fear of death, and above all the fear of what other people will think of them. Such fear is a most terrible thing, Miss Granger, and it is terribly important to know that. But it is not what Godric Gryffindor would have said. People become who they are meant to be, Miss Granger, by doing what is right." The old wizard's voice was gentle. "So tell me, Miss Granger, what seems to you like the *right* choice? For *that* is who you truly are, and wherever that path leads, that is who you are meant to become."

There was a long space filled with the sounds of things that could not

be counted.

She thought about it, because she was a Ravenclaw.

"I don't *think* it's right," Hermione said slowly, "for someone to have to live inside someone else's shadow like that..."

"Many things in the world are not right," said the old wizard, "the question is what is right for *you* to do about them. Hermione Granger, I shall be less subtle than is usual for a mysterious old wizard, and tell you outright that you cannot *imagine* how badly things could go if the events surrounding Harry Potter turn to ill. His quest is a matter you would not even *dream* of walking away from, if you knew."

"*What* quest?" said Hermione. Her voice was trembling, because it was very clear what answer the Headmaster was looking for and she didn't want to give it. "What *happened* to Harry back then, *why* was Fawkes on his shoulder?"

"He grew up," said the old wizard. His eyes blinked several times, beneath the half-moon glasses, and his face suddenly looked very lined. "You see, Miss Granger, people do not grow up because of time, people grow up when they are placed in grownup situations. That is what happened to Harry Potter that Saturday. He was told—you are not to share this information with anyone, you understand—he was told that he would have to fight someone. I cannot tell you who. I cannot tell you why. But that is what happened to him, and why he needs his friends."

There was a pause.

"*Bellatrix Black?*" Hermione said. She couldn't have been more shocked if someone had plugged an electrical cord into her ear. "You're going to make Harry fight *Bellatrix Black?*"

"No," said the old wizard. "Not her. I cannot tell you who, or why."

She thought about it some more.

"Is there any way I can *keep up* with Harry?" said Hermione. "I mean, I'm not saying it's what I'll *do*, but—if he needs friends then can we be *equal* friends? Can I be a hero too?"

"Ah," said the old wizard, and smiled. "Only you can decide that, Miss Granger."

"But you're not going to help me like you're helping Harry."

The old wizard shook his head. "I have helped him little enough, Miss Granger. And if you are asking me for a quest—" The old wizard smiled again, rather wryly. "Miss Granger, you are in your first year of Hogwarts. Do not be too eager to grow up; there will be time enough for that later."

"I'm twelve. Harry's *eleven.*"

"Harry Potter is special," said the old wizard. "As you know, Miss Granger." The blue eyes were suddenly piercing beneath the half-moon glasses, and she was reminded of the day of the Dementor when Dumbledore's voice had said, inside her mind, that he knew about Harry's dark side.

Hermione put up her hand and touched Professor McGonagall's hand, which had stayed strong on her shoulder this whole time, and Hermione said, she was surprised that her voice didn't break, "I'd like to go, now, please."

"Of course," said Professor McGonagall, and Hermione felt the hand on her shoulder gently turning her around to face the oaken door.

"Have you chosen your path yet, Hermione Granger?" said Albus Dumbledore's voice from behind her, even as the door slowly creaked open to reveal the Enchantment of the Endless Stair.

She nodded.

"And?"

"I'll," she said, her voice stuck, "I'll, I'll—"

She swallowed.

"I'll do—what's right—"

She didn't say anything else, she couldn't, and then the Endless Stair began revolving around her once again.

Neither she nor Professor McGonagall spoke on the way down.

When the Flowing Stone gargoyles stepped out of their way, and the two of them stepped out into the corridors of Hogwarts, Professor McGonagall finally spoke, and she said in a whisper, "I'm so terribly sorry, Miss Granger. I did not think the Headmaster would say such things to you. I think he truly has forgotten what it is like to be a child."

Hermione glanced back up to her and saw that Professor McGonagall looked like *she* was about to burst into tears... only not really, but there

was a tightness in her face that was like that.

"If I want to be a hero too," said Hermione, "if I've decided to be a hero too, is there anything *you* can do to help?"

Professor McGonagall rapidly shook her head, and said, "Miss Granger, I'm not sure the Headmaster is wrong about *that.* You *are* twelve."

"Okay," said Hermione.

They walked forward a bit.

"Excuse me," said Hermione, "is it okay if I walk back to the Ravenclaw tower by myself? I'm sorry, it's not your fault or anything, I just want to be by myself right now."

"Of course, Miss Granger," said Professor McGonagall, her voice sounding a little hoarse, and Hermione heard her footsteps stop, and then turn around behind her.

Hermione Granger walked away.

She climbed a flight of stairs, and then another, wondering if there was anyone else in Hogwarts who would give her a chance to be a hero. Professor Flitwick would say the same thing as Professor McGonagall, and even if he didn't, he probably couldn't help, Hermione didn't know who *could* help. Well, Professor Quirrell would come up with something clever if she used up enough Quirrell points, but she had a feeling that asking him would be a bad idea—that the Defense Professor couldn't help anyone become the sort of hero that was worth becoming, and that he wouldn't even understand the difference.

She had almost gotten to the Ravenclaw tower when she saw the flash of gold.

CHAPTER SIXTY-NINE

SELF-ACTUALIZATION, PART IV

It was out of the corner of her eye that Hermione Granger saw it, a reflection on the polished metal of a statue at the junction of two corridors, a flash of gold, a flash of red, something like an image of fire; just for a moment she saw it, and then it was gone.

She paused, puzzled, and she *almost* walked away, but there had been something familiar about that brief glow—

Hermione walked forward to where the statue had stood, looked at the corridor from which she thought the fiery reflection might have come.

Faintly, as though from a faraway place, she heard the cry, the call.

Hermione started to run.

She ran for a while; whenever she got to a junction she would pause, catch as much breath as she could, and then she would see a flash of fire reflected from one direction or another, or hear that distant call. If it hadn't been for her army training she would've fallen over in exhaustion, running like that.

She never saw the phoenix.

And then she came to a four-way branch and there was *nothing,* no sign, she waited for long seconds and she heard no cry and saw no fire, and she was only just starting to wonder with a sick sad feeling if she'd imagined the whole thing, when she heard a *person* cry out.

When her rapidly racing feet turned the corner her mind took in the whole scene at a glance, three huge boys in green-trimmed robes already

turning to look at her, and one shorter and smaller boy in yellow, who was dangling in the air from one foot held up high by an invisible hand.

The Sunshine General didn't even think about it, people who stopped to think didn't spring very good ambushes.

Her wand was in her hand, her fingers did the twist and her lips said "*Somnium!*" and one of the bullies fell over, the Hufflepuff boy dropped out of the air with a *thump* and the other two bullies were trying to aim their wands at her and she said "*Somnium!*" again and another huge boy keeled over—the one who'd been aiming his wand faster, that was who she'd fired at.

Unfortunately casting two Sleep Hexes in a row like that was hard even for her, and she couldn't get off a third before—

The last bully shouted "*Protego!*" and was surrounded by a shimmering blue glow.

Twenty-four hours ago, Hermione would have panicked at that, a *real* Shielding Charm would let the bully-boy cast spells on her even while he was protected.

Now she—

"*Stupefy!*" shouted the bully-boy.

The crimson bolt blasted toward her with a terrible brilliance, blazing far brighter than any hex that had sprung from Harry's wand.

Hermione swayed slightly to the left, and the bolt missed, because the bully's *aim* hadn't been nearly as good as Harry's; and the thought came to her that maybe bullies and Professor Quirrell's armies didn't mix.

"*Stupefy!*" shouted the bully-boy again. "*Expelliarmus! Stupefy!*"

Anyway, *now* she'd just spent a whole hour thinking of all the *other* spells she could've cast on Harry and Neville—

"*Jellyfy!*" yelled the bully-boy, a wide-beam jinx with no visible bolt to dodge, and her knees suddenly felt almost too weak to support her. And then, with an angry roar producing an even brighter blaze of crimson, "*Stupefy!*"

She dodged that one by deliberately falling, and by then she'd recovered enough for her next spell, which was—

"*Lubriceum,*" said Hermione, directing her remark to the floor.

"Oof," said the bully-boy as his feet went out from under him and *he actually dropped his wand.*

The *Protego* winked out.

"*Somnium,*" said Hermione.

She was still breathing in gasps as she crawled over to where the Hufflepuff boy was sitting up, and groaning and rubbing his skull where he'd been dropped head-first into the floor; it was a good thing he hadn't been a Muggle, Hermione realized, or he might have snapped his neck. She hadn't actually thought of that.

"Uh," said the boy, his hair was of a color that would've been called 'brunette' if he was a girl, his eyes an undistinguished brown that somehow seemed just right for Hufflepuff, there weren't any tears on his face but he looked sort of pale. She pegged him at about fourth year, or third.

Then the brown eyes widened as he focused on her. "*General Sunshine?*"

"Yeah," she said. "That's *(gasp)* me." If the Hufflepuff boy said anything about her being Harry Potter's love interest, she decided, he was going to die.

"Wow," said the Hufflepuff boy. "That was—you just—I mean I saw you on the screens before Christmas but—wow! I can't believe you just did that!"

There was a pause.

I can't believe I just did that, thought Hermione Granger, who was feeling a little faint all of a sudden, it must have been all that running. "Excuse *(gasp)* me," she said, "can you *(gasp)* Unjellyfy my legs?"

The boy nodded, pushed himself to his feet, and reached inside his robes for his wand; but Hermione had to correct his gesture before the counter-Jinx worked right.

"I'm Michael Hopkins," said the boy once Hermione had rolled back to her own feet. He stuck out his hand. "Or just Mike inside Hufflepuff, there aren't any other Mikes in all of Hufflepuff this year, would you believe it?"

They shook hands, and Mike said, "Anyway, *thank you.*"

Hermione wasn't prepared for the rush of euphoria that hit her then, saving someone like that literally felt better than anything she'd ever felt

in her *whole life.*

She turned to look at the bullies.

They were very big and they looked, she thought, around fifteen years old, and she was suddenly realizing just how *large* a difference had sprung up between Hogwarts students who'd signed up for all of Professor Quirrell's extra-curricular activities, and students who'd had years of being taught by the worst Professors ever to go Professing. Being able to *hit* things that you aimed at, for example; or being able to think well enough in the middle of a fight to realize that you ought to *Innervate* your fallen allies. And other things Professor Quirrell had said, like that in the real world almost any fight would be settled by a surprise attack, suddenly made a lot more sense to her.

Still trying to catch her breath, she looked back at Mike.

"Would you *(gasp)* believe," said Hermione Granger, "that five minutes ago I was *(gasp)* having trouble figuring out how to become a *(gasp)* hero?"

Had she really thought she needed *permission* from someone, or that heroes sat around waiting for someone else to give them quests? It was very simple actually, you just went where the evil was, that was all it ever took to be a hero. She should've remembered, she shouldn't have needed a phoenix to tell her, that bad things sometimes happened right here in Hogwarts.

Then Hermione glanced nervously back at where the three older boys were lying unconscious as the realization hit that they'd *seen* her, they might *know* who she was, they might sneak up on her and take *her* by surprise and—and they could really hurt her—

Hermione stopped.

She remembered that Harry Potter had put himself in the middle of *five* Slytherin bullies on the first day of class when he hadn't even known how to use his wand.

She remembered the Headmaster saying that you grew up by being put in grownup situations, and that most people lived their lives inside a constraining circle of fear.

And she remembered Professor McGonagall's voice saying, 'You *are* twelve.'

Hermione took a deep breath, once, twice, and three times.

She asked Mike if he needed to go to Madam Pomfrey's office, which he didn't; and got him to tell her the names of the Slytherin boys, just in case.

And then Hermione Granger strolled away from the heap of unconscious bullies, making sure to put a smile on her face as she walked.

She knew that she was probably going to get hurt sooner or later. But if you were too scared of getting hurt to do what was right, then you couldn't be a hero, it was as simple as that; and if you'd put the Sorting Hat on her head at that moment it wouldn't have waited even *one second* before calling out 'GRYFFINDOR!'

⁂

She was still thinking about it when she came down to dinner; the euphoria of saving someone still hadn't worn off, and she was beginning to worry that it had broken something in her brain.

As she approached the Ravenclaw table a sudden epidemic of whispers broke out, and Hermione wondered if the Hufflepuff boy had said anything yet before she realized that the whispers probably weren't about *that.*

She sat down across from Harry Potter who looked *extremely* nervous, probably because she was still smiling.

"Uh—" said Harry, as she served herself freshly toasted bread, butter, cinnamon, no fruits or vegetables whatsoever, and three helpings of chocolate brownies. "Uh—"

She let him go on like that until she'd finished pouring herself a glass of grapefruit juice, and then she said, "I've got a question for you, Mr. Potter. How do you think people fail to become themselves?"

"*What?*" said Harry.

She looked at him. "Pretend there isn't all this stuff going on," she said, "and just say whatever you'd have said yesterday."

"Um..." Harry said, looking very confused and worried. "I think we already *are* ourselves... it's not like I'm an imperfect copy of someone

else. But I guess if I try to run with the sense of the question, then I'd say that people don't become themselves because we absorb all this crazy stuff from the environment and then regurgitate it. I mean, how many people playing Quidditch would be playing a game like that if they'd invented the game themselves? Or back in Muggle Britain, how many people who think of themselves as Labour or Conservative or Liberal Democrat would invent that exact bundle of political beliefs if they had to come up with everything themselves?"

Hermione considered this. She'd been wondering if Harry would say something Slytherin or maybe even Gryffindor, but this didn't seem to fit into the Headmaster's list; and it occurred to Hermione that there might be a lot more viewpoints on the subject than just four.

"Okay," said Hermione, "different question. What makes someone a hero?"

"A *hero?*" said Harry.

"Yeah," said Hermione.

"Ah..." Harry said. His fork and knife nervously sawed at a piece of steak, cutting it into tinier and tinier pieces. "I think a lot of people can do things when the world channels them into it... like people are expecting you to do it, or it only uses skills you already know, or there's an authority watching to catch your mistakes and make sure you do your part. But problems like that are probably already being solved, you know, and then there's no need for heroes. So I think the people we call 'heroes' are rare because they've got to make everything up as they go along, and most people aren't comfortable with that. Why do you ask?" Harry's fork stabbed three pieces of thoroughly shredded steak and lifted them up to his mouth.

"Oh, I just stunned three older Slytherin bullies and rescued a Hufflepuff," said Hermione. "I'm going to be a hero."

When Harry had finished choking on his food (some of the other Ravenclaws in hearing distance were still coughing) he said, "*What?*"

Hermione told the story, it began rippling out in further whispers even as she spoke. (Though she left out the part about the phoenix, because that seemed like a private thing between the two of them. Hermione had felt surprised, thinking about it afterward, that a phoenix

would appear for someone who *wanted* to be a hero; it seemed a bit selfish when she thought about it that way; but maybe it didn't matter to phoenixes so long as they saw that you were willing to help people.)

When she was done talking, Harry stared at her across the table and didn't say a word.

"I'm sorry for how I acted earlier," Hermione said. She sipped from her glass of grapefruit juice. "I should've remembered that if I'm still beating the pants off you in Charms class then it's okay for you to do better in Defense."

"*Please* don't take this the wrong way," said Harry. He looked too-adult now, and grim. "But are you sure this is who *you* are, and not, to put it bluntly, me?"

"I'm quite certain," said Hermione. "Why, my name practically spells out 'heroine' except for the extra 'm', I never noticed that until today."

"Being a hero isn't all fun and games," said Harry. "Not real heroing, the sort grownups have to do, it isn't like this, it isn't going to be this easy."

"I know," said Hermione.

"It's hard and it's painful and you've got to make decisions where there isn't any good answer—"

"Yes, Harry, I read those books too."

"No," said Harry, "you don't understand, even if the books warn you there's no way you *can* understand until—"

"That doesn't stop you," said Hermione. "It doesn't stop you even a little. I bet you never even *considered* not being a hero because of that. So why d'you think it'll stop me?"

There was a pause.

A sudden huge smile lit Harry's face, a smile that was as bright and as boyish as the frown had been grim and adult, and everything was all right again between them.

"This is going to go horribly mind-bogglingly wrong somehow," said Harry, still smiling hugely. "You know that, right?"

"Oh, I know," said Hermione. She ate another bite of toast. "That reminds me, Dumbledore refused to be my mysterious old wizard, is

there someplace I can write to get another one?"

Aftermath:

"...and Professor Flitwick says her determination seems unshakeable," Minerva said tightly, staring at the silver-bearded old wizard who was responsible for this. Albus Dumbledore was just sitting silently and listening to her with a distant sad look in his eyes. "Miss Granger didn't even blink when Professor Flitwick threatened to have her transferred to Gryffindor, just said that if she left she would take all the books with her. Hermione Granger has decided she's going to be a hero and she's not taking no for an answer. I doubt you could have pushed her into this any harder if you had *tried* to—"

It took all of five full seconds for Minerva's brain to process the realization.

"ALBUS!" she shrieked.

"My dear," said the old wizard, "after you have dealt with your thirtieth hero or so, you will realize that they react quite predictably to certain things; such as being told that they are too young, or that they are not destined to be heroes, or that being a hero is unpleasant; and if you truly wish to be sure you should tell them all three. Although," with a brief sigh, "it does not do to be *too* blatant, or your Deputy Headmistress might catch you."

"Albus," Minerva said, her voice even tighter, "if she is hurt, I swear this time I'll—"

"She would have come to that same place in due time," Albus said, the distant sad look still in his eyes. "If someone is meant to become a hero then they will not listen to our warnings, Minerva, no matter how hard we try. And given that, it is better for Harry if Miss Granger does not fall too far behind him." Albus produced, as though from nowhere, a tin which flipped open to reveal small yellow lumps, she'd never been able to figure out where he kept it and she'd never been able to detect the magic involved. "Lemon drop?"

"*She is a twelve-year-old girl, Albus!*"

Afteraftermath:

Within the windows, barely visible in the evening gloom, fishes swam in the black waters, illuminated by the bright shine of the Slytherin common room as they came closer, fading into darkness as they swam away.

Daphne Greengrass was sitting in a comfortable black leather couch, her head collapsed into her hands, glowing golden-yellowish as bright sparks of white light winked in and out of existence around her.

She'd been ready to be teased about liking Neville Longbottom. She'd been expecting to hear a lot of snide remarks about Hufflepuffs. She'd thought of whole *reams* of snappy comebacks for it while she was on the way back to the Slytherin dungeons.

She'd been looking *forward* to being teased about liking Neville. Being teased about that sort of thing meant you'd grown up into a real girl.

As it turned out, nobody had worked out that her challenging Neville to a Most Ancient Duel meant that she liked him. She'd thought it would be *obvious* but no, nobody else had even thought of that apparently.

It was always the hex you didn't see that hit you.

She should've just called herself Daphne of Sunshine, like Neville of Chaos. Or Sunny Daphne like Sunny Ron. Or *anything* except Greengrass of Sunshine.

Greengrass of Sunshine.

It had gone from there to Greengrass of Sunshine and Blue Skies.

Then someone had added Snow-Topped Mountains and Frolicking Woodland Creatures.

Currently she was being referred to as the Sparkly Unicorn Princess of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Sparklypoo.

And some cursed sixth-year girl had hit her with a Sparkling Jinx, she hadn't even known there *was* such a thing as a Sparkling Jinx, and *Finite Incantatem* hadn't worked, and she'd asked older girls who she'd *thought* were her friends (she had apparently been wrong about this) and then she'd threatened the caster with grievous political mayhem wreaked

by her father and nonetheless Daphne Greengrass was still sitting in the Slytherin common room with her head in her hands, sparkling brightly and wondering how she'd ended up as the only sane person in Hogwarts.

It was *after dinnertime* and they were *still at it* and if they didn't stop by tomorrow morning she was going to transfer to Durmstrang and become the next Dark Lady.

"Hey, everyone!" said the Carrow twins dramatically, waving an issue of the *Daily Prophet.* "Did you hear the news? The Wizengamot just ruled that 'let's see what you got' constitutes a lawful challenge to be fought until the challenger lies down and has a nap!"

"How dare you insult the honor of the Sparkly Unicorn Princess!" shouted Tracey. "Let's see what you got!" Then Tracey lay down flat on her sofa and started snoring loudly.

Daphne's sparkling head sank further into her glowing hands. "After my family takes over I'm going to have you all put under anti-Apparition jinxes and Flooed into the sea," she said to no one in particular. "You're all okay with that, right?"

Thunk-thunk, thunk-thunk-thunk, thunk.

Daphne looked up, surprised; that was a Sunshine code-signal—

"*I hight someone knocking!*" bellowed Mr. Goyle. "*Knocking of the door!*"

"*Let's see what you've got, doory!*" shouted an older boy near the door, and yanked the door open.

There was a moment of complete surprise.

"I've come to have a word with Miss Greengrass," said the Sunshine General, sounding like she was trying to sound confident. "Could someone please—"

From the look on Hermione's face she had just noticed Daphne sparkling.

And *that* was when Millicent Bulstrode raced up from the lower dorms and shouted, "Hey, everyone, guess what, now *Granger* went and beat up Derrick and what's left of his crew, and his father owled him and said that if he didn't—"

Millicent caught sight of Hermione standing in the doorway.

There was a very loud silence.

"Uh," said Daphne. *What?* said her brain. "Uh, what're you doing here, General?"

"Well," said Hermione Granger with a strange smile on her face, "I've decided it's not fair if mysterious old wizards give some people a chance to be heroes and not others, and also I've read history books and there aren't nearly enough girl heroes in them. So I thought I'd just drop by and see if you wanted to be a hero and why are you glowing like that?"

There was another silence.

"This," said Daphne, "was probably *not* the best time to ask me that question—"

"*I'll take it!*" shouted Tracey Davis, leaping off her sofa.

And thus was born the Society for the Promotion of Heroic Equality for Witches.

CHAPTER SEVENTY

SELF-ACTUALIZATION, PART V

Even if you had been the Deputy Headmistress for three decades, and a Transfiguration Professor before that, it was rare that you saw Albus Dumbledore caught completely flatfooted.

"...Susan Bones, Lavender Brown, and Daphne Greengrass," Minerva finished. "I should also note, Albus, that Miss Granger's account of your seemingly unsupportive attitude—I believe her phrase was 'he said I should be happy to be just a sidekick'—has generated a good deal of *interest* among the older girls. Several of whom came to me to ask if Miss Granger's accusations were true, since Miss Granger had said that I was there."

The old wizard leaned back in his huge chair, still gazing at her, his eyes looking rather abstracted beneath the half-moon glasses.

"It placed me in something of a dilemma, Albus," said Professor McGonagall. Her face stayed quite neutral, she made sure of that. "I now know that you did not truly mean to discourage the girl. Quite the opposite, in fact. But you and Severus have often told me that to keep a secret I must give no sign that differs from the reaction of someone truly ignorant. Thus I had no choice but to confirm that Miss Granger's account was accurate, and feign the appropriate degree of worry, with a slight overtone of offense. After all, had I *not* known you were deliberately manipulating Miss Granger, I might have been rather put out."

"I... see," the old wizard said slowly. His hands toyed absently with his silver beard, small quick gestures.

"Thankfully," Professor McGonagall continued, "so far Professors Sinistra and Vector are the only two faculty members to don Miss Granger's buttons."

"Buttons?" repeated the old wizard.

Minerva drew forth a small silver disc bearing the initials SPHEW, laid it on Albus's desk, and gave it a brief tap with her finger.

And the voices of Hermione Granger, Padma Patil, Parvati Patil, Lavender Brown, Susan Bones, Hannah Abbott, Daphne Greengrass, and Tracey Davis cried out in unison, "*We won't settle for second best, it's time to give a witch a quest!*"

"Miss Granger is selling them for two Sickles, and tells me that she has so far sold fifty of them. I believe that Nymphadora Tonks, in seventh-year Hufflepuff, is enchanting them for her. To conclude my report," Professor McGonagall said briskly, "our eight newly minted heroines have asked permission to conduct a protest outside the entrance to your office."

"I hope," Albus said, frowning, "you explained to them that—"

"I explained to them that Wednesday at 7PM would be fine," said Minerva. She took back the button from the Headmaster's desk, favored Albus with a honeyed smile, and turned to the door.

"Minerva?" said the old wizard from behind her. "*Minerva!*"

The oaken door shut solidly behind her.

There wasn't a lot of room between the brief stone walls that demarcated the vestibule to the Headmaster's office, so although a lot of people had wanted to watch the protest, not many had been allowed to come. Just Professor Sinistra and Professor Vector, who were wearing the buttons, and the prefects Penelope Clearwater and Rose Brown and Jacqueline Preece, who were wearing the buttons. Behind *them*, Professor McGonagall and Professor Sprout and Professor Flitwick, who weren't wearing the buttons, scrutinizing the whole affair. Harry Potter and the Head Boy of Hogwarts were there, and the boy prefects Percy Weasley

and Oliver Beatson, all wearing the buttons to show Solidarity. And of course the eight founding members of SPHEW, forming a picket line next to the gargoyles with their signs. Hermione's own sign, attached to a solid wooden handle which seemed to weigh heavier and heavier in her hands as the seconds passed, said NOBODY'S SIDEKICK.

And Professor Quirrell, who was leaning with his back against the far stone wall and watching with unreadable eyes. The Defense Professor had gotten one of her buttons, though she'd never sold one to him; and he wasn't wearing it, but idly tossing it with one hand.

This whole idea had seemed like a much better idea four days ago, when the fires of her indignation had been burning fresh and hot, and she'd been facing the prospect of doing it all four days *later* instead of *right now.*

But she had to carry on, because that was what heroes did, they carried on, and also because it had seemed infinitely too awful to tell everyone she was calling it off. Hermione wondered how much heroism had gone on for reasons like that. Most books didn't *say* "And then they refused to give up, no matter how sensible it would have been, because that would've been too embarrassing"; but a great deal of history made a lot more sense that way.

At 7:15PM, Professor McGonagall had told her, Headmaster Dumbledore would come down and talk to them for a couple of minutes. Professor McGonagall had said not to be frightened—the Headmaster was a good person deep down, and they'd properly gotten the school's authorization for the protest.

But Hermione was very very aware that even if she was doing it with signed permission, she was still Defying Authority.

After she'd decided to be a hero, Hermione had done the obvious thing, and gone to the Hogwarts library and taken out books on how to be a hero. Then she'd returned those books back to their shelves, because it'd been patently obvious that none of the authors had been actual heroes themselves. Instead she'd just read five times over, until she'd memorized every word, the thirty inches by Godric Gryffindor that was all his autobiography and his life's advice. (Or the English translation, anyway; she couldn't read Latin yet.) Godric Gryffindor's autobiog-

raphy had been a lot more *compressed* than the books Hermione was used to reading, he used *one sentence* to say things that should've taken thirty inches just by themselves, and then there was *another* sentence after that...

But it was clear from what she'd read that, while Defying Authority wasn't the *point* of being a hero, you couldn't be a hero if you were too scared to do it. And Hermione Granger knew by now how others saw her, and she knew what other people thought she couldn't do.

Hermione hefted her picket sign a little higher and concentrated on breathing slowly and rhythmically instead of hyperventilating until she fell over.

"*Really?*" said Miss Preece in a tone of undisguised fascination. "They couldn't *vote*?"

"Indeed," said Professor Sinistra. (The Astronomy Professor's hair was still dark, and her dark face only slightly lined; Hermione *would* have guessed her age at around seventy, except—) "I quite remember my mother's rejoicing when they announced the Qualification of Women Act, although she did not actually qualify." (Which meant that Professor Sinistra had been around her Muggle family in 1918.) "And that wasn't the worst of it. Why, just a few centuries earlier—"

Thirty seconds later all the non-Muggleborns, male and female both, were staring at Professor Sinistra with utterly shocked expressions. Hannah had dropped her sign.

"And *that* wasn't the worst of it either, not by half," finished Professor Sinistra. "But you see where this sort of thing could potentially lead."

"Merlin preserve us," said Penelope Clearwater in a strangled voice. "You mean *that's* how men would treat us if we didn't have wands to defend ourselves?"

"*Hey!*" said one of the boy prefects. "*That's* not—"

There was a short, sardonic laugh from the direction of Professor Quirrell. When Hermione turned her head to look she saw that the Defense Professor was still idly toying with the button, not bothering to glance up at the rest of them, as he said, "Such is human nature, Miss

Clearwater. Rest assured that *you* would be no kinder, if witches had wands and men lacked them."

"I hardly think so!" snapped Professor Sinistra.

A cold chuckle. "I suspect it happens more often than any dare suggest, in the proudest pureblood families. Some lonely witch spies a handsome Muggle; and thinks how very easy it would be, to slip the man a love potion, and by him be adored alone and utterly. And since she knows he can offer her no resistance, why, it is only natural for her to take from him whatever she pleases—"

"*Professor Quirrell!*" said Professor McGonagall sharply.

"I'm sorry," Professor Quirrell said mildly, his eyes still looking down on the button in his hand, "are we all still pretending it doesn't happen? My apologies, then."

Professor Sinistra snapped, "And I suppose that wizards don't—"

"There are *children* present, Professors!" Again Professor McGonagall.

"Some do," Professor Quirrell said equably, as though discussing the weather. "Although personally, I don't."

There was a bit of silence, for a time. Hermione put up her sign again—it had slipped down to her shoulder while she was listening. She'd never thought of that, not even a little, and now she was trying *not* to think of it, and her stomach was feeling a bit queasy. She looked in Harry Potter's direction, not quite knowing why she did; and she saw that Harry's face was perfectly still. A chill ran down her spine before she looked away, not quite fast enough to miss the small nod that Harry gave her, as though they were agreeing on something.

"To be fair," Professor Sinistra said after a while, "since I received my Hogwarts letter I can't recall encountering any prejudice on account of being a woman, or colored. No, now it is all for being a Muggleborn. I believe Miss Granger said that it was *just* with heroes that she found a problem, so far?"

It took Hermione a moment to recognize that she'd been asked the question, and then she said "Yes," in a tone that squeaked a little. This whole thing had blown up a bit larger than she'd imagined when she'd started it.

"What exactly did you check, Miss Granger?" said Professor Vector. She looked older than Professor Sinistra, her hair starting to gray a little; Hermione hadn't ever come close to Professor Vector in person until the Arithmancy Professor had asked her for a button.

"Um," Hermione said, her voice a little high, "I checked the history books and there's been as many woman Ministers of Magic as men. Then I looked at Supreme Mugwumps and there were a few more wizards than witches but not many. But if you look at people like famous Dark Wizard hunters, or people who've stopped invasions of Dark creatures, or people who've overthrown Dark Lords—"

"And the Dark Wizards themselves, of course," said Professor Quirrell. *Now* the Defense Professor had looked up. "You may add that to your list, Miss Granger. Among all the suspected Death Eaters we know of only two sorceresses, Bellatrix Black and Alecto Carrow. And I daresay that most wizards would be hard-pressed to name a single Dark Lady besides Baba Yaga."

Hermione just stared at him.

He couldn't *possibly* be—

"Professor Quirrell," said Professor Vector, "what exactly are you implying?"

The Defense Professor raised the button so that the golden-lettered SPHEW faced them, and said, "Heroes," then turned the button to show its silver backside and said, "Dark Wizards. They are similar career paths followed by similar people, and one can hardly ask why young witches are turning away from one course without considering its reflection."

"Oh, *now* I see!" said Tracey Davis, speaking up so suddenly that Hermione gave a small startle. "You're joining our protest because you're worried that not enough girls are becoming Dark Witches!" Then Tracey giggled, which Hermione couldn't have managed at this point if you paid her a million pounds sterling.

There was a half-smile on Professor Quirrell's face as he replied, "Not really, Miss Davis. In truth I do not care about that sort of thing in the slightest. But it is futile to count the witches among Ministers of Magic and other such ordinary folk leading ordinary existences, when Grindelwald and Dumbledore and He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named were

all men." The Defense Professor's fingers idly spun the button, turning it over and over. "Then again, only a very few folk ever do anything interesting with their lives. What does it matter to you if *they* are mostly witches or mostly wizards, so long as *you* are not among them? And I suspect you will not be among them, Miss Davis; for although you are ambitious, you have no ambition."

"*That's not true!*" said Tracey indignantly. "And what's it mean?"

Professor Quirrell straightened from where he had been leaning against the wall. "You were Sorted into Slytherin, Miss Davis, and I expect that you will grasp at any opportunity for advancement which falls into your hands. But there is no great ambition that you are driven to accomplish, and you will not *make* your opportunities. At best you will grasp your way upward into Minister of Magic, or some other high position of unimportance, never breaking the bounds of your existence."

Then Professor Quirrell's gaze shifted away from Tracey, he was looking at *her,* the pale blue eyes staring at her with an awful intensity—"Tell me, Miss Granger. Do *you* have an ambition?"

"Professor—" squeaked the high stern voice of Professor Flitwick, and then her Head of House's voice cut off, and from the side of her vision Hermione saw that Harry had laid his hand on Professor Flitwick's shoulder and was shaking his head, face looking very adult.

Hermione felt like a deer caught in headlights.

"What drove you to break your bounds, Miss Granger?" said the Defense Professor, still gazing directly at her. "Why is getting good marks in class no longer enough? Is it true greatness that you seek? Does some aspect of the world dissatisfy you, that you must remake according to your will? Or is this all merely a child's game to you? I will be quite disappointed if this is only about rivaling Harry Potter."

"I—" said Hermione, her voice so high-pitched it made a sort of peeping sound, but then she couldn't think of what else to say.

"You may take a moment to think, if you like," said Professor Quirrell. "Pretend it is a homework essay, six inches due Thursday. I hear you are quite eloquent in them."

Everyone was looking at her.

"I—" said Hermione. "I don't agree with one single thing you just said, anywhere."

"Well spoken," came Professor McGonagall's crisp voice.

Professor Quirrell's gaze did not waver. "That is not six inches, Miss Granger. *Something* drives you to defy the Headmaster's verdict and gather followers about yourself. Perhaps it is something you prefer not to speak aloud?"

Hermione knew the correct answer wouldn't impress Professor Quirrell, but it was the correct answer, so she said it. "I don't think you need ambition to be a hero," Hermione said. Her voice wavered but it didn't crack. "I think you just have to do what's right. And they're not my followers, we're friends."

Professor Quirrell leaned back against the wall again. The half-smile had faded from his face. "Most folk tell themselves they are doing right, Miss Granger. They do not thereby rise above the ordinary."

Hermione took a couple of deep breaths, trying to be brave. "It's not *about* being not ordinary," she said as stoutly as she could. "But I think if someone just tries to do what's right, over and over again, and they're not too lazy to do all the work it takes, and they think about what they're doing, and they're brave enough to do it even when they're scared—" Hermione paused for an instant, her eyes darting to Tracey and Daphne, "—and they cleverly plan how to do it—and they don't just do what other people do—then I think someone like that would already get into enough trouble."

Some of the girls and boys chuckled, as did Professor McGonagall, who looked wry and proud at the same time.

"You may be right about that," said the Defense Professor, his eyes half-lidded. He tossed Hermione the button, and she caught it without thinking. "My donation to your cause, Miss Granger. I understand that they are worth two Sickles."

The Defense Professor turned and walked away without another word.

"I thought I was going to faint!" gasped Hannah after his footsteps had faded, and she heard some of the other girls letting out their breath or putting down their signs for a moment.

"I do *too* have an ambition!" said Tracey, who seemed to be almost on the verge of tears. "I'm—I'm—I'll figure out what it is by tomorrow, but I have one, I'm sure!"

"If you really can't think of anything," Daphne said, giving Tracey a comforting pat on the shoulder, "just go with the oldie but goodie and try to take over the world."

"Hey!" said Susan sharply. "You're supposed to be heroes now! That means you have to be *good!*"

"No, it's all right," said Lavender, "I'm pretty sure General Chaos wants to take over the world and *he's* sort of a good guy."

More conversation was going on behind the picket line. "My goodness," said Penelope Clearwater. "I think that's the most *overtly* evil Defense Professor we've ever had."

Professor McGonagall coughed warningly, and the Head Boy said, "You weren't around for Professor Barney," which made several people twitch.

"Professor Quirrell just *talks* like that," said Harry Potter, though he sounded less certain than before. "I mean, think about it, he doesn't *do* anything like what Professor Snape does—"

"Mr. Potter," squeaked Professor Flitwick, voice polite and face stern, "why did you ask me to stay silent?"

"Professor Quirrell was testing Hermione to see if he wanted to be her mysterious old wizard," Harry said. "Which totally would not have worked out in any way, shape, or form, but she had to answer for herself."

Hermione blinked.

Then Hermione blinked again, as she realized that it was Professor Quirrell who was Harry Potter's mysterious old wizard, and not Dumbledore at all, and that *really wasn't a good sign—*

A rumbling noise filled the small stone vestibule, and Hermione, her nerves already on edge, spun rapidly around, almost dropping her protest sign as her other hand darted toward her wand.

The gargoyles were stepping aside, the Flowing Stone rumbling like rock as it moved like flesh. The huge ugly figures waited only briefly, dead gray eyes staring out in silent vigil. Then the great gargoyles folded

their wings back into place and stepped back into their former positions, the Flowing Stone not changing its outward appearance at all as it returned from flexibility to motionlessness, and the brief gap in the stone of Hogwarts was solid once more.

And before them all, wearing robes of bright purple that probably only looked hideous if you were Muggleborn, stood the towering form of Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, the Headmaster of Hogwarts, the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, the Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards, the vanquisher of the Dark Lord Grindelwald and protector of Britain, the rediscoverer of the fabled Twelve Uses of Dragon's Blood, the most powerful wizard alive; and he was looking at *her,* Hermione Jean Granger, General of the recently expanded Sunshine Regiment, who was getting the best grades in the first year of Hogwarts classes, and who had declared herself a heroine.

Even her *name* was shorter than his.

The Headmaster smiled benevolently at her, his wrinkle-lined eyes twinkling cheerfully beneath their half-circles of glass, and said, "Hello, Miss Granger."

The odd thing was that it wasn't nearly as scary as talking to Professor Quirrell. "Hello, Headmaster Dumbledore," Hermione said with only a slight quaver in her voice.

"Miss Granger," said Dumbledore, now looking more serious, "I think you and I may have had a bit of a misunderstanding. I did not mean to imply that you could not, or should not be a hero. I certainly did not mean to imply that witches in general should not be heroes. Only that you were... a bit young, to be thinking of such things."

Hermione, unable to help herself, glanced at Professor McGonagall and saw that Professor McGonagall was giving her an encouraging smile—or she was giving the two of them *some* kind of smile, anyway—so Hermione looked back at the Headmaster and said, the small quaver in her voice a little larger now, "Since you became Headmaster forty years ago, there've been eleven students to graduate Hogwarts who became heroes, I mean people like Lupe Cazaril and so on, and *ten* of those were boys. Cimorene Linderwall was the only witch."

"Hm," said the Headmaster. There was a thoughtful expression on

his face; he at least *seemed* to be thinking about it. "Miss Granger, I have never been one for tallying such numbers. Often it is too much easier to count than to understand. Many good people have come out of Hogwarts, witches and wizards both; those famed as heroes are only one kind of good person, and perhaps not the highest. You did not include Alice Longbottom or Lily Potter in your reckoning... But leave that aside. Tell me, Miss Granger, did you tally how many heroes came out of Hogwarts in the forty years before me? For in that time I can recall only three now called heroes; and among those three, no witches at all."

"I'm not trying to say it's *just* you!" Hermione said. "Only I think maybe a *lot* of people, like the Headmasters before you too, maybe even your whole society and everything, might be discouraging girls."

The old wizard sighed. His half-glasses eyes looked only at her, as though they were the only two people present. "Miss Granger, it might be possible to discourage witches from becoming Charms Mistresses, or Quidditch players, or even Aurors. But not heroes. If someone is meant to be a hero then a hero they will be. They will walk through fire and swim through ice. Dementors will not stop them, nor the deaths of friends, and not discouragement either."

"Well," Hermione said, and paused, struggling with the words. "Well, I mean... what if that's not *actually* true? I mean, to *me* it seems that if you want more witches to be heroes, you ought to teach them heroing."

"Many boys and girls are heroes in their dreams," Dumbledore said quietly. He did not look at any of the other girls, only at her. "Fewer in the waking world. Many have stood their ground and faced the darkness when it comes for them. Fewer come for the darkness and force it to face them. It is a hard life, sometimes lonely, often short. I have told none to refuse that calling, but neither would I wish to increase their number."

Hermione hesitated; there was something in the lined face that stopped her, like a hint to all the emotion that wasn't being displayed, years and years of it...

Maybe if there were more heroes, their lives wouldn't be so lonely, or so short.

She couldn't bring herself to say that, though, not to him.

"But the point is moot," said the old wizard. He smiled, a bit ruefully she thought. "Miss Granger, you cannot teach heroism like you would teach Charms. You cannot assign twelve inches on how to carry on when all hope seems lost. You cannot rehearse students on when to stand up and tell the Headmaster he has done wrong. Heroes are born, not taught. And for whatever reason, more of them are born boys than girls." The Headmaster shrugged, as if to say that *he* was helpless to do anything about that.

"Um," Hermione said. She couldn't help it, she glanced behind her.

Professor Sinistra was looking a bit indignant. And it *wasn't* true that everyone was staring at her like she'd just been silly, the way she'd started to imagine while she was listening to Dumbledore.

Hermione turned back to face Dumbledore again, took a deep breath, and said, "Well, maybe people who are going to be heroes, will be heroes no matter what. But I don't see how anyone could really *know* that, aside from just saying it afterward. And when *I* told you that I wanted to be a hero, you weren't very encouraging."

"Mr. Potter," the Headmaster said mildly. His eyes didn't leave hers. "Please tell Miss Granger your impression of our own first meeting. Would you say that I was encouraging? Speak the truth."

There was a pause.

"Mr. Potter?" said Professor Vector's voice from behind her, sounding puzzled.

"Um," Harry's voice said from further back, sounding extremely reluctant. "Um... well, actually in my case the Headmaster set fire to a chicken."

"He *what?*" Hermione blurted, only there were several other people exclaiming things at around the same time so she wasn't sure anyone heard her.

Dumbledore went on gazing at her, looking perfectly serious.

"I didn't know about Fawkes," Harry's voice said rapidly, "so he told me that Fawkes was a phoenix, while he was pointing to a chicken on Fawkes's stand so I'd think *that* was Fawkes, and then he set the chicken on fire—and also he gave me this big rock and told me it had belonged to my father and I ought to carry it everywhere—"

"But that's *crazy!*" Susan blurted out.

There was a sudden hush.

The Headmaster slowly turned his head to stare at Susan.

"I—" said Susan. "I mean—I—"

The Headmaster leaned down until he was face-to-face with the young girl.

"I didn't—" said Susan.

Dumbledore put a finger to his lips and twiddled them, making a *bweeble-bweeble-bweeble* sound.

"Albus," said the weary voice of Professor McGonagall.

The Headmaster straightened up again and said, "Well, my good heroines, it has been pleasant speaking to you, but alas, much else remains to do this day. Still, rest assured that I am inscrutable at everyone, not just witches."

The gargoyles stepped aside, the Flowing Stone rumbling like rock as it moved like flesh.

The huge ugly figures waited briefly with dead gray eyes staring out in silent vigil, as Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, smiling as benevolently as when he'd first emerged from his office, stepped back into the Enchantment of the Endless Stair.

Then the great gargoyles folded their wings back into place and stepped back into their former positions, only one last brief "Bwa-ha-ha!" echoing out before the gap closed.

There was a long silence.

"He *really* set a chicken on fire?" said Hannah.

⁂

The eight of them had continued protesting even after that, but to be honest their heart had gone out of it.

It *had* been established, after some careful questions from Professor Flitwick, that Harry Potter hadn't smelled the chicken burning. Which meant that it had probably been a pebble or something, Transfigured into a chicken and then enclosed in a Boundary Charm to make sure that

no smoke escaped into the air—both Professor Flitwick and Professor McGonagall had been very emphatic about nobody trying that without their supervision.

But still...

But still... what?

Hermione didn't even *know* but still what.

But *still*.

After a lot of glances exchanged between girls none of whom had wanted to be first to say it, Hermione had declared the protest over, and the adults and boys had drifted off.

"You don't think we were being unfair to Dumbledore, do you?" said Susan as the heroines walked away to the sound of eight pairs of feet trodding on the stone paving of Hogwarts's corridors. "I mean, if he *is* crazy at everyone and not just at witches then it's not discrimination, right?"

"I don't want to protest against the Headmaster any more," Hannah said weakly. The Hufflepuff girl seemed a bit unsteady on her feet. "I don't care what Professor McGonagall says about him not holding it against us, it's just too much for my nerves."

Lavender snorted. "I guess *you* won't be slaying armies of Inferi anytime soon—"

"Stop that!" Hermione said sharply. "Look, all of us have got to *learn* to be heroines, right? It's okay if someone doesn't know right away."

"The Headmaster doesn't think it *can* be learned," Padma said. The Ravenclaw girl's face was thoughtful, her steps measured as she strode through the corridor. "The Headmaster doesn't even think that's a good idea."

Daphne was striding with her back straight and her head held bolt upright, looking more like a Proper Young Lady in her Hogwarts robes than Hermione could have done with her best formal dress. "The Headmaster," Daphne said in a precise voice, her shoes making hard, sharp tacking sounds on the stone, "thinks the lot of us are a bunch of silly girls playing games, and that someday Hermione might make a good sidekick but the rest of us are hopeless."

"Is he *right?*" said Parvati. The Gryffindor girl's face was very serious, making her look much more like her twin than she usually did. "I mean it has to be asked—"

"*No!*" spat Tracey. The Slytherin girl was stalking through the hallway looking ready to *kill* someone, like a miniature female Snape. Of all the girls, Tracey was the one who Hermione knew least. Hermione had talked to Lavender once before, but she'd never really *seen* Tracey except at wandpoint during a battle, until the Slytherin had jumped up from her sofa to volunteer. Right now Tracey looked so angry there should've been sparks flying off her. "We'll show him! We'll show them *all!*"

"Okay," said Susan, "that was *definitely* evil—"

"No," said Lavender, "that's a Chaos Legion motto, actually. Only she didn't do the insane laughter."

"That's right," Tracey said, her voice low and grim. "This time I'm not laughing." The girl went on stalking through the corridor, like she had dramatic music accompanying her that only she could hear.

(Hermione was starting to worry about what *exactly* the impressionable youths of the Chaos Legion were learning from Harry Potter.)

"But—I mean—" Parvati said. She still had a contemplative look on her face. "I mean, you can see *why* the Headmaster would think we were just silly girls, right? What does protesting outside the Headmaster's office have to do with becoming heroines?"

"Huh," Lavender said, now looking thoughtful herself. "That's true. We should do something heroic. I mean heroinic."

"Um—" said Hannah, which very much expressed Hermione's own feelings on the subject.

"Well," said Parvati, "has everyone already been through Dumbledore's third-floor forbidden corridor? I mean everyone in Gryffindor's been through it by now—"

"Hold *on!*" Hermione said desperately. "I don't want you doing anything *dangerous!*"

There was a pause while everyone looked at Hermione, who was suddenly realizing, much too late, why Dumbledore hadn't wanted anyone *else* to be a hero.

"I don't think you can become a heroine if you never do anything dangerous," Lavender observed reasonably.

"Besides," said Padma, a considering look on her face. "Everyone knows that nothing *really* bad ever happens in Hogwarts, right? To students, I mean, not to the Defense Professors. We've got all these ancient wards and so on."

"Um—" Hannah said again.

"Yeah," said Parvati, "the worst that can happen is that we'll lose a few dozen House points or something, and there's two of us from each House so *that'll* all come out even."

"Why, that's *brilliant,* Hermione!" said Daphne in a tone of great amazement. "The way you set it up means we can get away with *anything!* And I didn't even notice your cunning plan until now!"

"*UM*—" said Hermione, Hannah, and Susan.

"Right!" said Parvati. "So now it's time for us to become real heroines. We'll come for the darkness—"

"And make *it* face *us* —" said Lavender.

"And teach it to be afraid," Tracey Davis said grimly.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-ONE

SELF-ACTUALIZATION, PART VI

"Well," Daphne whispered, keeping her voice as low as she could, "at least now I don't feel like the only sane person in Hogwarts any more."

"Because now you've got the rest of us as friends?" whispered Lavender Brown, who was tiptoeing along at her left side.

"I don't think that's what she means," General Granger murmured from Lavender's own left.

They crept slowly and carefully through the corridors of Hogwarts, all eight of them keeping both ears peeled for the slightest sound of Trouble, just like it was a battle and they were looking for enemy soldiers to ambush; only in this case they were looking for bullies to Vanquish and victims to Rescue in the span between the end of breakfast-time and when Lavender and Parvati had to get to their Herbology class.

Lavender had argued that if one first-year girl could take down three older bullies, then eight first-year girls ought to be able to outfight twenty-four older bullies because of Multiplication.

Judging by her frantic spluttering and waving of hands, General Granger hadn't found this convincing.

Padma had stayed silent for a bit during the ensuing argument, and then observed thoughtfully that even in Hogwarts, beating up first-year girls probably wouldn't be good for your reputation as a bully.

Parvati had straightened up at this, exclaiming that this meant they were the *only ones* who could do something about Hogwarts's bully

problem, which made it *really truly* heroinic. Plus the *whole reason* their parents had moved to Britain was so that the two of them could attend the world's only magical school with a 0% fatality rate, and what was the point if they didn't take advantage and try a few things?

To which General Granger had responded that Parvati didn't understand the point of a perfect safety record *at all*—

Lavender had said that if they were *really* all friends together and not Hermione's followers like Professor Quirrell thought, then they should vote on things like this.

Daphne had known that hers would be the deciding vote after Hermione and Susan and Hannah voted no. And so Daphne had considered it carefully after her first flush of enthusiasm wore off. She *was* a Slytherin, after all, and that meant it was *her* responsibility to keep a watchful eye on their own interests while they were all running around trying to help people—her job to figure out how risky it really was, and whether it would be worth it for *them*, just like Mother would have done in her place. Always looking out for yourself and your friends like that, was what real Slytherining was all about...

Hannah Abbott, the nervous little Hufflepuff girl, had in a small trembling voice said "Yes."

And now Daphne and Susan and Hermione *had* to stay with the other five, they couldn't *possibly* let the others go off on their own. Because no Gryffindor would ever live down hurting the last surviving child of the Bones family, and no Slytherin would dare assault a daughter of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Greengrass. (Daphne *hoped* so, anyway.) And General Granger who'd started the whole thing... you didn't even have to ask.

The corridors of Hogwarts passed them by one after another, their tense hands never straying far from their wands, as stone and wood and Everburning Torches came into vision and then moved past. At one point they heard footsteps and drew in their breath, hands almost dropping to their wands, but it was just a lone older Ravenclaw who looked at them curiously before sniffing and dropping his head back to his book as he walked on.

The heroines crept past solemn oaken panels carved with gilded fres-

cos, and came to a dead end leading into a boys' bathroom, and turned around, and wandered *back* through the solemn oaken panels carved with gilded frescos, and then turned through dusty old brick corridors grouted with worn cement, which sort of led them in a circle actually, so they consulted a portrait and then went down a *different* dusty old brick corridor instead, that took them to a brief rise of marble stairs that should've put them on the third-and-a-halfth floor if it'd been anywhere but Hogwarts, and then it was back to tiled stone pavement again, and skylights that let shafts of sunlight pour down even though they were nowhere near the roof, and after they'd followed that passageway around a few corners it took them to another boys' bathroom, clearly marked with a plaque showing the silhouette of a robed figure whizzing into a toilet.

The eight of them stood before the closed door and stared with a certain amount of weariness.

"I'm bored," said Lavender.

Padma made a show of taking a pocketwatch out of her robes and looking at it. "Sixteen minutes and thirty seconds," she said. "A new record for the longest attention span in Gryffindor."

"*I* don't think this is going to work either," said Susan. "And I'm a *Hufflepuff*."

"Y'know," Lavender said thoughtfully, "I wonder if maybe what *really* makes someone a hero, is that when they try something like this, something interesting *actually happens*."

"I bet you're right," said Tracey. "I bet if we had *Harry Potter* with us, we'd run into three bullies and a hidden room full of treasure in the first five minutes. I bet that all General Chaos has to do is go to the bathroom and he, like, finds Slytherin's Chamber of Secrets or something—"

Daphne couldn't quite let that one go past. "You think Lord Slytherin would've put the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets in a *bathroom*—"

"What I'm *saying*," said Susan, as Tracey was opening her mouth to reply, "is that we've got no way of actually *finding* any bullies. I mean, all *they've* got to do is find a Hufflepuff somewhere, but we've got to run across them at exactly the right *time*, d'you see? Which is a *very*

good problem because if we *did* find them we'd all get squished like bugs. Can't we just do the forbidden third-floor corridor like we're *supposed* to?"

Lavender snorted scornfully. "You don't become a *real* heroine just by doing the forbidden things the Headmaster *tells* you not to do!"

(Daphne's mind tried to wrap around this statement as she silently thanked the Sorting Hat for not putting her anywhere near Gryffindor.)

"Come to think..." Parvati said slowly, "I mean, what're the odds that Harry Potter would run across those five bullies on his *first morning* of school? He must've had *some* way of finding them."

Daphne happened to be standing where looking at Parvati let her see Hermione, so she noticed the Ravenclaw girl's expression change—and then she realized that the Sunshine General had *also* found some bullies just recently—

"Oh!" said Padma in a tone of sudden realization. "Of course! He got told by the ghost of Salazar Slytherin!"

"*What?*" said Daphne at the same time as several other people.

"That's who the ghost was that scared me, I'm pretty sure," Padma explained. "I mean I only figured it out afterward, but... yeah. Salazar Slytherin's ghost doesn't like it when Slytherins bully people, he thinks it shames his name, and the ghost is still keyed into the Hogwarts wards so he knows everything that happens, I bet."

Daphne's mouth was hanging open; and she saw that Hannah had put a hand to her forehead and was leaning against the stone walls, while Tracey's eyes were blazing like little brown stars.

Salazar Slytherin's ghost?

Had leagued himself with *Harry Potter?*

And had sent *Hermione Granger* to stop Derrick's crew?

She would have paid a hundred Galleons to be there when Draco Malfoy got told about this.

Although considering how fast rumors spread through Hogwarts, now that Padma had spilled the beans, Millicent had probably told him thirty minutes ago...

In fact... now that Daphne *thought* about it...

"So," said Parvati. "We've got to ask the Boy-Who-Lived where to find Salazar Slytherin's ghost? Wow, I guess if I'm saying stuff like that out loud, I might actually be turning into a heroine—"

"Yes!" said Lavender. "We've got to ask the Boy-Who-Lived where to find Salazar Slytherin's ghost!"

"We've got to ask... the Boy-Who-Lived... where to find Salazar Slytherin's ghost..." repeated Hannah in a nervous voice, like she was forcing herself to say it.

"And if *that* doesn't work," shouted Tracey, "we'll stun Harry Potter, tie him up and bring him *with* us!"

⁂

It said something, Hermione Granger thought, and it was something rather sad—as the eight of them strolled back through the maze of twisty little passages that was Hogwarts, their time before the next class having run out without finding any bullies—that she genuinely didn't know whether Harry Potter had been led around by the ghost of Salazar Slytherin or a phoenix or *what.* And whatever Harry had done, she hoped it *didn't* work for them. And most of all she hoped that the others didn't vote for Tracey's idea of stunning Harry Potter and carting his unconscious body around with them to attract Adventures. That couldn't possibly work in real life, or, if it did, she was giving up.

Hermione looked from witch to witch, Tracey chatting with Lavender, and the others making occasional remarks; and her gaze caught on a girl who was subdued and quiet, the one person whose thoughts right now she couldn't guess at all.

"Hannah?" she said to the girl walking alongside her. Hermione tried to make her voice as gentle as she could. "You don't have to answer, but is it okay if I ask why you voted yes on fighting bullies?"

Hermione had thought she'd made her voice soft, but everyone stopped walking, and Lavender and Tracey halted their conversation and looked at them.

Hannah's cheeks were already reddening, and just as Hannah opened her mouth—

"It's 'cause she's got more courage than *you* think, obviously," said Lavender.

Hannah paused with her mouth open.

She closed her mouth.

She swallowed, hard and visibly, while her cheeks reddened even further.

Then Hannah took a deep breath, and said, in a small voice, "There's a boy I like."

The Hufflepuff girl flinched as she said it, and her head darted around nervously to look at everyone looking at her, while the pause and silence stretched.

"Um, okay?" Susan said eventually.

"I've got *five* boys I like," said Lavender.

"Padma and I knew we'd both like the same boys," said Parvati, "so we made a list and flipped a Knut to see who got to pick first."

"I know who *I'm* destined to marry," said Tracey. "I don't care what the world says, he's meant to be mine!"

This made all the other girls look expectantly at Hermione, whose brain had gone ahead and flushed Tracey's last statement entirely so it could focus on just on the first thing Hannah had said.

"Um," said Hermione. She carefully continued keeping her voice gentle. "Hannah, the reason why you joined the Society for Promotion of Heroic Equality for Witches was that there's a boy who might like you more if you become a hero?"

The Hufflepuff girl nodded again, her cheeks reddening even further while she stared down at her own reflection in her black-polished shoes.

"She likes Neville Longbottom, actually," Daphne said. The Slytherin gave a woeful sigh. "And unfortunately for her, he's going to marry someone else. It's very tragic."

This produced a high-pitched *eeping* sound from Hannah as she went on staring at her feet.

"Wait what?" said Lavender. "Neville's going to marry someone else? How do you know about this? *Who?*"

Daphne just shook her head sadly with a downcast expression.

"*Excuse me*," said Hermione, and then when the others looked at her again, "Ah..." while she tried to organize her thoughts. "I mean, um... Hannah... trying to become a hero so that a boy will like you isn't very *feminist*."

"It's pronounced *feminine* actually," said Padma.

"And why're you calling Hannah unfeminine?" said Susan. "There's nothing unfeminine about wanting to impress a boy."

"Besides," said Parvati, sounding puzzled, "isn't the whole point that we're trying to be heroes even though that isn't feminine?"

The ensuing discussion would not be remembered by Hermione Granger as one of her most successful forays into the realms of political education. She tried to explain, and then after the resulting argument tried to explain again, while the other seven girls looked at her more and more skeptically. Afterward Daphne declared in the imperious tones of the future Lady Greengrass that if this feminism business meant girls weren't allowed to pursue boys in whichever way they pleased, then feminism could stay in the Muggle lands where it belonged. Lavender suggested that maybe witchism could say that witches got to do anything they wanted, which sounded like more fun than feminism. And finally Padma closed off further discussion by observing wearily that she didn't see much point to going on arguing, since SPHEW wasn't *about* anything to do with feminism in the first place, it was just about more girls becoming heroes.

Hermione had given up at that point.

*

As their Charms session that day ended and the first-year Ravenclaws began shuffling out of the class, Hermione was already wincing to herself. They'd made it to class just barely before the opening gong, they'd had to run right over to their desks and sit down, so there hadn't been time for the awful thing to happen *yet;* but that just meant that Hermione got to look forward to the coming disaster for the *whole class.*

Sure enough, after Professor Flitwick squeaked his dismissal and everyone rose from their chairs, Harry began walking toward her; and for her own part Hermione shoved her book into her mokeskin pouch and very quickly walked over to the door and threw it open and headed into the corridors, and of course Harry followed her with a surprised look because they had a library session scheduled—

"Hermione?" Harry said as he closed the door behind him. "What's wrong?"

The door flew open behind Harry not a moment after he closed it, almost hitting Harry as he stepped out of the way, and Padma Patil stepped out of the classroom with a dreadful look of determination upon her face.

"Excuse me, Mr. Potter," came the awful words, the young girl's high voice resounding through the corridor like the gloomy bells of doom, "can I ask you for help with something?"

Harry's eyebrows drew up, and he said, "You can *ask,* of course."

"Can you tell us how to talk to Salazar Slytherin's ghost? We want him to tell us where to find bullies, like he tells you."

There was a little bit of silence in the corridor outside the classroom.

The door opened again, and Su peered out with an inquiring look—

"Well, we've got to get to the library," Harry said quite casually, his face looking relaxed, "would you mind following us?" and began to walk off in the direction that led to the library on odd-numbered days of the month, and Su made like she was going to follow but Harry's face turned toward her for a moment.

It wasn't until Harry had rounded a corner that he drew his wand, said in a low precise voice "*Quietus*" and then turned to Padma and said, "An interesting guess, Miss Patil."

Padma looked rather smug, then; and said, "I *should've* figured it out earlier, really. There was that *hiss* in the ghost's voice, I should've thought Parselmouth right away, even before he started talking about Godric Gryffindor."

Harry's face didn't change. "May I ask, Miss Patil, whether you've shared this thought with—"

"She said it in front of everyone in SPHEW," Hermione said.

Harry's eyes had that look they had when he was very rapidly calculating something, and then he said, "Hermione, what's the chance that—"

"She said it in front of Lavender *and* Tracey."

"Um," said Padma. "Should I not've done that?"

"Wait here," growled Mr. Goyle, and went around the corner; and there was the sound of him knocking on Draco Malfoy's private room.

There was a bit of a queasy feeling in Tracey's stomach, and she reminded herself again that since Padma had spilled the beans *someone* was bound to tell Draco Malfoy, and it might as well be *her*, and it wasn't as if she *owed* Harry Potter anything, and a Slytherin had to do what was necessary to achieve her Ambitions.

She'd been collecting Ambitions ever since Professor Quirrell told her off, and so far she'd decided that she wanted to own her own Nimbus 2000 broomstick, become super famous, marry Harry Potter, eat Chocolate Frogs for breakfast every day, and defeat at least *three* Dark Lords just to show Professor Quirrell who was ordinary.

"Mr. Malfoy will see you," said the low, menacing voice of Mr. Goyle as he returned. "And you'd better hope he doesn't think you're wasting his time." The boy loomed at her briefly, and then stepped aside.

Tracey added having her own servants to her list of Ambitions, and entered.

The Malfoy private bedroom looked just like Daphne's. She'd been privately hoping for diamond chandeliers or golden frescos on the walls—she'd never have said it in front of Daphne, but the House of Malfoy *was* a step up from Greengrass. But it was just a small bedroom like Daphne's, and the only difference was that Malfoy's stuff was decorated in silver snakes instead of emerald plants.

As she stepped through the doorway, Draco Malfoy—who was perfectly groomed even inside his own bedroom—rose up from his desk chair to greet her with a small friendly bow, wearing a charming smile

just like she was someone who *mattered,* which made Tracey so flustered that she forgot everything she'd rehearsed inside her head and just blurted out, "I've got something to tell you!"

"Yes, Gregory said so," Draco Malfoy said smoothly. "Please, Miss Davis, sit down." He gestured to *his own desk chair*, even as he sat down on his bed.

She felt somewhat lightheaded as she carefully sat herself down in Malfoy's own chair, her fingers unthinkingly fiddling with how her dress robes fell across her knees, trying to make them look as elegant and uncreased as Draco Malfoy's—

"So, Miss Davis," said Draco Malfoy. "What did you want to tell me?"

Tracey hesitated, and then when Malfoy's face started to look a bit impatient, just stammered it all out, everything Padma had said about Salazar Slytherin's ghost sending Harry Potter to stop bullies and also what Daphne had told her about Hermione Granger being in on it—

Draco Malfoy's expression didn't change at all as she spoke, not even in the slightest, and it dawned on Tracey with a sickening lurch in her stomach.

"You don't *believe* me!" she said.

There was a slight pause.

"Well," said Draco Malfoy, with a smile that wasn't quite as charming as his last one, "I *do* believe that's what Padma said and what Daphne said, so thank you anyway, Miss Davis." The boy rose from where he'd been sitting on his bed, and Tracey, not even thinking, rose from the chair.

As he was escorting her to the door, just as he was about to turn the knob, it occurred to Tracey that—"You didn't ask what I wanted for the information," she said.

Draco Malfoy gave her some kind of look, she didn't quite know what it was supposed to mean, and he didn't say anything.

"Well, anyway," Tracey said, making an on-the-spot change to her previous Plans, "I *don't* want anything for the information, I was just being friendly."

A brief look of surprise crossed Draco Malfoy's face for just an instant before his expression flattened again and he said, "It's not that easy to become friends with a Malfoy, Miss Davis."

Tracey smiled, and meant it. "Well, I'll just go on being friendly, then," she said, and left the room with a skip in her step, feeling like a real Slytherin for maybe the first time in her life, and having just decided that Draco Malfoy would be one of her husbands too.

⁂

After the girl was gone, Gregory came in, shut the door again and said, "Are you alright, Mr. Malfoy?"

Draco said nothing to his servant and friend. His eyes gazed off into nowhere, like he was trying to stare through the wall of his bedroom, through the Hogwarts lake that surrounded the Slytherin dungeons, through Earth's crust and atmosphere and the interstellar dust of the Milky Way, into the utterly empty and lightless void between galaxies which no wizard and no scientist had ever seen.

"Mr. Malfoy?" Gregory said, starting to sound a little worried.

"I can't believe I believed every word of that," said Draco.

⁂

Daphne finished her final inch of Transfiguration and looked up across the Slytherin common room, at where Millicent Bulstrode was still working on her own homework. It was time to come to a Decision.

If SPHEW did go around trying to stun bullies, the bullies wouldn't like it, that was certain. And they'd try to do something unpleasant about it, which was also certain. On the other hand, if the bullies got really nasty then Hermione could ask Harry Potter for help, or they could pool their combined Quirrell points and ask the Defense Professor for a favor... No, the thing that Daphne was *really* worried about was if this business got them in bad with Professor Snape. You didn't want to *ever* end up on the wrong side of Professor Snape.

But since the day she'd challenged Neville to a Most Ancient Duel, she'd noticed people looking at her differently. Even the Slytherins who'd made fun of her were looking at her differently. It was dawning on Daphne that being the daughter of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Greengrass brought in a *lot* more respect if you were a beautiful *heroine* born to a Most Ancient House, and not just a pretty noble girl. It was the difference between having your role played by the lead actress and having your role played by a two-Galleon extra with a screechy laugh.

Fighting bullies might not be the *best* way to become a heroine. But Father had once told her that the trouble with passing up opportunities was that it was habit-forming. If you told yourself you were waiting for a better opportunity next time, why, next time you'd probably tell yourself the same thing. Father had said that most people spent their whole *lives* waiting for an opportunity that was good enough, and then they died. Father had said that while seizing opportunities *would* mean that all sorts of things went wrong, it wasn't nearly as bad as being a hopeless lump. Father had said that *after* she got into the habit of seizing opportunities, *then* it was time to start being picky about them.

On the other hand, Mother had warned her not to take all of Father's advice, and said that Daphne wasn't allowed to ask about Father's sixth year in Hogwarts until she was at least thirty years old.

Still (her Mother had confessed with a sigh) in the end Father *had* gotten Mother to marry him and successfully plotted his way into a Most Ancient House, so there *was* that.

Millicent Bulstrode finished her homework and began putting her things away.

Daphne stood up from her desk, and walked over.

Millicent swung out her legs from the table and stood up, slinging her bookbag over one shoulder, then looked over at where Daphne was approaching, the girl's expression puzzled.

"Hey, Millicent," Daphne said as she drew near, making her voice low and excited, "guess what I figured out today?"

"The thing about Salazar Slytherin's ghost helping Granger?" said Millicent. "I already heard about that—"

"No," Daphne said in a hushed whisper, "this is even *better.*"

"Really?" Millicent said, in an equally low, equally excited voice. "What is it?"

Daphne looked around conspiratorially. "Come to my room and I'll tell you."

They went off toward the stairs that led downward, the private rooms were even lower in the lake than the seventh-year dorms...

Soon enough Daphne was sitting in her comfy desk-chair and Millicent had bounced over to the edge of her bed.

"*Quietus,*" said Daphne, when they were both seated; and then instead of putting her wand away inside her robes, Daphne just let her hand fall naturally down to her side, still holding the wand, just in case.

"All *right!*" said Millicent. "What *is* it?"

"You know what I figured out?" said Daphne. "I figured out that you get the gossip *so* fast, you know about things *before they actually happen*."

Daphne had half-expected Millicent to turn white and fall over, and she didn't really, but the girl did flinch pretty hard before she started stammering denials.

"Don't worry," said Daphne with her sweetest smile, "I won't tell anyone else you're a seer. I mean, we're friends, right?"

Rianne Felthorne, seventh-year of Slytherin, was working diligently on yet another two-foot essay (she was taking everything except Divination and Muggle Studies and her N.E.W.T. year seemed to consist *entirely* of homework) when her Head of House strode up to the table she was working at and barked "You will come with me, Miss Felthorne!" and walked away even as she frantically began putting away her parchment and book and quill.

When she caught up with Professor Snape, he was waiting just outside the room and gazing at her with half-lidded eyes that seemed far too intense; and before she could ask what this was about he spun without a

word and stalked off through the hallways, so that she had to scramble to keep up.

Their walk took them down a flight of stairs, and then another, below what she'd thought was the lowest level of the Slytherin dungeons. And the corridors began to look older in their appearance, the architecture reverting back in time by centuries into roughened stone held together by crude-looking mortar. She began to wonder if Professor Snape was taking her to the *real* dungeons that she'd heard rumors of, the true dungeons of Hogwarts that had been sealed off to all but faculty; and if maybe Professor Snape did terrible things down there to innocent helpless young girls but that was probably just wishful thinking on her part.

They went down another flight of stairs, and came out into a room that was no room at all, but an empty rock cavern with a single door, pierced by many dark openings and lit by a single torch of ancient style that fired as they entered.

Professor Snape took out his wand, then, and began to cast Charm after Charm, she lost track of how many; and when the Potions Master was done he turned back toward her, locked his intense eyes on hers, and said in a level voice unlike his usual drawl, "You will say nothing to anyone of this matter, Miss Felthorne, nothing now or ever. If that is acceptable to you, nod. If not, we will turn and go."

She nodded, frightened and with a strange hope dawning in her heart (well, not exactly her heart).

"The task I have for you is very simple, Miss Felthorne," said Professor Snape's toneless voice, "and your extremely generous pay of fifty Galleons is merely to compensate you for being Memory-Charmed afterward."

She drew an involuntary breath. Her family might be rich but they had other daughters and kept her on a tight leash and it was certainly a lot of money for *her*.

Then her ears caught up with the words *Memory-Charmed* and for a moment she felt outraged, there was no point if she couldn't keep the memories, what sort of girl did Professor Snape think she *was?*

"You surely know," said Severus Snape, "of Miss Hermione Granger, the Sunshine General?"

"*What?*" said Rianne Felthorne in sudden horror and disgust. "She's in her *first year! Ew!*"

CHAPTER SEVENTY-TWO

SELF-ACTUALIZATION, PART VII: PLAUSIBLE DENIABILITY

The winter Sun had well set by the time dinner ended, and so it was amid the peaceful light of stars twinkling down from the enchanted ceiling of the Great Hall that Hermione left for the Ravenclaw Tower alongside her study partner Harry Potter, who lately seemed to have a *ridiculous* amount of time for studying. She hadn't the faintest idea of when Harry was doing his actual homework, except that it was getting done, maybe by house elves while he slept.

Nearly every single pair of eyes in the whole Hall lay on them as they passed through the mighty doors of the dining-room, which were more like siege gates of a castle than anything students ought to go through on the way back from supper.

They went out without speaking, and walked until the distant babble of student conversation had faded into silence; and then the two of them went on a little further through the stone corridors before Hermione finally spoke.

"Why'd you do that, Harry?"

"Do what?" said the Boy-Who-Lived in an abstracted tone, as if his mind were quite elsewhere, thinking about vastly more important things.

"I mean, why didn't you just *tell* them no?"

"Well," Harry said, as their shoes pattered across the tiles, "I can't just go around saying 'no' every time someone asks me about something I

haven't done. I mean, suppose someone asks me, 'Harry, did you pull the prank with the invisible paint?' and I say 'No' and then they say 'Harry, do you know who messed with the Gryffindor Seeker's broomstick?' and I say 'I refuse to answer that question.' It's sort of a giveaway."

"And *that's* why," Hermione said carefully, "you told everyone..." She concentrated, rembering the exact words. "That if hypothetically there *was* a conspiracy, you could not confirm or deny that the true master of the conspiracy was Salazar Slytherin's ghost, and in fact you wouldn't even be able to admit the conspiracy existed so people ought to stop asking you questions about it."

"Yep," said Harry Potter, smiling slightly. "That'll teach them to take hypothetical scenarios too seriously."

"And you told *me* not to answer anything—"

"They might not *believe* you, if you deny it," said Harry. "So it's better to say nothing, unless you want them to think you're a liar."

"But—" Hermione said helplessly. "But—but now people think I'm *doing* things for *Salazar Slytherin!*" The way the Gryffindors had been looking at her—the way the *Slytherins* had been looking at her—

"It goes along with being a hero," Harry said. "Have you seen what the *Quibbler* says about *me*?"

For a brief second Hermione imagined her parents reading a newspaper article about her, and instead of the story being about her winning a nationwide spelling bee or any of the other ways she'd imagined getting into the papers, the headline said "HERMIONE GRANGER GETS DRACO MALFOY PREGNANT".

It was enough to make you think twice about the whole heroine business.

Harry's voice turned a bit more formal. "Speaking of which, Miss Granger, how goes your latest quest?"

"Well," said Hermione, "unless the ghost of Salazar Slytherin really *does* show up and tell us where to find bullies, I don't think we're going to have much luck." Not that she was sorry about that.

She glanced over at Harry, and saw the boy giving her a peculiarly intense look.

"You know, Hermione," the boy said quietly, as though to make sure that nobody else in the world heard, "I think you're right. I think some people get a lot more help than others in becoming heroes. And *I* don't think that's fair, either."

And Harry grabbed at her witch's robes where they lay over her arm, and hustled her into a side-hall of the corridor they were walking through, her mouth gaping open in surprise even as Harry's wand came into his hand, they rounded a curve of the side-hall and it was so narrow that it was almost pushing her and Harry into each other, even as Harry pointed to the way they'd come and softly said "*Quietus*", then a moment later, in the other direction, "*Quietus*" again.

The boy looked searchingly around them, not just to every side, but even upward toward the ceiling and down toward the floor.

And then Harry stuck a hand in his pouch and said, "Invisibility cloak."

"*Gleep?*" said Hermione.

Harry was already drawing out folds of shimmering black fabric from the mokeskin device. "Don't worry," the boy said with a small grin, "they're so rare that nobody bothered to make a school rule against them..."

And then Harry held out the dark velvet mesh to her, and said, his voice strangely formal, "I do not give you, but loan you, my cloak, unto Hermione Jean Granger. Protect her well."

She stared at the shimmering velvet of the cloak, cloth that swallowed all the light that fell on it except what glinted from small strange reflections, fabric so perfectly black it should've shown dust or lint or *something* but it didn't, the longer you looked the more you felt like what you were seeing wasn't really there at all, but then you blinked again and it was just a black cloak.

"Take it, Hermione."

Hardly even thinking, Hermione stretched out her hand to grasp the fabric; and then just as her brain woke up and she started to pull her hand back, Harry let go of the cloak and it started to fall and she grabbed at it without thinking. And the instant her fingers touched and held the cloak she felt an intangible jolt run through her like picking up

her wand for the first time; and it was like she heard a song being sung, ever so faintly, in the back of her mind.

"That's one of my quest items, Hermione," Harry said softly. "It belonged to my father, and it's not something I can replace, if it's lost. Don't loan it to anyone else, don't show it to anyone, don't tell anyone it exists... but if you want to borrow it for a while, just come to me and ask."

Hermione finally tore her eyes loose from the depthless black folds and stared back up at Harry.

"I can't—"

"You certainly can," Harry said. "Because there's nothing even the tiniest bit fair about my finding this gift-wrapped in a box next to my bed one morning, and you... not." Harry paused thoughtfully. "Unless you *did* get your own invisibility cloak, in which case never mind."

Then the implications of *invisibility cloak* finally dawned on her, and she pointed a shocked finger at Harry, though they were close enough together that she couldn't quite straighten her arm properly, and her voice rose with considerable indignation as she said, "So *that's* how you disappeared from the Potions closet! And the time when—" and then she trailed off, because even *with* an invisibility cloak she still couldn't see how Harry had...

Harry buffed his fingernails on his robes with artful nonchalance, and said, "Well, you knew there had to be *some* trick to it, right? And now the heroine will mysteriously know where and when to find bullies—just like she listened to the bullies planning it, even though nobody her age could *possibly* have turned herself invisible to spy on them."

There was a pause and a silence.

"Harry—" she said. "I'm—I'm not sure anymore that fighting bullies is such a good idea."

Harry's eyes stayed steady on hers. "Because the other girls might get hurt?"

She nodded, just nodded.

"That's *their* choice, Hermione, just like it's yours. *I* decided not to do the obvious stupid thing that everyone does in books, try to keep you safe and protected and helpless, and have you get really angry at me,

and push me away while you go off on your own and get into even more trouble, and then heroically pull through it successfully, after which I'd finally have my epiphany and realize that blah blah blah etcetera. I know how that part of my life story goes, so I'm just skipping over it. If I can predict what I'm going to think later, I might as well go ahead and think it now. Anyway, my point is, you shouldn't smother *your* friends to keep them safe, either. Just tell them up front it's predictably going to go horribly wrong, and if they still want to be heroines after that, fine."

It was at times like this that Hermione wondered if she was *ever* going to get used to the way Harry thought. "Harry, I really," her voice stuck for a second, "really, *really* don't want them getting hurt! Especially because of something I started!"

"Hermione," Harry said seriously, "I'm pretty sure you did the right thing. I don't see what could realistically happen to them that would be *worse* for them, in the long run, than *not trying*."

"What if they get *badly* hurt?" Hermione said. Her voice felt blocked in her throat; she remembered Captain Ernie saying how Harry had just stared straight into the eyes of a bully as the bully bent his finger back, before Professor Sprout had arrived to save him; and there was another thought that came after that, about Hannah and her delicate hands with the fingernails that she carefully painted in Hufflepuff yellow every morning, but that wasn't allowed to be imagined. "And then—they'll never do anything courageous, ever again—"

"I don't think it works like that," Harry said steadily. "Even if it all goes mind-bogglingly wrong, I don't think it works like that inside a human mind. The important thing is believing about yourself that you're someone who can break your boundaries. Trying and getting hurt can't possibly be worse for you than being... *stuck*."

"What if you're *wrong*, Harry?"

Harry paused for a moment, and then shrugged a little sadly, and said, "What if I'm right?"

Hermione looked back at the black mesh running over her hand. From the inside the cloak felt strangely soft and yet firm against her palm, as if it was trying to give her hand a reassuring hug.

Then she lifted her arm back up, holding the cloak back to Harry.

Harry didn't move to take it.

"I—" said Hermione. "I mean, thank you, thank you a lot, but I'm still thinking about it, so you can take it back for now. And... Harry, I don't think it's right to *spy* on people—"

"Not even on known bullies, to rescue their victims?" Harry said. "*I've* never been bullied, but I've been through a realistic simulation, and it didn't feel very pleasant. Have you ever been bullied, Hermione?"

"No," she said in a quiet voice, and went on holding out Harry's invisibility cloak to him.

Finally Harry took back his cloak—she felt a small twitch of loss as the inaudible song vanished from the back of her mind—and started to stuff the black material back into his pouch.

As the pouch ate the last of the fabric, Harry turned from her, to break the Quieting Barrier—

"And, um," Hermione said. "That's not *the* Cloak of Invisibility, is it? The one we read about in the library on page eighteen of Paula Vieira's translation of Gottschalk's *An Illustrated Scroll of Lost Devices*?"

Harry turned his head back, grinning slightly, and said in exactly the same tone of voice he'd used earlier with the other students at dinner, "I cannot confirm or deny that I possess magical artifacts of incredible power."

When Hermione climbed into bed that night she was still trying to decide. Her life had been simpler at dinnertime, back when there hadn't *been* any practical way for them to find bullies; and now she had to choose again; not for herself, this time, but for her friends. In her mind's eye she kept seeing Dumbledore's lined face and the pain it hadn't quite hidden, and in her mind's ears she kept hearing Harry's voice saying 'That's their choice, Hermione, just like it's yours.'

And her hand kept remembering the sensation of the cloak against her fingers, replaying it over and over in her mind. There was a power to the feeling that compelled her thoughts to return to it, and to the song

she'd heard/hadn't heard in a part of her mind and magic which now lay silent once more.

Harry had spoken to the cloak like it was a *person*, telling it to take good care of her. Harry had said the cloak had belonged to his father, that he couldn't replace it if it was lost...

But... Harry wouldn't *really* do that, would he?

Just *hand* her one of the three Deathly Hallows created centuries before Hogwarts?

She could say that she felt flattered, but this went *way* beyond feeling flattered, into making her wonder just what she was to Harry, exactly.

Maybe Harry was the sort of person who went around loaning ancient lost magical artifacts to *anyone* he considered a friend, but—

But when she thought about *which* part of his life Harry had said he'd skipped over, the part where he tried to keep her safe and protected...

Hermione stared up at the ceiling of the Ravenclaw dorm. Somewhere beyond her bed, Mandy and Su were talking. She'd turned up her Quieting Charm to where she couldn't hear the exact words, but could still hear their faint murmur; there was something comforting about sleeping in a dorm with the other girls. Harry kept his own Quieter turned up all the way, she knew.

She was starting to wonder if maybe Harry actually *did*, well...

You know...

Like her.

It took Hermione Granger a long time to fall asleep that night.

And when she woke up the next morning there was a small slip of parchment peeking out from under her pillow which said *At half-past ten you will find a bully in the fourth passageway to the left of the hall leaving the Potions classroom—S.*

*
*

When Hermione entered the Great Hall that morning, her stomach was filled with flying butterflies the size of Hippogriffs; even as she approached the Ravenclaw breakfast table she still hadn't decided what to *do*.

There was an empty place next to Padma, she saw. That would be where to sit down, if she was going to tell Padma and then ask Padma to tell Daphne and Tracey.

Hermione walked toward the empty place next to Padma.

There were words waiting in her throat, *Padma, I got a mysterious message—*

And she could feel a huge brick wall inside her, stopping the words from coming out. She'd be putting Hannah and Susan and Daphne *in danger*. Taking them and leading them by the hand straight into trouble. That was Wrong.

Or she could just go try to handle the bully herself, without telling her friends anything, and that, quite obviously, was also Wrong.

Hermione knew she was being faced with a Moral Dilemma, just like all those wizards and witches she'd read about in stories. Only in stories people always got a *right* choice and a wrong choice, not two wrong ones, which seemed a bit unfair. But she had the sense, somehow—maybe it came from the way Harry always talked about how the history books would see them—that she was faced with a Heroic Decision, and that her whole life might end up going one way or another, depending on what she chose right now, *this morning*.

Hermione sat down at the table without looking to either side, just gazing at the plate and silverware like they might have answers hidden inside, thinking as hard as she ever had, and a few seconds later she heard Padma's voice whispering almost in her ear, "Daphne says she knows where a bully's going to be at ten-thirty today."

Doomed.

They were all doomed, in Susan Bones's opinion.

Auntie sometimes told stories which started out like this, people doing something they *knew* was stupid, and the stories usually ended with someone being *doomed* all over the floor and all over the walls and getting on Auntie's shoes.

"Hey, Padma," muttered Parvati, her voice just barely audible over the soft impacts of eight girls tiptoeing through the corridor leading to the Potions classroom, "d'you know why Hermione's been sighing all morning—"

"No talking!" hissed Lavender, the harsh whisper sounding much louder than Parvati's mutter. "You never know when Evil might be listening!"

"Shhh!" said three other girls even more loudly.

Utterly, totally, quite extremely doomed.

As they approached the fourth passageway to the left of the Potions classroom, where Daphne's mysterious informant had said the bullying would take place, the eight of them moved slower, the sound of their feet got softer, and finally General Granger made the gesture that meant *Halt, I'll look ahead.*

Lavender raised a hand, then, and when Hermione turned to look at her, Lavender, looking puzzled, pointed straight down the corridor, gestured to herself, and then tried to sign something else that Susan didn't understand—

General Granger shook her head, and once again, this time with slower, more exaggerated movements, made the sign for *Halt, I'll look ahead.*

Lavender, looking even more puzzled, pointed back the way they'd come, and made a bouncing gesture with her other hand.

Now everyone else was looking even more confused than Lavender, and Susan thought with some acerbity that evidently one hour of practice done two days ago wasn't enough to remember a new set of code signals.

Hermione pointed at Lavender, then at the floor beneath Lavender's feet, the expression on her face making it very clear that the intended meaning was *You. Stay. Here.*

Lavender nodded.

Doom doom doom, went the words of the Chaos Legion's marching song through Susan's mind, *doom doom doom doom doom doom...*

Hermione reached into her robes, and drew out a little rod with a mirror on the end of it and an eyepiece. Very very softly indeed, the

Ravenclaw girl crept up to the wall, right next to where the passageway opened off the corridor, and peeked just the tip of the eyepiece around the corner.

Then a little more.

Then a little more.

Then General Granger cautiously stuck her head around the side.

General Granger turned back to them, nodded, and made the hand gesture for *follow me*.

Susan felt a little better as she crept forward. The part of the Plan which called for them to arrive thirty minutes before the bully had, apparently, actually worked. Maybe they were only *slightly* doomed...?

⁂

At ten-twenty-nine, almost on the dot, the bully showed up. If anyone had been present to hear—though the corridor was apparently empty—they would have heard his shoes clicking solidly through the main corridor, entering the passageway, walking toward where the passageway turned its first corner, turning that corner, and then stopping in some surprise upon seeing that the passageway now terminated in a solid brick wall where no wall had been before.

Then the bully shrugged and turned away, as he leaned back to watch the main passage from just around the corner.

It *was* the castle Hogwarts, after all.

Behind the hastily Transfigured thin panels they'd assembled into the outward appearance of a brick wall, the girls waited; not speaking, not moving, hardly even breathing, but watching through the eyeholes they'd left themselves.

As Susan's gaze took in the bully, she could feel the tightening of her chest all the way into her toes. The boy looked to be in his seventh-year if not *older*, and his robes were trimmed in green instead of the red they'd been hoping for, and he had *muscles*, and after staring for a bit longer, Susan realized his stance had the balance that meant that he *dueled*.

Then they all heard the sound of more feet approaching from the corridor. The fourth-year Gryffindors and Slytherins had just been let out of Potions class.

The footsteps pattered past, and diminished and faded, and the bully didn't do anything. For a moment Susan felt an instant of relief—

Then another, smaller group of footsteps approached.

The bully still didn't do anything, as the footsteps went past.

That happened a few more times.

And then, as there approached the faintly audible sound of one last set of footsteps, the seven girls heard the bully's voice saying, clear and cold and quiet, "*Protego*".

Someone *did* gasp then, though fortunately very very quietly. If they couldn't get in even a single shot—

The bullies were learning *already*, Susan realized, she hadn't expected SPHEW to be able to do this very often before the bullies caught on—but—Hermione had already defeated three bullies—and the school had been buzzing with speculation about Salazar Slytherin's ghost, yesterday—

He's expecting us!

Susan would have whispered to give up, to abort the plan, only there was no way to convey a message to—

"*Silencio*," said the bully in a soft, deliberate voice with his wand pointed toward the corridor, the blue haze of his Shielding Charm shimmering around him. "*Accio* victim."

When the fourth-year boy came into their field of vision he was dangling upside down as if an invisible hand were holding him high by one leg, his red-trimmed robes beginning to slide down his thighs to reveal the pants beneath. His mouth was opening and closing helpessly, no sound coming out.

"I suppose you're wondering what's going on," the seventh-year Slytherin said in a quiet, cold voice. "Don't worry. It's so simple even a Gryffindor could understand."

With that, the Slytherin's left hand formed a fist and drove hard into the Gryffindor's belly. The fourth-year boy's body jerked around frantically, but still no words left his mouth.

"You're my victim," said the older Slytherin. "I'm a bully. I'm going to beat you up. And we'll see if anyone stops me."

It was at that moment that Susan realized it was a trap.

And in almost the same moment, there rang out the mighty and high-pitched voice of a young girl, crying, "*Stop, evildoer! Finite Incantatem!*"

Lavender, thought Susan, agonized. The Gryffindor girl had volunteered to be a distraction, while the rest of them executed a flank attack from where the bully wouldn't expect it, that had been the plan, only now—

"In the name of Hogwarts," cried Lavender's voice, though they couldn't see her, "and in the name of heroines everywhere, I command you to let go of that EEK!"

"*Expelliarmus*," said the bully. "*Stupefy*. *Accio* stupid heroine."

When Lavender floated into their vision, dangling by one foot and unconscious, Susan blinked; the girl was dressed in a bright crimson-and-gold skirt and blouse, instead of her usual Hogwarts robes.

The bully was also giving the girl's upside-down body an odd look, and then he pointed his wand at her and said "*Finite Incantatem*," but the clothes stayed the same.

Then the bully shrugged, and, still facing in the direction of Lavender instead of the dangling fourth-year boy, drew back his fist—

"*Lagann!*" yelled five voices, and five green spirals blasted from five wands aimed through five holes in the false wall, and an instant later Hermione's voice shouted "*Stupefy!*"

Five green spirals shattered ineffectually on blue haze, and Hermione's red bolt bounced off the haze and struck the fourth-year boy, who jerked and then was still.

And the seventh-year bully turned around, smiling grimly, as the first-year girls screamed and charged.

*

Susan's eyes flew open and instantly she was rolling away from where she'd lain on the floor, her lungs still on fire and her whole body still

aching from when she'd been hit, the battle had only moved forward a few seconds from what she could see, Hannah's body falling with her arm still stretched out toward Susan, "*Glisseo!*" shouted Hermione but the older boy just slashed his wand down leaving a trail of green glow behind and Hermione's Charm visibly disrupted into a shower of blue-white sparks, then in almost the same motion the bully said "*Stupefy!*" and Hermione was blown backward and Susan summoned up all the magic she had left and shouted "*Innervate!*" at Hermione's body even as the bully turned toward her, the bully's wand pointed in her direction again and then Padma yelled "*Prismatis!*" just before the bully shouted "*Impedimenta!*", the rainbow sphere forming *around the bully* and the seventh-year Slytherin staggered as his own hex was reflected back at him, but an instant later the bully's wand swept back to tap himself and then Padma's Prismatic Sphere shattered like a blown soap bubble as the bully's wand cut through it and "*Innervate!*" yelled Parvati at Hannah's body and Tracey and Lavender screamed at the same time, "*Wingardium Leviosa!*"—

⁂

Hannah Abbott held out her wand with a hand that trembled with exhaustion, she didn't have enough magic left for even one *Innervate*, now.

The rest of the passageway was silent, scattered bodies lying across the ground, Padma and Tracey and Lavender, Hermione and Parvati in a heap against one wall, Susan standing in petrified rigor as her eyes tracked it all helplessly, even the Gryffindor boy lying sprawled and motionless (Hermione had woken him and he'd fought, but it hadn't been enough).

It had been a very short battle.

The bully was still smiling, the only signs of his exertion a wavering ripple in the blue glow surrounding him, and a few beads of sweat on his forehead.

The bully raised his arm, wiped the sweat off his forehead, and stalked toward her like a man-shaped living Lethifold.

Hannah turned and fled, spun and ran with screams kept bound in her choking throat, sprinted past the fallen paneling of the fake brick wall, ran down the passageway with all the speed she could muster, weaving as much as she could—

Just before Hannah got to the turn in the passageway, the bully's voice from behind her said "*Cluthe!*" and she got awful cramps all through her legs, she fell down and slid and hit her head against the wall, only she didn't even notice the pain of the smack as she started to scream with the twisting muscles—

The bully was still stalking toward her, Hannah saw as she turned her head; stalking toward her like a man-shaped living Lethifold, still wearing that dreadful smile.

And she rolled, despite the pain as her leg muscles knotted up around themselves, she rolled around the corner of the passageway, and screamed, "Go *away!*"

"I think not," said the bully, his voice deep and scary like that of a grown man, sounding very close at hand now.

The bully walked around the corner and Daphne Greengrass stabbed her Most Ancient Blade directly into his groin.

There was a flash that lit up the whole corridor—

⁂

It was with a subdued mien that seven girls left Madam Pomfrey's office, leaving one of their own behind in a hospital bed.

Hannah would be all right in about thirty-five minutes, the healer had said; torn muscles were easy to mend.

Daphne had done all the talking, and according to her, Hannah had suffered a mishap with a Road-Running Charm which had caused the leg cramps. Madam Pomfrey had given them a sharp look but hadn't argued, even though that Charm was around six years above their level.

Madam Pomfrey had also given Daphne a potion to help with her state of total magical exhaustion, and warned her not to cast any spells for the next three hours. That, supposedly, was from Daphne using up

too much magic trying to *Finite* Hannah, rather than the Most Ancient Blade drawing out all of her power to break the *Protego*.

The rest of them had decided not to say anything about the bruises under their robes until they could get some older girls to cast *Episkey*. There were limits to what Daphne could talk around.

The whole thing, Susan thought, had been too close, much too close. If the bully had so much as looked around the corner—if he'd taken a moment to recast his Shielding Charm—

"We should stop," said Susan, as soon as the seven of them had gotten out of hearing range of the healer's office. "We should stop doing this."

For some reason, then, even though they were supposed to vote on this sort of thing, everyone turned to look at General Granger.

The Sunshine General didn't seem to see them looking at her, she just strode on, gazing off straight ahead.

After a little while, Hermione Granger said, in a voice that sounded thoughtful and a little sad, "Hannah said *she* didn't want us to stop. I'm not sure it's right for us to... be less brave *for* her, than she is."

All the other girls, except Susan, nodded at that.

"I think that's got to be as bad as it gets," said Parvati. "And we can handle it. We've proved that now."

Susan couldn't think of anything to say to that. She didn't think that shrieking at the top of her lungs about blatant stupidity and DOOM would be persuasive. And she couldn't just *leave* the other girls, either. Wasn't it enough to be cursed with hard work, why did Hufflepuffs have to be *loyal* on top of everything else?

"By the way, Lavender," said Padma. "What in the name of Merlin's underpants were you *wearing* back there?"

"My hero outfit," said the Gryffindor girl.

Daphne sounded weary, as she spoke without turning her own head from where she was plodding through the hall. "It's the costume of the Soldier of Gryffindor from the play *Chronicles of the Lunarian Soldiers*."

"Did you Transfigure it?" said Parvati, looking puzzled. "But the bully cast *Finite* on you—"

"Nope!" Lavender said. "It's *real!* See, I just Transfigured my hero outfit into a regular shirt and skirt *beforehand*, so all I had to do was cast

Finite on myself after I saw the bully. Do you want your own, Parvati? I got mine made yesterday by Katarina and Joshua in sixth-year, for twelve Sickles—"

"I think," General Granger said in a careful voice, "that would make us all look a little silly."

"Well," said Lavender, "we should vote on whether to—"

"I think," General Granger said, "that no matter what *anyone* votes, I'm not going to be caught *dead* wearing one of those costumes—"

Susan ignored the argument. She was trying to think up some sort of clever strategy for being less doomed.

⁂

The whole Great Hall went silent, even if only for a moment, as the seven of them walked into lunch.

Then the applause started.

It was scattered, not the massive applause of everyone applauding at once. A lot of it came from the Gryffindor table, less from Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw, and none from Slytherin.

Daphne felt her face tightening. She'd *hoped* —well, maybe after they found a Gryffindor bully to stop and a Slytherin to rescue, her fellow Slytherins would realize—

She looked at the Hufflepuff table.

Neville Longbottom was applauding with his hands held high above his head, although he wasn't smiling. Maybe he'd heard about Hannah, or maybe he was wondering why Hannah wasn't there.

Then, not quite able to help herself, she glanced toward the Head Table.

Professor Sprout's face was lined with concern. She and Professor McGonagall were leaning their heads toward Headmaster Dumbledore, who had a solemn look, and all their lips were moving quickly. Professor Flitwick looked more resigned than anything else, and Quirrell, face slack, was taking trembling stabs at his soup using a spoon gripped in a fist.

Professor Snape was looking directly at—

Her?

Or—at Hermione Granger, standing next to her?

A small, thin smile crossed the Potions Master's face, and he raised his hands, brought them together once in a motion that was too slow to be a real clap; and then the Potions Master turned back to his plate, ignoring the conversations around him.

Daphne felt a little chill go down her spine, and she hastily turned to walk toward the Slytherin table. Susan and Lavender and Parvati peeled off from their group, heading toward the Hufflepuff and Gryffindor tables on the other side of the Great Hall.

It happened as they were passing the part of the Slytherin table where the Slytherin Quidditch team sat.

That was when Hermione stumbled suddenly, stumbled *hard* like she was being yanked off her feet, and went sprawling into the gap between where Marcus Flint and Lucian Bole sat, and there was a sad little splutching sound as Hermione's face ended up in Flint's plate of steak and mashed potatoes.

Everything seemed to happen too quickly then, or maybe it was just Daphne herself who was thinking too slow, as Flint let out a bellow of indignation and his hand yanked Hermione back and threw her into the Ravenclaw table, and she bounced off a student's back and collapsed onto the ground—

The quiet spread out in ripples.

Hermione pushed herself up on her hands, though she didn't get all the way to her feet, Daphne could see that her whole body was shaking, and that her face was still covered with mashed potatoes with scattered pieces of steak embedded like carbuncles.

For a long moment, nobody spoke, nobody moved. Like nobody in the whole Great Hall could imagine, any more than Daphne could, what happened next.

Then Flint's powerful voice, the voice of the Slytherin Captain that bellowed commands on the Quidditch pitch, said in a dangerous rumble, "You ruined my food, girl."

Another moment of frozen silence. Hermione's head—Daphne could see it trembling—turned to look at the Slytherin Quidditch Captain.

"Apologize to me," said Flint.

Harry Potter started to push himself up from the Ravenclaw table, and then stopped abruptly, halfway to his feet, as if he'd just thought of something—

Then five other people stood up from the Ravenclaw table.

All of the Slytherin Quidditch team stood up, their wands coming into their hands, and then students stood up at the Gryffindor table and at the Hufflepuff table and without thinking Daphne turned to look at the Head Table and she saw that the Headmaster was still sitting down, watching, just watching, Dumbledore was *just watching* and he had one hand out as though to restrain Professor McGonagall—in just one second someone would shout a spell and then it would be too late, *why wasn't the Headmaster doing anything*—

And a voice said, "My apologies."

Daphne turned back to look, her mouth gaping open in absolute shock.

"*Scourgify*," said that smooth voice, and the mashed potatoes vanished from Hermione's face, revealing the Ravenclaw's surprised expression as Draco Malfoy approached her, sheathed his wand again, and then knelt to one knee beside her and offered her a hand.

"Sorry about that, Miss Granger," said Draco Malfoy's polite voice. "I guess someone thought they were being funny."

Hermione took Draco's hand, and Daphne suddenly realized what was about to happen—

But Draco Malfoy *didn't* raise Hermione halfway up and then drop her.

He just pulled her to her feet.

"Thanks," said Hermione.

"You're welcome," Draco Malfoy said in a loud voice, not looking to either side to see where all four Houses of Hogwarts were staring at him in total shock. "Just remember, being cunning and ambitious doesn't mean you have to be like that."

And then Draco Malfoy went back to his seat at the Slytherin bench and sat down like he hadn't—he hadn't just—*he'd just*—

Hermione went to the nearest empty place at the Ravenclaw bench and sat down.

A number of other people, rather slowly, sat down.

"Daphne?" said Tracey. "Are you all right?"

Draco's heart was hammering in his chest so hard he worried it might explode right out of his chest in a shower of blood, like that curse Amycus Carrow had used once on a puppy.

Draco's face stayed completely controlled, because he knew (it'd been drilled into him over and over) that if he showed the slightest sign of the fear he was feeling, his Housemates would rip him apart like a swarm of Acromantulas.

There'd been no time to check with Harry Potter, no time to plot, no time to think, just the instant of realizing that the time to start rescuing Slytherin's reputation was *right then*.

From all sides of the long Slytherin table, angry faces stared at Draco.

But they were outnumbered by the faces that just looked puzzled.

"All right, I give up," said a sixth-year boy that Draco didn't recognize, sitting across from him and two places to his right. "Why did you do that, Malfoy?"

Although his mouth was very dry, Draco didn't swallow. That would have been a sign of fear. Instead he took a bite of carrots, which had the most moisture of anything on his plate, and chewed and swallowed, thinking as rapidly as he could.

"You know," Draco said, making his voice as cutting as he could—as his heart thumped even harder in his chest, as everyone around him stopped talking to listen—"there's *probably* some way to make Slytherin look even *worse* than attacking eight first-year girls from all four Houses who are working together to stop bullies, but I can't think of *how*. This way we get the benefit of what Greengrass is doing."

The puzzled faces stayed puzzled.

"What?" said the sixth-year boy, and "Wait, *what* benefit?" said a fifth-year girl sitting to his right.

"It makes Slytherin House look better," said Draco.

The Slytherins around him were giving him quizzical gazes like he'd just tried to explain algebra.

"Look better to *who?*" said the sixth-year boy.

"But you just helped a *mudblood*," said the fifth-year girl. "How's *that s*upposed to look good?"

Draco's throat closed up. His brain was experiencing a hideous malfunction during which it couldn't think of anything to say except the truth—

Then, "It's probably some kind of tremendously clever scheme Malfoy's got going," said a fifth-year boy. "You know, like in *The Tragedy of Light*, where everything that looks like a setback is part of the plot. And it ends with Granger's head on a stick and nobody suspecting that it was him."

"*That* makes sense," someone said from further down the table, and there was a lot of nodding.

⁂

"Do *you* know what the boss's up to?" Vincent muttered in an undertone.

Gregory Goyle didn't reply. In his mind he could hear very clearly his master's voice, saying, *I can't believe I believed every word of that*, the day the rumor had started about Salazar Slytherin showing Potter and Granger where to find bullies.

"Mr. Goyle?" whispered Vincent.

Gregory Goyle's lips shaped the words, *Oh no,* but no sound came out.

⁂

Hermione had left lunch early that day, for some reason she hadn't felt hungry. Those few seconds of horrible humiliation had kept burning

through her mind, over and over, the feeling of her face squishing into the mashed potatoes and then being thrown through the air and then the Slytherin's boy's voice saying 'Apologize to me'... it might have been the first time in her whole life that she'd felt like *hating* someone. The boy who'd thrown her (Marcus Flint, they'd said his name was) and whoever had cast the tripping Jinx on her in the first place... she'd felt it, for one horrible instant she'd wanted to go tell Harry that if he started getting *creative* on her behalf, she wouldn't object.

She hadn't been a minute out of the Great Hall before she'd heard the sound of running feet behind, and turned to see Daphne racing toward her.

And listened to what her Sunshine Soldier had to say...

"Don't you *understand?*" Daphne's voice was barely below a shriek. "Just because someone's nice to you doesn't mean they're your friend! He's *Draco Malfoy!* His father's a Death Eater, all the parents of all his friends are Death Eaters—Nott, Goyle, Crabbe, *everyone around him*, do you get it? They *all* despise Muggleborns, they want everyone like you to *die*, they think you're good for nothing but being a *sacrifice* in horrible Dark rituals! Draco is *the next Lord Malfoy*, he's been raised from birth to hate you and he's been raised from birth to *lie!*" Daphne's gray-green eyes stared fiercely at her, demanding assent and understanding.

"He—" Hermione said falteringly. She remembered the rooftop, the awful jolt as she started to fall, Draco Malfoy's hand grabbing hers and holding it so hard that she'd had bruises afterward. She'd had to tell him twice before he finally let her fall. "Maybe Draco Malfoy isn't like them—"

Daphne's whisper was almost a scream. "If he *doesn't* end up doing you ten times as hard as he just helped you, his *life* is *over*, do you understand? I mean Lucius Malfoy would *literally* disinherit him! D'you know what the chance is that he's *not* up to something?"

"Tiny?" said Hermione in a small voice.

"*Zero!*" hissed Daphne. "I mean *none!* I mean *less* than zero! I mean the chance is so small that you couldn't find it with three Magnifying Charms and a Point-Me spell and—and—and an ancient map and a centaur prophet! Everyone in Slytherin knows he's plotting to do some-

thing to you and doesn't want to be suspected, I heard someone say he was seen pointing his wand at you just before you tripped—don't you *see? This is all part of Malfoy's plan!*"

⁂

Draco sat eating his steak with roasted cauliflower florets and Ashwinder sauce (it wasn't made from real Ashwinder eggs, it just tasted like fire), trying not to laugh and trying not to cry.

He'd *heard* about plausible deniability, but hadn't realized how much it mattered until he found that Malfoys didn't have any.

"You want to know my plot?" said Draco. "*Here's* my plot. I'm not going to do *anything* and then the *next* time people think I'm plotting something, they won't be sure."

"Huh..." said the fifth-year boy. "I don't think I believe you, that doesn't sound cunning enough to be really it—"

"That's what he *wants* you to think," said the fifth-year girl.

⁂

"Albus," Minerva said dangerously, "did you *plan* all this?"

⁂

"Well, if I *did* snap my fingers under the table, I wouldn't just *tell* you that—"

⁂

The Defense Professor's quavering hand dropped his spoon into the soup again.

⁂

"What do you mean, *set you up?*" said Millicent. The two of them were sitting cross-legged on Daphne's bed, having come there straight from

the Great Hall after lunch. "With my Seer's eyes that stare through Time Itself, I saw you *winning*."

Daphne stared at Millicent, her own merely mortal eyes rather narrowed at the moment. "That boy was *expecting* us."

"Well, yeah!" said Millicent. "Everyone knows you're hunting bullies!"

"Hannah got hit by a really painful hex," Daphne said. "She had to visit a healer, Millicent! If we're friends you should've *warned* me!"

"Look, Daphne, I *told* you—" The Slytherin girl paused, as if trying to remember something, and then said, "I mean, I told you, what I See *has* to come to pass. If I try to change it, if *anyone* tries to change it, really terrible, awful, no good, extremely bad things will happen. And then it'll come to pass *anyway*. If I See you getting beaten up, I *can't* tell you that, because then you'd try to *not go*, and *then* —" Millicent stopped.

"And then?" Daphne said skeptically. "I mean, what happens if we just don't go?"

"I don't *know!*" said Millicent. "But it probably makes being eaten by Lethifolds look like a tea party!"

"Look, even I know that's not how prophecies work," Daphne said, then paused. "At least prophecies don't work like that in plays..." Admittedly, there were all sorts of tragedies where trying to avoid a prophecy *made* it happen, or where, on the other hand, trying to *go along* with a prophecy was the only reason why it happened. But you *could* make prophecies happen your own way if you were clever enough; or someone who loved you enough could take your place; or with enough effort it was possible to break a prophecy outright... Then again, in plays the Seers never remembered what they Saw, either...

Millicent must have seen Daphne's hesitation, because the other girl started looking a little more confident. "Well," Millicent said sharply, "this isn't a play! Look, I'll tell you if I See it being a hard battle or an easy one. But that's *all* I can do, you understand? And if I say 'hard' you *can't* not show up! Or—or—" Millicent's eyes rolled back in her head, and she intoned hollowly, "*Those who try to cheat their destinies will come to sad and gloomy ends—*"

Professor Sprout shook her head, her face looking tight.

"But—" said Susan. "But you helped *Harry Potter* that one time—"

"And it was made *quite clear* to me," Professor Sprout said in a voice that sounded like someone was using a Shrinking Charm to squeeze her throat, "that it was Professor Snape's job, and not mine, to keep order in Slytherin House—Miss Bones, *please*, you don't have to *do* this if—"

"Yes, I *do* have to," Susan said unhappily. "I'm a Hufflepuff, we have to be loyal."

⁂

"A mysterious parchment under your pillow?" said Harry Potter, looking up from where he was sitting, in the Quieted nook where they were studying. Then the boy's green eyes narrowed. "It wasn't from Santa Claus, was it?"

Pause.

"Okay," said Hermione. "I'm *not* going to ask, and you're *not* going to tell me, and we're *both* going to pretend you never said that and I don't know anything about it—"

⁂

Susan approached the table as soon as the older girl was alone, glancing around the Hufflepuff common room to make sure nobody was watching (the way Auntie had taught her to do it, so that it wouldn't be obvious that she was looking).

"Hey, Susie," said the seventh-year Hufflepuff. "Do you already need more—"

"Can I please talk to you privately for a bit?" Susan said.

⁂

Jaime Astorga, seventh-year of Slytherin, and until recently considered a promising upstart on the youth dueling circuit, stood ramrod straight in

Professor Snape's office, with his teeth clenched tight and sweat trickling down his spine.

"I distinctly recall," said the Head of his House in a sardonic drawl, "that I warned you, and a number of others this very morning, that there were certain first-year girls who might prove annoying, if a fighter were *incautious* and allowed himself to be *taken by surprise*."

Professor Snape stalked in a slow circle around him.

"I—" said Jaime, as more sweat beaded on his forehead. He knew how ridiculous it sounded, how much of a pathetic excuse. "Sir, they shouldn't have been able to—" One first-year-girl shouldn't have been able to break his *Protego*, no matter what sort of ancient Charm she used—Greengrass must have had *help*—

But it was very clear that his Head of House wouldn't believe that.

"Oh, I quite agree," murmured Snape in a low tone, instinct with menace. "They shouldn't have. I begin to wonder if Mr. Malfoy, whatever his plotting, has a point, Astorga. It cannot be good for the repute of Slytherin's House if our fighters, rather than demonstrating their strength, lose to little girls!" Snape's voice had risen. "It is well that you had the good taste to be defeated by a little girl who is a fellow Slytherin of a Noble House, Astorga, or I would deduct points from you myself!"

Jaime Astorga's fists clenched at his side, but he couldn't think of a thing to say.

It was some time before Jaime Astorga was allowed to leave the presence of his Head of House.

And afterward, only the walls, the floor, and the ceiling saw Severus Snape's smile.

⁂

That evening Draco was visited by his father's owl, Tanaxu, who wasn't green but only because there weren't such things as green owls. The best Father had been able to find was an owl of the purest silver feathers, with great luminous green eyes, and a beak as sharp and cruel as any snake's fang. The parchment wrapped around Tanaxu's leg was short and to the point:

What are you doing, my son?

The parchment that Draco sent back was equally short, and it said,

I am trying to stop harm done to Slytherin's reputation, father.

In as much time as it took for an owl to fly from Hogwarts to Malfoy Manor and back again, the family owl bore another message to Draco, and this one said only:

What are you really doing?

Draco stared at the parchment he'd unwrapped from the owl's leg. His hands trembled, as he held up the parchment to the light of his fireplace. Five words, carved in black ink, shouldn't have been scarier than death.

There wasn't very much time to think. Father knew exactly how long it took for a message to go from Malfoy Manor to Hogwarts and back again; he would know if Draco delayed to compose a careful lie.

But Draco still waited until his hand stopped trembling, before he wrote his reply, the only answer he'd thought of that Father might accept.

I am preparing for the next war.

Draco wrapped that parchment around the owl's leg and tied it, and then sent Tanaxu winging out from his room, through the halls of Hogwarts, into the night.

He waited, but no reply came.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-THREE

SELF-ACTUALIZATION, PART VIII: THE SACRED AND THE MUNDANE

The red jet of fire took Hannah full in the face, flipping her end-over-heels and smacking her head straight into the stone wall, where her pale face seemed to linger for an instant, framed by flying strands of brown-golden hair, before she collapsed to the ground in a heap of robes, as the third and final volley of blazing green spirals brought down their foe's Shield Charm.

The March days marched by, filled with lectures and study and homework, breakfast and lunch and dinner.

The Gryffindor boy stared at the eight of them, tension in every line of his body's frame, his face working soundlessly; and then his hands released their clenched grasp on the Slytherin boy's lapels, and he walked away without anyone saying a word. (Well, Lavender almost said a word—her mouth was just opening in indignation, maybe because she hadn't gotten a chance to declaim her speech—but luckily Hermione spotted it and made the gesture that meant SHUT UP.

Then there was sleeping, of course. You wouldn't want to forget about sleeping just because it seemed so normal.

"Innervate!" said the young voice of Susan Bones, and Hermione's eyes flew open and her lips drew in air with a gasp, her lungs feeling heavy like there was a huge weight resting on her chest. Beside her, Hannah was already sitting up, holding her head in her hands and grimacing. Daphne had

warned them that this would be a 'hard' fight, creating a certain trepidation in Hermione, and indeed in all of them. Except maybe Susan, who'd just shown up at the appointed meeting-time, and walked alongside them without speaking, and fought the seventh-year bully until she was the last girl standing. Maybe the Gryffindor had been reluctant to fight the last daughter of Bones, or maybe Susan had just gotten very lucky; at any rate, when Hermione had tried to sit up again, she'd realized that her chest had felt heavy because there was, in fact, a rather large body sprawled on top of her.

And you wouldn't want to forget about magic either, even if the actual moment of casting a spell only formed a very small part of your day. It was the whole point of Hogwarts, after all.

"Okay, how about if we all ride around on skateboards?" said Lavender. "We could get places faster than walking. And we'd look really awesome on skateboards, Muggle artifacts may not be as fast as broomsticks but they look cooler—we should vote on it—"

As for the remaining fractions of time, you would fill that according to your nature: gossip about upper-year romances, or books and study sessions.

Hermione reached out a trembling hand to grasp her copy of Hogwarts: A History *from where it had fallen, the ever-comforting book only a pace distant from where she herself had ended up on the floor, after the red-robed upper-year girl had "bumped" her into a wall. And then the older Gryffindor witch had walked away without a look back, only a whispered "Salazar's—" and a word that hurt her more than anything the Slytherins said about mudbloods, 'mudblood' was just a strange wizarding word but Hermione knew the word the Gryffindor had said. She couldn't get used to it, she just couldn't get used to being hated. It still hurt just as much every time it happened, and somehow it hurt even more coming from the Gryffindors who were* supposed *to be the good ones.*

Harry had divided up eight of his soldiers among the other armies, as ordered; he'd voluntarily given up *two* Chaotic Lieutenants, sending Dean Thomas to Dragon Army and then trading Seamus Finnigan to her for Blaise Zabini, who Harry had said was being "underutilized" in Sunshine. Lavender had elected to join most of SPHEW in Sunshine; Tracey had decided to stay with Chaos.

"So you can work your charms on General Potter?" said Lavender, as Hermione ignored both of them as hard as she could. "I've got to say, Traces, I think our Sunshine General has him pretty well sewn up by now—you'd have better luck convincing Hermione that the three of you should have one of those, you know, arrangements—"

Nobody had figured out yet what Draco Malfoy was plotting.

"Certain?" said Harry Potter, sounding rather reluctant. "You know a rationalist isn't ever certain of anything, Hermione, not even that two and two make four. I can't actually read Malfoy's mind, and if I could, I couldn't be certain he wasn't a perfect Occlumens. All I can say is that based on what I've seen of Malfoy, it's a lot more plausible than Daphne Greengrass thinks, that he actually is trying to show the Slytherins a better way. We should... we really should try to go along with that, Hermione."

(Well, Harry seemed to think Draco Malfoy was a good guy. But then the trouble was that Harry also tended to trust people like Professor Quirrell.)

⁂

"Professor Quirrell," Harry said, "I'm worried about the hatred Slytherin House seems to be developing for Hermione Granger."

They were sitting in the Defense Professor's office, Harry sitting far back from the teacher's desk (and the sense of pending disaster was still noticeable, even then), the empty bookcase still framing Professor Quirrell's balding head. The cup balanced on Harry's thigh was filled with Professor Quirrell's obscure, probably-expensive Chinese tea, and it said something about the way Harry had been thinking lately that he'd needed to make a conscious decision to drink it.

"And this concerns me for what reason?" said Professor Quirrell, sipping his tea.

"Yes, well," said Harry, "I'm just going to ignore that—oh, stop that, Professor Quirrell, *you've* been plotting to restore Slytherin House's reputation since at least the first Friday of this year."

There might have been a tiny crack of a smile, at the edges of those thin pale lips; and then again, there might not have been. "I think

Slytherin's House will do well enough in the end, Mr. Potter, regardless of the fate of one girl. But I do agree that the present outlook is not favorable for your little friend. The bullies of two Houses, many of them with powerful and well-connected families, see Miss Granger as a threat to their reputation and a shame to their pride. As powerful a motive as that is to hurt her, it pales compared to the raw envy of the Gryffindors, who see an outsider gaining the laurels of heroism which they have dreamed of since childhood." Now the smile on Professor Quirrell's lips was definite, though slight. "And then there are those of Slytherin House who hear that Salazar Slytherin's ghost has abandoned them to favor a mudblood. I wonder if you can even conceive, Mr. Potter, of how such as they would react? Those who do not believe it would cheerfully kill Miss Granger for the insult. And as for those Slytherins who wonder deep down, in some quiet place within themselves, if it might perhaps be *true*... their inner panic is something scarcely to be contemplated." Professor Quirrell sipped his tea equably. "When you are more experienced, Mr. Potter, you will see such consequences in advance of your plotting. As it stands, you are being ill-served by your willful ignorance of all human nature you deem unpleasant."

Harry sipped his own tea.

"Ah..." said Harry. "Professor Quirrell... help?"

"I already offered Miss Granger my help," said Professor Quirrell, "as soon as I foresaw what would develop. My student told me, in polite terms, to stay out of her business. Nor would she tell you anything different, I expect. As I have little to truly gain or lose in this matter, I hardly intend to press the point." The Defense Professor shrugged, his teacup held steady in the exactly-right polite grip, so that the surface of the liquid did not even ripple as Professor Quirrell leaned back within his chair. "Do not worry too much, Mr. Potter. Emotions run high around Miss Granger, but she is in less danger than you might imagine. When you are older, you will learn that the first and foremost thing which any ordinary person does is nothing."

The envelope which the Slytherin System had delivered to Daphne at lunch was unsigned, as always; the parchment within named a time and a place and said, simply, *"Hard."*

That wasn't what had concerned Daphne. What had concerned Daphne was that Millicent didn't seem to be looking in her or Tracey's direction at lunch that day. She'd just stared straight ahead at her plate and eaten. Millicent had looked up just once that Daphne saw, in the direction of the Hufflepuff table, and then looked quickly back down again; though Daphne was too far away to see the expression on Millicent's face, since Millicent had sat down far away from her and Tracey.

Daphne had thought about that during lunch, with a sick feeling in her stomach unlike anything she'd felt before, and which had caused her to stop eating halfway through her first plate.

What I See has to come to pass... it probably makes being eaten by Lethifolds look like a tea party...

It wasn't any conscious decision that Daphne made, nothing like Slytherins were supposed to do, no weighing of the benefits to herself.

Instead—

Daphne told Hannah and Susan and everyone, that her informant had warned her that the next bully was going to target Hufflepuffs in particular, and that the bully planned to risk the teachers' wrath in order to *really* hurt either Hannah or Susan, like *seriously*, and the two of them needed to stay out of this one.

Hannah had agreed to stay out of it.

Susan had—

"*What are you doing here?*" yelled General Granger, though it was sort of a yell and a whisper at the same time.

Susan's round face didn't change, like the Hufflepuff girl had suddenly developed the sort of experienced blankness that Daphne's own Mother used. "Am I here, really?" Susan said calmly.

"*You said you wouldn't come!*"

"Did I say that?" said Susan. She flipped her wand casually in one hand, leaning against the stone wall of the corridor where they were waiting, her reddish-brown hair somehow arranging itself in perfect order against the yellow trim of her witch's robes. "I wonder why. Maybe I didn't want Hannah to get any strange ideas. Hufflepuff loyalty, you know."

"If you don't leave," said the Sunshine General, "I'll call a mission abort, and we'll *all* go back to our study halls, Miss Bones!"

"*Hey!*" said Lavender. "We didn't vote on—"

"That's fine by me," said Susan, who was keeping a steady gaze on the other end of the corridor where it merged into the tiled hallway where they'd been told to expect the bully. "I'll just stay here myself, then."

"Why—" said Daphne. Her heart was in her throat. *If I try to change it, if* anyone *tries to change it, really terrible, awful, no good, extremely bad things will happen. And then it'll come to pass anyway...* "Why are you doing this?"

"It's not like me," said Susan. "I know. But—" Susan shrugged. "People don't always behave like themselves, you know."

They pleaded.

They begged.

Susan didn't even say anything anymore, she just kept watching, waiting.

Daphne was nearly crying, she kept wondering if she'd *caused* this, if trying to change Fate was making this happen *worse*—

"Daphne," said Hermione, her voice sounding much higher than usual, "go get a teacher. Run."

Daphne spun on her heels and started to pelt down the other direction of the stony corridor, and then she realized, and she turned back to where all the other girls except Susan were watching her go, and Daphne, feeling like she was about to throw up, said, "I can't..."

"*What?*" said Hermione.

"I think it gets worse every time you try to fight it," said Daphne. That was how it worked in plays, sometimes.

Hermione stared at her, and then Hermione said, "Padma."

The other Ravenclaw girl just tore right out of there without arguing. Daphne watched her go, knowing that Padma wasn't as good a runner as her, and now wondering if maybe that would turn out to be the *only reason* why help would come too late...

"Bullies are here," Susan said laconically. "Huh, they've got a hostage."

They all whirled, and looked, and saw—

Three older bullies, Daphne's eyes recognized Reese Belka who was a top lieutenant in one of the seventh-year armies, and Randolph Lee who was number two in the Hogwarts dueling club, and worst of all, Robert Jugson III, in his sixth year, whose father was almost certainly a Death Eater.

All three were surrounded by Shielding Charms, blue hazes that glowed beneath the surface in ribbons of other color and showed occasional faceting above, multi-layered shields like the three of them thought they were fighting serious duelists and had expended energy accordingly.

And behind them, bound and supported by glowing ropes, was Hannah Abbott. Her eyes were wide and panicked and her mouth was moving, though they couldn't hear anything through the *Quietus* they'd put up earlier.

Then Jugson made an offhand gesture with his wand, and the glowing ropes flung Hannah at them, there was a small pop as Hannah's body blew through the Quieting barrier, Susan's wand was instantly pointing at Hannah and Susan's voice muttered "*Wingardium Leviosa*"—

"*Run!*" screamed Hannah, as she was gently lowered to the ground.

But the corridor behind them and in front of them was now blocked with a glowing gray field, a barrier spell that Daphne didn't recognize.

"Do I need to explain what this is about?" Lee said with false joviality. The seventh-year duelist was sporting a smile that didn't reach his eyes. "Well, just in case, you little inconveniences, and that includes you Miss Greengrass, you've been quite enough trouble and you've told quite enough lies. We brought your little friend just to make sure everyone knew we got all of you—though I suppose the other Ravenclaw girl is

hiding around a corner or clinging to the ceiling somewhere? Well, no matter. This is your—"

"Enough talk," said Robert Jugson III, "time for pain," and raised his wand. "*Cluthe!*"

Simultaneously Susan pointed her wand and said "*Prismatis!*" and a small rainbow sphere formed in midair almost instantly, the miniature barrier so condensed and bright that it stayed intact even as Jugson's hex hit it and bounced off toward Belka, whose wand flashed to swat away the dark bolt; and then a moment later the many-colored blaze was gone.

Daphne's eyes went wide for a moment; she'd never thought of using a Prismatic Sphere like *that*—

"Jugsy, honey?" said Belka. Her lips widened in a vicious smile. "I thought we discussed this. First we beat them, *then* we play."

"P-please," said Hermione Granger in a faltering voice, "let them go—I, I, I promise I'll—"

"Oh, really," said Lee in an annoyed tone. "Are you about to offer to turn yourself over if we let the others go? We've got *all* of you, now."

Jugson smiled, then. "It could be funny," said the sixth-year junior Death Eater, softly and with menace. "How about if you lick my shoes, mudblood, and *one* of your friends can go? Pick whichever one you like best, leave the others to get hurt."

"Nope," said the young voice of Susan Bones, "not going to happen," and with a blindingly fast motion the Hufflepuff girl leapt leftward just as a red stunbolt erupted from Belka's wand, Daphne could hardly *see* the movement as Susan seemed to hit the corridor wall and then bounce off it like she was a rubber ball and her legs smashed into Jugson's *face*, it didn't go through the shield but the sixth-year went sprawling backward with the impact and Susan followed him downward and her foot stamped down on the boy's wand arm, again being repelled by the shield, "*Elmekia!*" shouted Lee and Parvati shouted "*Prismatis!*" and the rainbow wall formed but the fiery blue blast passed right through it like it wasn't even there, the bolt missed Susan by inches, there was a whirlwind of motion that Daphne couldn't follow during which Belka had her feet knocked out from under her, but the older witch just rolled back to a stand and then—

Daphne saw it coming, and her lips started to mouth "*Pris*—" but it was already too late.

Three blasts of brilliance slammed into Susan at once, she had her wand raised as though she could counter them and there was a white flash as the hexes struck the magical wood, but then Susan's legs convulsed and sent her flying into a corridor wall. Her head hit with a strange cracking sound, and then Susan fell down and lay motionless with her head at an odd-seeming angle, her wand still clutched in one outstretched hand.

There was a moment of frozen silence.

Parvati scrambled over to where Susan lay, pressed a thumb over the pulse point on Susan's wrist, and then—then slowly, tremblingly, Parvati rose to her feet, her eyes huge—

"*Vitalis revelio*," said Lee just as Parvati opened her mouth, and Susan's body was surrounded a warm red glow. Now the seventh-year boy really was grinning. "Probably just a broken collarbone, I'd say. Nice try, though."

"Merlin, they *are* tricky," said Jugson.

"You had me going for a second there, dearies." The seventh-year girl wasn't smiling at all.

"*Tonare!*" screamed Daphne, raising her wand above her head and focusing harder than she ever had in her life. "*Rava calvaria! Lucis*—"

She didn't even see the hex that got her.

⁂

Hermione felt the jolt of Innervation bringing her awake, and out of some intuitive strategism she *didn't* roll to her feet right away; it had been a completely hopeless battle and she didn't know what she could do but some instinct told her that leaping to her feet wasn't it.

Just a crack, Hermione opened her eyes, and the thin rays of light that entered them showed Parvati backing away from all three bullies, the last girl standing that Hermione could see.

And her eyes also showed Tracey fallen not far away from her, and Hermione's wand was still in her hand; and so, desperately hoping the

Slytherin girl would show more sense than she usually did, Hermione made the wand movements as subtly as she could, and hardly moving her lips, whispered, "Innervate."

Hermione felt the spell working, but Tracey didn't move. Hermione hoped it was because Tracey was being cunning, and waiting to...

What *could* they do?

Hermione didn't know, and the panic that had waited through the moments of fighting was starting to eat her up inside now that she was still, now that she was trying to think, now that she could see that it was all absolutely hopeless.

That was when Hermione heard a thud, and though it was out of her field of vision now, she knew that Parvati had fallen.

A moment of silence came, and passed.

"Now what?" said the voice of the scary-soft boy.

"Now we wake up the mudblood," said the precise voice of the scary-formal boy, "and find out who's *really* behind them, not Salazar Slytherin's ghost."

"No, dears," said the voice of the scary-sweet girl, "*first* we bind them all *very* securely—"

And then there was a sound like lightning and thunder and Hermione's eyes widened in shock before she could stop herself, and in her widened field of vision she saw the scary-soft boy convulsing as yellow arcs of energy crawled over him like giant blazing worms. His wand flew out of his hand as he collapsed to the ground, twitching, and then a moment later he lay still.

"Is everyone else asleep now?" said a voice. "Good."

Susan Bones rose from the floor near where the scary-soft boy had stood, neck still oddly bent. Then she rolled her head around her shoulders, a casual loose motion, and her head was straight again.

The round-faced first-year girl stood facing the remaining two bullies with one hand cocked on her hip.

Grinning.

And surrounded by faceted blue haze.

"Polyjuice!" spat the bully-girl.

"*Polyfluis Reverso!*" roared the remaining boy bully.

Something like the form of a mirrored scarf spat out of his wand—

Passed without resistance through the haze surrounding Susan—

For an instant, she glowed in a strange mirror-color, like a reflection of herself—

And then the glow faded.

The young girl still stood there, hand on her hip.

"Wrong," said Susan.

"And *this* is the truth," said Susan. "In case nobody ever told you—"

In her small hand a wand rose up, blurred by the blue haze surrounding it.

"You don't mess with the 'Puffs," said Susan, and with a grey flash so bright it hurt Hermione's half-closed eyes, the real battle started.

It went on for a while.

Some of the ceiling got melted.

The girl-bully tried to cry a truce, that they would leave and take Jugson with them, and Susan roared out the syllables of a curse Hermione recognized as Abi-Dalzim's Horrid Wilting which was illegal in seven countries.

Eventually the girl-bully lay unconscious and unawakenable on the ground, and the last boy-bully had fled leaving his companions' bodies behind, and Susan was leaned over against one wall, covered in sweat and her scorched robes soaked through with wet spots, gasping for breath, and clutching at her right shoulder using her left hand.

After a while Susan straightened up, and turned to look back at where her fellow witches were sleeping on the floor.

Well, they *should've* been sleeping on the floor.

Lavender was already sitting up with eyes as wide as watermelons.

"That..." said Lavender.

"Was..." said Tracey.

"*What?*" said Hermione.

"I mean, *what?*" said Parvati.

"*Cool!*" said Lavender.

"Oh, hell," said Susan Bones. Her face had already looked a little pale beneath the sweat, and now it was getting paler, looking almost

frighteningly white. "Ah... could I convince you that you hallucinated all that?"

There was a rapid exchange of glances. Hermione looked at Parvati, Parvati looked at Lavender, Lavender briefly locked gazes with Tracey.

The four of them looked back at Susan and shook their heads.

"Oh, hell," said Susan again. "Look I'll be back in a few minutes but I've really got to go now *please* don't say anything bye!"

And Susan ran out into the hallway, moving surprisingly fast, before anyone could say another word.

"No, seriously, *what?*" said Parvati.

"*Innervate*," said Hermione, pointing her wand at Daphne, whose body she hadn't been able to see before; and Lavender pointed her wand at Hannah's body and said the same.

Hannah's eyes opened and she tried frantically to roll to her feet, but collapsed to the ground halfway through.

"It's okay, Hannah!" said Lavender. "We won."

"We *what?*" said Hannah from her little heap on the floor.

Daphne hadn't stirred, but Hermione could see her chest rising and falling, and the breathing rhythm looked normal enough. "I think she's okay," said Hermione, "but—" She took a moment to swallow, her mouth was still dry. This had all gotten way, way, *way* out of hand. "I think we ought to take Daphne to Madam Pomfrey's..."

"Sure, sure, just *give me a second here* and I'll *probably be fine*," said Parvati.

"Ex*cuse* me," Hannah said in a tone that was polite, but firm. "How did we win? And why does the ceiling look all melty?"

There was a pause.

"Susan did it," said Tracey.

"Yeah," said Parvati, voice only slightly shaky as she stood up and started to brush off her red-trimmed robes, "it turns out that Susan Bones is the Heir of Hufflepuff and she's opened up the long-lost entrance to Helga Hufflepuff's Chamber of Hard Work and Practice."

"*Huh?*" said Hannah, who was feeling over herself as if to make sure all her body parts were still there. "I thought that was just something Professor Sprout says to teach us an Important Moral Lesson—*Susan* is?"

Slowly, Hermione was beginning to feel a bit more together. It hadn't really been more than thirty seconds of extreme terror, at least not the parts she'd been conscious for. "Actually," Hermione said carefully, as her mind started to work again, "I'm pretty sure that *is* just something Professor Sprout says, it wasn't in *Hogwarts: A History* or anywhere else I've read—"

"*She's a double witch!*" shouted Tracey, her voice so high it cracked. "She *is!* She's one of *them!* She's been this whole time!"

"*What?*" yelled Parvati, twisting around to look at Tracey. "That is the *looniest* thing—"

"Of *course!*" said Lavender, now all the way on her feet and starting to bounce up and down with excitement. "I should've *realized!*"

"Susan's a *what?*" said Hermione.

"A *double* witch!" said Tracey.

"You see," said Lavender, speaking very rapidly, "There've always been stories, about these children who are born as super magicians who can cast spells no one else can, and there's a whole secret school hidden inside Hogwarts with classes that only they can see and go to—"

"Those are just *stories!*" yelled Parvati. "That's not how real life works! I mean, sure, I read those books too—"

"Just a minute, please," said Hermione. Maybe her mind *was* feeling a little slow after all. "You mean even though you *already* get to go to a magical school and everything, you still want to go to a *double* magical school?"

Lavender looked at her, puzzled. "What?" said Lavender. "Who *wouldn't* want to have super extra magical powers? It would be like this whole amazing *destiny* and everything! It'd mean you were *special!*"

Hannah nodded to that, looking up from where she'd crawled to Daphne's side and was checking the girl for broken bones. "I wish *I* was a double witch," Hannah said, and then, sounding a little sadder, "though I don't believe there is any such thing, really... what did you see Susan do, exactly? I mean, are you sure you weren't just seeing things after getting stunned?"

Hermione truly, truly couldn't find any words at this point.

"Oh, no," said Tracey. The Slytherin girl spun around to look at the entrance to the corridor, her robes fluttering around her. "Oh no! We've got to get out of here! We've got to get away before Susan comes back with someone who can Super-Memory-Charm us!"

"Susan wouldn't *do* that!" said Parvati. "I mean, if there even *was* —"

"WHAT'S GOING ON HERE?" roared a high-pitched squeaky voice, as Professor Flitwick stormed into the partially melted corridor like a small, dangerously compressed package of pure academic fury, an ashen-faced Padma gasping along behind him.

⁂

"What *happened?*" Susan blurted to the girl who looked exactly like her, except for the scorched robes damp with sweat.

"Ooh, great question!" said the other Susan Bones as she rapidly skinned off what was left of her borrowed clothes. A moment later the girl began to Metamorphose back into her more accustomed form of Nymphadora Tonks. "Sorry but I couldn't think of anything myself so you've got about three minutes to decide on an answer to that—"

⁂

As Daphne Greengrass observed afterward with some acidity, the flaw in Hermione's cunning plan to make sure that House points were taken evenly from all four Houses if they got caught, was that it didn't work on *detentions*.

They'd all agreed to keep their mouths shut about Susan's mysterious powers—even Tracey, after Susan threatened to have her Super-Memory-Charmed if she didn't promise. Unfortunately, they discovered at dinnertime that someone had forgotten to tell the *bullies* about their agreement, and also that Susan Bones had sacrificed her soul to dreadful forbidden powers which now inhabited the hulk of her body and that was why they'd all gotten detention.

"Hermione?" Harry Potter said to her from beside her at the dinner table, his voice very tentative. "Please don't take offense, and I'll understand if you say it's none of my business, but I think all this is starting to spin out of control."

Hermione went on mashing the slice of chocolate cake on her plate into a seamless mush of cake and icing. "Yes," Hermione said, her voice might have been a little acerbic, "that was what I said to Professor Flitwick while I was apologizing to him, that I knew things had gotten out of hand, and he yelled: *Really, Miss Granger? Do you think?* in a squeak so loud that my ears caught on fire. I mean my ears *actually caught on fire*. Professor Flitwick had to put them out again."

Harry had put his hand to his forehead. "Excuse me," Harry said. His face was perfectly straight. "Sometimes I still have a little trouble getting used to that sort of thing. Hey, Hermione, remember when we were young and naive and we still thought the world was a relatively understandable place?"

Hermione put her fork down and looked at him for a moment. "Do you sometimes wish you were a Muggle, Harry?"

"*Huh?*" said Harry. "Well, of course not! I mean, even if I was a Muggle, I'd probably have tried someday to take over the worrrrllllll—" as Hermione gave him a *look* and the boy hastily swallowed the word and said, "I mean *optimize* of course, you *know* that's what I really mean, Hermione! My point is, it's not like my *goals* would change one way or another. But with magic it's going to be a lot easier to get things done than if I had to do stuff using only the Muggle capability set. If you think about it logically, that's *why* I'm going to Hogwarts instead of just ignoring all this and studying for a career in nanotechnology."

Hermione, having finished hand-crafting her Chocolate Cake Sauce, began to dip her carrots in it and eat them.

"Why do you ask?" said Harry. "Do *you* wish you were back in the Muggle world?"

"Not exactly," Hermione said, as she crunched into both the carrot and the chocolate. "I was just, well, feeling strange about having *wanted* to be a witch... Did you want to be a wizard when you were little?"

"Of course," Harry said promptly. "I also wanted psychic powers and super-strength and adamantium-reinforced bones and my own flying castle and sometimes I felt sad that I might have to settle for just being a famous scientist and an astronaut."

Hermione nodded. "You know," she said softly, "I think the witches and wizards who *grow up* here don't really appreciate magic properly..."

"Well, of course they don't," Harry said, "that's what gives us our advantage. Isn't that obvious? I mean seriously, that was bloody obvious to me within five minutes of walking into Diagon Alley." There was a puzzled look on the boy's face, like he couldn't understand why she was paying attention to something so ordinary.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-FOUR

SELF-ACTUALIZATION, PART IX: ESCALATION OF CONFLICTS

Harry walked forward a step, then another step, until a sense of unease began to pervade him, a disquiet in his nerves.

He said nothing, lifted no hand; the pervading sense of unease would say it for him.

From behind the closed door of the office came a whisper, carrying through the door as though no door were present.

"It is not my office hours," said that cold whisper, "nor yet the time of our meeting. I take ten Quirrell points from you, and be glad it is not more."

Harry stayed calm. Going through Azkaban had recalibrated his scale of emotional disturbances; and losing a House point, which had formerly rated five out of ten, now lay somewhere around zero point three. Harry's voice was likewise level, as he said, "You made a testable prediction and it was falsified, Professor. I only wished to note that."

As Harry turned to go, he heard the door opening behind him, and he swung back around in some surprise.

Professor Quirrell was leaning back in his chair, his head lolling back against its rest, as a parchment floated before him. Both the Defense Professor's hands rested limply on the desk, as though nerveless. He might have been a corpse, excepting that the ice-blue eyes still moved, back and forth, back and forth.

The parchment vanished, and was replaced by another so quickly it was like the material had only flickered.

Then the lips moved as well. "And from this," whispered the lips, "you infer what, Mr. Potter?"

Harry was shaken by the sight, but his voice stayed even as he said, "That ordinary people do not always do nothing, and that Hermione Granger is in more danger from Slytherin House than you thought."

The lips curved, ever so barely. "So you think I have failed in my grasp of human nature. But that is hardly the only possibility, boy. Do you see the other?"

Harry furrowed his brows as he stared at the Defense Professor.

"I tire of this," the Defense Professor whispered. "You will stand there until you see it for yourself, or else leave." As though Harry had stopped existing, the Defense Professor's eyes looked back to the parchment, once more scanning back and forth.

It was six parchments later that Harry saw it, and said out loud, "You think your prediction failed because there was some other factor at work which was not in your model. Some reason why Slytherin House hates Hermione more than you realized. Like when the orbital calculations for Uranus were wrong, and the problem wasn't in Newton's Laws, it was that they didn't know about Neptune—"

The parchment vanished, and was not replaced. The head rose from its lolling position then, facing Harry more directly, and the voice which issued forth was quiet, but not toneless. "I think, boy," Professor Quirrell said softly, but in something approaching his normal voice, "that if all Slytherin House hated her so much, I would have seen it. And yet three formidable fighters of that House did something rather than nothing, at risk and at cost to themselves. What force could have moved them, or willed their motion?" The icy blue glitter of the Defense Professor's eyes met Harry's own gaze. "Some hand possessed of influence within Slytherin, perhaps. Then how would that hand have benefited itself by harm done to the girl and her followers?"

"Um..." said Harry. "It would have to be someone threatened by Hermione somehow, or someone who would get the credit if she was hurt? I don't know anyone who fits that profile, but then I don't know

much about anyone in Slytherin outside first-year." The thought was also coming to Harry that deducing a hidden mastermind from a single mildly-unexpected attack seemed like insufficient evidence to support the prior improbability of the theory; but then it *was* Professor Quirrell who was doing the deducing...

The Defense Professor was just looking at Harry, eyelids slightly lowered as though in impatience.

"And yes," said Harry, "I *am* sure that Draco Malfoy isn't behind it."

A hiss of outward air like a sigh. "He is the son of Lucius Malfoy, trained to the most exacting standards. Whatever you have seen of him, even in what seem to be unguarded moments when his mask slips and you trust that you have seen the truth beneath, even that may all be part of the face he chooses to show you."

Only if Draco successfully cast the Patronus Charm as part of keeping up the act. But Harry didn't say that, of course; instead he just grinned slightly, and said, "So either you've *really* never read Draco's mind, or that's just what you want me to think."

There was a pause. One of the hands turned over, beckoned a finger.

Harry stepped into the room. The door closed behind him.

"That was not something you should have said aloud in human speech," said Professor Quirrell's soft voice. "Legilimency, on Malfoy's heir? Did Lucius Malfoy learn of it, he would have me assassinated outright."

"He would *try*," Harry said. It should have won a crinkle of Professor Quirrell's eyes, but the Defense Professor's face was unmoving. "But sorry."

When the Defense Professor spoke again, his voice had once more become a cold whisper. "I suppose I could, and pity the assassin." His head fell back against the chair, lolled to one side, the eyes no longer meeting Harry's. "But these small games hardly hold my interest as they stand. Add Legilimency, and it ceases to be a game at all."

Harry hardly knew what to say. He'd seen Professor Quirrell in an angry mood once or twice before, but this seemed emptier, and Harry didn't know what to say to it. *What's bothering you, Professor Quirrell?* he could not ask.

"What *does* hold your interest?" Harry said a few moments later, after he'd worked it out as a safer-seeming strategy for redirecting Professor Quirrell's attention to positive things. Citing experimental results about keeping a gratitude journal as a strategy for improving life happiness didn't seem like it would be taken well.

"I will tell you what does not hold my interest," said that icy whisper. "Grading Ministry-mandated essays does not hold my interest, Mr. Potter. But I have undertaken the position of Defense Professor at Hogwarts, and I will see it through to its end." Another parchment appeared in front of Professor Quirrell's head, and his eyes began to scan it. "Reese Belka held a high position in my armies before her folly. I will offer her the chance to stay rather than being expelled, if she tells me exactly of the forces which moved her. And I shall make clear to her what will happen if she lies. I do permit myself to read faces."

The Defense Professor's finger pointed past Harry, toward the door.

"But whether you were wrong about human nature," Harry said, "or whether there's some extra force at work in Slytherin House—either way, Hermione Granger is in more danger than you predicted. Last time it was three strong fighters, so what happens after—"

"She wishes not my help, nor yours," said a soft cold voice. "I no longer find your concerns so entertaining as I once did, Mr. Potter. Go."

⁂

Somehow, even though they were all equals and she definitely wasn't in charge, it was always Hermione who ended up speaking first in this sort of situation.

The four tables of Hogwarts, the four Houses having breakfast, were glancing over at where they, the eight members of SPHEW, had gathered off to one side.

Professor Flitwick was also staring sternly at all of them from the Head Table. Hermione wasn't looking there, but she could feel Professor Flitwick's gaze on the back of her neck. *Literally* feel it. It was really creepy.

"Why'd you tell Tracey you wanted to talk to us, Mr. Potter?" said Hermione, her tone crisp.

"Professor Quirrell expelled Reese Belka from her army last night," Harry Potter said. "And from all her other after-school Defense activities. Do any of you see the significance of that? Miss Greengrass? Padma?"

Harry's eyes swept over them, as Hermione exchanged a puzzled glance with Padma, and Daphne shook her head.

"Well," Harry said quietly, "I wouldn't actually expect you to. But what it means is that you're in danger, and I don't know how much danger." The boy squared his shoulders, looking straight into Hermione's eyes. "I wasn't going to say this, but... I just wanted to offer to put you under whatever protection I could give. Make it clear to everyone that anyone who messes with you, is messing with the Boy-Who-Lived."

"Harry!" said Hermione sharply. "You *know* I don't want—"

"Some of them are *my* friends too, Hermione." Harry didn't take his eyes from hers. "And it's their decision, not yours. Padma? You told me that I owed you no debt for what I did, and that's the sort of thing a friend would say."

Hermione broke her gaze from Harry, to look at where Padma was shaking her head.

"Lavender?" Harry said. "You fought well in my army, and I'll fight for you if you wish it."

"Thank *you*, General!" Lavender said crisply. "I mean Mr. Potter. No, though. I'm a heroine and a Gryffindor, and I can fight for myself."

There was a pause.

"Parvati?" Harry said. "Susan? Hannah? Daphne? I don't know any of you so well, but it's something I would offer anyone who came to ask it of me, I think."

One by one, the other four girls shook their heads.

Hermione realized what was coming, then, but she didn't see a single thing she could do about it.

"And my loyal soldier, Chaotic Tracey?" said Harry Potter.

"*Really?*" gasped Tracey, oblivious to the stabbing glares that Hermione and every other girl were directing at her. Tracey's hands flew

artfully to her cheeks, though she didn't actually manage to blush, not that Hermione could see; and her brown eyes were, if not shining, at least opened very wide. "You'd do that? For *me?* I mean—I mean, of course, absolutely, General Chaos—"

⁂

And so it was on that very morning that Harry Potter went over to the Gryffindor table, and then the Slytherin table, and told both Houses that anyone who hurt Tracey Davis, regardless of what she was doing at the time, would, quote, learn the true meaning of Chaos, unquote.

It was with considerable restraint that Draco Malfoy managed to prevent himself from slamming his head repeatedly into his plate of toast.

They weren't exactly scientists, the bullies of Hogwarts.

But even *they*, Draco knew, were going to want to test it.

⁂

The Society for the Promotion of Heroic Equality for Witches hadn't *announced* it, it didn't seem like it would do any good to *announce* it. But they had all quietly decided (or, in the case of Lavender, been shouted into it by all seven other girls) to take a break from fighting bullies for a while, at least until their Heads of House weren't looking at them quite so sharply anymore, and older students had stopped bumping Hermione into walls.

Daphne had *told* Millicent that they were taking a break.

And so it was with some puzzlement, a few days later, that Daphne looked at the parchment delivered to her at lunch, drawn in a hand so shaky it was almost unreadable, saying:

2 this afternoon at the top of the stairs going up from the library REALLY IMPORTANT *everyone has to be there—Millicent*

Daphne looked around, but she couldn't see Millicent anywhere in the Great Hall.

"A message from your informant?" said Hermione, when Daphne told her. "That's odd— *I* didn't—"

"You didn't what?" said Daphne, after the Ravenclaw girl had stopped in mid-sentence.

The Sunshine General shook her head and said, "Listen, Daphne, I think we need to know where these messages come from before we keep following them. Look at what happened last time, how could anyone have *known* where those three bullies would be, unless they were in on it?"

"I can't say—" Daphne said. "I mean, I can't say anything, but I know where the messages come from, and I know how anyone can know."

Hermione gave Daphne a *look* that, for a moment, made the Ravenclaw girl look scarily like Professor McGonagall.

"Uh huh," said Hermione. "And do you know how Susan suddenly turned into Supergirl?"

Daphne shook her head, and said, "No, but I think it might be *really important* that if we get a message saying we should be somewhere, *everyone has to be there*." Daphne hadn't *seen* what had happened with Susan, after Daphne had tried to avert the prophecy by keeping Susan away. But she'd been *told* about it afterward, and now Daphne was afraid that...

She might have possibly...

Might possibly have Broken Something...

"Uh huh," said Hermione, who was doing the McGonagall Stare again.

Nobody seemed to know where it had started, who had started it. If you'd tried tracing it afterward, tracked it back word by word and mutter by mutter, you probably would have found it all going in a huge circle.

Peregrine Derrick was tapped on his shoulder as he left Potions that morning.

Jaime Astorga heard a whisper in his ear at lunch.

Robert Jugson III discovered a tiny folded note under his plate.

Carl Sloper overheard two older Gryffindors whispering about it, and they gave him significant glances as they walked past.

Nobody seemed to know where the word began, or who had first spoken it, but it named the place, and it named the time, and it said that the color would be white.

"Every single one of you had better be absolutely clear on this," said Susan Bones. The Hufflepuff girl, or whatever strange power had possessed her, wasn't even *pretending* to act normal anymore. The round-faced girl was striding through the halls with a firm, confident gait. "If we get there and it's just one bully, that's fine, you can fight them the regular way. My mysterious superpowers won't activate if there are no innocents in danger. But if five seventh-year bullies jump out of a closet, you know what you do? That's right, you *run away* and let me fight them. Finding a teacher is optional, the important thing is that you *run away* as soon as I create an opening. In a fight like that you are *liabilities*. You are *civilian targets* I have to worry about protecting. So you will get away as fast as possible and you *will not try* to do *anything* heroic or so help me, the hour you get out of your healer's beds I will *personally* show up and *kick your asses* right back in. Are we all clear on that?"

"Yes," squeaked most of the girls, though in Hannah's case it came out, "Yes, Lady Susan!"

"*Don't* call me that," snapped Susan. "And *I don't think I heard you, Miss Brown!* I'm warning you, I have friends who write plays and if you do anything dumb, posterity will remember you as Lavender, the Amazing Stupid Hostage."

(Hermione was beginning to worry about just how many other Hogwarts students besides Harry had mysterious dark sides, and whether *she* was likely to develop one if she kept hanging out with them.)

"Alright, Captain Bones," said Lavender in an unusually respectful tone, as they turned another corner along the shortest way to the library, passing through a rather large corridor studded with six sets of double

doors, three sets on either side. "Can I ask if there's any way for *me* to become a double witch?"

"Sign up for the Auror preparation program in your sixth year," said Susan. "It's the next best thing. Oh, and if a famous Auror offers to oversee your summer internship, just ignore anyone who warns you that he's a terrible influence or that you're almost certainly going to die."

Lavender was nodding rapidly. "Got it, got it."

(Padma, who hadn't actually been there last time, was giving Susan *very* skeptical looks.)

Then Susan suddenly stopped in place and her wand snapped up and she said, "*Protego Maximus!*"

A jolt of adrenaline went through Hermione, she was instantly drawing her wand and spinning around—

But she couldn't see anything wrong, through the greater blue haze now surrounding them all.

The other girls, who had likewise pulled into formation, were also looking puzzled.

"Sorry!" said Susan. "Sorry, girls. Give me a moment to check this place out. Thinking of a certain person has just reminded me that this hall we're in right now, with all those doors, would be an *excellent* place for an ambush."

There was a moment of silence.

"Now," said a harsh male voice, blurred into unidentifiability by a buzzing undertone.

All six sets of double doors slammed open.

White robes filed silently forward, all-concealing white robes without marks of House affiliation and white cloth hiding the faces beneath the hoods. They marched out, and marched out, crowding the great corridor in numbers too high to count easily. Less than fifty robes, probably. Certainly more than thirty. All of them already surrounded by blue haze.

Susan said some Extremely Bad Words, so awful that at almost any other time, Hermione would have noticed.

"That message!" Daphne cried in sudden horror. "It *wasn't* from—"

"Millicent Bulstrode?" said the voice and its buzzing undertone. "No, it wasn't. You see, Miss Greengrass, if the same girl sends off a Slytherin message every day you fight a bully, pretty soon someone else will notice. We'll have a talk with her after we're done with you."

"Miss Susan," said Hannah in a voice just starting to quaver, "can you be super enough to—"

Wands rose in many hands. There came a series of blinding flashes of green light, a massive volley of shieldbreakers, at the end of which there was no more protective blue dome surrounding them, and Susan had fallen to her knees, clutching her head.

Barriers of solid blackness had sprung into being at both ends of the corridor. Behind the double doors that Hermione could see into, there were only unused classrooms, very dead ends.

"No," said the male voice with that buzz overlaid, "she can't. In case you haven't noticed, you've gotten quite a lot of people very angry at you and we have no intention of losing this time. All right everyone, prepare to fire."

The wands around the perimeter aimed again, low enough that their enemies wouldn't hit each other if they missed.

And then another male voice, with a similar buzz accompanying it, suddenly said "*Homenum Revelio!*"

An instant later there was another massive volley of shieldbreakers and hexes, fired on reflex at the suddenly revealed figure, shattering the shields which had almost immediately begun to form around it—

And then, as that same figure fell to the ground, a stunned silence.

"*Professor Snape?*" said the second voice. "*He's* the one who's been interfering?"

It was the Potions Master of Hogwarts who now lay unconscious on the stone floor, the dirt-spotted robes stirring for a final moment before they settled in place, his fallen hand outstretched toward where his wand was slowly rolling away.

"No," said the first male voice, now sounding a bit more uncertain. Then it rallied, "No, that can't possibly be it. He heard us passing the word, of course, and came along to make sure nobody screwed it up again. We'll wake him up afterward and apologize and he'll Memory-

Charm the children so they don't remember, he's a Professor so he can do that. Anyway, we should make sure we're *really* alone now. *Veritas Oculum!*"

Fully two dozen different Charms must have been spoken, then, but no more invisible people showed up. One of them in particular made Hermione's heart sink; she recognized it as the Charm which had been listed alongside the description of the True Cloak of Invisibility, which would not reveal the Cloak, but would tell you whether it or certain other artifacts were nearby.

"Girls?" whispered Susan. She was slowly pushing herself to her feet, though Hermione could see her limbs swaying and quivering. "Girls, I'm sorry for what I said before. If you've got anything clever and heroic to try, you might as well try it."

"Oh, yeah," Tracey Davis said then, her voice trembling. "I almost *forgot*." The Slytherin girl raised her voice, and spoke.

"Hey, all of you!" yelled Tracey in a high-pitched shaky shout. "Hey, are you planning to hurt me too?"

"Yes, actually," said the buzzing voice of the leader. "We are."

"I'm under Harry Potter's protection, you know! Anyone who tries to hurt me will learn the true meaning of Chaos! So are you going to let me go?" It should have sounded defiant. It came out sounding terrified.

There was a pause. Some of the hoods of the robes turned to face each other, then turned back to face the girls.

"Hm..." said the buzzing male voice. "Hm... no."

Tracey Davis put her wand away into her robes.

Slowly, deliberately, she raised her right hand high in the air, and pressed her thumb and forefingers together.

"Go ahead," said that voice.

Tracey Davis snapped her fingers.

There was a long, awful pause.

Nothing happened.

"Yes, well," said the voice—

Tracey said, her voice sounding even higher and shakier, "*Acathla, mundatus sum*." Her hand, stretching up still further, snapped its fingers a second time.

A nameless chill went down Hermione's spine then, a frisson of fear and disorientation like she'd just felt the floor tilt beneath her, threatening to spill her into some darkness lying beneath.

"What's she—" began a buzzing female voice.

Tracey's face looked pale, twisted with fear, but her lips moved, spilled forth sound in a high chant, "*Mabra, brahoring, mabra...*"

A chill wind seemed to spring up within the confines of the corridor, a dark breath that caressed their faces and touched their hands with ice.

"Fire at her on my count!" shouted the leading voice. "One, two, *three!*" and maybe-forty voices roared spells, creating a huge concentric array of fiery bolts that lit the wide corridor brighter than the Sun—

—for the short moment before the bolts struck and vanished upon a dark red octagon that appeared in the air around the girls, and then disappeared a moment later.

Hermione saw it, she saw it but she still couldn't imagine it; she couldn't imagine a Shielding Charm that powerful, a spell that would withstand an army.

And Tracey's voice went on chanting, her voice sounding louder and more confident, and her face screwed up like she was trying to remember something *very exactly*.

"Shuffle, duffle, muzzle, muff.
Fista, wista, mista-cuff."

Now all those present could feel it, heroines and bullies alike, the sensation of some dark will pressing down on them, a tingling in the air as something built and built and built. All the blue hazes around the white robes, all the shielding spells, had died out without any visible hex touching them. There were more flashes of light as more desperate spells were fired, but they fizzled out in midair like candle-flames touching water.

The black barriers at the two ends of the corridor had dissipated like smoke beneath the growing pressure, but their evaporation revealed the exits sealed, blocked by tiled slats of dark metal that looked stained as though with blood; and as Tracey chanted "*Lemarchand, Lament,*

Lemarchand," a dreadful blue light began to shine out from beneath the metal slats and between them; and the six sets of double doors slammed shut all at once, as panicked white-robed bullies began to pound on them and howl.

Then Tracey's hand slashed to her left, and she cried "*Khornath!*", then her hand pointed below her and "*Slaaneth!*", above her "*Nurgolth!*", and then, to her right, "*Tzintchi!*"

Tracey paused, took a deep breath; and Hermione found her voice and cried, "*Stop! Tracey, stop!*"

But there was a strange wild smile on Tracey's face. She raised her hand still higher, and snapped her fingers a third time; and when she spoke again, beneath her high girlish voice there was an undertone as though some lower chorus were chanting along with her.

"Darkness beyond darkness, deeper than pitchest black.
Buried beneath the flow of time...
From darkness to darkness, your voice echoes in the emptiness."

"*What are you doing?*" shrieked Parvati, and the Gryffindor girl stretched out a hand as though to pull down the Slytherin, who was now starting to float upward into the air; and both Daphne and Susan grabbed Parvati's arm at the same time and Daphne cried out, "Don't, we don't know what will happen if the ritual is interrupted!"

"*Well what happens if it gets completed?*" screamed Hermione, as close as she'd ever come to total brain meltdown.

Susan's face was white as chalk, and she whispered, "I'm sorry, Mad-Eye..."

And Tracey spoke on, her body floating higher and higher off the floor, her black hair whipping wildly around her in the chill winds.

"You who know the gate, who are the gate, the key and guardian of the gate:
I bid you open the way for him, and manifest his power before me!"

The corridor was plunged then into utter darkness and silence, so that only Tracey could be seen and heard, like there was nothing left in the universe except her and the light illuminating her from some nameless source.

The shining girl raised her hand one final time, and with dreadful gravity, pressed her thumb and forefinger together.

And within the darkness Hermione looked at Tracey's face and saw that the Slytherin girl's eyes were now, to the exact shade, the green of Harry Potter's.

"Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres!
Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres!
Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres!"

There was a snap like thunder, and then—

Harry had chosen to assume a rather relaxed posture, as he sat in a low chair before the mighty desk of the Headmaster of Hogwarts: one leg cocked over his knee, and his arms sprawling casually to either side. Harry was doing his best to disregard the noise from the surrounding devices, although the one directly behind him that sounded like an owl hooting desperately as it was put through a woodchipper was pretty difficult to ignore.

"Harry," the old wizard said from behind the desk, the aged voice level as the blue eyes stared out at him from beneath the shining half-moon spectacles. Headmaster Dumbledore had garbed himself in robes of midnight purple; not true formal black, but dark enough to come close indeed to deadly seriousness, as the wizarding world counted the meaning of fashions. "Were you... *responsible* for this?"

"I cannot deny that my influence was at work," Harry said.

The old wizard took off his glasses, leaned forward to stare at Harry directly, blue eyes to green. "I will ask you one question," the Headmaster said in a quiet voice. "Do you think that what you did today was—*appropriate?*"

"They were bullies and they came to that hallway with the direct intent of hurting Hermione Granger and seven other first-year children," Harry said levelly. "If I am not too young for moral judgment, then

neither are they. No, Headmaster, they didn't deserve to die. But they *did* deserve to be stripped naked and glued to the ceiling."

The old wizard put his glasses back on. For the first time that Harry had seen of him, the Headmaster seemed to be at a loss for words. "As Merlin himself is my witness," said Dumbledore, "I haven't the faintest notion of how I ought to react to this."

"That's pretty much the effect I was aiming for," said Harry. He felt like he ought to be whistling a merry tune, but unfortunately he had never learned how to whistle reliably.

"I need not ask you who is *directly* responsible," said the Headmaster. "Only three wizards within Hogwarts might be powerful enough. I myself did not do it. Severus has assured me he was not involved. And the third..." The Headmaster shook his head in some dismay. "You loaned the Defense Professor your Cloak, Harry. I do not think that was wise. For now that he has escaped detection by simple Charms, he surely knows that it is a Deathly Hallow—if, indeed, he did not know from its first touch upon his flesh."

"Professor Quirrell had already deduced my possession of an invisibility cloak," Harry said. "And knowing him, he has probably guessed that it is a Deathly Hallow. But in *this* case, Headmaster, it so happens that Professor Quirrell was under one of those face-concealing white robes."

There was another pause.

"How very cunning," said the Headmaster. He leaned back in his throne and sighed. "I have spoken to the Defense Professor. Just before you, indeed. I did not quite know what to say. I told him that this was not the approved Hogwarts policy for dealing with infractions of hallway discipline, and that I did not feel it was appropriate for a Hogwarts professor to do what he had done."

"And what did Professor Quirrell say to that?" said Harry, who was not impressed with Hogwarts's current policies for enforcing hallway discipline.

The Headmaster wore a look of resignation. "He said: *Fire me.*"

Somehow Harry managed not to cheer out loud.

The Headmaster frowned. "But *why* did he do it, Harry?"

"Because Professor Quirrell doesn't like school bullies and I asked very politely," said Harry. *And he was feeling bored and I thought this might cheer him up.* "Either that or it's part of some incredibly deep plot."

The Headmaster rose up from behind the desk, began to pace back and forth before the hatstand that held the Sorting Hat and the red slippers. "Harry, do you not feel that all of this has gotten a bit..."

"Awesome?" offered Harry.

"*Utterly and completely out of hand* would say it better," said Dumbledore. "I am not sure there has ever been a time in the whole history of this school when things have become so, so... I don't have a word for this, Harry, because things have never become like this before, and so no one has ever needed to invent a word for it."

Harry would have tried to invent words to express how deeply complimented he felt, if he hadn't been snerkling too hard to speak.

The Headmaster was regarding him with increasing graveness. "Harry, do you understand *at all* why I find these events concerning?"

"Honestly?" said Harry. "No, not really. I mean, of course Professor McGonagall would object to anything that breaks up the dull monotony of the Hogwarts school experience. But then Professor McGonagall wouldn't set a chicken on fire."

The frown lines deepened on Dumbledore's wrinkled face. "That, Harry, is not what disturbs me," the Headmaster said quietly. "There was a full battle fought in these halls!"

"Headmaster," Harry said, trying to keep his voice carefully respectful, "Professor Quirrell and I did not choose for that battle to happen. The bullies did that. *We* just decided to have the Light side win. I know there are times where the boundaries of morality are uncertain, but in this case the line separating the villains and the heroines was twenty meters tall and drawn in white fire. Our intervention may have been *weird*, but it certainly wasn't *wrong*—"

Dumbledore had gone back to his desk, sat down in his padded throne with a dull thump, and was now covering his face with both his hands.

"Am I missing something here?" Harry said. "I thought you'd be secretly on our side, Headmaster. It was the Gryffindor thing to do. The Weasley twins would approve, *Fawkes* would approve—" Harry glanced at the golden perch, but it was empty; either the phoenix had more important things to do, or the Headmaster hadn't invited him to today's meeting.

"That," said the Headmaster in an old and tired and somewhat muffled voice, "is precisely the problem, Harry. There is a reason why courageous young heroes are not put in charge of schools."

"All right," Harry said. He couldn't quite keep the skepticism out of his voice. "What am I missing this time?"

The old wizard lifted his head, his face now solemn, and calmer. "Listen, Harry," said Dumbledore, "hear me well; for all who wield power must learn this in time. Some things in this world are, indeed, truly simple. If you pick up a stone and drop it again, the earth will be no heavier for it, the stars will not move from their paths. I say this, Harry, so that you know I am not pretending to be wise, when I tell you that even as some things are simple, others are complex. There are greater wizardries which leave marks upon the world, and marks upon those who wield them, as a simple Charm would *not*. Those wizardries demand hesitation, consideration of consequence, a moment to weigh the meaning of their marks. And yet the most intricate magics known to me are simpler than the simplest soul. *People*, Harry, people are always marked, by what they do and by what is done to them. Do you, then, understand how to say, 'Here is the line between hero and villain!' is not enough to say that what you did was right?"

"Headmaster," Harry said evenly, "this is not a decision I made at random. No, I don't know what exact effect this will have on every single one of the bullies present. But if I always waited for perfect information before I acted, I would never do anything. When it comes to the future psychological development of, say, Peregrine Derrick, beating up eight first-year girls probably wouldn't have been good for him. And it wasn't enough to just stop them quietly and quickly, since then they would just try again later; they had to see that there was a protective power worth fearing." Harry's voice stayed level. "But of course, since I

am a good guy, I didn't want to permanently injure them or even cause them any pain; and yet the penalty had to be enough to weigh on the minds of anyone thinking about trying it again. So, after weighing the expected outcomes as best I could with my boundedly rational intellect, I thought it would be wisest to strip the bullies naked and glue them to the ceiling."

The young hero stared directly into the old wizard's gaze, unflinching green eyes locked with the blue behind the spectacles.

And since I wasn't there and didn't do anything personally, there's no lawful way to punish me under the Hogwarts school rules; the only one who acted was Professor Quirrell, and he's fireproof. And just breaking the rules to get at me wouldn't be a wise thing to do to the hero you're grooming to fight Lord Voldemort... This time Harry actually *had* tried to think through all the ramifications in advance, before he'd made the suggestion to Professor Quirrell; and for once the Defense Professor hadn't called him a fool, just slowly smiled and then begun to laugh.

"I understand your intentions, Harry," the old wizard said. "You think you have taught the bullies of Hogwarts a lesson. But if Peregrine Derrick could learn that lesson, he would not be Peregrine Derrick. He will only be provoked more by what you do—it is not fair, it is not right, but that is the way it is." The old wizard closed his eyes, as though in brief pain, and then opened them again. "Harry, the most painful truth any hero must learn is that the right cannot, should not, must not win every battle. All of this began when Miss Granger fought three older enemies and won. If she had been content with this, the echoes of her deed would have died away in time. Yet instead she banded together with her classmates and raised her wand in open challenge to Peregrine Derrick and all his kind; and his kind cannot but raise their own wands in answer. So Jaime Astorga went hunting her, and in the natural course he would have beaten her; it would have been a sad day, but it would have ended there. There is not enough magic in eight first-year witches all together to defeat such a foe. But you could not accept that, Harry, could not let Miss Granger learn her own lessons; and so you sent the Defense Professor to watch over them invisibly, and pierce Astorga's shields when Daphne Greengrass struck at him—"

What? thought Harry.

The old wizard went on speaking. "Each time you intervened, Harry, it escalated matters further and yet further. Soon Miss Granger was facing Robert Jugson himself, the son of a Death Eater, with two strong allies at his side. Painful indeed it would have been for her, if Miss Granger had lost that battle. And yet again by your will and Quirinus's hand, this time shown more openly, she won."

Harry was still struggling with the notion of the Defense Professor watching invisibly over SPHEW, guarding the heroines from harm.

"And so," the old wizard finished, "that is how we came to today, Harry, to forty-four students attacking eight first-year witches. A full battle in these halls! I know it was not your intent, but you must accept some measure of responsibility. Such things did not happen before you came to this school, not through all my decades in Hogwarts; neither when I was a student nor when I was a Professor."

"Thank you very much," Harry said evenly. "Though I think Professor Quirrell deserves more credit than me."

The blue eyes widened. "Harry..."

"Those bullies were attacking victims long before this year," Harry said. Despite his best efforts, his voice was starting to rise. "But nobody seems to have taught the students that they're allowed to fight *back*. I know it's much harder to *ignore* a two-sided fight than some helpless victims getting hexed or almost pushed out of windows, but it's not exactly *worse*, is it? I wish I'd read more of Godric Gryffindor's writings so I could quote him, there's got to be something in there about this. Open battle may be *louder* than the victims suffering in silence, it may be harder to pretend that nothing is happening, but the final result is better—"

"No, it is not," Dumbledore said. "It is not, Harry. To *always* fight the darkness, to *never* let evil pass unchallenged—that is not heroism, but simple pride. Even Godric Gryffindor did not think that every war was worth fighting, though he went his whole life from one battle to another." The old wizard's voice went quieter. "In truth, Harry, the words you speak—they are not evil. No, not evil, and yet they have frightened me. You are one who might someday wield great power, over

wizardry, over your fellow wizards. And if, come that day, you still think that evil must never pass unchallenged—" Now a note of real worry had entered the Headmaster's voice. "The world has grown more fragile since the age when Hogwarts was raised; I fear it cannot bear the fury of another Godric Gryffindor. And he was slower to his wrath than you." The old wizard shook his head. "You are too ready to fight, Harry. Much too ready to fight, and Hogwarts itself is becoming a more violent place around you."

"Well," Harry said carefully, after weighing his words. "I don't know if it will help to say this, but I think you're getting the wrong impression of what I'm all about. I don't like real fighting either. It's scary, and violent, and somebody might get hurt. But I *didn't* fight today, Headmaster."

The Headmaster frowned. "You sent the Defense Professor in your place—"

"Professor Quirrell didn't do any fighting either," Harry said calmly. "There wasn't anyone there strong enough to fight him. What happened today wasn't fighting, it was winning."

It was a while then before the old wizard spoke. "That may be as it may be," the Headmaster said, "but all these conflicts must end. I can hear the strain in the air, and with each of these clashes, it rises. All this must end, decisively and soon; you must not stand in the way of its ending."

The old wizard gestured toward the great oaken door of his office, and Harry departed through it.

*

It was with some surprise that Harry stepped out from between the huge grey gargoyles which had made way for him, and saw that Quirinus Quirrell was still slumped against the stone of the corridor wall, a thick thread of spittle drooling from his slack mouth onto his Professorial robes, in just the same position he'd occupied when Harry had first gone up into the Headmaster's office.

Harry waited, but the slumped man didn't rise up; and after long awkward seconds, Harry began to walk down the corridor again.

"Mr. Potter?" came a soft call, after Harry had turned two corners; a quiet voice carrying unnaturally through the halls.

When Harry had returned he found Professor Quirrell still slumped against the wall, but the pale eyes now watched him with keen intelligence.

I'm sorry to have tired you out—

It was something that Harry couldn't say. He'd noticed the correlation between the effort Professor Quirrell expended and the time he had to spend 'resting'. But Harry had reasoned that if the effort was too painful or detrimental, surely Professor Quirrell would just say no. Now Harry was wondering if that reasoning had actually been correct, and if not, how to apologize...

The Defense Professor spoke in a quiet voice, the rest of the body unmoving. "How went your meeting with the Headmaster, Mr. Potter?"

"I'm not sure," Harry said. "Not the way I predicted. He seems to believe the Light should lose a lot more often than I'd consider wise. Plus I'm not sure he understands the difference between trying to fight and trying to win. It explains a lot, actually..." Harry hadn't read much about the Wizarding War, but he'd read enough to know that the good guys probably *had* acquired a pretty accurate picture of who most of the worst Death Eaters were, and *hadn't* just owled them all hand grenades over the course of five minutes.

A soft, soft laugh from the pale lips. "Dumbledore does not comprehend the enjoyment of winning, just as he does not comprehend the enjoyment of the game. Tell me, Mr. Potter. Did you suggest this little plan with the deliberate intention of relieving my tedium?"

"That was among my many motives," Harry said, because some instinct had warned that he couldn't just say *Yes*.

"Do you know," the Defense Professor said in soft reflective tones, "there are those who have tried to soften my darker moods, and those who have indeed participated in brightening my day, but you are the first person ever to succeed in doing it deliberately?" The Defense Professor seemed to straighten up from the wall with a peculiar motion which

might have included magic as well as muscle; and the Defense Professor began to walk away without a look back in Harry's direction. Only a single small gesture of one finger indicated that Harry was to follow.

"I particularly enjoyed that chant you composed for Miss Davis," said Professor Quirrell after they had walked a short distance. "Though you might have been wiser to consult me in advance, before giving it to her to memorize." One hand bestirred itself to within the Defense Professor's robes and drew forth a wand, which traced a small gesture in the air, after which all the faraway sounds of the castle Hogwarts fell silent. "Tell me honestly, Mr. Potter, have you somehow acquired a familiarity with the theory of Dark rituals? That is not the same as confessing an intent to cast them; many wizards know the principles."

"No..." Harry said slowly. He had decided some time ago against trying to sneak into the Restricted Section of the Hogwarts library, for much the same reason he'd decided a year earlier *not* to look up how to make explosives out of common household materials. Harry prided himself on at least having *more* sense than people thought he did.

"Oh?" said Professor Quirrell. The man was walking more normally now, and the lips curved about in a peculiar smile. "Why, perhaps you possess a natural talent for the field, then."

"Yes, well," Harry said wearily. "I suppose Dr. Seuss also has a natural talent for Dark rituals, because the part about *shuffle, duffle, muzzle, muff* came from a children's book called *Bartholomew and the Oobleck*—"

"No, not that part," said Professor Quirrell. His voice grew a little stronger, took on some of its normal lecturing tone. "An ordinary Charm, Mr. Potter, can be cast merely by speaking certain words, making precise motions of the wand, expending some of your own strength. Even powerful spells may be invoked in this way, if the magic is efficient as well as efficacious. But with the greatest of magics, speech alone does not suffice to give them structure. You must perform specific actions, make significant choices. Nor is the temporary expenditure of your own strength sufficient to set them in motion; a ritual requires permanent sacrifice. The power of such a greater spell, compared to ordinary Charms, can be like day compared to night. But many rituals—indeed, most—happen to demand at least one sacrifice which might inspire squeamish-

ness. And so the entire field of ritual magic, containing all the furthest and most interesting reaches of wizardry, is widely regarded as Dark. With a few exceptions carved out by tradition, of course." Professor Quirrell's voice took on a sardonic tinge. "The Unbreakable Vow is too useful to certain wealthy Houses to be outlawed entirely—even though to bind a man's will through all his days is indeed a dread and terrible act, more fearsome than many lesser rituals that wizards shun. A cynic might conclude that which rituals are prohibited is not so much a matter of morality, as habit. But I digress..." Professor Quirrell made a brief coughing sound, a clearing of his throat. "The Unbreakable Vow requires three participants and three sacrifices. The one who receives the Unbreakable Vow must be one who could have come to trust the Vower, but chooses instead to demand the Vow from them, and they sacrifice that possibility of trust. The one who makes the Vow must be someone who could have chosen to do what the Vow demands of them, and they sacrifice that capacity for choice. And the third wizard, the binder, permanently sacrifices a small portion of their own magic, to sustain the Vow forever."

"Ah," Harry said. "I'd *wondered* why that spell wasn't used all over the place, every time two people have difficulty trusting each other... although... why don't wizards on their deathbeds charge money to bind Unbreakable Vows, and use that to leave an inheritance for their children—"

"Because they are stupid," said Professor Quirrell. "There are hundreds of useful rituals which could be performed if men had so much sense; I could name twenty without stopping to draw breath. But in any case, Mr. Potter, the thing about such rituals—whether or not you choose to term them Dark—is that they are shaped to be magically efficacious, not to appear impressive when performed. I suppose there is a certain tendency for the more powerful rituals to require more dreadful sacrifices. Even so, the most terrible ritual known to me demands only a rope which has hanged a man and a sword which has slain a woman; and that for a ritual which promised to summon Death itself—though what is truly meant by that I do not know and do not care to discover, since it was also said that the counterspell to dismiss Death had been lost. The

most dread chant I have encountered does not sound even a hundredth as fearsome as the chant you composed for Miss Davis. Those among the bullies who had a passing familiarity with Dark rituals—and I am certain that there were some—must have been terrified beyond the capacity of words to describe. If there existed a true ritual which appeared that impressive, Mr. Potter, it would melt the Earth."

"Um," said Harry.

Professor Quirrell's lips twisted further. "Ah, but the truly amusing thing was this. You see, Mr. Potter, the chant of every ritual names that which is to be sacrificed, and that which is to be gained. The chant which you gave to Miss Davis spoke, first, of a darkness beyond darkness, buried beneath the flow of time, whose voice echoes in the emptiness, which knows the gate, and is the gate. And the second thing spoken of, Mr. Potter, was the manifestation of your own presence. And always, in each element of the ritual, *first* is named that which is sacrificed, and *then* is said the use commanded of it."

"I... see," said Harry, as he trod through the halls of Hogwarts after Professor Quirrell, following him toward the Defense Professor's office. "So my chant, the way I wrote it, implies that the Outer God, Yog-Sothoth—"

"Was permanently sacrificed to fuel a ritual which but briefly manifested your presence," said Professor Quirrell. "I suppose we will discover tomorrow whether anyone took that seriously, when we read the newspapers and see whether all the magical nations of the world are banding together in a desperate effort to seal off your incursion into our reality."

They walked on, as the Defense Professor began chuckling, odd throaty sounds.

The two of them didn't talk after that until they came to the Defense Professor's office, and then the man halted with his hand upon the door.

"It is a very strange thing," the Defense Professor said, his voice now soft again, almost inaudible. The man was not looking at Harry, and Harry saw only his back. "A very strange thing... There was a time when I would have sacrificed a finger from my wand hand, to work upon the bullies of Hogwarts as we have worked upon them this day. To

make them fear me as they now fear you, to have the deference of all the students and the adoration of many, I would have given my finger for that. You have everything now that I wanted then. All that I know of human nature says that I should hate you. And yet I do not. It is a very strange thing."

It should have been a touching moment, but instead Harry felt a coldness traveling down his spine, as though he were a little fish in the sea, and some vast white shark had just looked him over and decided after a visible hesitation not to eat him.

The man opened the door to Defense Professor's office, and passed within, and was gone.

⁂

Aftermath:

Her fellow Slytherins were looking at Daphne like... like they didn't have the faintest idea of how to look at her.

The Gryffindors were looking at her like they didn't have the faintest idea of how to look at her.

Showing no fear, Daphne Greengrass strode into the Potions classroom, wrapped in the imperious dignity of a Noble and Most Ancient House. Inside she was feeling much the same way everyone else probably did.

It had been two hours since the *What?* when the *What?* had happened and Daphne's brain was still going: *What? What? What?*

The classroom was quiet as they all waited for Professor Snape to arrive. Lavender and Parvati sat near a cluster of other Gryffindors, surrounded by silent stares. The two of them were looking over each other's homework before class started, and nobody else was helping them or talking to them. Even Lavender, who Daphne would have sworn could never be fazed by anything, seemed subdued.

Daphne sat down at her desk, and took *Magical Draughts and Potions* out of her bag, and began looking over her own homework, doing her very best to act normal. People stared at her, and said nothing—

A gasp went through the whole classroom. Girls and boys flinched back, leaning away from the door like they were stalks of wheat touched by a gust of wind.

In the door stood Tracey Davis, wrapped in a black tattered cloak which had been draped over her Hogwarts uniform.

Tracey walked slowly into the classroom, swaying slightly with each step, looking like she was trying to *drift*. She sat down at her accustomed desk, which happened to be right next to Daphne's.

Slowly Tracey's head turned to stare at Daphne.

"See?" the Slytherin girl said in a low, sepulchral tone. "I told you I'd get him before she did."

"What?" blurted Daphne, who immediately wished she hadn't said anything.

"I got Harry Potter before Granger did." Tracey's voice was still low, but her eyes were gleaming with triumph. "See, Daphne, what General Potter wants in a girl isn't a pretty face or a pretty dress. He wants a girl willing to channel his dread powers, that's what he wants. Now I'm his—and he's mine!"

This announcement produced a frozen silence through the whole classroom.

"Excuse me, Miss Davis," said the cultured voice of Draco Malfoy, who seemed unconcerned as he shuffled through his own Potions parchments. The other scion of a Most Ancient House didn't so much as glance up from his desk, even as everyone else turned to look at him. "Did Harry Potter actually *tell* you that? Using those words?"

"Well, no..." Tracey said, and then her eyes flashed angrily. "But he'd *better* take me in, now that I've sacrificed my soul to him and everything!"

"*You sacrificed your soul to Harry Potter?*" gasped Millicent. There was a clatter from the other side of the room as Ron Weasley dropped his inkwell.

"Well, I'm pretty sure I did," said Tracey, sounding briefly uncertain before she rallied. "I mean, I looked at myself in a mirror and I look paler now, and I can always feel darkness surrounding me, and I was a conduit for his dread powers and everything... Daphne, you also saw my eyes go green, right? I didn't see it myself but that's what I heard afterward."

There was a pause, broken only by the sounds of Ron Weasley trying to clean up his desk.

"Daphne?" said Tracey.

"I don't believe it," said an angry voice. "There's no way the next Dark Lord would take *you* to be his bride!"

Slowly, and with considerable disbelief, heads turned to stare at Pansy Parkinson.

"Hush, you," said Tracey, "or I'll..." The Slytherin girl paused. Then Tracey's voice went even lower, and she said, "Hush, you, or I'll devour your soul."

"You can't do that," said Pansy, in the confident tones of a hen which had worked out a perfectly good pecking order where she was at the top, and wasn't about to go updating that belief based on mere evidence.

Slowly, like she was trying to float, Tracey got up from her desk. There were more gasps. Daphne felt like she'd been Petrified in place within her chair.

"Tracey?" said Lavender in a small voice. "Please don't do all that again. Please?"

Now Pansy was showing definite nervousness as Tracey swayed toward her desk. "What d'you think you're doing?" Pansy said, not quite managing to sound indignant.

"I told you," Tracey said menacingly. "I'm going to devour your soul."

Tracey bent down over Pansy, who sat frozen at her desk; and, with their lips almost touching, made a loud inhaling noise.

"There!" said Tracey as she straightened. "I ate your soul."

"No you didn't!" said Pansy.

"Did too!" said Tracey.

There was a very slight pause—

"Merlin, she *did!*" cried Theodore Nott. "You look all pale now, and your eyes seem empty!"

"*What?*" screeched Pansy, turning pale. The girl leapt up from her desk and began frantically rummaging through her bookbag. After Pansy drew out a mirror and looked at herself, she turned even paler.

Daphne abandoned all pretense of aristocratic poise and let her head fall to the desk with a dull thud, as she wondered whether going to the same school as all the other important families was really worth going to the same school as the Chaos Legion.

"Ooh, you're in trouble now, Pansy," said Seamus Finnigan. "I don't know exactly what happens when a Dementor Kisses you, but if Tracey Davis kisses you that's probably even worse."

"I've heard about people without souls," Dean Thomas said gloomily. "They have to dress all in black, and they write awful poetry, and nothing ever makes them happy. They're all *angsty*."

"I don't want to be angsty!" cried Pansy.

"Too bad," said Dean Thomas. "You've got to be, now that your soul's gone."

Pansy turned, and stretched out a begging hand toward Draco Malfoy's desk. "Draco!" she said pleadingly. "Mr. Malfoy! Please, make Tracey give me back my soul!"

"I can't," said Tracey. "I *ate* it."

"Make her throw it up!" yelled Pansy.

The heir of Malfoy had slumped forward, resting his head in both hands, so that nobody could see his face. "Why is my life like this?" said Draco Malfoy.

A wild babble of whispers started up as Tracey returned to her desk, now smiling in satisfaction, while Pansy stood in the midst of the classroom, wringing her hands and tears starting from her eyes—

"Be. Quiet."

The soft, lethal voice seemed to fill the whole classroom as Professor Snape stalked in through the door. His face was angrier than Daphne had ever seen it, sending a jolt of genuine fear down her spine. Hastily she looked down at her homework.

"Sit down, Parkinson," the Potions Master hissed, "and you, Davis, take off that ridiculous cloak—"

"*Professor Snaaaaaape!*" wailed Pansy Parkinson in tears. "*Tracey ate my sooouuul!*"

CHAPTER SEVENTY-FIVE

SELF-ACTUALIZATION, FINALE: RESPONSIBILITY

It was a looping, meandering alley in the midst of Hogwarts, wandering like a stray lock of hair; sometimes crossing itself, it seemed, but you couldn't ever get to the end if you gave into the temptation of apparent shortcuts.

At the end of the tangle, six students leaned against rough stones, robes black against the grey walls and trimmed in green, eyes darting from one to each other. Torches burned in the windowless sconce, casting light to ward off the darkness and heat to ward off the chill of the Slytherin dungeons.

"I am *certain,*" Reese Belka snapped, "absolutely *certain,* that was no true ritual. Little firstie witches can't do that kind of magic, and even if they could, who's ever heard of a Dark ritual which *sacrifices* a sealed horror for—*that?*"

"Were you—" said Lucian Bole. "I mean—after that girl snapped her fingers—"

Belka's glare should have melted him. "No," she spat, "I was *not.*"

"That is, she wasn't naked," drawled Marcus Flint, his broad shoulders leaning back in apparent relaxation against the lumpy stone surface. "Covered in chocolate frosting, yes, but not naked."

"This day Potter has offered great insult to our Houses," said the grim voice of Jaime Astorga.

"Yes, well, I'm sorry to be blunt," Randolph Lee said evenly. The seventh-year duelist rubbed at his chin, where a faint fuzz of beard had been allowed to grow. "But when someone sticks you to the ceiling, it's a

message, Astorga. It's a message which says: I'm an incredibly powerful Dark Wizard who could've done anything to you I damn well pleased, and I don't care if your House is offended, either."

Robert Jugson III gave a soft, low laugh at this, a chuckle that sent chills down several spines. "It makes you wonder if you picked the wrong side, doesn't it? I've heard tales about *messages* like that, sent at the old Dark Lord's bidding..."

"I'm not ready to kneel to Potter just yet," said Astorga, staring hard into Jugson's eyes.

"Neither am I," said Belka.

Jugson was holding his wand, and he turned it idly back and forth in his fingers, pointing it up and then downward. "Are you a Gryffindor or a Slytherin?" said Jugson. "Everyone's got a price. Everyone smart."

This statement produced a moment of silence.

"Shouldn't Malfoy be here?" Bole said tentatively.

Flint gave a dismissive flick of his fingers. "Whatever Malfoy's plotting, he wants to put on an air of innocence. He can't be seen missing at the same time as us."

"But everyone *knows* that already," said Bole. "Even in the other Houses."

"Yes, very clumsy," said Belka. She snorted. "Malfoy or no, he's just a little firstie and we don't need him here."

"I will owl my father," Jugson said softly, "and *he* will speak to Lord Malfoy himself—" Abruptly, Jugson stopped speaking.

"I don't know about *you*, dearies," Belka said with fake sweetness, "but *I* don't plan on running scared from a false ritual, and *I'm* not done with Potter and his pet mudblood."

Nobody answered. All their gazes were looking past her.

Slowly, Belka turned around to see what the others were staring at.

"You will do *nothing,*" hissed their Head of House. Severus Snape's face was enraged, when he spoke small spots of spittle flew from his mouth, further dotting his already-dirtied robes. "You fools have done *enough!* You have embarrassed my House—*lost* to first-years—now you speak of embroiling noble Lords of the Wizengamot in your *pathetic* childish squabbles? *I* shall deal with this matter. *You* will not embarrass

this House again, you will not *risk* embarrassing this House again! You are *done* with fighting witches, and if I hear otherwise—"

⁂

If you thought they'd be sitting next to each other at dinnertime, after that, you'd be quite mistaken.

"What does she *want* from me?" came the plaintive cry of a boy who, for all his extensive reading in the scientific literature, was still a bit naive about certain things. "Did she *want* to get beaten up?"

The upper-year Ravenclaw boys who'd sat down next to him at the dinner-table exchanged swift glances with each other until, by some unspoken protocol, the most experienced of their number spoke.

"Look," said Arty Grey, the seventh-year who was leading in their competition by three witches and a Defense Professor, "the thing you've got to understand is, just because she's *angry* doesn't mean you lost points. Miss Granger is angry because she got all frightened and you're *there to be blamed,* you understand? But at the same time, even though she won't admit it, she'll be touched that her boyfriend went to such ridiculous and frankly insane lengths to protect her."

"This is not about *points,*" ground out Harry Potter, the words visibly escaping from between his clenched teeth. Dinner sat ignored on the table in front of him. "This is about *justice.* And *I. Am. Not. Her. Boyfriend!*"

This was met by a certain amount of sniggering from all present.

"Yeah, well," said a sixth-year Ravenclaw boy, "I think after she kisses you to bring you out of Dementation and you stick forty-four bullies to the ceiling for her, we've gone way past 'she's not my girlfriend, really' and into the question of what your kids will be like. Wow, that's a scary thought..." The Ravenclaw trailed off and then said, in a smaller voice, "Please don't look at me like that."

"Look," said Arty Grey, "I'm sorry to be blunt about this, but you can have justice or you can have girls, you can't have both at the same time." He clapped a companionable hand on Harry Potter's shoulder.

"You've got potential, kid, more potential than any wizard I've ever seen, but you've got to learn how to *use* it, you know? Be a bit sweeter to them, learn some spells to clean up that mess you call hair. Above all, you need to hide your evilness better—not *too* well, but better. Nice well-groomed boys get girls, and Dark Wizards also get girls, but nice well-groomed boys suspected of being *secretly* Dark get more girls than you can imagine—"

"Not interested," Harry said flatly, as he picked up the boy's hand from his shoulder and unceremoniously dropped it.

"But you will be," said Arty Grey, his voice low and foreboding. "Ah, you will be!"

Elsewhere along the same table—

"*Romantic?*" shrieked Hermione Granger, so loudly that some of the girls next to her winced. "*What part of that was romantic?* He didn't *ask!* He never *asks!* He just sends ghosts after people and glues them to ceilings and does whatever he wants with *my* life!"

"But don't you see?" said a fourth-year witch. "It means that even though he's evil, he *loves* you!"

"You're not helping," said Penelope Clearwater a little further down the table, but she was ignored. Several older witches had started toward Hermione, after she'd sat down at the extreme opposite end of the table from Harry Potter, but then a swifter cloud of younger girls had surrounded Hermione in an impenetrable barrier.

"Boys," said Hermione Granger, "should not be allowed to love girls without asking them first! This is true in a number of ways and especially when it comes to gluing people to the ceiling!"

This was also ignored. "It's just like a play!" sighed a third-year girl.

"A play?" said Hermione. "I'd like to see the play where anything like *this* happens!"

"Oh," said the third-year girl, "I was thinking of that really *romantic* one where there's this very nice, sweet boy who makes a Floo call, only he mispronounces his destination and stumbles out into this room full of Dark Wizards who are performing a forbidden ritual that should've stayed forever lost to time, and they're sacrificing seven victims in order to unseal this ancient horror which is supposed to grant someone a wish

if it's freed, so of course the boy's presence interrupts the ritual, and as the horror is eating all the Dark Wizards and everyone is dying the boy's last thought is that he wishes he could've had a girlfriend, and the next thing you know the boy is lying in the lap of this beautiful woman whose eyes are burning with a dreadful light, only she doesn't understand anything about being human so the boy always has to stop her eating people. This is just like that play, only you're the boy and Harry Potter is the girl!"

"That..." Hermione said, feeling quite surprised. "That actually *does* sound something like—"

"It *does?*" blurted a second-year girl sitting across the table, who was now leaning forward, looking horrified and yet even more fascinated.

"No!" said Hermione. "I mean—*he's not my boyfriend!*"

Two seconds later, Hermione's ears caught up with what her lips had just said.

The fourth-year witch put her hand on Hermione's shoulder and gave her a comforting squeeze. "Miss Granger," she said in a soothing voice, "I think if you're really honest with yourself, you'll admit that the real reason you're angry with your dark master is that he channeled his unspeakable powers through Tracey Davis instead of you."

Hermione's mouth opened but her throat locked up before the words came out, which was probably a good thing, because if she'd actually yelled that loudly it would've broken something.

"How's that possible, actually?" said the third-year girl. "I mean for Harry Potter to work through another girl even though he's bound himself to you? Do the three of you have one of those, you know, arrangements?"

"*Gaaaaack,*" said Hermione Granger, her throat still locked, her brain halted, and her vocal cords spontaneously making a noise like she was coughing up a yak.

⁂

(Later.)

"I don't understand why you're being so *unreasonable*," said another second-year witch, who'd replaced the third-year-girl after Hermione had threatened to ask Tracey to eat her soul. "I mean, really, if someone like Harry Potter rescued *me*, I'd be—sending him thank-you cards, and hugging him, and," the girl's face was a bit red, "well, kissing him, I'd hope."

"Yeah!" said the other second-year witch. "I've never understood why girls in plays get *angry* when the main character goes out of his way to be nice to them. *I* wouldn't act like that if the hero liked *me*."

Hermione Granger had dropped her head to the dinner table, her hands slowly pulling at her hair.

"You just don't understand male psychology," the fourth-year witch said in an authoritative voice. "Granger's got to make it *look* like she can mysteriously resist his seductive charm."

(Even later.)

And so before long Hermione Granger had turned to the only person left she could talk to, the only person guaranteed to understand her point of view—

"They're all mad," said Hermione Granger as she strode vigorously toward Ravenclaw tower, having left dinner a bit early. "Everyone except you and me, Harry, I mean *everyone* except us in this whole school of Hogwarts, they're all entirely *mad.* And Ravenclaw girls are the *worst,* I don't know *what* Ravenclaw girls go reading when they get older, but I'm certain they ought not to be reading it. One witch asked me if the two of us had soul-bonded, which I'm going to look up in the library tonight, but I'm pretty sure has never actually happened—"

"I don't even know a *name* for this kind of fallacious reasoning," said Harry Potter. The boy was walking normally, which meant he often had to skip forward a few steps to match her own indignation-fueled speed. "I seriously think if it was up to *them*, they'd be dragging us off

this minute to get our names changed to Potter-Evans-Verres-Granger... Ugh, saying that out loud makes me realize how awful it sounds."

"You mean *your* name would be Potter-Evans-Verres-Granger and *mine* would be Granger-Potter-Evans-Verres," said Hermione. "It's too horrible to imagine."

"No," said the boy, "House Potter is a Noble House, so I think that name stays in front—"

"*What?*" she said indignantly. "Who says *we* have to—"

There was a sudden awful silence, broken only by the thuds of their shoes.

"*Anyhow,*" Hermione said hastily, "some of the crazy things they said at dinner got me thinking, so I just want to say, Harry, that I really am grateful to you for saving me and everybody from getting beat up, and even though some parts of this afternoon upset me, I'm sure we can just talk about it calmly."

"Ah..." Harry said with a faint and tentative smile, his eyes showing a mixture of befuddlement and apprehension, "that's... good, I guess?"

To be specific, there'd been the fourth-year witch explaining that, since Harry was the evil wizard who'd fallen in love with Hermione, and Hermione was the pure and innocent girl who would either redeem him or get seduced by the Dark Arts herself, it followed that Hermione *had* to be perpetually indignant at anything Harry did, even if it was him heroically saving her from certain doom, just so that their romance wouldn't resolve itself before the end of Act IV. And *then* Penelope Clearwater, who Hermione had really thought was smarter than that, had remarked in a loud voice that for identical reasons it was *impossible* for Hermione to just go over and talk sensibly with Harry about why she was feeling hurt, and anyway Dark Wizards were attracted to passionate defiance in a woman, not logic. This was the point at which Hermione had shoved herself up from the benches, stomped furiously over to where Harry was sitting, and asked him in a reasonable voice if the two of them could go for a walk and sort things out.

"So in other words," Hermione said in her calmest voice ever, "you're not really in trouble with me, I'm still talking to you, we're still friends, and we're still studying together. We're *not* having a fight. Right?"

Somehow this only seemed to increase Harry Potter's apprehension. "Right," said the Boy-Who-Lived.

"Great!" said Hermione. "So, *have* you worked out why I was upset, Mr. Potter?"

There was a pause. "You wanted me to keep out of your affairs?" Harry said cautiously. "I mean—I know you wanted to do things on your own. And I *was* staying out of your way, until I'd heard you'd gotten ambushed by three junior Death Eaters and, honestly, I wasn't expecting that. *Professor Quirrell* wasn't expecting that. I started to worry you'd gotten in over your head and then, no offense Hermione, forty-four bullies in a massed ambush is way beyond what *anyone* could handle without help. That's why I thought you really needed help just that once—"

"No, that part's fine," said Hermione. "We *were* in over our heads, honestly. Please guess again, Mr. Potter."

"Um," said Harry. "What Tracey did... startled you?"

"Startled me, Mr. Potter?" There might have been a touch of acidity in her voice. "No, Mr. Potter, I was *scared.* I was *frightened.* I wouldn't want to admit to being afraid of just *dragons* or something, people might think I was *cowardly*, but when you can hear distant voices crying 'Tekeli-li! Tekeli-li!' and there's pools of blood seeping out from under all the doors, then it's okay to be scared."

"I *am* sorry," Harry said with what sounded like genuine regret. "I thought you'd realize it was me."

"And the *reason* we all got scared like that, Mr. Potter, was that *you didn't ask first!*" Despite her intentions, Hermione found her voice was rising again. "You should've *asked* me before you did something like that, Harry! You should've said very specifically, 'Hermione, can I make blood come out from under the doors?' It's important to be specific when you're asking about that sort of thing!"

The boy rubbed the back of his neck as he walked. "I... honestly, I just thought you'd *have* to say no."

"Yes, Mr. Potter, *I could've said no*. That's *the whole point of asking first*, Mr. Potter!"

"No, I mean you'd have *had* to say no, whether or not it was what you *really* wanted. And then all of you would've gotten beaten up and it would've been *my* fault for asking first."

Hermione's eyebrows went up in a bit of surprise, and she kept walking for a few steps while she tried to understand this. "What?" she said.

"Well..." the boy said a bit slowly. "I mean... you're the Sunshine General, aren't you? You *couldn't* say yes to me scaring people, not even bullies, not even to save your friends from getting beaten up. You would've *had* to say no, and then you would've gotten hurt. This way, you can tell people honestly that you had no idea and that it wasn't your fault. That's why I didn't warn you."

Hermione stopped walking, turned to face Harry full on instead of just turning her head. Her voice was carefully even as she said, "Harry, you've *got* to stop coming up with clever reasons for doing stupid things."

Harry's eyebrows flew up. After a moment he said, "Look... I know what you mean, of course, but there's still the question of whether it's actually *is* a good idea, not just a clever one—"

"I understand why you did what you did today," Hermione said. "But I want you to promise that from now on, you'll ask me first, always, even if you can come up with a reason why you shouldn't."

There was a pause that stretched, and Hermione could feel her heart sinking.

"Hermione—" Harry started to say.

"*Why?*" The frustration burst out into her voice. "*Why is it so awful? All you have to do is ask!*"

Harry's eyes were very serious. "Who in SPHEW do you try hardest to defend, Hermione? Who are you most afraid for, when you fight?"

"Hannah Abbott," Hermione said without having to think about it, and then felt a little bad, because Hannah *was* trying hard and she *had* improved a lot—

"Would you feel okay about trusting someone else, like Tracey, with *final* responsibility for protecting Hannah? If you knew Hannah was about to walk into an ambush, and you came up with a plan for protect-

ing her, would you feel good about letting Tracey say whether or not you were allowed to do it?"

"Well... no?" said Hermione, puzzled.

The green eyes of the Boy-Who-Lived were steady on hers. "Would you trust *Hannah* to have the final say in whether she needed protecting?"

"I—" said Hermione, and then paused. It was strange, she knew the right answer and she also knew the right answer wasn't actually true. Hannah was trying so hard to prove she wasn't afraid, even though she *was*, and it was easy to see how the Hufflepuff girl might try *too* hard—

Then Hermione realized the implication. "You think I'm like *Hannah*?"

"Not... exactly..." Harry ran his hands through his mess of hair. "Listen, Hermione, what would *you* have suggested doing, if I'd warned you about an ambush by forty-four bullies?"

"I would've done the *responsible* thing and told *Professor McGonagall* and let *her* take care of it," Hermione said promptly. "And *then* there wouldn't have been darkness and people screaming and horrible blue light—"

But Harry just shook his head. "That's *not* the responsible thing to do, Hermione. It's what someone playing the *role* of a responsible girl would do. *Yes*, I thought of going to Professor McGonagall. But she would've only stopped the disaster *once*. Probably before any disturbance happened in the first place, like by telling the bullies she knew. If the bullies got punished just for plotting, it would be by losing House points, or at worst a day's detention, not anything that would really scare them. And then the bullies would have *tried again*. Fewer of them, with better operational security so I didn't hear about it. They would probably ambush *one* of you, alone. Professor McGonagall doesn't have the *authority* to do something scary enough to protect you—and *she* wouldn't have overstepped her authority, because she's not really responsible."

"*Professor McGonagall* isn't responsible?" Hermione said incredulously. She jammed her hands on her hips, now openly glaring at him. "Are you *nuts*?"

The boy didn't blink. "You could call it heroic responsibility, maybe," Harry Potter said. "Not like the usual sort. It means that whatever happens, no matter what, it's *always* your fault. Even if you tell Professor McGonagall, she's not responsible for what happens, *you* are. Following the school rules isn't an excuse, someone else being in charge isn't an excuse, even trying your best isn't an excuse. There just aren't any excuses, you've got to *get the job done no matter what*." Harry's face tightened. "That's why I say you're not thinking responsibly, Hermione. Thinking that your job is done when you tell Professor McGonagall—that isn't heroine thinking. Like Hannah being beat up is *okay* then, because it isn't *your fault* anymore. Being a heroine means your job isn't finished until you've done *whatever it takes* to protect the other girls, *permanently.*" In Harry's voice was a touch of the steel he had acquired since the day Fawkes had been on his shoulder. "You can't think as if just following the rules means you've done your duty."

"I think," Hermione said evenly, "that you and I might disagree about some things, Mr. Potter. Like whether you or Professor McGonagall is more *responsible*, and whether being *responsible* usually involves people running around and screaming, and how much it's a good idea to follow school rules. And just because we disagree, Mr. Potter, doesn't mean that *you* get the final say."

"Well," said Harry, "you asked what was *so* awful about having to ask you first, and it was a surprisingly good question, so I examined my mind and that's what I found. I think my real fear is that if Hannah is in trouble and I come up with a way to save her that seems weird or dark or something, you might not weigh the consequences to Hannah. You might not accept the heroine's responsibility of coming up with *some* way to save her, somehow, no matter what. Instead you'd just carry out the *role* of Hermione Granger, the sensible Ravenclaw girl; and the *role* of Hermione Granger automatically says no, whether or not she has a better plan in mind. And then forty-four bullies will take turns beating up Hannah Abbott, and it'll all be my fault because I *knew,* even if I didn't want reality to be that way, I knew that was how it would go. I'm pretty sure that was my secret, wordless, unutterable fear."

The frustration was building up inside her again. "It's *my* life!" Her-

mione burst out. She could imagine what it would be like with Harry messing with her all the time, constantly inventing justifications not to ask her first and not to listen to her objections. She shouldn't have to *win an argument* just to—"There'll *always* be some reason, you can *always* say I'm not thinking right! I want my *own life!* Otherwise I'll walk away, I really will, I mean it Harry."

Harry sighed. "This is exactly where I didn't want things to end up, and here we are. You're afraid of just the same thing I am, aren't you? Afraid that if *you* let go of the steering wheel, we'll crash." The corners of his lips twisted, but it didn't look like a real smile. "That's something I can understand."

"I don't think you understand *at all!*" Hermione said sharply. "You said we'd be *partners,* Harry!"

That stopped him, she could see it stop him.

"How about this?" Harry said at last. "I'll promise to ask you first before I do anything that could be interpreted as meddling in your affairs. Only *you've* got to promise *me* to be reasonable, Hermione. I mean *really*, genuinely, stop and think for twenty seconds first, treat it as a real choice. The sort of reasonableness where you realize I'm offering a way to protect the other girls, and that if you automatically say *no* without considering it properly, there's this *actual consequence* where Hannah Abbott ends up in the hospital."

Hermione stared at Harry, as his recitation wound down.

"Well?" said Harry.

"I shouldn't have to make promises," she said, "just to be *consulted* about *my own life.*" She turned from Harry and began walking toward the Ravenclaw tower, not looking at him. "But I'll think about it, anyway."

She heard Harry sigh, and after that they walked in silence for a while, passing through an archway of some reddish metal like copper, into a corridor that was just like the one they'd left except that it was tiled in pentagons instead of squares.

"Hermione..." said Harry. "I've been watching you and thinking, since the day you said you were going to be a hero. You've *got* the courage. You'll fight for what's right, even in the face of enemies that

would scare other people away. You've certainly got the raw intelligence for it, and you're probably a better person inside than I am. But even so... well, to be honest, Hermione... I can't quite see you filling Dumbledore's shoes, leading magical Britain's fight against You-Know-Who. Not yet, anyway."

Hermione had turned her head to stare at Harry, who just went on walking, as though lost in thought. Fill *those* shoes? She'd never tried to imagine herself that way. She'd never *imagined* imagining herself that way.

"And maybe I'm wrong," Harry said as they walked. "Maybe I've just read too many stories where the heroes never do the sensible thing and follow the rules and tell their Professor McGonagalls, so my brain doesn't think you're a proper storybook hero. Maybe it's you who's the sane one, Hermione, and me who's just being silly. But every time you talk about following rules or relying on teachers, I get that same feeling, like it's bound up with this one last thing that's stopping you, one last thing that puts your PC self to sleep and turns you into an NPC again..." Harry let out a sigh. "Maybe that's why Dumbledore said I should have wicked stepparents."

"He said *what*?"

Harry nodded. "I still don't know whether the Headmaster was joking or... the thing is, he was *right* in a way. I *had* loving parents, but I never felt like I could trust their decisions, they weren't *sane* enough. I always knew that if I didn't think things through myself, I might get hurt. Professor McGonagall will do whatever it takes to get the job done *if* I'm there to nag her about it, she doesn't break rules on her own without heroic supervision. Professor Quirrell really *is* someone who gets things done no matter what, and he's the only other person I know who notices stuff like the Snitch ruining Quidditch. But *him* I can't trust to be *good*. Even if it's sad, I think that's part of the environment that creates what Dumbledore calls a hero—people who don't have anyone else to shove final responsibility onto, and that's why they form the mental habit of tracking everything themselves."

Hermione didn't say anything to that, but she was thinking back to something Godric Gryffindor had written near the end of his very

short autobiography. Briefly and without any explanation, because the scroll had been meant to be copied by hand, centuries before the Muggle printing press had inspired wizards to invent the Reading-Writing Quill.

No rescuer hath the rescuer, Godric Gryffindor had written. *No Lord hath the champion, no mother and no father, only nothingness above.*

If *that* was the price of being a hero, Hermione wasn't sure she wanted to pay it. Or maybe—though it wasn't the sort of thing she would have thought, before she started hanging around Harry—maybe Godric Gryffindor had gotten it *wrong*.

"Do you trust *Dumbledore?*" Hermione said. "I mean, he's right here in our school and he's the most legendary hero in the whole world—"

"He *was* the most legendary hero," said Harry. "Now he sets chickens on fire. Honestly, does Dumbledore seem reliable to *you?*"

Hermione didn't answer.

Side by side, the two of them began to climb huge wide spiral stairs, the steps alternating between bronze metal and blue stone; the final approach to where the Ravenclaw portrait waited to guard their dorm with silly riddles.

"Oh, and I just thought of something I should tell you," Harry said when they were about halfway up. "Since it affects your life and all. Think of it as a sort of down payment—"

"What is it?" said Hermione.

"I predict SPHEW is about to retire."

"*Retire?*" Hermione said, almost stumbling on one of the stairs.

"Yeah," Harry said. "I mean, I could be wrong, but I suspect the teachers are about to clamp down hard on fighting in the corridors." Harry was grinning as he spoke, a glint in his eyes behind the glasses hinting at secret knowledge. "Cast new wards to detect offensive hexes, or start verifying reports of bullying using Veritaserum—I can think of several ways they might shut it down. But if I'm right, it's something to celebrate, Hermione, you and all of you. You kicked up enough public ruckus that you got them to actually *do* something about the bullying. *All* the bullying."

Slowly, then, a smile began to creep up her lips, and as she reached the top of the stairs and began walking toward the Ravenclaw portrait for

her riddle, Hermione felt rather lighter on her feet, a wonderful lifting feeling spreading through her like she'd been pumped full of helium.

Somehow, despite all the effort the eight of them had put in, she hadn't expected *that* much, she hadn't expected it to actually *work*.

They'd made a *difference*...

⁂

It was the end of breakfast-time on the next morning.

The students from every year sat very still in their benches, all heads turned in the same direction, toward the Head Table, before which one lone first-year girl stood rigid and motionless, her head tilted back to stare up at the Head of House Slytherin.

Professor Snape's face was twisted with fury and triumph, vindictive as any painting of a Dark Wizard; and behind him the other Professors sat at the Head Table, watching with faces as though carved from stone.

"—permanently disbanded," spat the Potions Master. "Your self-proclaimed Society is *outlawed* within Hogwarts, by my decision as a Professor! If your Society or any member of it is discovered fighting in the hallways again, Granger, you will be *personally* held responsible and expelled, by me, from the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry!"

That first-year girl stood there, before the Head Table where she'd been called before only to receive commendations and smiles; stood there with her spine held tall and upright in its curve like a centaur's bow, giving nothing to the enemy.

That first-year witch stood there with all tears and anger bottled, her face still, nothing changing of her outward appearance, while something slowly broke inside her, she could feel it breaking.

It broke further when Professor Snape gave her two weeks detention for the crime of violence in school, sneering with the contemptuous face he'd shown them all on the first day of Potions, and with a little twist in the corner of his smile that said the Potions Master knew exactly how unfair he was being.

Whatever-it-was inside her cracked all the way through, from top to bottom, when Professor Snape took one hundred points from Ravenclaw.

It ended, then, and Snape told her she was dismissed.

She turned around and saw that at the Ravenclaw table, Harry Potter was sitting still in his place, she couldn't see his expression from here, she saw his fists on the table but she couldn't see if they were clenched white like her own. She had whispered to him, when Professor Snape had called her, that he wasn't to do anything without asking first.

Hermione wheeled back again to look at the Head Table, just as Snape was turning away from her to resume his place.

"I said you're dismissed, girl," said the sneering voice, but there was a pleased smile on Snape's face, like he was waiting for her to do something—

Hermione strode forward another five steps toward the Head Table and said in a breaking voice, "Headmaster?"

Utter silence filled the Great Hall.

Headmaster Dumbledore said nothing, didn't move. It was as though he, too, was just carved from stone.

Hermione turned her gaze to look at Professor Flitwick, whose head, barely visible above the table, seemed to be staring down into his lap. Beside him, Professor Sprout's face was very tight, she seemed to be forcing herself to watch, and her lips were trembling, but she said nothing.

Professor McGonagall's chair was empty, the Deputy Headmistress hadn't shown up to breakfast that morning.

"Why aren't any of you saying anything?" said Hermione Granger. Her voice was trembling with the last of her hope, the last desperate reach for help from that place inside her. "You *know* what he's doing is wrong!"

"Two more weeks' detention, for insolence," Snape said silkily.

It shattered.

She looked at the Head Table for a few seconds longer, at Professor Flitwick and Professor Sprout and the empty place where Professor McGonagall should've been. Then Hermione Granger turned and began walking toward the Ravenclaw table.

There was a babble of voices starting up, as the students came unfrozen from where they'd sat.

And then, as she was almost to the Ravenclaw table—

The dry voice of Professor Quirrell cut through everything, and that voice said, "One hundred points to Miss Granger for doing what is right."

Hermione almost fell over her own feet; and then she continued forward, even as Snape shouted something furious, even as Professor Quirrell leaned back in his chair and began to laugh, even as Dumbledore's voice was saying something she didn't catch and then she was sitting down at the Ravenclaw table again next to Harry Potter.

Harry Potter was frozen beside her, he looked like someone who didn't dare move.

"It's all right," her voice said to him, automatically without there being any choice or thought involved, although really it wasn't right at all. "But can you see if you can get me out of Snape's detentions, like you did yourself that time?"

Harry Potter nodded, a single jerky motion of his head. "I—" said Harry. "I—I'm sorry, this—this is all my fault—"

"Don't be *ridiculous*, Harry." It was odd how her voice was coming out all normal, and without her thinking about what to say. Hermione looked down at her breakfast plate, but eating seemed to be clearly out of the question, there was a roiling and churning in her stomach which suggested that she was already on the verge of throwing up, which was odd because she could have sworn her whole body felt numb, like she wasn't feeling anything, at the same time.

"And," her voice said, "if you want to break school rules or something, you can ask me about it, I promise I won't just say no."

Non est salvatori salvator,
neque defensori dominus,

CHAPTER SEVENTY-FIVE

nec pater nec mater,
nihil supernum.
—Godric Gryffindor,
1202 C.E.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-SIX

INTERLUDE WITH THE CONFESSOR: SUNK COSTS

She descended the stairs of roughened stone and crude mortar, keeping a *Lumos* lit through the distances between fire-sconces, holding aloft her wand through the gaps from light to light.

She came to the empty rock cavern pierced by many dark openings, lit by a torch of ancient style that fired as she entered.

There was no one else there, as yet, and after long minutes of nervous standing, she began the spell to Transfigure a cushioned sofa large enough for two people to sit, or maybe even lie down on. A simple wooden stool would have been easier, she could have done that in fifteen seconds, but—well—

Even when the sofa was fully conjured, Professor Snape still hadn't arrived, and she sat down on the left side of her sofa with her pulse hammering in her throat. Somehow she was only becoming more nervous, not less, as the delay stretched.

She knew this was the last time.

The last time before all these memories went away, and Rianne Felthorne found herself in a mysterious cavern, wondering what was going on.

There was something about it that felt like dying.

The books said a properly done Obliviation wasn't harmful, people forgot things all the time. People dreamed, and then woke up without remembering their dreams. Obliviation didn't even involve that much discontinuity, it was like being distracted by a loud noise and losing track of a thought you couldn't seem to remember afterward. That was what

the books said, and why Memory Charms were fully approved by the Ministry for all authorized governmental purposes.

But still, *these thoughts*, the thoughts she was thinking right now; soon nobody would have them anymore. When she looked ahead in the future, there was nobody to complete the thoughts she wasn't finished thinking. Even if she managed to tie up all the loose ends in her mind over the next minute, there wouldn't be anything left of it afterward. Wasn't that exactly what you would find yourself reflecting on, if you were going to die in the next minute?

There came the sound of muffled steps...

Severus Snape emerged into the cavern.

His eyes moved to her sitting on the sofa, and a brief smile moved his lips; and it was strange, because the smile wasn't sardonic, or angry, or cold.

"Thank you, Miss Felthorne," Snape said quietly, "that was considerate of you." The Potions Master took out his wand and performed the usual privacy Charms, and then he moved toward her, and sat down heavily beside her on the Transfigured sofa.

Her pulse was now pounding for another reason entirely.

She slowly turned to look at Professor Snape, and saw that his head was leaning back against the sofa, and his eyes were closed. Not sleeping, though. His face appeared tense, unrelaxed, bearing pain.

She knew—she was suddenly certain—that she was only allowed to see this sight because she wouldn't remember it afterward; and that nobody before her had ever been allowed to see it.

The frantic conversation going on inside Rianne Felthorne's mind sounded something like this: *I could just lean over and kiss him, you are completely out of your tiny mind, his eyes are closed I bet he wouldn't stop me in time, I bet it would be years before anyone found your body—*

But Professor Snape opened his eyes then (to her inner disappointment and relief), and said, in a more normal voice, "Your payment, Miss Felthorne." From his robe he took a ruby, cut to Gringotts standard, and held it out toward her. "Fifty facets. I will not mind if you count them."

She held out a trembling hand, hoping that Snape would press the ruby into her fingers, that she would feel a touch of his skin alive against hers—

But instead Snape raised his hand slightly and dropped the ruby into her hand, then leaned back against the couch. "You will remember finding it lying on the ground of this cavern, where you came exploring," said Snape. "And since nobody except you will actually believe that, you will remember thinking that it would be less troublesome if you deposited the money into a separate box in Gringotts."

For a stretch there was only the faint crackling of the torch.

"Why—" Rianne Felthorne said. *He knows I won't remember.* "Why *did* you do it? I mean—you said to tell you where bullies would be, and who they would be, but not whether Granger would be there. And I know, the way the Time-Turner works, if you want to *make* Granger be there, you can't be told whether it's already happened. So I did work out that *we* were the ones telling her where to go. We were, weren't we?"

Snape nodded without speaking. He had closed his eyes again.

"But," said Rianne, "I didn't understand *why* you were helping her. And now—after what you did to Granger in the Great Hall—I just don't understand at all." Rianne had never thought of herself as particularly nice. She'd taken little notice of the controversy over the Sunshine General. But something about *helping* Granger fight bullies had... well, she'd gotten used to thinking of that as the good side, and thinking of *herself* as being on the good side. And she'd found she actually liked it. It was hard, to just let that go. "Why'd you do that, Professor Snape?"

Snape shook his head, his face tightened.

"Is—" Rianne said falteringly. "I mean—so long as we're here—is there anything you do want to talk about?" There was something *she* wanted to say, but she couldn't make the words pass her own lips.

"I can think of one matter," Snape said after a pause. "If you are interested, Miss Felthorne."

Snape's eyes were still shut, so she couldn't just nod her head. Her voice almost broke, when she forced herself to say "Yes."

"There's a certain boy in your class who likes you, Miss Felthorne," Snape said from behind his closed eyes. "I won't say his name. But he

watches you every time you walk across the room, when he thinks you aren't looking. He dreams about you and desires to possess you, but he's never asked you for so much as a kiss."

Her heart started hammering even harder.

"Please tell me the honest truth, Miss Felthorne. What do you think of that boy?"

"Well—" she said. She was stumbling over her words. "I think—to never even ask for one kiss—would be—"

Sad.

Just too pitiful.

"Weakness," she said, her voice trembling.

"I agree," said Snape. "Suppose that boy had helped you, though. Would you think that you owed him a kiss, if he asked?"

She inhaled sharply—

"Or would you think," Snape continued, his eyes still closed, "that he was just being bothersome?"

The words stabbed into her like a knife and she couldn't help gasping out loud.

Snape's eyes flew open, and his gaze met hers across the sofa.

Then the Potions Master began to laugh, small sad chuckles.

"No, not *you,* Miss Felthorne!" Snape said. "Not *you!* We really *are* talking about a boy. One who attends your Potions class, in fact."

"Oh," she said. She tried to remember what Snape had said before, now feeling rather unnerved as she thought of some boy watching her, always silently watching. "Well, um, in that case. That's kind of *creepy*, actually. Who is it?"

The Potions Master shook his head. "It doesn't matter," said Snape. "Out of curiosity, what would you think if that boy were still in love with you years later?"

"Um," she said, feeling a bit confused, "that would be totally pathetic?"

The torch crackled a bit in the cavern.

"It's strange," Snape said quietly. "I have had two mentors, over the course of my days. Both were extraordinarily perceptive, and neither one ever told me the things I wasn't seeing. It's clear enough why the

first said nothing, but the second..." Snape's face tightened. "I suppose I would have to be naive, to ask why he stayed silent."

The quiet stretched, while Rianne tried frantically to think of something to say.

"It is an odd thing," Snape said, his voice still softer, "to look back after only thirty-two years, and wonder when your life was ruined past all rescuing. Was it determined when the Sorting Hat cried 'Slytherin!' for me? It seems unfair, since I was offered no choice; the Sorting Hat spoke the moment it touched upon my head. Yet I cannot claim it named me untruly. I never treasured knowledge for its own sake. I was not loyal to the one person I called friend. I was never one for righteous fury, then or now. Courage? There is no bravery in risking a life already ruined. My little fears have always mastered me, and I never turned aside from any of the paths I walked down, for those little fears. No, the Sorting Hat could never have put me in her House. Perhaps my final loss was determined, even then. Is that fair, I ask, even if the Sorting Hat speaks truly? Is it fair that some children should possess more courage than others, and thus a man's life be judged?"

Rianne Felthorne was starting to realize that she'd never had the tiniest inkling of who her Potions Master was inside, and unfortunately all these dark hidden depths weren't helping her with her problem.

"But no," Snape said. "I know where it went wrong for the last time. I could point to the very day and hour I missed my final chance. Miss Felthorne, did the Sorting Hat offer you Ravenclaw?"

"Y-yes," she said without thinking.

"Have you ever been any good at riddles?"

"Yes," she said again, because whatever Professor Snape was about to say, she wouldn't hear it if she said *no*.

"I am terrible at riddles," Snape said in a distant voice. "I was once given a riddle to solve, and I did not understand even the simplest part until too late. I did not even realize the riddle was meant for *me* until too late. I thought I had merely happened to overhear it, when in truth it was I who was overheard. So I sold my riddle to another, and that is when the wreckage of my life passed beyond retrieval." Snape's voice was still distant, sounding more abstracted than sorrowful. "And even now,

I understand nothing of importance. Tell me, Miss Felthorne, suppose I were carrying a knife, and I tripped over a baby and stabbed myself. Would you say that the baby had," Snape's voice lowered, as though he were imitating some still deeper voice, "THE POWER TO VANQUISH me?"

"Um... no?" she said hesitantly.

"Then what *does* it mean to have the power to vanquish someone?"

Rianne considered the puzzle. (Wishing, not for the first time in her life, that she had chosen Ravenclaw and to perdition with her parents' disapproval; but the Sorting Hat had never offered her Gryffindor.) "Well..." Rianne said. She was having trouble putting her thoughts into words. "It means you've got the *power*, but you don't *have* to do it. It means you could do it if you tried—"

"Choice," the Potions Master said in the same faraway voice, as though he wasn't really talking to her at all. "There will be a choice. That is what the riddle seems to imply. And that choice is not a foregone conclusion to the chooser, for the riddle does not say, *will vanquish,* but rather *the power to vanquish.* How would a grown man mark a baby as his equal?"

"What?" said Rianne. She didn't understand that at all.

"*Marking* a baby is simple. Any strong Dark curse would produce a lasting scar. But such may be done to any child. What mark would signify that a baby was your *equal?*"

She answered with the first thought that came to mind. "If you signed a betrothal contract, that would mean you'd be equals with them someday, when they grew up and you got married."

"That..." said Snape. "That's probably not it, Miss Felthorne, but thank you for trying." The long delicate fingers, honed by stirring potions to unimaginably fine tolerances, reached up and rubbed at the temples of the man's forehead. "It is enough to drive me to madness, so much hinging on such fragile words. Power he knows not... it *must* be more than some unknown spell. Not something *he* could acquire simply by practice and study. Some innate talent? No one can learn to be a Metamorphmagus... and yet that hardly seems like a power he *knows not*. Nor can I see how *either* could destroy all but a remnant of the other; I can see it in one direction, but not the reverse..." The Potions Master sighed.

"And none of this means anything to you, does it, Miss Felthorne? The words are nothing. The words are shadows. It is her *intonation* which carries the meaning and that is something I've never been able to..."

The Potions Master trailed off, while Rianne stared at him.

"A *prophecy?*" Rianne said in a high squeak. "You heard a *prophecy?*" She'd taken Divination for a couple of months before dropping it in disgust, and she knew that much about how it worked.

"I will try one last thing," said Snape. "Something I have not tried before. Miss Felthorne, listen to the *sound* of my voice, the *way* I say it, not the words themselves, and tell me what you think it means. Can you do that? Good," said Snape, as she nodded obediently, though she wasn't sure at all what she was supposed to do.

And Severus Snape drew a breath, and intoned, "FOR THOSE TWO DIFFERENT SPELLETS CANNOT EXIST IN THE SAME VULD."

It sent shivers down her spine, all the worse for knowing the hollow words had been spoken in imitation of a true prophecy. Unnerved, she blurted out the first thing which came to mind, which might have been influenced by her present company. "Those two different ingredients cannot exist in the same cauldron?"

"But why *not*, Miss Felthorne? What is the *meaning* of a statement like that? What are we really being told?"

"Ah..." she hazarded. "If the two ingredients mix, they'll catch fire and burn the cauldron?"

Snape's face did not change expression in the slightest.

"Perhaps," Snape finally said, after they'd sat on the sofa in awful silence for what seemed like minutes. "It would explain the word *must*. Thank you, Miss Felthorne. Once again you have been most helpful."

"I—" she said, "I was glad to—" and the words stuck in her throat. The Potions Master had thanked her with a tone of finality, and she knew that the time of the Rianne Felthorne who remembered these moments was drawing to an end. "I wish I didn't have to forget this, Professor Snape!"

"I wish," Severus Snape said in a whisper so low she could hardly hear it, "that everything had been different..."

The Potions Master stood up from the sofa, the weight of his presence vanishing from beside her. He turned and drew his wand from his robes, pointing it at her.

"Wait—" she said. "Before that—"

Somehow it was unbelievably hard to take the first step from fantasy to reality, from imagining to doing. Even if it was only one step and would never go any further. The gap stretched like the distance between two mountains.

The Sorting Hat had never offered her Gryffindor...

...was it fair that thus a woman's life be judged?

If you can't say it now, when you won't even remember it afterward—when nothing will continue from this moment, just as if you were to die—then when will you ever say it, to anyone?

"Can I have a kiss first?" said Rianne Felthorne.

Snape's black eyes studied her so intensely that her blush started to reach all the way to her chest, and she wondered if he knew perfectly well that she was still being weak, and it wasn't a kiss she'd truly wanted.

"Why not," the Potions Master said quietly, and he leaned his head down over the sofa and kissed her.

It was nothing like she'd imagined. In her fantasies Snape's kisses were fierce, seized from her, but this was—it was just *awkward,* actually. Snape's lips pressed down too hard on hers, forcing them back against her teeth, and the angle wasn't right and their noses were sort of bending and his lips were too *tight* and—

Only as the Potions Master straightened back up again, raising his wand once more, did she realize.

"That wasn't—" she said in a wondering voice, looking up at him. "That wasn't—was it—your *first*—"

Rianne Felthorne blinked at the stone cavern she'd discovered, still holding the extraordinary ruby she'd found embedded in the dirt of one corner. It was an incredible windfall, and she didn't know why looking at the ruby made her feel so sad, like she'd forgotten something, something that had been precious to her.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-SEVEN

SELF-ACTUALIZATION, AFTERMATHS: SURFACE APPEARANCES

AFTERMATH: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE AND —

The old wizard sat alone at his desk, in the unsilence of the Headmaster's office, amid the innumerable and unnoticed devices; his robes a gentle yellow, of soft fabric, not such clothing as he ordinarily wore before others. His wrinkled hand held a quill scratching away at an official-looking parchment. If you had somehow been there to watch his lined face, you would have been unable to deduce anything more about the man himself than you understood of the enigmatic devices. You might have observed that the face looked a little sad, a little tired, but then Albus Dumbledore always looked like that when he was alone.

In the Floo hearth there were only scattered ashes without a hint of flame, a magical door that had been shut so solidly as to stop existing. On the material plane, the great oaken door to the office had been closed and locked; beyond that door, the Endless Stairs stayed motionless; at the bottom of those stairs, the gargoyles that blocked the entrance did not flow, their pseudo-life withdrawn to leave solid rock.

Then, even as the quill was in the middle of penning a word, even as it was in the middle of scratching a letter—

The old wizard shot to his feet with a speed that would have shocked anyone watching, abandoning the quill in mid-letter to fall onto the

parchment; like lightning he spun on the oaken door, his yellow robes whirling around him and a wand of dread power leaping into his hand—

And as abruptly, the old wizard paused, halting his motion even as the wand came to bear.

A hand struck upon the oaken door, three times knocking.

More slowly, now, that grim wand went back into the dueling holster strapped beneath the old wizard's sleeve. The ancient man moved forward a few paces, drew himself up into a more formal stance, composed his face. Nearby upon the desk, the quill moved to the side of the parchment, as though it had been carefully placed there rather than dropped in haste; and the parchment itself flipped over to show blankness.

With a silent twitch of his will, the oaken door swung open.

Hard as stones, the green eyes glared at him.

"I admit that I am impressed, Harry," the old wizard said quietly. "The Cloak of Invisibility would have let you evade my lesser means of vision; but I did not sense my golems step aside, nor the stairs turning. How did you come here?"

The boy walked into the office, step by deliberate step until the door closed smoothly behind him. "I can go anywhere I choose, with or without permission," that boy said. His voice seemed calm; too calm, perhaps. "I am in your office because I decided to be here, and to hell with passwords. You are greatly mistaken, Headmaster Dumbledore, if you think that I stay in this school because I am a prisoner here. I simply have not chosen, *yet*, to leave. Now keeping that in mind, why did you tell your agent, Professor Snape, to break the agreement we made in this office, that he would not torment any student in her fourth year or below?"

The old wizard looked at the angry young hero for a long moment. Then, slowly enough not to alarm the boy, those wizened fingers drew open one of the manifold drawers of the desk, lifted out a sheet of parchment, laid it upon the desk. "Fourteen," the old wizard said. "It is not the number of all the owls sent last night. Only the owls sent to families with a seat on the Wizengamot, or families of great wealth, or families already allied with your foes. Or, in the case of Robert Jugson, all three; for his father, Lord Jugson, is a Death Eater, and his grandfather a Death

Eater who died by Alastor Moody's wand. What the letters said, I do not know, but I can guess. Do you *still* not understand, Harry Potter? Each time Hermione Granger *won*, as you put it, the danger to her from Slytherin grew again, and yet again. But now the Slytherins have triumphed over her, easily and safely, without violence or lasting harm. They have won, and need fight no more..." The old wizard sighed. "So I had planned. So I had hoped. So it would have been, if the Defense Professor had not taken it upon himself to intervene. Now the dispute goes to the Board of Governors, where Severus will seem to conquer the Defense Professor; but that will not feel the same to the Slytherins, it will not have been over and finished in a moment, to their satisfaction."

The boy advanced further into the room, his head tilting back further to look up at the half-moon glasses; and somehow it was like the boy was looking down at the Headmaster, rather than up. "So this Lord Jugson is a Death Eater?" the boy said softly. "Good. His life is already bought and paid for, then, and I can do anything I want to him without ethical problems—"

"*Harry!*"

The boy's voice was clear as ice, frozen of purest water from some untouched spring. "You seem to think that the Light should live in fear of the darkness. I say it should be the other way around. I'd prefer not to kill this Lord Jugson, even if he is a Death Eater. But one hour of brainstorming with the Defense Professor would be plenty of time to come up with some creative way to wreck him financially, or get him exiled from magical Britain. That would serve to make the point, I think."

"I confess," the old wizard said slowly, "that the thought of ruining a five-hundred-year-old House, and challenging a Death Eater to war to the finish, over a scuffle in a Hogwarts hallway, had not occurred to me, Harry." The old wizard lifted a finger to push back his half-moon glasses from where they had slid a little down his nose, during his sudden motion earlier. "I daresay it would not occur to Miss Granger either, nor to Professor McGonagall, nor to Fred and George."

The boy shrugged. "It wouldn't *be* about the hallways," the boy said. "It would be justice for his past crimes, and I'd only do it if Jugson made the first move. The point isn't to make people scared of me as a wild

card, after all. It's to teach them that neutrals are perfectly safe from me, and poking me with a stick is incredibly dangerous." The boy smiled in a way that didn't reach his eyes. "Maybe I'll buy an ad in the Daily Prophet, saying that anyone who wants to carry on this dispute with me will learn the true meaning of Chaos, but anyone who leaves me alone will be fine."

"*No*," the old wizard said. His voice was deeper now, showing something of his true age and power. "No, Harry, that must not be. You have not yet learned the meaning of fighting, what truly happens when foes meet in battle. And so you dream, as young boys do, of teaching your foes to fear you. It frightens me that you, at far too young an age, might already have enough power to make some part of your dreams into reality. There is *no* turning of that road which does not lead into darkness, Harry, none. That is the way of a Dark Lord, for certain."

The boy hesitated, then, and his eyes flickered to the empty golden platform where Fawkes sometimes rested his wings. It was a gesture that few would have caught, but the old wizard knew it very well.

"All right, forget the part about teaching them to fear me," the boy said then. His voice was no less hard, but some of the cold had gone from it. "I still don't think you should let children get hurt out of fear of what someone like Lord Jugson *might* do. Protecting them is the whole point of your job. If Lord Jugson really does try to get in your way, then do whatever it takes to stop him. Give me full access to my vaults, and *I'll* take personal responsibility for dealing with any fallout from banning bullies in Hogwarts, whether it's Lord Jugson or anyone else."

Slowly the old wizard shook his head. "You seem to think, Harry, that I need merely use my full power, and all foes will be swept aside. You are wrong. Lucius Malfoy controls Minister Fudge, through the *Daily Prophet* he sways all Britain, only by bare margins does he not control enough of the Board of Governors to oust me from Hogwarts. Amelia Bones and Bartemius Crouch are allies, but even they would step aside if they saw us acting wantonly. The world that surrounds you is more fragile than you seem to believe, and we must walk with greater care. The old Wizarding War never ended, Harry, it only continued in a different form; the black king slept, and Lucius Malfoy moved his

chesspieces for a time. Do you think Lucius Malfoy would lightly permit you to take a pawn of his color?"

The boy smiled, now with a touch of coldness again. "Okay, I'll figure out some way to set it up so that it looks like Lord Jugson betrayed his own side."

"Harry—"

"Obstacles mean you *get creative*, Headmaster. It doesn't mean you abandon the children you're supposed to protect. Let the Light win, and if trouble comes of it—" The boy shrugged. "Let Light win again."

"So might phoenixes speak, if they had words," the old wizard said. "But you do not understand the *phoenix's price.*"

The last two words were spoken in a peculiarly clear voice that seemed to echo around the office, and then a huge rumbling noise seemed to come from all around them.

Between the ancient shield on the wall and the Sorting Hat's hatrack, the stone of the walls began to flow and move, pouring itself into two framing columns and revealing a gap between them, an opening that showed a set of stone stairs leading upward into darkness.

The old wizard turned and strode toward those stairs, and then looked back at where Harry Potter stood. "Come!" said the old wizard. There was no twinkle now in those blue eyes. "Since you have already gone so far as to force your way here uninvited, you may as well go further."

⁂

There were no railings on those stone steps, and after the first few steps Harry drew his wand and cast *Lumos.* The Headmaster did not look back, did not seem to be looking downward, as though he had climbed the steps often enough to have no need of vision.

The boy knew that he should have been curious, or frightened, but there was no spare brain capacity for that. It was taking all his control not to let the fury simmering inside him boil over any further than it already had.

The stairs went on for only a short distance, one straight rising flight without turns or curves.

At the top was a door of solid metal, looking black in the blue light cast from Harry's wand, meaning that the metal itself was either black or perhaps red.

Albus Dumbledore lifted up his long wand like a brandished symbol, and again spoke in that strange voice which seemed to echo in Harry's ears, as though burning itself into his memory: "*Phoenix's fate.*"

That last door opened, and Harry followed Dumbledore inside.

The room beyond seemed to be made of black metal like the door that led to it. The walls were black, the floor was black. The ceiling above was black, but for a single globe of crystal that hung down from the ceiling on a white chain, and shone with a brilliant silver light that looked like it had been cast in imitation of Patronus light, though you could tell it wasn't the real thing.

Within the room were pedestals of black metal, each bearing a moving picture, or an upright cylinder half-filled with some faintly shining silver liquid, or a lone small object; a scorched silver necklace, a crushed hat, an untouched golden wedding ring. Many pedestals bore all three, the moving picture and the silver liquid and the item. There seemed to be a good many wizards' wands upon those pedestals, and many of those wands were broken, or burned, or looked like the wood had somehow melted.

It took that long for Harry to realize what he was seeing, and then his throat suddenly choked; it was like the rage inside him had been hit a hammerblow, maybe the hardest hammerblow of his entire existence.

"These are not all the fallen of all my wars," Albus Dumbledore said. His back was to Harry, only his grey locks and yellowish robes showed. "Not even nearly all of them. Only my closest friends, and those who died of my worst decisions, there is something of them here. Those I regret most of all, this is their place."

Harry couldn't count how many pedestals were in the room. It might have been around a hundred. The room of black metal was not small, and there was clearly more space left in it for future pedestals.

Albus Dumbledore turned and regarded Harry, the deep blue eyes set like steel in his brow, but his voice, when he spoke, was calm. "It seems to me that you know nothing of the phoenix's price," Albus Dumbledore said quietly. "It seems to me that you are not an evil person, but most terribly ignorant, and confident in your ignorance; as I once was, a long time ago. Yet I have never heard Fawkes so clearly as you seemed to, that day. Perhaps I was already too old and full of grief, when my phoenix came to me. If there is something I do not understand, about how ready I should be to fight, then tell me of this wisdom." There was no anger in the old wizard's voice; the impact that drove out your breath like falling off a broomstick was all in the scorched and shattered wands, gleaming gently in their death beneath the silver light. "Or else turn and go from this place, but then I wish to hear no more of it."

Harry didn't know what to say. There had been nothing in his own life that was like this, and all the words seemed to fall away. He would find something to say if he looked, but he couldn't believe, in that moment, that the words would be meaningful. You shouldn't be able to win any possible argument, just from people having died of your decisions, and yet even knowing that it felt like there was nothing to be said. That there was nothing Harry had any right to say.

And Harry almost did turn and go from that place, except for the understanding which came to him then: that there was probably a part of Albus Dumbledore which always stood in this place, always, no matter where he was. And that if you stood in a place like this you could do anything, *lose* anything, if it meant that you didn't have to fight another time.

One of the pedestals caught Harry's eye; the photograph on it did not move, did not smile or wave, it was a Muggle photograph of a woman looking seriously at the camera, her brown hair twisted into braids of an ordinary Muggle style that Harry hadn't seen on any witch. There was a cylinder of silvery liquid beside the photograph, but no object; no melted ring or broken wand.

Harry walked forward, slowly, until he stood before the pedestal. "Who was she?" Harry said, his voice sounding strange in his own ears.

"Her name was Tricia Glasswell," said Dumbledore. "The mother of

a Muggleborn daughter, who the Death Eaters killed. She was a detective of the Muggle government, and after that she fed information from the Muggle authorities to the Order of the Phoenix, until she was—betrayed—into the hands of Voldemort." There was a catch in the old wizard's voice. "She did not die well, Harry."

"Did she save lives?" Harry said.

"Yes," the wizard said quietly. "She did."

Harry lifted his gaze from the pedestal to look at Dumbledore. "Would the world be a better place if she hadn't fought?"

"No, it would not," said the old wizard. His voice was tired, and grieving. He seemed more bent now, as though he were folding in on himself. "I see that you still do not understand. I think you will not understand until the day that you—oh, Harry. So very long ago, when I was not much older than you are now, I learned the true face of violence, and its cost. To fill the air with deadly curses—for any reason—for *any* reason, Harry—it is an ill thing, and its nature is corrupted, as terrible as the darkest rituals. Violence, once begun, becomes like a Lethifold that strikes at any life near it. I... would spare you that lesson the way I learned it, Harry."

Harry looked away from the blue eyes, cast his gaze down at the black metal of the floor. The Headmaster was trying to tell him something important, that was clear; and it wasn't something that Harry thought was stupid, either.

"There was a Muggle once named Mohandas Gandhi," Harry said to the floor. "He thought the government of Muggle Britain shouldn't rule over his country. And he refused to fight. He convinced his whole country not to fight. Instead he told his people to walk up to the British soldiers and let themselves be struck down, without resisting, and when Britain couldn't stand doing that any more, we freed his country. I thought it was a very beautiful thing, when I read about it, I thought it was something higher than all the wars that anyone had ever fought with guns or swords. That they'd really done that, and that it had *actually worked.*" Harry drew another breath. "Only then I found out that Gandhi told his people, during World War II, that if the Nazis invaded they should use nonviolent resistance against them, too. But the Nazis

would've just shot everyone in sight. And maybe Winston Churchill always felt that there should've been a better way, some clever way to win without having to hurt anyone; but he never found it, and so he had to fight." Harry looked up at the Headmaster, who was staring at him. "Winston Churchill was the one who tried to convince the British government *not* to give Czechoslovakia to Hitler in exchange for a peace treaty, that they should fight right away—"

"I recognize the name, Harry," said Dumbledore. The old wizard's lips twitched upward. "Although honesty compels me to say that dear Winston was never one for pangs of conscience, even after a dozen shots of Firewhiskey."

"The point is," Harry said, after a brief pause to remember exactly who he was talking to, and fight down the suddenly returning sense that he was an ignorant child gone insane with audacity who had no right to be in this room and no right to question Albus Dumbledore about anything, "the point is, saying violence is evil isn't an *answer.* It doesn't say when to fight and when not to fight. It's a hard question and Gandhi refused to deal with it, and that's why I lost some of my respect for him."

"And your own answer, Harry?" Dumbledore said quietly.

"One answer is that you shouldn't ever use violence except to stop violence," Harry said. "You shouldn't risk anyone's life except to save even more lives. It *sounds* good when you say it like that. Only the problem is that if a police officer sees a burglar robbing a house, the police officer *should* try to stop the burglar, even though the burglar might fight back and someone might get hurt or even killed. Even if the burglar is only trying to steal jewelry, which is just a *thing.* Because if nobody so much as *inconveniences* burglars, there will be *more* burglars, and *more* burglars. And even if they only ever stole *things* each time, it would—the fabric of society—" Harry stopped. His thoughts weren't as ordered as they usually pretended to be, in this room. He should have been able to give some perfectly logical exposition in terms of game theory, should have at least been able to *see* it that way, but it was eluding him. Hawks and doves—"Don't you see, if evil people are willing to risk violence to get what they want, and good people always back down because violence is too terrible to risk, it's—it's not a good society to

live in, Headmaster! Don't you realize what all this bullying is doing to Hogwarts, to Slytherin House most of all?"

"*War* is too terrible to risk," the old wizard said. "And yet it will come. Voldemort is returning. The black chesspieces are gathering. Severus is one of the most important pieces our own side possesses, in that war. But our evil Potions Master must, as the saying goes, keep up appearances. If Severus can pay that keep by hurting the feelings of children, only their feelings, Harry," the old wizard's voice was very soft, "you would have to be most terribly innocent in the ways of war, to think he had made a poor bargain. Hard decisions do not look like *that*, Harry. They look—like this." The old wizard did not gesture. He simply stood where he was, among the pedestals.

"You shouldn't be Headmaster," Harry said through the burning in his throat. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, but you shouldn't try to be a school principal and run a war at the same time. Hogwarts shouldn't be part of this."

"The children will survive," the old wizard said with tired old eyes. "They would not survive Voldemort. Have you wondered why the children of Hogwarts do not speak much of their parents, Harry? It is because there is always, within earshot, someone who has lost their mother or father or both. That is what Voldemort left behind, the last time he came. *Nothing* is worth that war beginning again even one day earlier than it must, or lasting one day longer than it must." The old wizard did gesture now, as though to indicate all the shattered wands. "We did not fight because it seemed righteous to do so! We fought when we had to, when there was no other way left. That was our answer."

"Is that why you waited so long to confront Grindelwald?"

Harry had uttered the question without quite thinking—

There was a slow time while the blue eyes searched him.

"Who have you been talking to, Harry?" said the old wizard. "No, do not answer. I already know." Dumbledore sighed. "Many have asked me that question, and always I have turned them aside. Yet in time you must learn the full truth of that matter. Will you swear never to speak of it to another, until I give you leave?"

Harry would have liked to be allowed to tell Draco, but—"I swear," Harry said.

"I could not break Grindelwald's defense," said Dumbledore. "In our duel I could not win, only fight him for long hours until he fell in exhaustion; and I would have died of it afterward, if not for Fawkes. But while his Muggle allies yet made blood sacrifice to sustain him, Grindelwald would *not* have fallen. He was, during that time, truly invincible. There is an ill thing bound up in this matter; a grim secret of which none must know, none must suspect, there must be not a single hint. And therefore you must not speak of it, and I will say no more for now. That is all, Harry. There is no moral to it, and no wisdom. That is all there is."

Harry slowly nodded. It wasn't entirely implausible, by the standards of magic...

"And then," Dumbledore's voice went on, even quieter, almost as though he were speaking to himself, "since it was I who felled him, they obeyed me when I said he should not die, though they cried by the thousands for his blood. So he was imprisoned in Nurmengard, in the prison that he built, and he abides there until this day. I went to that duel without any intent to kill him, Harry. Because, you see, I had tried to kill Grindelwald once before, a long time ago, and that... that was... it proved to be... a mistake, Harry..." The old wizard was staring now at his long dark-grey wand where he held it in both hands, as though it were a crystal ball out of Muggle fantasy, a scrying pool within which answers could be found. "And I thought, then... I thought that I should never kill. And then came Voldemort."

The old wizard looked back up at Harry, and said, in a hoarse voice, "He is not like Grindelwald, Harry. There is nothing human left in him. *Him* you must destroy. You must not hesitate, when the time comes. To him alone, of all the creatures in this world, you must show no mercy; and when you are done you must forget it, forget that you ever did such a thing, and go back to living. Save your fury for that, and that alone."

In that office there was silence.

It lasted for some many long seconds, and finally was broken by a single question.

"Are there Dementors in Nurmengard?"

"What?" said the old wizard. "No! I would not have done that even to him—"

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The old wizard stared at the young boy, who had straightened, and his face changed.

"In other words," the boy said, as though talking to himself without any other people in the room, "it's already known how to keep powerful Dark Wizards in prison, without using Dementors. People *know* they know that."

"Harry...?"

"No," the boy said. The boy looked up, and his eyes were blazing like green fire. "I do not accept your answer, Headmaster. Fawkes gave me a mission, and I know now why Fawkes gave that mission to me, and not to you. You are willing to accept balances of power where the bad guys end up winning. I am not."

"That too is not an answer," the old wizard said; his face showed nothing of his hurt, he had long practice in concealing pain. "Refusing to accept something does not change it. I wonder now if you are simply too young to understand this matter, Harry, despite your outward airs; only in children's fantasies can all battles be won, and not a single evil tolerated."

"And that's why I can destroy Dementors and you can't," said the boy. "Because I believe that the darkness can be broken."

The old wizard's breath stopped in his throat.

"The phoenix's price isn't inevitable," the boy said. "It's not part of some deep balance built into the universe. It's just the parts of the game where you haven't figured out yet how to cheat."

Silver light falling, on broken and shattered wands. The old wizard opened his mouth, and no words came forth.

"Fawkes gave me a mission," the boy repeated, "and I will carry out that mission if I must break the entire Ministry to do it. That's the part of the answer that you're missing. You don't stop and say, *oh well, guess*

I can't possibly figure out any way to stop bullying in Hogwarts, and *leave* it at that. You just keep looking until you figure out how to do it. If that requires breaking Lucius Malfoy's entire conspiracy, *fine.*"

"And the true fight, the fight against Voldemort?" the old wizard said in an unsteady voice. "What will you do to win *that*, Harry? Will you break the whole world? Even if someday you gain such power, you are not yet beyond prices, and perhaps you never will be! For you to act this way *now* is nothing short of madness!"

"I asked Professor Quirrell why he'd laughed," the boy said evenly, "after he awarded Hermione those hundred points. And Professor Quirrell said, these aren't his exact words, but it's pretty much what he said, that he'd found it tremendously amusing that the great and good Albus Dumbledore had been sitting there doing nothing as this poor innocent girl begged for help, while *he* had been the one to defend her. And he told me then that by the time good and moral people were done tying themselves up in knots, what they usually did was nothing; or, if they did act, you could hardly tell them apart from the people called bad. Whereas *he* could help innocent girls any time he happened to feel like it, because he wasn't a good and moral person. And that I ought to remember that, any time I considered growing up to be good."

The old wizard did not show the force of the blow. Only a slight widening of his eyes would have betrayed it, if you had been watching him very closely.

"Don't worry, Headmaster," said the boy. "I haven't gotten my wires crossed. I know that I'm supposed to learn goodness from Hermione and Fawkes, not from Professor Quirrell and you. Which brings me to the actual reason why I came here. Hermione's time is too valuable to waste in detentions. Professor Snape will revoke it, claiming that I blackmailed him."

After a hesitation the old wizard nodded his head, the silver beard swaying slowly beneath. "That would not be best for *her,* Harry," the old wizard said. "But the detention can be put down as being served with Professor Binns, and you and she can study together in his classroom."

"Fine," the boy said. "I think that was all the business we had together, in the end. You may expect, the next time you seem to be work-

ing on the side of the bad guys or letting them win, that I will do whatever I think Fawkes would tell me to, regardless of how much trouble comes of it. I hope we're both clear on that."

Without another word, the boy turned and walked out of the room, through the open door of black metal, the words "*Lumos!*" and the light of his wand following a moment later.

The old wizard stood there silent, silent amid the ruins of the lives which his own life had left behind. His wrinkled hand rose, shaking, to touch at his half-moon glasses—

The boy poked his head back in. "Would you mind switching on the stairs, Headmaster? I'd rather not go through all the work again to leave the same way I came."

"Go, Harry Potter," the old wizard said. "The stairs will receive you."

(Some time later, an earlier version of Harry, who had invisibly waited next to the gargoyles since 9PM, followed the Deputy Headmistress through the opening that parted for her, stood quietly behind her on the turning stairs until they came to the top, and then, still under the Cloak, spun his Time-Turner thrice.)

AFTERMATH: PROFESSOR QUIRRELL AND —

In a shadowy clearing the Defense Professor waited, his back leaned negligently against the rough grey bark of a towering beech tree as yet unleaved in the late March days, so that its trunk and crown seemed like a pale arm reaching up from the ground and exploding into a hand of a thousand fingers. Around the Defense Professor and above him were branches so dense that even in the earliest spring, with few trees so much as budding, you could have hardly seen the sky from the ground. The strands of the wooden net crossed and proliferated so many times that

if you were on a broomstick above, searching for someone below, you would have found it easier to follow your ears than your eyes. Nor would it have helped that it was almost dark amid the prohibited woods, the unseen sun almost set, so that only a few glows of fading sunlight illuminated the tops of the tallest trees.

Then came the faintest sound of footsteps, almost inaudible even on the forest ground; the gait of a man accustomed to passing unseen. No twig snapped, nor leaf rustled—

"Good afternoon," said Professor Quirrell. The Defense Professor did not trouble to move his eyes, or his hands from where they rested negligently at his side.

A figure clad in a black cloak shimmered into existence, his head turning to look left and then right. In the figure's right hand, gripped low, was a wand of wood so grey it was almost silver.

"I do not know why you wished to meet *here* of all places," said Severus Snape, his voice cool.

"Oh," Professor Quirrell said idly, as though the whole matter was of the least importance, "I thought you would prefer privacy. The walls of Hogwarts have ears, and you would not wish the Headmaster to know of your role in yesterday's affair, would you?"

The March chill seemed to grow deeper, the temperature further fall. "I don't know what you're talking about," the Potions Master said icily.

"You know perfectly well what we're talking about," said Professor Quirrell in an amused voice. "Really, my good Professor, you should not meddle in the affairs of idiots unless you are ready to defend yourself upon the instant from all their violence." (The Defense Professor's hands still lay relaxed and open at his side.) "And yet none of those idiots seem to remember the sight of you falling, nor do the young ladies recall your presence. Which begs the fascinating question of why you would go to the extraordinary length, I dare say the *desperate* length, of casting *fifty-two* Memory Charms." Professor Quirrell tilted his head. "Would you fear so much the opinions of mere students? I think not. Would you dread the matter becoming known to your good friend, Lord Malfoy? But those fools, upon the very spot, invented a quite satisfactory excuse for your presence. No, there is only one person who holds so much

power over you, and who would be most perturbed to find you executing any plot without his knowledge. Your true and hidden master, Albus Dumbledore."

"*What?*" hissed the Potions Master, the anger plain upon his face.

"But now, it seems, you are moving on your own; and so I find myself most intrigued as to what you could *possibly* be doing, and why." The Defense Professor regarded the black-clad silhouette of the Potions Master with the scrutiny a man might give an exceptionally interesting bug, even if it was still ultimately just a bug.

"I am no servant of Dumbledore's," the Potions Master said coldly.

"Really? What astonishing news." The Defense Professor smiled slightly. "Do tell me all about it."

There was a long pause. From some tree an owl hooted, the sound huge in the silence; neither man startled or flinched.

"You don't want me as your enemy, Quirrell," Severus Snape said, his voice very soft.

"I don't?" said Professor Quirrell. "How would you know?"

"On the other hand," the Potions Master continued, voice still soft, "my friends enjoy many advantages."

The man leaning against the grey bark raised his eyebrows. "Such as?"

"There is much that I know of this school," said the Potions Master. "Things I might not be expected to know."

There was an expectant pause.

"How incredibly fascinating," said Professor Quirrell. The man was examining his fingernails with a bored look. "Do go on."

"I know you have been... *investigating*... the third-floor corridor—"

"You know nothing of the sort." The man's back straightened against the wood. "Do not bluff against me, Severus Snape; I find it annoying, and you are in no position to annoy me. A single glance would tell any competent wizard that the Headmaster has laced that corridor with a ridiculous quantity of wards and webs, triggers and tripsigns. And more: there are Charms laid there of ancient power, magical constructs of which I have heard not even rumors, techniques that must have been disgorged from the hoarded lore of Flamel himself. Even He-Who-Must-

Not-Be-Named would have had trouble passing those without notice." Professor Quirrell tapped a thoughtful finger on his cheek. "And for the actual lock, a *Colloportus* laid on an ordinary doorknob, cast so weakly that it could not have kept out Miss Granger on the day she entered Hogwarts. I have never seen such an obvious trap in all my life." Now the Defense Professor narrowed his eyes. "I know of no one left in the world against whom such fantastic feats of detection would serve any useful purpose. If there is some wizard possessed of ancient lore, of whom I know nothing, against whom this trap is set—you may trade *that* information for as much silence as you like, my dear Professor, and a good serving of my favor left over afterward."

You could have sworn that Professor Quirrell was watching Severus Snape with keen interest. Not the faintest trace of a smile crossed the man's lips.

There was another long silence in the clearing.

"I do not know *who* Dumbledore fears," Snape said. "But I know what bait he has set out, and somewhat of how it is truly guarded—"

"As to that," said Professor Quirrell, sounding bored again, "I stole it months ago, and left a fake in its place. But thank you kindly for asking."

"You're lying," said Severus Snape after a pause.

"Yes, I am." Professor Quirrell leaned back against the grey wood again, his eyes drifting up to the dense net of branches, the falling night scarcely visible between the complex crossings. "I simply wished to learn whether you would call me on it, since you are pretending to know so little." The Defense Professor smiled to himself.

The Potions Master looked like he was about to choke on his own fury. "*What do you want?*"

"Nothing, really," said the Defense Professor, continuing to gaze at the forest ceiling. "I was only curious. I suppose I shall just watch and see where your plotting goes, and meanwhile I will say nothing to the Headmaster—so long as you are willing to do me a favor now and then, of course." A dry smile crossed the face. "You are dismissed for now, Severus Snape. Though I wouldn't mind having another little chat soon, if you're willing to speak with me honestly of where your loyalties lie.

And I do mean *honestly,* not the false faces you've shown today. You might find you have more allies than you thought. Take some time to think it over, my friend."

Aftermath: Draco Malfoy and —

A rainbow hemisphere, not of solid color but of solid force that had little chromaticity of its own, and yet sent back small portions of infringing light in splintered reflections, iridescent in many colors, as it fractured the incoming light from the many-splendored chandeliers of the Slytherin common room.

Sheltered beneath the rainbow hemisphere, the terrified face of a young witch who had never fought bullies, who had not joined any of Professor Quirrell's armies, who was getting Acceptable marks at best in her Defense class, who could not have cast a Prismatic Barrier even to save her own life.

"Oh, stop it," said Draco Malfoy, making his voice sound bored despite the sweat that had broken out underneath his robes, as he kept his wand pointed at the barrier that was sheltering Millicent Bulstrode.

He couldn't remember making the decision, there'd just been the two older boys about to hex Millicent, the common room silently staring, and then Draco's hand had just drawn his wand and cast the barrier, leaving his heart to pump itself full of shocked adrenaline while his poor sad brain frantically racked itself for explanations—

The two older boys were straightening up from where they'd been looming over Millicent, turning to Draco, looking at him with a mixture of shock and anger. Gregory and Vincent beside him had already drawn their own wands, but weren't pointing them. All three of them together couldn't have won, anyway—

But the older boys wouldn't hex him. Nobody could possibly be stupid enough to hex the next Lord Malfoy.

It wasn't fear of being hexed that was making Draco sweat beneath his robes, as he desperately hoped the beads of water weren't visible on his forehead.

Draco was sweating because of the dawning and sickening certainty that even if he got away with this now, if he kept down this path, there would come a time when it would all come crashing down; and then he might not be the next Lord Malfoy anymore.

"Mr. Malfoy," said the oldest-looking boy. "Why are you protecting her?"

"So you've located the mistress of the conspiracy," Draco said in his most sarcastic voice, "and it's, let me get this straight now, a first-year girl named Millicent Bulstrode. She's just a *conduit*, you *niddlewit!*"

"So?" demanded the older boy. "She still helped them!"

Draco lifted his wand and the Prismatic Sphere winked out. Still talking in a bored voice, Draco said, "*Did* you know what you were doing, Miss Bulstrode?"

"N-no," Millicent stammered from where she was still sitting at her desk.

"Did you know where the Slytherin messages you were passing on were going to?"

"No!" said Millicent.

"Thank you," Draco said. "All of you please leave her alone, she's just a pawn. Miss Bulstrode, you may consider the favor you did me in February to have been repaid." And Draco turned back to his Potions homework, hoping to Merlin and back again that Millicent didn't say anything incredibly stupid like 'What favor?'—

"Then why," a voice said clearly from across the room, "did those witches go where a note from Millicent told them to go?"

Sweating even more, Draco lifted his head again to look at where Randolph Lee had spoken. "What did the fake note say exactly?" said Draco. "Was it, 'I command you to go forth in the name of the Dark Lady Bulstrode' or 'Please meet me here, sincerely Millicent?'"

Randolph Lee opened his mouth, hesitated for a fractional second—

"I thought so," said Draco. "That wasn't a very good test, Mr. Lee, it—it can—" A frantic, nerve-racking moment while he figured out how

to say it without using Harry-words like *false positive.* "It can get the witches to go there if any of them is just *friends* with Millicent."

As though the matter had been entirely settled, Draco looked down again at his Potions homework, ignoring (except for the feeling of sick dread in his stomach) some of the whispers from around the room.

It was only out of the corner of his eye that he caught Gregory staring at him.

Draco's eyes rested on his Astronomy homework, but he couldn't make his mind focus there. If you were trying not to think about things Harry Potter had said, pretty much the worst possible thing you could do was look at your textbook's pictures of the night sky, and try to remember what you *weren't* supposed to know about how the planets wandered. Astronomy, a noble and prestigious art, a sign of learning and knowledge; only Muggles possessed secret modern artifacts which could do it a million billion times better using methods that Harry had tried to explain and which Draco still couldn't begin to understand except that apparently it didn't even take *magic* to make *things* do *Arithmancy.*

Draco looked at the pictures of constellations, and wondered if it was like this in the other Houses, if people were always threatening each other in Ravenclaw.

Harry Potter had told him once that soldiers on a battlefield didn't really fight for their country. The country might get them to the battlefield in the first place, but once they were there, they fought to protect *each other,* the friends who were right in front of them. And Harry had observed, and Draco had known that it was true, that you wouldn't be able to use loyalty to a leader to power a Patronus Charm, it wasn't *quite* the right kind of happy thought. But thinking of protecting someone beside you—

That, Harry Potter had said thoughtfully, was probably why the Death Eaters had fallen apart the moment the Dark Lord had departed. They hadn't been warm enough to *each other*.

You could recruit a group that included Bellatrix Black and Amycus Carrow alongside Lord Malfoy and Mr. MacNair, and keep them in line with the Cruciatus Curse. But the instant the master of the Dark Mark was gone, you didn't have an army anymore, you had a circle of acquaintances. That was why Father had failed. It hadn't even really been his fault. There'd been nothing Father *could* have done, after inheriting the Death Eaters from a Dark Lord who couldn't have cast the Patronus Charm with twelve buckets of chocolate and the Unbeatable Wand.

And even though it was Slytherin House that he was supposed to be protecting, that he and Harry had formed a pact to *save*, Draco couldn't help but think sometimes that it was just less *wearisome* when he was in his General's office or leading army practices. When he was working with the students from the other three Houses that weren't Slytherin. Once you saw and named the problems, you couldn't *stop* seeing them, it just got more *annoying* every day.

"Mr. Malfoy?" said the voice of Gregory Goyle, from where he was laying on the floor beside Draco's desk, in the small but private bedroom. Gregory was doing his Transfiguration homework and not uncommonly needed to give up and ask for help.

"Yes?" Draco said, feeling glad for the distraction—

"You weren't really plotting against Granger at all," said Gregory. "Were you?"

The sensation spreading through Draco's stomach felt just like Gregory's voice sounded, sickened and afraid.

"You actually were helping Granger, that day you picked her up off the floor," said Gregory. "And before, that time you kept her from falling off the roof. You *helped* a *mudblood*—"

"Yeah, right," Draco said sarcastically, without the slightest hesitation or delay, looking back down at his Astronomy homework like he wasn't the least bit nervous. It was all happening exactly the way Draco had been afraid it would, but at least that *did* mean he'd played this conversation in his head over and over, coming up with the right opening gambit. "Come on, Gregory, you've dueled General Granger, you *know* how strong her spells are. Like a real Muggle-spawn is going to be more powerful than you, more powerful than Theodore, more powerful than

every single pureblood in our whole school year except me? Don't you actually *believe* in anything Father says? She's *adopted.* Her parents died in the war and someone stuck her with a couple of Muggles to hide her. No *way* is General Granger a real mudblood."

A slow beat of silence through Draco's bedroom. Draco wanted to know, needed to know what look was on Gregory's face. But he *couldn't* look up from his desk, not yet, not until Gregory spoke first.

And then—

"Is *that* what Harry Potter said to you?" said Gregory.

The voice wavered, and broke. When Draco looked up from his homework, he saw that tears were leaking out of Gregory's eyes.

Okay, that hadn't worked.

"I don't know what to do," Gregory said in a whisper. "I don't know what to do now, Mr. Malfoy. Your father isn't—when he finds out—he's not going to like it, Mr. Malfoy!"

It's not your *job to decide what Father will like, Goyle—*

Draco could hear the words in his head; they sounded in Father's voice, with the same sternness. It was the sort of thing Father had *told* him to say, if Vincent or Gregory ever questioned him; and if that didn't work he was to hex them. They were *not* equal friends, Father had said, and he wasn't ever to forget it. Draco was in charge, they were his servants, and if Draco couldn't keep it that way then he wasn't fit to inherit House Malfoy.

Draco looked at the other boy for a long moment, thinking about some of the bits of scientific history he'd read. Unless he'd gone to the trouble of making up whole books, Harry really *hadn't* been lying about how scientists were always doing better than their forefathers, how you were *expected* to contradict your ancestors about a few things...

"It's all right, Gregory," Draco said, as gently as he could. "All you've got to do is worry about protecting me. Nobody's going to blame you for following my orders, not my father, not yours." Putting all the warmth he could into his voice, like trying to cast a Patronus Charm. "And anyway, the next war isn't going to be the same as the last one. House Malfoy was around long before the Dark Lord, and not every Lord Malfoy does the same thing. Father knows that."

"Does he?" said Gregory in trembling voice. "Does he *really?*"

Draco nodded. "Professor Quirrell knows it too," said Draco. "That's what the armies are about. The Defense Professor's right, when the next war comes, Father won't be able to unite the whole country, they'll remember the *last* war. But anyone who's fought in Professor Quirrell's armies will remember who the strongest generals were, they'll know who's worthy to lead them. They'll proclaim Harry Potter their Lord, and I'll be his right hand, and House Malfoy will come out on top, like always. People might even turn to *me,* if Potter isn't there, so long as they think I'm trustworthy. That's what I'm setting up now. Father will understand."

Gregory reached up and wiped his eyes, looking down again at his Transfiguration homework. "Okay," Gregory said in a shaky voice. "If you say so, Mr. Malfoy."

Draco nodded again, ignoring the hollow feeling inside himself at the lies he'd just told his friend, and turned back to the stars.

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Aftermath: Hermione Granger and —

Being invisible should've been more *interesting* than this, the corridors of Hogwarts should have been outlined in strange colors, or something. But actually, Hermione Granger thought, being under Harry's invisibility cloak was exactly like *not* being under an invisibility cloak, except for the cloak part. When you pulled the veil of soft black cloth down from the hood and over your face, you couldn't even see it stretching in front of you, and afterward it didn't seem to impede your breathing any. And the world looked just the same, except that when you walked past things of metal, you didn't see any small reflections of yourself. Portraits never looked at you, only did whatever strange things they did when they were alone. Hermione hadn't tried walking past a mirror

yet, she wasn't sure she *wanted* to. And most of all, there was no *you* anymore as you walked around, no hands, no feet, just a changing point of view. It was an unnerving feeling, not so much of being *invisible* as being *not there.*

Harry hadn't questioned her at all, she'd just got out the words 'invisibility cloak' and then Harry was drawing his invisibility cloak, which might or might not have been a Deathly Hallow, from his pouch. She hadn't needed to explain about her extremely secret meeting with Daphne and Millicent Bulstrode, or that she thought it was necessary to help protect the other girls, Harry had just nodded and handed it over. If you were fair, and she *did* try to be fair, she had to admit that sometimes Harry could be a very true, true friend.

The secret meeting itself had been a great big failure.

Millicent had claimed to be a seer.

Hermione had carefully explained to Millicent and Daphne at some length that this could not possibly be true.

She and Harry had looked up Divination early on in their research, reading everything they could find that wasn't in the Restricted Section. As Harry had observed, it would save a lot of effort if they could just get a seer to prophesy everything they would figure out thirty-five years later. (Or to put it in Harry's terms, any means of obtaining information transmitted from the distant future was potentially an instant global victory condition.)

But, as Hermione had explained to Millicent, prophesying wasn't controllable, there was no way to *ask* for a prophecy about anything in particular. Instead there was this sort of *pressure* that built up in Time, the books had said, when some huge event was trying to happen, or stop itself from happening. And seers were like weak points that let out the pressure, when the right listener was nearby. So prophecies were only about big, important things; and you almost never got more than one seer saying the same thing, because afterward the pressure was gone. And, as Hermione had further explained to Millicent, the seers themselves didn't remember their prophecies, because the message wasn't for *them,* it was for the person that would bring about events by hearing the prophecy. And the messages would come out in riddles, and only some-

one who heard the prophecy in the seer's original voice would hear all the meaning that was in the riddle. There was no *possible* way that Millicent could just give out a prophecy *any time she wanted*, about *school bullies*, and then *remember* it, and if she *had* it would've come out as 'the skeleton is the key' and not 'Susan Bones has to be there'.

Millicent had been looking rather frightened at this point, so Hermione had relaxed her fists where they'd been jammed on her hips, calmed herself down, and stated carefully that while she was glad Millicent had helped them, they *had* sometimes gone into traps following what Millicent said, and so Hermione really did want to know where the messages had *actually* come from.

And Millicent had said in a small voice:

But, but she told me *that she was a seer...*

Hermione had told Daphne not to press it, after Millicent had refused to give up her source. It wasn't just that Hermione had felt awful about the scared look on Millicent's face. It was that Hermione had a strong feeling that if they *did* find the person who'd been telling Millicent things, why, *they* would turn out to just be finding envelopes under their pillow in the morning.

She was getting that same despairing feeling she'd gotten in the battle before Christmas, looking at Zabini's charts with all the colored lines and boxes and... and she had only just now realized what it meant that *Zabini* had been the one showing her that chart.

Even for a Ravenclaw, she felt, there was such a thing as having your life get overly complicated.

Hermione began ascending a short spiral of yellow marble steps protruding from a central spine, a poorly-kept "secret" staircase that was actually one of the fastest ways up from the Slytherin dungeons to the Ravenclaw tower, but which only witches could use. (Why girls in particular needed a quick way to move from Ravenclaw to Slytherin and back was something Hermione found a bit puzzling.) At the top of the staircase, now that she was away from Slytherin places, Hermione stopped and took off Harry's invisibility cloak.

After her pouch had swallowed the cloak, Hermione turned right and started to walk down a short passageway, now automatically keeping

an eye out in all directions without really thinking about it, and her constantly-scanning eyes glanced into a shadowy alcove—

—she felt a momentary sense of disorientation—

—and then a rush of shock and fear hit her like a Stunning Hex over her whole body, her body jerked around so fast it was like she had Apparated, she found that without any thought or any conscious decision her wand had leaped into her hand and was already pointed at...

...a black cloak so wide and billowing that it was impossible to determine whether the figure beneath was male or female, and atop the cloak a broad-brimmed black hat; and a black mist seemed to gather beneath it and obscure the face of whoever or whatever might lie beneath.

"Hello again, Hermione," whispered a sibilant voice from beneath the black hat, from behind the black mist.

Hermione's heart was already pounding hugely inside her chest, her witch's robes felt already sweat-dampened against her skin, there was a taste of fear already in her mouth; she didn't know why she was so suddenly filled up with adrenaline but her hand gripped harder on her wand. "Who are you?" Hermione demanded.

The hat tilted slightly; the whispery voice, when it came forth from the black mist, sounded dry as dust. "The last ally," spoke the sibilant whisper. "The one who finally answers, when no other will answer you. I am perhaps the only *true* friend you have in all Hogwarts, Hermione. For you have now seen how the others stayed silent when you were in need—"

"What's your *name*?"

The black cloak rotated slightly, back and forth, it didn't *look* like shoulders shrugging, but it conveyed a shrug. "That is the riddle, young Ravenclaw. Until you solve it, you may call me whatever you wish."

She could feel her palm already sweaty and was thankful for the spiral grooves on her wand that helped her hand keep a steady grip on the wood. "Well, Mister Incredibly Suspicious Person," Hermione said, "what do you want with me?"

"That is the wrong question," came the whisper from black mist. "You should ask, rather, what *I* can offer *you*."

"No," the young girl said quite steadily, "I don't think I *should* be asking that, actually."

A high-pitched chuckle from behind the black mist. "Not power," whispered the voice, "not wealth, you care little for such things, do you, young Ravenclaw? *Knowledge*. That is what I possess. I know what is unfolding within this school, all the hidden plans and players, the answers of the riddle. I know the true reason for the coldness you see in Harry Potter's eyes. I know the true nature of Professor Quirrell's mysterious illness. I know who Dumbledore truly fears."

"Good for you," said Hermione Granger. "But do you know how many licks it takes to get to the Tootsie Roll center of a Tootsie Pop?"

The black mist seemed to darken slightly, the voice sounded lower when it spoke, disappointed. "So you are not even curious, young Ravenclaw, about the truths behind the lies?"

"One hundred and eighty-seven," she said. "I tried it once and that's how many it came out to." Her hand was almost slipping on her wand, there was a sense of fatigue in her fingers like she'd been holding the wand for hours instead of minutes—

The cold voice hissed, "Professor Snape is a hidden Death Eater."

Hermione almost dropped her wand.

"Ah," the voice whispered in satisfaction. "I thought that might interest you. So, Hermione. Is there anything else you would like to know about your enemies, or those you call friends?"

She stared up at the black mist that topped the towering black cloak, frantically trying to order her thoughts. Professor Snape was a Death Eater? Who would tell *her* something like that, *why,* what was going *on?* "That's—" Hermione said. Her voice was quavering. "That's extremely serious business, if it's really true. Why are you telling something like that to *me,* and not to Headmaster Dumbledore?"

"Dumbledore did nothing to stop Snape," the black mist whispered. "You saw it, Hermione. The rot at Hogwarts begins at the top. Everything that is wrong with this school, it all begins with the mad Headmaster. You alone dared to call him out for it—and therefore I speak to you."

"And have you also spoken to Harry Potter, then?" Hermoine said, keeping her voice as even as she could. If *this* was his helpful ghost—

The black mist darkened and lightened, like a shake of the head. "I am frightened of Harry Potter," it whispered. "Of the coldness in his eyes, of the darkness that grows behind them. Harry Potter is a killer, and anyone who is an obstacle to him will die. Even you, Hermione Granger, if you dare truly oppose him, the darkness behind his eyes will reach out and destroy you. This I know."

"Then you don't know half of what you pretend to know," Hermione said, her voice a little firmer. "I'm scared of Harry too. But not because of what he might ever do to *me*. I'm scared of what he might do to *protect* me—"

"Wrong." The whisper was flat, and hard, as if to brook no possibility of denial. "Harry Potter *will* turn against you in time, Hermione, when the darkness takes him fully. He will not shed a tear, he will not even notice, on the day his footsteps finally crush you underneath."

"*Double* wrong!" she said back in a rising voice, even though there were chills going down her spine. One of Harry's phrases came to her. "Just what do you think you know, and how do you think you know it, anyway?"

"Time—" The voice seemed to catch itself. "Time enough for that later. For now, for today, indeed Harry Potter is not your enemy. And yet you are in gravest danger."

"I can believe *that*," said Hermione Granger. She desperately wanted to shift her wand to her other hand, she felt like she needed to grab her right arm just to keep it up, her head ached like she'd been staring at the black mist for days; she didn't know why she'd gotten tired so quickly.

"Lucius Malfoy has taken notice of you, Hermione." The whisper had risen, departed from its tonelessness, taken on a note of audible concern. "You have humiliated Slytherin House, you have defeated his son in battle. Even before then you were an embarrassment to all who stand with the Death Eaters; for you are a Muggleborn and yet you possess a power of wizardry greater than any pureblood. And now you are becoming known, the eyes of the world on you. Lucius Malfoy seeks to

crush you, Hermione, to hurt you and perhaps even kill you, and he has the means to do it!" The whisper had grown urgent.

There was a pause.

"Is that all?" Hermione said. If she was ex-Colonel Zabini or Harry Potter, she'd probably be asking clever questions to gather more information; but her mind felt slow and fatigued. She really needed to get out of here and go lie down for a while.

"You don't believe me," the whisper said, softer and sadder now. "Why not, Hermione? I *am* trying to help you."

Hermione took a step backward, away from the shadowy alcove.

"*Why not, Hermione?*" demanded the voice, rising to a hiss. "You owe me that much! Tell me, and then—" The voice caught, and came back quieter. "And then you can go, I suppose. Only tell me—*why*—"

Maybe she shouldn't've answered; maybe she should've just turned and fled, or better yet, cast a Prismatic Wall first and then screamed at the top of her lungs as she ran; but it was the note of real pain in the voice that caught her, and so she answered.

"Because you look incredibly dark and scary and suspicious," Hermione said, keeping her voice polite, as her wand stayed level on the towering black cloak and the faceless black mist.

"That's *all?*" whispered the voice incredulously. Sadness seemed to infuse it. "I hoped for better from you, Hermione. Surely such a Ravenclaw as you, the most intelligent Ravenclaw to grace Hogwarts in a generation, knows that appearances can be misleading."

"Oh, I know it," said Hermione. She took another step back, her tired fingers tightening on the wand. "But the thing that people forget sometimes, is that even though appearances *can* be misleading, they're usually *not.*"

There was a pause.

"You *are* the clever one," said the voice, and the black mist evaporated away, no longer obscuring; recognition sent a jolt of terrified adrenaline bursting through her—

—she felt a momentary sense of disorientation—

—and then a rush of shock and fear hit her like a Stunning Hex over her whole body, her body jerked around so fast it was like she had Ap-

parated, she found that without any thought or any conscious decision her wand had leaped into her hand and was already pointed at...

...a shining lady, her long white dress billowing about her as though in invisible winds; neither her hands nor her feet were visible, her face hidden beneath a white veil; and she was glowing all over, not like a ghost, not transparent, just surrounded by soft white light.

Hermione stared open-mouthed at the gentle sight, wondering why her heart was already hammering, and why she felt so scared.

"Hello again, Hermione," the kindly whisper emanated from the white glow behind the veil. "I've been sent to help you, so please don't be afraid. I am your servant in all things; for you, my Lady, are the bearer of a most marvelous destiny—"

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...
...

CHAPTER SEVENTY-EIGHT

TABOO TRADEOFFS PRELUDE: CHEATING

It was Saturday, on the 4th of April, in the year 1992.

Mr. and Mrs. Davis looked rather nervous, as they sat in a certain special section of the Hogwarts Quidditch stands—though today the cushioned benches did not look upon flying broomsticks, but rather viewed a gigantic square of something like parchment; a great white blankness soon to flicker with windows into grass and soldiers. For now it showed only the reflected dull gray color of the surrounding overcast skies. (Looking rather stormy, though the weather-wizards had promised that the rain wouldn't break before nightfall.)

Ordinarily it was the ancient tradition of Hogwarts that mere parents were to Stay Out—for much the same reason that impatient children are told to get out of the kitchen and not meddle in the cook's affairs. The only reason for a parent-teacher conference was if a teacher felt that a parent wasn't shaping up properly. It took an exceptional circumstance to make the Hogwarts administration feel that *it* had to justify itself to *you*. On any given occasion, generally speaking, the Hogwarts administration was backed up by eight hundred years of distinguished history and you were not.

Thus it had been with some trepidation that Mr. and Mrs. Davis had insisted on an audience with Deputy Headmistress McGonagall. It was hard to muster a proper sense of indignation when you were confronting the same dignified witch who, twelve years and four months earlier, had

given both of you two weeks' detention after catching you in the act of conceiving Tracey.

On the other hand, Mr. and Mrs. Davis's courage had been helped by angrily waving about a copy of *The Quibbler* whose headline showed, in bright bold text for all the world to see:

PACTS WITH POTTER?
BONES, DAVIS, GRANGER
IN LOVE RECTANGLE OF FEAR

And so Mr. and Mrs. Davis had argued their way into the Faculty Box of the Hogwarts Quidditch stands, where they were now ensconced with an excellent view of Professor Quirrell's enchanted screens, so that the two of them could see for themselves "Just what the Fiddly-Snocks has been going on in this school, if you'll pardon the expression, Deputy Headmistress McGonagall!"

Seated to the left of Mr. Davis was another concerned parent, a white-haired man in elegant black robes of unmatchable quality, one Lucius Malfoy, political leader of the strongest faction of the Wizengamot.

To the left of Lord Malfoy, a sneeringly aristocratic man with a scarred face who had been introduced to them as Lord Jugson.

Then an elderly but sharp-eyed fellow named Charles Nott, rumored to be nearly as wealthy as Lord Malfoy, seated on Lord Jugson's left.

On the right of Mrs. Davis, one would find the comely Lady and yet handsomer Lord of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Greengrass. Young they were as wizards counted age, garbed in grey silken robes set with tiny dark emeralds embroidered into the shape of grass blades. The Lady Greengrass was considered a key swing vote on the Wizengamot, her own mother having retired from the body with surprising speed. Her charming husband, though his family was not noble or wealthy of itself, had taken a seat on the Hogwarts Board of Governors.

To their right, a square-jawed and incredibly tough-looking old witch, who had shaken hands with Mr. and Mrs. Davis without the slightest hint of condescension. This was Amelia Bones, Director of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

To Amelia's right was a seniorish woman who had set the fashion scene of magical Britain on its ear by integrating a live vulture into her hat, one Augusta Longbottom. Though she was not addressed as Lady, Madam Longbottom would exercise the full rights of the Longbottom family for so long as their last scion had yet to attain his majority, and she was considered a prominent figure in a minority faction of the Wizengamot.

At the side of Madam Longbottom was seated none other than Chief Warlock Supreme Mugwump Headmaster Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, legendary defeater of Grindelwald, protector of Britain, rediscoverer of the fabled twelve uses of dragon's blood, the most powerful wizard in the world &c.

And finally, on the far right, one would find the enigmatic Defense Professor of Hogwarts, Quirinus Quirrell, who was leaning back on the cushioned benches as though resting; seeming entirely and naturally at ease in the rarefied company of a voting quorum of the Hogwarts Board of Governors, which had dropped by on this fine Saturday to learn just what the Fiddly-Snocks had been going on at Hogwarts in general and with Draco Malfoy, Theodore Nott, Daphne Greengrass, Susan Bones, and Neville Longbottom in particular. The name of Harry Potter had also been much discussed.

Oh, and one mustn't forget Tracey Davis, of course. Director Bones's eyebrows had climbed in some interest upon hearing the young couple introduced as her parents. Lord Jugson had given them a brief, incredulous stare before dismissing them with a snort. Lucius Malfoy had greeted them politely, his smile containing a hint of grim amusement mixed with pity.

Mr. and Mrs. Davis, whose last vote on anything of significance had been touching their wands to the name of Minister Fudge, who had all of three hundred Galleons stored in their Gringotts vault, and who respectively worked at selling cauldrons in a Potions shop and enchanting Omnioculars, were pressed up tightly against each other, sitting rigidly erect upon their cushioned benches, and desperately wishing they'd worn nicer robes.

The sky above was a solid mass of cloud dispersed into darker and

lighter grays, grim with the promise of future storms; though no lightning flickered as yet, nor distant rumbles of thunder echoed; and only a few threatening droplets had fallen.

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To their designated starting place in a certain forest, the Sunshine Regiment marched, though it was really more like a slow walk; you wouldn't want to tire yourself out before the battle even started, and the breezes of April were annoyingly humid, though cool. Ahead of them, a yellow flame wandered slowly through the air, guiding them according to their pace.

Susan Bones kept throwing worried glances toward the Sunshine General as they marched through the grayly illuminated forest. Professor Snape's going after Hermione seemed to have really shaken her. Hermione had even missed her Sunshine Regiment Official Planning Meeting, which seemed understandable enough; but when Susan had offered her sympathy afterward, Hermione had stammered that she'd lost track of time, which wasn't at all a usual thing for her to say, and the girl had looked exhausted and frightened like she'd just spent three days locked in a bathroom stall with a Dementor. Even now, when all the Sunshine General's focus should've been on the coming battle, the Ravenclaw girl's gaze was constantly darting in all directions, as though she expected Dark Wizards to jump out of the bushes and sacrifice her.

"The ban on Muggle artifacts cuts down our options a lot," Anthony Goldstein was saying in the dour tones the boy used to denote deliberate pessimism. "I had the idea of trying to Transfigure nets to throw on people, but—"

"No good," said Ernie Macmillan. The Hufflepuff boy shook his head, looking even more serious than Anthony. "I mean, it's just like throwing a hex, they'd *dodge*."

Anthony nodded. "That's what I figured, too. Do you have any ideas, Seamus?"

The former Chaotic Lieutenant still looked a bit nervous and out-of-place, marching along with his new comrades in the Sunshine Regiment. "Sorry," said the newly minted Captain Finnigan. "I'm more the strategic master type."

"*I'm* the strategic master type," said Ron Weasley, sounding put-off.

"There are *three* armies," the Sunshine General said acerbically, "which means we fight *two* armies at once, which means we need more than one strategist, which means shut up, Ron!"

Ron gave their General a surprised and worried look. "Hey," the Gryffindor boy said in a calming tone, "you shouldn't let Snape get to you so much—"

"What do *you* think we ought to do, General?" Susan said very loudly and quickly. "I mean, we don't really have a plan at this point." Their official planning session had failed *amazingly* with Hermione gone and both Ron and Anthony thinking they were in charge.

"Do we really need a plan?" the Sunshine General said, sounding a little distracted. "We've got you and me and Lavender and Parvati and Hannah and Daphne and Ron and Ernie and Anthony *and* Captain Finnigan."

"That—" began Anthony.

"Sounds like a pretty good strategy," Ron said with an approving nod. "We've got as many strong soldiers now as both other armies put together. Chaos's only got Potter and Longbottom and Nott left —well, and Zabini too, I suppose—"

"And Tracey," said Hermione.

Several people swallowed nervously.

"Oh, *stop it,*" Susan said sharply. "She's just a battle-hardened member of SPHEW, that's all General Sunshine means."

"Still," Ernie said, turning to look seriously at Susan, "I think you'd better go with whatever group fights Chaos, Captain Bones. I know you can't use your double magical powers except when innocents are in danger, but I mean—just in case Miss Davis *does,* you know, go out of control and try to eat someone's soul—"

"I can handle her," Susan told him, keeping her voice reassuring. Admittedly, Susan hadn't been replaced by a Metamorphmagus at the

moment, but then Tracey probably wasn't Polyjuiced Dumbledore or whoever.

Captain Finnigan intoned in a deep, sort-of-rumbling voice, "I find your lack of skepticism disturbing." He raised his hand with his thumb and forefinger almost touching, pointed at Ernie.

For some reason Anthony Goldstein seemed to be having a sudden choking fit. "What's that supposed to mean?" said Ernie.

"It's just something General Potter says sometimes," said Captain Finnigan. "Funny, when you first join the Chaos Legion it all seems crazy, and then after a couple of months you realize that actually everyone who *isn't* in the Chaos Legion is crazy —"

"I *said*," Ron said loudly, "it sounds like good strategy. We don't Transfigure anything, we don't tire ourselves out, we handle whatever they throw at us, and then we just overrun them."

"Okay," said Hermione. "Let's do that."

"But—" said Anthony, shooting a glare at Ron. "But General, Harry Potter's got *sixteen* people left in his army. Dragon and us each have twenty-eight. Harry *knows* that, he knows he's *got* to come up with something *incredible*—"

"Like *what?*" demanded Hermione, sounding stressed. "If we don't *know* what he's planning, we might as well save our magic for doing massed *Finites.* Like we *should've* done *last* time!"

Susan touched Hermione gently on the shoulder. "General Granger?" said Susan. "I think you should take a break for a bit before the battle."

She'd been expecting Hermione to argue, but Hermione just nodded and then walked a little faster, pulling away from the Sunshine Regiment Official Officer Group, her eyes still watching the forest, and sometimes the sky.

Susan followed her. It wouldn't do, having it look like the Sunshine General was being ejected from her own Official Officer Group.

"Hermione?" Susan said softly, after they'd walked a bit away. "You've got to focus. Professor Quirrell's in charge here, not Snape, and he won't let anything bad happen to you or anyone."

"You're not helping," Hermione said, sounding shaky. "You're not helping at all, Captain Bones."

The two of them walked faster, circling around some of the other soldiers, inspecting the marching perimeter and glancing at the surrounding trees.

"Susan?" Hermione said in a small voice, when they'd gotten further away from all the others. "Do you think Daphne's right about Draco Malfoy plotting something?"

"Yes," Susan said at once, not even thinking about it. "You can tell, because his name's got the letters M-A-L-F-O and Y in it."

Hermione looked around, as if to make sure that nobody was watching, although of course that was a wonderful way to get other people to pay attention to you. "Could Malfoy have been behind what Snape did?"

"Snape could be behind Malfoy," Susan said thoughtfully, remembering dinner-table conversations she'd heard at Auntie's, "or Lucius Malfoy could be behind both of them." A slight chill went down Susan's spine as this last thought occurred to her. Suddenly, telling Hermione to just focus on the coming battle seemed a lot less reasonable. "Why, did you find some sort of clue about that?"

Hermione shook her head. "No," the Ravenclaw girl said, in a voice that sounded almost like she was about to cry. "I was—just thinking about it myself—that's all."

In their designated place in a forest near Hogwarts, the Dragon General and the warriors of Dragon Army waited where their red flame had led them, beneath grey skies.

At Draco's right side stood Padma Patil, his second-in-command, who had once led all of Dragon Army after Draco had been stunned. At Draco's back was Vincent, the son of Crabbe, a family which had served the Malfoys into the distance of forgotten memory; the muscular boy was watchful as he was always watchful, whether battle had been declared or no. Further back, Gregory of the Goyles stood waiting beside

one of the two broomsticks Dragon Army had been given; if the Goyles had not served the Malfoys so long as the Crabbes, yet they had served no less well.

And at Draco's left side, now, stood one Dean Thomas of Gryffindor, a mudblood or possible half-blood who knew nothing of his father.

Sending Dean Thomas to Dragon Army had been a quite deliberate move on Harry's part, Draco was certain. Three other former Chaotics had also been transferred to Dragon Army, and all were watching Draco hawklike to see if he offered the former Lieutenant the slightest insult.

Some might have called it sabotage, but Draco knew better. Harry had also sent Lieutenant Finnigan to the Sunshine Regiment, even though Professor Quirrell's mandate had only required that Harry give up *one* Lieutenant. That too had been a deliberate move, making crystal clear to everyone that Harry *wasn't* dumping his least-favored soldiers.

In one sense, it might have been easier for Draco to win the true loyalties of his new soldiers if they'd thought Harry hadn't wanted them. In another sense... well, it wasn't easy to put into words. Harry had given him good soldiers with their pride intact, but it was more than that. Harry had showed kindliness toward his soldiers, but it was more than *that*. It wasn't just Harry playing fair, it was something that... that you couldn't help but contrast with the way the game was played in Slytherin House.

So Draco hadn't offered the slightest insult to Mr. Thomas, but brought him straight to his side, subordinate to himself and Padma but no one else. It was a test, Draco had told Mr. Thomas and everyone, not a promotion. Mr. Thomas would have to show himself worthy of rank within Dragon Army—but he would be given a chance, and the chance *would* be fair. Mr. Thomas had looked surprised at the ceremony of it (the Chaos Legion, from what Draco had heard, didn't stand on formality) but the Gryffindor boy had stood a little straighter, and nodded.

And then, after Mr. Thomas had done well enough in one of Dragon Army's training sessions, he'd been brought into the strategy session in Dragon Army's huge military office. And a few minutes into the session, Padma had happened to ask—as though it was a perfectly normal question—whether Mr. Thomas had any ideas about how to defeat the

Chaos Legion.

The Gryffindor boy had said cheerfully that Harry had predicted that General Malfoy would get one of his soldiers to ask him that, and that Harry had given him the message that General Malfoy should ask himself where his relative advantage lay—what Draco Malfoy could do, or what Dragon Army could do, that the Chaos Legion couldn't match—and then try to exploit it for all it was worth. Dean Thomas couldn't think of what that advantage might be, but if he *did* come up with any ideas for beating Chaos, he'd share them. Harry had ordered him to, after all.

Sigh, Draco had thought, since he couldn't actually sigh out loud. But it was good advice, and Draco had followed it, sitting at his bedroom desk with quill and parchment listing out everything that might be a relative advantage.

And, almost to Draco's own surprise, he'd had an *idea,* a real one. In fact he'd had *two.*

The hollow bell sounded through the forest, somehow sounding more ominous than ever before. On the instant, the two pilots cried "*Up!*" and leapt onto their broomsticks, heading into the gray sky.

⁂

Mr. and Mrs. Davis had now slumped slightly against each other, more from sheer muscle exhaustion than from any decrease of tension. Before them, the vast blank white parchment flickered with three great windows, as though holes had been cut through into the forest, showing three armies on the march. Lesser windows showed the six riders upon their broomsticks, and the corner of the parchment showed a view of the entire forest, with glowing dots to indicate armies and scouts.

The window into Sunshine showed General Granger and her Captains marching in the center of the Sunshine Regiment, protected by *Contego* screens along with a number of other young witches. The Sunshine Regiment, the Defense Professor had remarked, knew well that it had now acquired a strong advantage in experienced soldiers, and it

meant to protect those soldiers from a surprise attack. Aside from that, the Sunshine Soldiers were moving forward at a steady march, conserving their strength.

The soldiers in General Malfoy's army, at least those with higher Transfiguration scores, were picking up leaves and Transfiguring them into... well, if you looked at Padma Patil, who was almost done with hers, it looked like her leaf was becoming a left-handed glove bearing a dangling strap. (The window had zoomed in to show this.)

Lord Jugson was watching the screen with a flat expression; his voice, when he spoke, seemed to ooze and drip with disdain. "What *is* your son doing, Lucius?"

The foreign-born witch who stood at Draco Malfoy's right side had finished Transfiguring her glove, and was now bringing it before the Dragon General like a sacrifice.

"I do not know," said Lucius Malfoy, his tone calm though no less aristocratic, "but I must trust that he has good reason for doing it."

All Dragon Army stopped for a moment as Padma slid the glove over her left hand, strapped it in place, and presented it before Draco Malfoy; who also stopped in place, took several deep breaths, raised his wand, executed a precise set of eight movements and bellowed "*Colloportus!*"

The Dragon Warrior raised her gloved hand, flexed it, and gave a small bow to Draco Malfoy, who returned it more shallowly, though the Dragon General was staggering slightly. Padma then returned to her place at Draco's side, and the Dragons began marching once more.

"Well," remarked Augusta Longbottom. "I don't suppose someone would care to explain?" Amelia Bones was frowning slightly as she gazed at the screen.

"For some reason or other," said the amused voice of Professor Quirrell, "it seems that the scion of Malfoy is able to cast surprisingly strong magic for a first-year student. Due to the purity of his blood, of course. Certainly the good Lord Malfoy would not have openly flouted the underage magic laws by arranging for his son to receive a wand before his acceptance into Hogwarts."

"I suggest you be careful in your implications, Quirrell," Lucius Malfoy said coldly.

"Oh, I am," Professor Quirrell said. "A *Colloportus* cannot be dispelled by *Finite Incantatem;* it requires an *Alohomora* of equal strength. Until then, a glove so Charmed will resist lesser material forces, deflect the Sleep Hex and the Stunning Hex. And as neither Mr. Potter nor Miss Granger can cast a counterspell powerful enough, that Charm is invincible upon this battlefield. It is not the original intent of the Charm, nor the intent of whoever taught Mr. Malfoy an emergency spell for evading his enemies. But it would seem that Mr. Malfoy has been learning creativity."

Lucius Malfoy had straightened as the Defense Professor spoke; he now sat erect upon his cushioned bench, his head held perceptibly higher than before, and when he spoke it was with quiet pride. "He will be the greatest Lord Malfoy that has yet lived."

"Faint praise," Augusta Longbottom said under her breath; Amelia Bones chuckled, as did Mr. Davis for a tiny, fatal fraction of a second before he stopped with a strangled gargle.

"I quite agree," said Professor Quirrell, though it wasn't clear to whom he spoke. "Unfortunately for Mr. Malfoy, he is still new to the art of creativity, and so he has committed a classic error of Ravenclaw."

"And what might that be?" said Lucius Malfoy, his voice now turned chill once more.

Professor Quirrell had leaned back in his seat, the pale blue eyes briefly unfocusing as one of the windows shifted its viewpoint within the greater screen, zooming in to show the sweat now on Draco Malfoy's forehead. "It is such a beautiful idea that Mr. Malfoy has quite overlooked its pragmatic difficulties."

"Would someone care to explain that?" said Lady Greengrass. "Not all of us present are experts at such... affairs."

Amelia Bones spoke, the old witch's voice somewhat dry. "It will tempt them to try to catch hexes that they would be wiser to simply dodge. The more so, if they have had little practice catching them. And the casting of so many Charms will tire their strongest warrior."

Professor Quirrell gave the DMLE Director a half-nod of acknowledgment. "As you say, Madam Bones. Mr. Malfoy is new to the business of having ideas, and so when he has one, he becomes proud of himself

for having it. He has not yet had enough ideas to unflinchingly discard those that are beautiful in some aspects and impractical in others; he has not yet acquired confidence in his own ability to think of better ideas as he requires them. What we are seeing here is not Mr. Malfoy's best idea, I fear, but rather his only idea."

Lord Malfoy simply turned to watch the screens again, as though the Defense Professor had used up his right to exist.

"But—" said Lord Greengrass. "But *what* in Merlin's name is Harry Potter—"

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Sixteen remaining soldiers of the Chaos Legion—or fifteen plus Blaise Zabini, rather—marched confidently through the forest, their shoes thudding over the still-dry ground. Their camouflage uniforms blended into the forest even more than usual, all colors washed out by the tints of an overcast day.

Sixteen Chaos Legionnaires, against twenty-eight Dragon Warriors and twenty-eight Sunshine Soldiers.

The common consensus had been that, with odds *that* bad, it was practically impossible for them to lose. After all, General Chaos was *bound* to come up with something really *spectacular,* facing odds like that.

There was something almost nightmarish about how everyone seemed to now *expect* Harry to pull miracles out of his hat, on demand, any time one was needed. It meant that if you couldn't do the impossible, you were *disappointing your friends* and *failing to live up to your potential...*

Harry hadn't bothered complaining to Professor Quirrell about 'too much pressure'. Harry's mental model of the Defense Professor had predicted him looking severely annoyed, saying things along the lines of *You are perfectly capable of solving this problem, Mr. Potter; did you even try?* and then deducting several hundred Quirrell points.

From above, from where two broomsticks watched their march, the high young voice of Tess Walsh cried "Friend!" and after another moment, "Gingersnap!"

A handful of seconds later, the soldier who'd code-named herself Gingersnap returned bearing a double handful of acorns, sweating slightly in the cool but humid air from the jog that had taken her to the oak tree Neville had spotted. Gingersnap approached to where Shannon was holding a uniform-shirt with the neck tied off, in lieu of anyone having to Transfigure a bag. When Gingersnap brought her hands forward to try and dump her acorns into the holding-shirt, Chaotic Shannon, giggling, jerked the shirt to the right, then to the left again as Gingersnap made another effort to dump the acorns, until a sharp "Miss Friedman!" from Lieutenant Nott caused Shannon to sigh and hold the shirt still. Gingersnap dumped her acorns into those accumulated, and then headed out for more.

Somewhere in the background, Ellie Knight was singing her very own version of the Chaos Legion's marching song, and around half the other soldiers were trying to step along with it despite not knowing the tune in advance. Nearby, Nita Berdine, who had a high Transfiguration score, finished creating yet another pair of green sunglasses, and handed them to Adam Beringer, who folded up the sunglasses before tucking them into his uniform pocket. Other soldiers were already wearing their own green sunglasses, despite the cloudy day.

You might guess that there was some sort of incredibly complicated and fascinating explanation behind this, and you would be right.

Two days earlier Harry had been sitting amid his bookcases in the comfy rocking-chair he'd obtained for his trunk's cavern level, pondering silently in the quiet span between classes and dinnertime, thinking about power.

For sixteen Chaotics to defeat twenty-eight Sunnies and twenty-eight Dragons they would need a force amplifier. There were limits to what you could do with maneuver. There *had* to be a secret weapon and it had to be invincible, or at least moderately unstoppable.

Muggle artifacts were now illegal in Hogwarts's mock battles, banned by Ministry edict. And the trouble with finding some other clever and

unusual spell was that an army twice your own size could brute-force *Finite* almost anything you tried. The Sunshine Regiment might have missed that tactic with the Transfigured chainmail, but nobody would miss it again now that Professor Quirrell had spelled it out. And *Finite Incantatem* was a brute-force counterspell which required at least as much magic as the spell being canceled... which, if you were severely outnumbered, made it a whole new order of military challenge. The enemy could *Finite* anything you tried, and still have enough magic left over for shields and volleys of Sleep Hexes.

Unless, somehow, you could invoke potencies beyond the ordinary strength of first-year Hogwarts students, something too powerful for the enemy to *Finite*.

So Harry had asked Neville if he'd ever heard of any *small, safe* sacrificial rituals—

And then, after the screaming and the shouting had subsided, after Harry had stopped trying to argue about Unbreakable Vows and just given up the whole thing as clearly impossible from a public relations standpoint, Harry had realized that he hadn't even needed to go there. They taught you how to invoke potencies far beyond your own strength in ordinary Hogwarts classes.

Sometimes, even though you were looking straight at something, you didn't realize *what* you were looking at until you happened to ask exactly the right question.

Defense. Charms. Transfiguration. Potions. History of Magic. Astronomy. Broomstick Flying. Herbology...

"*Foe!*" screamed the voice from above.

It was a good thing that Neville Longbottom hadn't the tiniest idea that his grandmother was watching; or he would've been more self-conscious about screaming scary battlecries at the top of his lungs while casting *Luminos* every three seconds as he rocketed through a dense forest of trees, hot on the tail of Gregory Goyle.

("But—" Augusta Longbottom said, her expression showing almost as much astonishment as worry. "But Neville is afraid of heights!")

("Not all fears last," said Amelia Bones. The old witch was favoring the great screen before them with a measuring gaze. "Or perhaps he has found courage. It is much the same, in the end.")

A glimmer of red—

Neville dodged, very nearly into a tree but he *did* dodge; and then Neville somehow also managed to dodge *almost* all of the branches before they smacked him in the face.

Now Mr. Goyle's broomstick was pulling further and further away—even though the two of them were riding exactly the same broomstick and Mr. Goyle weighed more, somehow Neville was still falling behind. So Neville slowed down, pulled back, angled up out of the forest and began to accelerate back toward where the Chaos Legion still marched.

Twenty seconds later—it hadn't been a *long* chase, just an *exciting* one—Neville was back among his fellow Chaotics, and dismounted his broom to walk on the ground for a little bit.

"Neville—" said General Potter. Harry's voice was a little distant, as he walked carefully and steadily through the forest, his wand still applied to the almost-finished Form of the object he was slowly Transfiguring. Beside him, Blaise Zabini, working a smaller version of the same Transfiguration, looked like a shambling Inferi as he stumbled forward. "I told you—Neville—you don't have to—"

"Yes, I do," said Neville. He looked down at where his fingers grasped the broomstick, and saw that not just his hands, but his whole arms were shaking. But unless anyone else in Chaos had been practicing dueling for an hour a day with Mr. Diggory, and then practicing their aim in private for another hour afterward, Neville was probably the best shot from a broomstick even after taking into account that he wasn't a very good flyer.

"Good show, Neville," Theodore said from where he was walking ahead of them all, leading the Chaos Legion forward through the forest while wearing only his undershirt.

(Augusta Longbottom and Charles Nott exchanged brief astonished glances and then wrenched their gazes away from one another as though

stung.)

Neville took a few deep breaths, trying to steady his hands, trying to think; Harry might not be good for deep strategic thinking while he was in the middle of an extended Transfiguration. "Lieutenant Nott, do you have any idea why Dragon Army just did that? They *lost* a broom—" The Dragons had started the combat with a feint to provide a distraction for Mr. Goyle's approach through the forest; Neville hadn't realized there were *two* brooms attacking until almost too late. But the Chaos Legion had *gotten* the other pilot. That was why broomsticks usually didn't attack before armies met, it meant a whole army would concentrate fire on the broomstick. "And the Dragons didn't even get anyone, did they?"

"Nope!" Tracey Davis said proudly. She too was now marching by General Potter's side, her wand gripped low and watchful as her eyes scanned the surrounding forest. "I threw up a Prismatic Sphere like a split second before Mr. Goyle's hex got Zabini, and the way Mr. Goyle had his other arm stretched out I think he planned to knock down the General, too." The Slytherin witch smiled with vicious confidence. "Mr. Goyle tried a Breaking Drill Hex, but learned to his dismay that his weak magic was no match for my newfound dark powers, hahahaha!"

Some Chaotics laughed with her, but a queasy sensation was starting in Neville's stomach as he realized how close the Chaos Legion had come to complete disaster. If Mr. Goyle had managed to disrupt both Transfigurations—

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"Report!" snapped the Dragon General, doing his best to conceal the fatigue he felt after casting seventeen Locking Charms, with more yet to come.

Beads of sweat now dotted Gregory's forehead. "The enemy got Dylan Vaughan," Gregory said formally. "Harry Potter and Blaise Zabini were each Transfiguring something dark-grey and roundish, I don't think it was finished but it looked like it would be big and hollow, sort of cauldron-shaped. Zabini's was smaller than Potter's. I couldn't get either of them or disrupt their Transfigurations, Tracey Davis blocked

me. Neville Longbottom is on a broomstick and he's still a terrible flyer but his aim is really good."

Draco listened, frowning, and then he glanced at Padma and Dean Thomas, who both shook their own heads, indicating that they also couldn't think of what might be big and grey and shaped like a cauldron.

"Anything else?" said Draco. If that was it, they'd lost a broom for nothing—

"The only other weird thing I saw," Gregory said, sounding puzzled, "was that some Chaotics were wearing... sort of like goggles?"

Draco thought about this, not noticing that he'd stopped marching or that all of Dragon Army had automatically stopped with him.

"Was there anything special about the goggles?" Draco said.

"Um..." Gregory said. "They were... greenish, maybe?"

"Okay," said Draco. Again without thinking, he began walking once more and his Dragons followed. "Here's our new strategy. We're only going to send eleven Dragons against the Chaos Legion, not fourteen. That should be enough to beat them, now that we can neutralize their special advantage." It was a gamble, but you had to take gambles sometimes, if you wanted to come in first in a three-way battle.

"You figured out Chaos's plan, General Malfoy?" said Mr. Thomas with considerable surprise.

"What *are* they doing?" said Padma.

"I haven't the faintest idea," said Draco, with a smirk of the most refined smugness. "We'll just do the *obvious* thing."

Harry, having now finished his cauldron, was carefully scooping acorns into the container while the scouts searched for a nearby source of water that could be used as a liquid base. They'd come across frequent sinkholes and miniature creeks in the forest before, so it ought not to take long. Another scout had brought a straight stick that would serve as a stirrer, so Harry didn't have to Transfigure one.

Sometimes, even though you were looking straight at something, you didn't realize *what* you were looking at until you happened to ask exactly the right question...

How can I invoke magical powers that ought to be beyond the reach of first-year students?

There was a cautionary tale the Potions Master had told them (with much sneers and laughter to make the stupidity seem low-status instead of daring and romantic) about a second-year witch in Beauxbatons who'd stolen some extremely restricted and expensive ingredients, and tried to brew *Polyjuice* so she could borrow the form of another girl for purposes better left unmentioned. Only she'd managed to contaminate the potion with *cat hairs,* and then instead of seeking a healer immediately, the witch had hidden herself in a bathroom, hoping the effects would just wear off; and when she'd finally been found, it had been too late to reverse the transformation completely, condemning her to a life of despair as a sort of cat-girl hybrid.

Harry hadn't realized what that *meant* until the instant of thinking the right question—but what that implied was that a young wizard or witch could do things with Potions-Making that they couldn't even come *close* to doing with Charms. Polyjuice was one of the most potent potions known... but what made Polyjuice a N.E.W.T.-level potion, apparently, wasn't the required age before you had enough magical power; it was how difficult the potion was to brew *precisely* and what happened to you if you screwed up.

Nobody in any army had tried brewing any potions up until then. But Professor Quirrell would let you get away with nearly anything, if it was something you *could* have done in a real war. *Cheating is technique,* the Defense Professor had once lectured them. *Or rather, cheating is what the losers call technique, and will be worth extra Quirrell points when executed successfully.* In principle, there was nothing *unrealistic* about Transfiguring a couple of cauldrons and brewing potions out of whatever came to hand, if you had enough time before the armies met.

So Harry had retrieved his copy of *Magical Drafts and Potions,* and begun looking for a safe but useful potion he could brew in the minutes before the battle started—a potion which would win the battle too fast

for counterspells, or produce spell effects too strong for first-years to *Finite*.

Sometimes, even though you were looking straight at something, you didn't realize *what* you were looking at until you happened to ask exactly the right question...

What potion can I brew using only components gathered from an ordinary forest?

Every recipe in *Magical Drafts and Potions* used at least one ingredient from a magical plant or animal. Which was unfortunate, because all the *magical* plants and animals were in the Forbidden Forest, not the safer and lesser woods where battles were held.

Someone else might have given up at that point.

Harry had turned the pages from one recipe to another, skimming faster and faster in dawning realization, confirming what he had already read and was now *seeing* for the first time.

Every single Potions recipe seemed to demand at least one magical ingredient, *but why should that be true?*

Charms required no material components at all; you just said the words and waved your wand. Harry had been thinking about Potions-Making as essentially analogous: Instead of your spoken syllables triggering a spell effect for no comprehensible reason, you collected a batch of disgusting ingredients and stirred four times clockwise, and *that* arbitrarily triggered a spell effect.

In which case, given that most potions used ordinary components like porcupine quills or stewed slugs, you'd expect to see some potions using *only* ordinary components.

But instead *every* single recipe in *Magical Drafts and Potions* demanded at least *one* component from a magical plant or animal—an ingredient like silk from an Acromantula or petals from a Venus Fire Trap.

Sometimes, even though you were looking straight at something, you didn't realize *what* you were looking at until you happened to ask exactly the right question...

If making a potion is like casting a Charm, why don't I fall over from exhaustion after brewing a draught as powerful as boil-curing?

The Friday before last, Harry's double Potions class had brewed *potion of boil-curing...* although even the most trivial healing Charms, if you tried to cast them with wand and incantation, were at least fourth-year spells. And afterward, they'd all felt the way they usually felt after Potions class, namely, *not* magically exhausted to any discernible degree.

Harry had shut his copy of *Magical Drafts and Potions* with a snap, and rushed down to the Ravenclaw common room. Harry had found a seventh-year Ravenclaw doing his N.E.W.T. potions homework and paid the older boy a Sickle to borrow *Moste Potente Potions* for five minutes; because Harry hadn't wanted to run all the way to the library to find confirmation.

After skimming through five recipes in the seventh-year book, Harry had read the sixth recipe, for a *potion of fire breathing*, which required Ashwinder eggs... and the book warned that the resulting fire could be no hotter than the magical fire which had spawned the Ashwinder which had laid the eggs.

Harry had shouted "*Eureka!*" right in the middle of the Ravenclaw common room, and been severely rebuked by a nearby prefect, who'd thought Mr. Potter was trying to cast a spell. Nobody in the wizarding world knew or cared about some ancient Muggle named Archimedes, nor the ur-physicist's realization that the water displaced from a bathtub would equal the volume of the object entering the bathtub...

Conservation laws. They'd been the critical insight in more Muggle discoveries than Harry could easily count. In Muggle technology you couldn't raise a feather one meter off the ground without the power coming from *somewhere.* If you looked at molten lava spilling from a volcano and asked where the heat came from, a physicist would tell you about radioactive heavy metals in the center of the Earth's molten core. If you asked where the energy to power the radioactivity came from, the physicist would point to an era before the Earth had formed, and a primordial supernova in the early days of the galaxy which had baked atomic nuclei heavier than the natural limit, the supernova compressing protons and neutrons into a tight unstable package that yielded back some of the supernova's energy when it split. A light bulb was fueled by electricity, fueled by a nuclear power plant, fueled by a supernova...

You could play the game all the way back to the Big Bang.

Magic did *not* appear to work like this, to put it mildly. Magic's attitude toward laws like Conservation of Energy was somewhere between a giant extended middle finger, and a shrug of total indifference. *Aguamenti* created water out of nothingness, so far as anyone knew; there was no known lake whose water level went down each time. That was a simple fifth-year spell, not considered impressive by wizards, because creating a mere glass of water didn't seem amazing to them. They didn't have the wacky notion that mass ought to be conserved, or that creating a gram of mass was somehow equivalent to creating 90,000,000,000,000 joules of energy. There was an upper-year spell Harry had run across whose *literal incantation* was '*Arresto Momentum!*' and when Harry had asked if the momentum went anywhere *else* he'd just gotten a puzzled look. So Harry had kept a desperate eye out for *some* kind of conservation principle in magic, *anywhere*...

...and the whole time it had been right in front of him in every Potions class. Potions-Making didn't *create* magic, it *preserved* magic, that was why every potion needed at least one magical ingredient. And by following instructions like 'stir four times counterclockwise and once clockwise'—Harry had hypothesized—you were doing something like casting a small spell that reshaped the magic in the ingredients. (And unbound the physical form so that ingredients like porcupine quills dissolved smoothly into a drinkable liquid; Harry strongly suspected that a Muggle following exactly the same recipe would end up with nothing but a spiny mess.) That was what Potions-Making really *was,* the art of transforming existing magical essences. So you were a *little* tired after Potions class, but not much, because you weren't empowering the potions yourself, you were just reshaping magic that was already there. And that was why a second-year witch could brew Polyjuice, or at least get close.

Harry had kept scanning through *Moste Potente Potions,* looking for something that might disprove his shiny new theory. After five minutes he'd flipped the older boy another Sickle, over his protests, and kept going.

The *potion of giant strength* required a Re'em to trample the mashed

Dugbogs you stirred into the potion. It was odd, Harry had realized after a moment, because crushed Dugbogs weren't strong themselves, they were just... very, very crushed after the Re'em got through with them.

Another recipe said to 'touch with forged bronze', i.e., grasp a Knut in pliers so you could skim the potion's surface; and if you dropped the Knut all the way in, the book warned, the potion would instantly superheat and boil over the cauldron.

Harry had stared at the recipes and their warnings, forming a second and stranger hypothesis. Of course it wouldn't be as simple as Potions-Making using magical potentials imbued in the ingredients, like Muggle cars fueled by the combustion potential of gasoline. Magic would never be as *sensible* as that...

And then Harry had gone to Professor Flitwick—since he didn't want to approach Professor Snape outside of class—and Harry had told Professor Flitwick that he wanted to invent a new potion, and he knew what the ingredients ought to be and what the potion should do, but he didn't know how to deduce the required stirring pattern—

After Professor Flitwick had stopped screaming in horror and running in little circles, and Professor McGonagall had been called into the ensuing fierce interrogation to promise Harry that in this case it was both acceptable and important for him to reveal his underlying theory, it had developed that Harry had *not* made an original magical discovery, but rediscovered a law so ancient that nobody knew who had first formulated it:

A potion spends that which is invested in the creation of its ingredients.

The heat of goblin forges that had cast the bronze Knut, the Re'em's strength that had crushed the Dugbogs, the magical fire that had spawned the Ashwinder: all these potencies could be recalled, unlocked, and restructured by the spell-like process of stirring the ingredients in exact patterns.

(From a Muggle standpoint it was just *odd*, a deranged version of thermodynamics invented by someone who thought life ought to be *fair*. From a Muggle standpoint, the heat expended in forging the Knut hadn't gone *into* the bronze, the heat had *left* and dissipated into the envi-

ronment, becoming permanently less available. Energy was conserved, could be neither created nor destroyed; *entropy* always increased. But wizards didn't think that way: from their perspective, if you'd put some amount of work into making a Knut, it stood to reason that you could get exactly the same work back out. Harry had tried to explain why this sounded a bit *odd* if you'd been raised by Muggles, and Professor McGonagall had asked bemusedly why the Muggle perspective was any better than the wizarding one.)

The fundamental principle of Potions-Making had no name and no standard phrasing, since then you might be tempted to write it down.

And someone who wasn't wise enough to figure out the principle themselves might read it.

And they would start having all sorts of bright ideas for inventing new Potions.

And then they would be turned into catgirls.

It had been made very clear to Harry that he *wasn't* going to be sharing this particular discovery with Neville, or Hermione either after the next armies' battle. Harry had tried to say something about Hermione seeming really off lately and this being just the sort of thing that might cheer her up. Professor McGonagall had said flatly that he wasn't even to think it, and Professor Flitwick had raised his little hands and made a gesture as of snapping a wand in half.

Although the two Professors had been kind enough to suggest that if Mr. Potter thought he knew what the potion's ingredients should be, he might be able to find an *already-existing* recipe that did the same thing; and Professor Flitwick had mentioned several volumes in the Hogwarts library that might be useful...

The vast parchment-like screen now showed only an aerial view of the forest, from which you could barely make out the camouflaged forms of three armies, split up into two groups each, converging to fight their three-way battle.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-EIGHT

The benches of the Quidditch stadium were now rapidly filling up with the more easily bored sort of spectator who only wanted to be there for the final battle and skip out on all the boring points along the way. (If there was anything wrong with Professor Quirrell's battles, it was widely agreed, it was that his spectacles didn't last nearly as *long* as Quidditch matches, once they actually started. To this Professor Quirrell had replied only, *Such is real life,* and that had been that.)

Within the huge window—it was all one window now, observing from a great height—the vague collections of tiny camouflaged forms grew closer.

Closer.

Almost touching—

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The vast white parchment window showed the first touch of battle between Sunshine and Chaos, a screaming mass of running children with smiley-faces upon their breasts, charging forward with *Contego* shields held high and others shouting "*Somnium!*"—

Until one of their number shrieked "*Prismatis!*" in a terrified voice and the entire charge came to a sudden halt before the sparkling wall of force that had appeared in front of them.

Tracey Davis had walked out from behind the trees.

"That's right," said Tracey, her voice low and grim as she leveled her wand on the barrier. "You *should* fear me. For I am Tracey Davis, the Darke Lady! That's Darke Lady spelled D-A-R-K-E, with an E!"

(Amelia Bones, Director of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, was sending an inquiring look at Mr. and Mrs. Davis, both of whom looked like they would have dearly preferred to die on the spot.)

Behind the Prismatic Barrier, there was some kind of hushed argument taking place among the Sunshine Soldiers, one of whom in particular seemed to be getting scolded by several of the others.

Then, a moment later, *Tracey* flinched.

Susan Bones had come to the front of the Sunshine contingent.

("Goodness," said Augusta Longbottom. "What *do* you suppose your grand-niece has been learning at Hogwarts?")

("I don't know," Amelia Bones said calmly, "but I shall owl her a Chocolate Frog and instructions to learn more of it.")

The Prismatic Barrier vanished.

The Sunshine Soldiers resumed their charge forward.

Tracey yelled, her voice high with strain, "*Inflammare!*" and the Sunshine charge came to another sudden halt as a line of fire blazed up between them in the half-dry grass, extending to follow the path of Tracey's wand as she pointed it; an instant later Susan Bones cried "*Finite Incantatem!*" and the flames dimmed, brightened, dimmed in the contest of their wills, other soldiers raising their wards to aim at Tracey; and *that* was when Neville Longbottom plunged shrieking out of the sky.

One of the Dragon Warriors, Raymond Arnold, made a hand-sign, pointing forward and oblique left; and there was a sudden hushed hiss of whispers among the Dragon Army contingent as they all quietly reoriented themselves in the direction of the enemy. The Sunnies knew they were there, of course both armies knew; but somehow, in this moment, they had all become instinctively quiet.

The Dragons crept forward further, and then further, the dull camouflaged forms of the Sunnies beginning to appear among the distant trees, and still nobody spoke, nobody bellowed the call to charge.

Draco was now at the forefront of his soldiers, Vincent behind him and Padma only a shade further back; if the three of them could take the shock of Sunshine's best, the rest of Dragon Army might stand a chance.

Then Draco saw one Sunnie staring at him from the distance, in the vanguard of her own army; staring at him with a look of fury—

Across the forest battleground, their eyes met.

Draco had only a fraction of a second to wonder, in the back of his mind, what Hermione Granger was so angry about, before the shout went up from both their armies; and they were all running forward to

the charge, himself and Granger on a direct collision course for each other.

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The other Chaotics had appeared now from among the trees, some had *dropped out* of trees, and the battle was in full force now, everyone firing in every direction at anything that looked like an enemy. Plus a number of Sunnies crying *"Luminos!"* at Neville Longbottom as the Chaos Hufflepuff twisted and rocketed up through the air on courses that could only be described as, indeed, "chaotic"—

And it happened, the way it happened only one time out of twenty in mock aerial combat, that Neville Longbottom's *broomstick* glowed bright red beneath his clenched hands.

It should've meant that Longbottom was out of the game.

Then, in the Hogwarts stands, among the watching crowds of students, a scream went up—

Combat realism. It was Professor Quirrell's one master rule. You could get away with anything if it was *realistic,* and in real life, a soldier didn't just vanish when their *broomstick* got hit by a curse.

Neville was falling toward the ground and screaming "*Chaotic landing!*" and the Chaotics were wrenching their attention away from fights to cast the Hover Charm (and run at the same time so they wouldn't be sitting ducks), almost everyone else stopping to gape—

And Neville Longbottom slammed into the leaf-laden forest ground, landing on one knee, one foot, and both hands, as though he were kneeling down to be knighted.

Everything stopped. Even Tracey and Susan paused in their duel.

In the stadium, all crowd noises vanished.

There was a universal silence composed of astonishment, concern, and sheer dumbstruck gaping awe, as everyone waited to see what would happen next.

And then Neville Longbottom slowly rose to his feet, and leveled his wand, still in hand, at the Sunshine Soldiers.

Though nobody on the battlefield heard it, a large segment of the stadium audience had begun chanting, in steadily rising notes each time the word was uttered, "Doom Doom Doom Doom Doom", because you just couldn't see that and *not* think it required musical accompaniment.

"The crowd is cheering your grandson," said Amelia Bones. The old witch was favoring the screen with a measuring look.

"So they are," said Augusta Longbottom. "Some, if I hear correctly, are cheering, *Our blood for Neville! Our souls for Neville!*"

"Quite," said Amelia, taking a sip from a teacup which had not been there moments earlier. "It shows the lad has leadership potential."

"These cheers," continued Augusta, her voice taking on an even more stunned quality, "seem to be coming from the Hufflepuff benches."

"It *is* the House of the loyal, my dear," said Amelia.

"Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore! *What in Merlin's name has been happening in this school?*"

Lucius Malfoy was watching the screens with an ironic smile, his fingers tapping at his armrest in no discernible pattern. "I do not know what is more frightening, the thought that he has some hidden plan behind all this, or the thought that he does not."

"Look!" cried the Lord of Greengrass. The dapper young man had risen half out of his chair, pointing his finger at the screen. "There she goes!"

"We'll both take him at once," Daphne whispered. She knew that a few fear-filled minutes of real combat experience, a handful of times each week, might not be enough to match Neville's regular dueling practice with Harry and Cedric Diggory over the same period. "He's too much for one of us, but both of us together— I'll use my Charm, you just try to stun him—"

Hannah, beside her, nodded, and then they both screamed at the top of their lungs and charged forward, the Hover Charms of two supporting Sunshine Soldiers moving them faster and making them light on their feet, Daphne already crying "*Tonare!*" even as Hannah kept a huge

Contego shield moving in front of them, and with a brief extra lift they leapt over the heads of the front screen of soldiers and landed in front of Neville with their hair billowing high around them—

(Photographs were strictly prohibited at all Hogwarts games, but somehow this moment *still* ended up on the front page of the next day's *Quibbler*.)

—and in the same instant, because fighting older bullies had burned away the slightest traces of hesitation, Hannah fired her first Sleep Hex at Neville (she'd started the incantation while she was still in the air) even as Daphne, concentrating more on speed than on force, slashed down with her Ancient Blade at where she thought Neville's thighs would be *after* he dodged—

But Neville leapt *up,* not sideways, leapt up higher than he should've been able to go, so that her glowing sword cut only the air beneath his feet. Somehow Daphne realized what it meant, that Neville still had other Chaotics Hovering him, in time for her to raise her Blade up over her head, but Neville *fell too fast* and when his Blade smashed into hers it was like being hit by a Bludger. It knocked Daphne off her feet and sent her sprawling backward onto the grass, hitting the ground hard on her back. It might have been all over for her, then, if Neville hadn't landed too hard himself and gone to his knees with a pained gasp. And then before Neville could bring his glowing Blade down, Hannah shouted "*Somnium!*" and Neville lurched frantically backward—though of course no spell had actually come from Hannah's wand, the Hufflepuff girl couldn't really have fired again that fast—which gave Daphne a second to scramble to her feet and get both hands around her wand again—

*

"Dear Merlin," said Lady Greengrass. Her voice seemed unsteady, the aristocratic poise well-punctured. "My daughter is *fighting* with the Charm of the Most Ancient Blade, in her first year. I never knew—she possessed such extraordinary talent—"

"Excellent blood," Charles Nott said approvingly, causing Augusta to snort.

"My good Lady," said Professor Quirrell, sounding grave. "Do not wrong your daughter so. That is not mere *talent* which you see." His voice grew a little dryer. "*That* is what happens when young wizards and witches put their competitive efforts into a game which, unlike Quidditch or Exploding Snap, involves—to put it bluntly—actual spellcasting."

⁂

"*Expelliarmus!*" shouted Draco, trying not to let his voice crack as he simultaneously dodged the blazing red stunbolt that Hermione Granger had fired at him, his muscles twisting with the need to dodge in the wrong direction—she'd pointed to his left, and then with a mysterious twitch fired right—

Hermione dodged the fast-moving dueling hex, and cried with hardly another moment's pause, "*Steleus!*", a wide-angle Hex that Draco couldn't avoid, but he managed to point his wand at his own face and cry "*Quiescus!*" before the sudden urge to inhale could devolve into a sneezing fit that would've ended the battle.

Draco Malfoy was already half-exhausted from all the Locking Charms and Transfigurations earlier, but his confusion was beginning to give way to a sense of his own blood boiling, he didn't know *why* Granger was attacking him so angrily all of a sudden, but *if she wanted a fight he'd give her one—*

(The Dragons and Sunnies weren't stopping to watch the duel of their Generals, the Dragons were too disciplined to stop and watch and that meant the Sunnies had to go on fighting too; but the gaping audience in the Hogwarts Quidditch stands were being distracted even from Neville and Daphne's spectacle, shifting their eyes to the duel of two Generals as Malfoy and Granger fired hex after hex and jinx after jinx at each other, casting more rapidly than any other student in their year could have managed, the Dragon General's trained dueling dance matched by the Sunshine General's frantic energy, the combat between them beginning

to resemble an adult duel as the two most magically powerful first-years resorted to spells more exotic than the usual Sleep Hex.)

—although, Draco was beginning to realize, when he and Harry and Professor Quirrell had dismissed Miss Granger as having as much intent to kill as a bowl of wet grapes, *they'd never seen her angry.*

Daphne lashed out with her Ancient Blade, again not trying to hit hard but just moving the Blade as fast as possible, at the same time Hannah cried "*Somnium!*" and Neville leapt back again, but it had been another bluff and Hannah was moving in to fire a real spell almost point-blank—

—and Neville Longbottom did exactly what—he would explain afterward—Cedric Diggory had trained him to do if he was fighting Bellatrix Black, which was to spin around and kick Hannah *really hard* in the pit of her stomach.

The Hufflepuff girl made a sad little sound, a gasping cry of pain, as she was knocked off her feet by the hard shoe sinking into her abdomen with the force of Neville's whole body behind it.

For an instant the battlefield stood still, everything halted except Hannah's falling form.

Then Neville's face turned to absolute dismay and he lowered his wand, the Chaotic Lieutenant starting instinctively toward his Housemate as he reached for her with his other hand—

Even as Hannah turned her fall into a roll and came out with her wand raised and shot him.

A fractional second later, Daphne, who hadn't hesitated either, sank her Most Ancient Blade squarely into Neville's back, causing the Chaotic Lieutenant's muscles to jerk convulsively with the stunning magic discharging into him even as Hannah's Sleep Hex took effect, and then the last scion of Longbottom was sprawled still on the ground with a look of total surprise frozen to his face.

"Today Mr. Longbottom has learned a valuable lesson about his feelings of pity and remorse," said Professor Quirrell.

"And chivalry," said Amelia, sipping her tea again.

⁂

"Are you all right?" whispered Daphne, as she stood protectively over where Hannah lay on the ground clutching her stomach. The girl didn't give anything back in reply except more retching sounds that sounded like Hannah was trying not to throw up while trying not to cry.

Somehow, even though it might not have been good tactics—it would've been better if Hannah had been hexed outright, than for other soldiers to be tied up *protecting* her—a number of Sunnies seemed to be standing in front of Hannah with their wands clutched tightly, staring angrily at the Chaotics. Someone had thrown up a Prismatic barrier between the two groups, Daphne couldn't see who.

And for some reason the Chaotics didn't seem to be pressing the attack. Even Tracey had completely dropped the grim look on her face and was shifting her weight nervously from one foot to another, as though she was having trouble remembering which side she was on—

"*Hold!*" shouted a voice. "*Hold battle!*"

There wasn't much battle going on anyway, but it held.

General Potter, looking every inch the Boy-Who-Lived, strode out from the trees with something large and camouflage-cloth-covered held under one arm.

"Is Miss Abbott breathing all right?" General Potter yelled.

Daphne didn't look back. She didn't trust that this wasn't a trap—it was absolutely certain that if the Chaotics took the opportunity to attack, Professor Quirrell would not only rule it legal but also award them extra points afterward. But Daphne could hear the answer well enough with her ears, it wasn't like Hannah was trying to breathe *quietly*, and so she said, "Sort of."

"She should get out of here and to someone who can use healing Charms," Harry said. "Just in case that broke something."

From behind Daphne, a small gasping voice said, "I—can—still—fight—"

"Miss Abbott, don't—" Harry said, just as there was the sound from behind Daphne of someone collapsing back to the grass after trying and failing to get to her feet. Everyone winced, but Daphne didn't turn her back on Harry.

"Why haven't the teachers stopped the battle?" said Susan, her voice angry.

"I expect it's because Miss Abbott is in no danger of permanent damage and Professor Quirrell thinks we're learning valuable lessons," Harry said in a hard voice. "Look, Miss Abbott, if you go, Tracey will also retire from the battle. You already outnumber us, so that's a very good deal for your side. Please take it."

"Hannah, just *go!*" said Daphne. "I mean, just say you're out!"

When Daphne glanced back she saw that Hannah was shaking her head, still curled up in a ball on the grass.

"Oh, screw this," said Harry. "*Chaotics! The faster we stun them, the faster she's out of here! We're going to do this very quickly, even if we take casualties! End truce! Tunafish!*"

Daphne's political hindbrain had only an instant to admire how Harry's few words had just made the Chaotics the *good* guys, and then in almost perfect unison, the Chaotics were plunging their hands into the pockets of their uniforms and drawing out green sunglasses in an unfamiliar style. Not like anything you would wear to the beach, more like goggles for advanced Potions—

Then Daphne realized what was about to happen and snapped up her other hand to shield her eyes, just as Harry ripped the cloth off the cauldron.

The fluid that spilled forth as Harry Potter threw the cauldron's contents into the air was too bright to be seen, too brilliant to be imagined, incandescent like the Sun magnified a dozen times—

(which was exactly what it was)

(the sunlight which had been invested to create the acorns, the bright energy that had fueled a tree rising up from the bare dirt)

(blazing a searing purple, the color of the mixed blue and red wavelengths that chlorophyll absorbed)

(with almost none of the green wavelengths that chlorophyll reflected to create the green color of leaves)

(which was the color of the Chaos Legion's sunglasses, made to pass through green wavelengths, blocking red and blue, reducing even the most incandescent purple glare to something bearable)

—the violet light blazed on and on, Daphne tried dropping her arm from her eyes but found that she couldn't look directly at *anything,* even the secondhand purple glare was so bright she had to squint; and she had only time to cry one *Finite Incantatem,* which didn't work, before a Sleep Hex took her.

What was left of the battle didn't take very long after that.

"Now!" bellowed Blaise Zabini, formerly of Sunshine, now commanding a detachment of Chaos Legionnaires. "I mean, TUNAFISH!" The Slytherin boy's hand grasped the cloth shielding the cauldron from the triggering touch of daylight, already beginning to move it aside.

"Now!" bellowed Dean Thomas, formerly of Chaos, commanding a consignment of Dragon Warriors. "DO WHATEVER THEY DO!"

The Chaotics of Zabini's detachment plunged their hands into their uniform pockets, and came forth bearing green sunglasses—

—an action almost perfectly mirrored by Dean and the Dragon Warriors, who drew forth green-colored Potions goggles, and quickly drew the straps over their own heads, even as the Chaotics put on their sunglasses and the violet incandescence blasted forth.

(As General Malfoy had explained, if Mr. Goyle reported that the Chaos Legion was wearing green-colored Potions goggles, you didn't have to know *why* to Transfigure some copies.)

"THAT'S CHEATING!" shrieked Blaise Zabini.

"That's technique!" Dean yelled back. "Dragons, charge!"

("Pardon me," the Lady Greengrass said. "Could you stop *laughing* like that, Mr. Quirrell? It's unnerving.")

"Finite their goggles!" shouted Blaise Zabini, as the two armies ran headlong toward each other through omnipresent eye-searing purple glare. "We can still win!"

"You heard him!" bellowed Dean. "Get their glasses!"

Blaise Zabini's reply to this wasn't anything articulate.

That battle went on a lot longer.

⁂

"*Stupefy!*" shrieked the Sunshine General.

Draco didn't dodge, he didn't counter, he didn't have enough energy left for either, all he could do was whip his left hand into position and hope—

The red stunbolt dissipated again on Draco's *Colloportused* glove, which he'd Transfigured and spell-locked to his hand the same as the rest of Dragon Army. It was all that was saving him now, that shield.

It should have been a time to counterattack, but Draco could only catch his breath, as the two of them danced backward and forward beneath the trees in the never-ending movements of their duel. Across from him, General Granger was panting hard, the young girl's face glistening with sweat like dew, her chestnut hair wetted into brown plaits. Her camouflage uniform was stained with damp spots, her shoulders visibly trembling with exhaustion, but her wand was still steel-steady where it stayed level on Draco through all their motion. Her eyes glaring, her cheeks flushed with rage.

So, little girl, why're you pretending to fight like a grownup today?

The taunt came to mind, but he didn't really think he needed Granger any angrier; so instead Draco just said—though he could hear his own voice cracking—"Any reason you're feeling mad at me, Granger?"

The girl was gasping for breath herself, her own voice wobbling as she spoke. "I know what you're up to," said Hermione Granger, her

voice rising. "I know what you and Snape are up to, Malfoy, and I know who's behind it!"

"Huh?" Draco said without even thinking about it.

That only seemed to increase Granger's fury, and her fingers whitened on the wand she held leveled on him.

And then Draco got it, and it boiled his own blood in his veins. Even *she* thought he was secretly plotting against her—

"*You too?*" Draco yelled. "*I helped you, you bucktoothed bint! You, you, you,*"— stuttering past all the Dark curses that came to mind until he found something he could actually cast at her—"DENSAUGEO!"

But Granger flashed and whirled around the Tooth-Lengthening Hex, and then her own wand came around and leveled at almost point-blank range, even as Draco brought up his left hand like a shield, placing the magic-locked glove between himself and whatever she was about to fire, and the Sunshine General's own voice rose to a shriek audible across the whole battleground—

"ALOHOMORA!"

Time should have paused.

But it didn't.

Instead the padlocked glove on Draco's hand flashed briefly grey, and then the padlock clicked and fell off.

Just like that.

Just like that.

The screens showed it all very clearly, to the entire watching Hogwarts stadium.

And the bone-dead-silent hush that fell over every bench in every bleacher said that everyone understood quite clearly what it meant, that the scion of House Malfoy had just had his magic overcome by a Muggleborn.

Hermione Granger didn't pause in her fight, gave no sign that she even knew what she'd done; instead her foot snapped out in a Muggle-style kick that knocked Draco's wand cleanly out of his hand, his shocked mind and body moving just a little too slowly. Draco dove after his wand, scrabbling frantically on the ground, but from behind

him a girl's cracking voice said "*Somnium!*" and Draco Malfoy fell and didn't rise again.

There was another moment of frozen silence. The Sunshine General was wobbling on her feet, looking like she might faint.

Then the Dragon Warriors screamed at the top of their lungs and charged forward to avenge their fallen commander.

⁂

Mr. and Mrs. Davis were shaking as they stood up from the comfortable chairs of the faculty Quidditch box; they couldn't quite clutch each other while walking, but they held hands tightly, pretending hard to be invisible. If they'd been children young enough for accidental magic they probably would've spontaneously Disillusioned themselves.

The elderly Charles Nott said nothing as he stood from his chair. The scarred Lord Jugson said nothing, as he stood from his own chair.

Lucius Malfoy said nothing as he stood.

All three of them turned without pause and strode toward the stairwell of the elevated bleachers, moving in eerie unison like an Auror trio—

"Lord Malfoy," the Defense Professor said in mild tones. That man was still seated in his own chair, looking upon his parchment-like screens, arms limp at his side, as though for some reason he didn't feel like moving.

The white-haired man halted just before reaching the exit archway, and the elderly man and the scarred man halted as well, flanking him. Lord Malfoy's head turned, too slightly to be any form of acknowledgement, but in the Defense Professor's direction.

"Your son performed exceptionally well today," said Professor Quirrell. "I must confess that I underestimated him. And he has earned his army's loyalty, as you have witnessed." Still very mild, the Defense Professor's voice. "Speaking as your son's teacher, it is my opinion that he will not benefit if you interfere in his—"

Lord Malfoy and his compatriots vanished down the stairs.

"A fine try, Quirinus," Dumbledore said quietly. The old wizard's face showed small lines of worry; he hadn't risen from his own seat either, staring at the parchment screens as though they were still active. "Do you think he will listen?"

The Defense Professor's shoulders twitched in a slight shrug, the only movement they'd shown since the battle ended.

"*Well*," said the Lady Greengrass, as she rose up and cracked her knuckles, stretching, her husband silent beside her. "I must say, that was quite... interesting..."

Amelia Bones had risen from her own cushioned seat without any fuss. "Interesting indeed," said Director Bones. "I do confess, I find myself disturbed by the skill with which those children were fighting one another."

"The skill?" Lord Greengrass said. "Their spells didn't seem all that impressive to me. Except for Daphne's, of course."

The old witch did not move her eyes from where she was gazing at the Defense Professor's balding head. "The Stunning Hex is not a first-year spell, Lord Greengrass, but that is not the skill I had in mind. They supported each other with those simple spells, they reacted at speed to surprises..." The Director of the DMLE paused, as though searching for words that a mere civilian could understand. "In the midst of battle," she said finally, "with spells flying in every direction... those children seemed quite at home."

"Indeed, Director Bones," said the Defense Professor. "Some arts are best begun in youth."

The old witch's eyes narrowed. "You are readying them to become a military force, Professor. To what end?"

"Now hold on!" interjected Lord Greengrass. "There's plenty of schools where they teach dueling in first year!"

"Dueling?" said the Defense Professor. From behind it wasn't visible if the pale face was smiling. "That is *nothing*, Lord Greengrass, to what my students have learned. They have learned not to hesitate in the face of ambushes and greater foes. They have learned to adapt when combat conditions change and change again. They have learned to protect their allies, to protect more those who are more valuable, to abandon pieces

which cannot be rescued. They have learned that to survive they must follow orders. Some have even learned a little creativity. Oh, no, Lord Greengrass, *these* wizards will not hide in their manors and wait to be protected, when the next threat comes. They will know that they know how to fight."

Augusta Longbottom loudly clapped her hands together three times.

⁂

We won.

It was the first thing Draco heard when he woke up on the battlefield, Padma telling him how his soldiers had rallied after he fell. How, thanks to the Dragon General's foresight, Mr. Thomas had led his detachment to victory over Chaos. How General Potter had defeated the portion of the Sunshine Regiment that clashed with him. How Mr. Thomas's Dragon Warriors had rejoined the main body of soldiers bearing both their own goggles and the sunglasses of the defeated Chaotics. How, only moments later, General Potter's remaining contingent had attacked both other armies with a potion that emitted searing purple light. But Dragon had held the numerical advantage over Sunshine and Chaos both, and enough sunglasses for their warriors; and so Padma had managed to lead her inherited army to victory.

From the light in Padma's eyes and her arrogant smile that would have done proud to a Malfoy, she was expecting congratulations. Draco managed to grit out some form of praise from between his clenched teeth, and couldn't have said afterward what it was. The foreign-born witch, it appeared, hadn't any idea what'd happened, or what it meant.

I lost.

The Dragons trudged back to Hogwarts beneath gray skies, cold droplets landing heavy on Draco's skin, one by one. While he'd been stunned, it had begun, the long-promised rain finally beginning to fall. There was only one option left to Draco now. A forced move, as Mr. MacNair, who'd taught Draco chess, would have termed it. Harry Potter probably wouldn't like it, if he really was in love with Granger the

way everyone said. But the forced move, as Mr. MacNair had defined it, was one you needed to make if you wanted the game to continue at all.

It kept on playing in Draco's mind, over and over again, even as he walked like an automaton through the massive portals of Hogwarts, sent away Vincent and Gregory with two sharp words, and became alone within his private bedroom, sitting on his bed, staring at the wall above his desk. Filling his mind like a Dementor had locked him into the memory.

The grey flash coming from his glove, the lock clicking and falling away—

Draco knew, he *knew* what he'd done wrong. He'd been so tired after casting twenty-seven Locking Charms for all the other Dragon Warriors. Less than a minute wasn't enough time to recover after each spell. And so he'd *just* cast *Colloportus* on his own padlocked glove, *just* cast the spell, not put in all his strength to bind it stronger than Harry Potter or Hermione Granger could undo.

But nobody was going to *believe* that, even if it was true. Even in Slytherin, nobody would believe that. It *sounded* like an excuse, and an excuse was all that anyone would hear.

Granger whirled and spun and screamed 'ALOHOMORA!'—

Draco's mind kept playing it over and over as the resentment built. He'd *helped* Granger—cooperated with her on banning traitors—held her hand as she'd dangled off the roof—stopped a riot from breaking out around her in the Great Hall—did she have any idea what he'd *risked,* what he'd probably already *lost*, what it meant for the heir of *House Malfoy* to do that for a *mudblood*—

And now there was only one move left, and the thing about a forced move was that you *had* to make it, even if it meant getting detention and losing House points. Professor Snape would certainly *understand* but there were limits (Father had warned him) to what Snape would overlook.

Challenge Granger to a wizard's duel, in open defiance of Hogwarts regulations. Attack her outright, if she tried to refuse. Defeat her one-on-one, in public, not with clever dueling technique, but by *overpowering* her magic. Beat her solidly, completely, *crush* her as utterly as the

Dark Lord himself had crushed his enemies. Make it absolutely clear to everyone, so that nobody could possibly doubt, that Draco had just been exhausted from casting the spell so many times. Prove that the Malfoy blood was stronger than any mudblood's—

Only it's not, Harry Potter's voice whispered inside Draco's mind. *It's easy to forget what's really true, Draco, once you start trying to win at politics. But in reality there's only one thing that makes you a wizard, remember?*

Draco knew, then, he knew the reason for the disquiet in the back of his mind, as he stared at the blank wall above his desk contemplating his forced move. It should've been simple—when you only had one move, the thing to do was make it—but—

Granger whirling, spinning, sweat-dampened hair flying around her, bolts flying from her wand as fast as his own, jinx and counter-jinx, glowing bats flying at his face, and through all of it the look of fury in Granger's eyes—

There'd been a part of him *admiring* that, before it had all gone wrong, admiring Granger's fury and power; a part of him that had exulted in the first *real* fight he'd ever been in, against...

...his first equal opponent.

If he challenged Granger, and *lost...*

It ought not to be possible, Draco had gotten his wand two full years before anyone else in his Hogwarts class.

Only there was a *reason* why they usually didn't bother giving wands to nine-year-olds. Age counted too, it wasn't just how long you'd held a wand. Granger's birthday had been only a few days into the year, when Harry had bought her that pouch. That meant she was twelve now, that she'd been twelve almost since the start of Hogwarts. And the truth was, Draco hadn't been practicing much outside of class, probably not nearly as much as Hermione Granger of Ravenclaw. Draco hadn't thought he *needed* any more practice to stay ahead...

And Granger was exhausted too, whispered the Voice of Contrary Evidence inside him. Granger must have been exhausted from all those Stunning Hexes, and even in that state she'd been able to undo his Locking Charm.

And Draco *could not* afford to challenge Granger publicly, one-on-one with no excuses, and *lose.*

Draco knew what you were supposed to do in this sort of situation. You were supposed to cheat. But if anyone discovered Draco cheating, it would be *disastrous*, perfect blackmail material even if it never got out publicly, and any Slytherins watching would *know* that, they'd be *looking...*

And then, if you were watching, you would have seen Draco Malfoy get up from his bed, and go to his desk, and take out a sheet of the finest sheepskin parchment, and a pearl-carven inkwell, filled with greenish-silver ink that had been made with true silver and crushed emeralds. From the great trunk at his bed's foot, the Slytherin drew forth a book bound also in silver and emeralds, entitled *The Etiquette of the Houses of Britain.* And with a new, clean quill, Draco Malfoy began to write, frequently looking to the book where it lay open as a reference. There was a grim smile on the boy's face, making the young Malfoy look very much like his father, as he carefully drew each letter as though it were a separate artwork.

From Draco, son of Lucius son of Abraxis Lords of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Malfoy, son also of Narcissa daughter of Druella Lady of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black, scion and heir of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Malfoy:

To Hermione, the first Granger:

(That form might have been meant to sound polite, long ago when it had been invented; nowadays, after centuries of being used to address mudbloods, it carried a lovely tinge of refined venom.)

I, Draco, of Most Ancient House, demand redress, for

Draco paused, carefully moving the quill aside so that it wouldn't drip. He needed a pretext for this, at least if he wanted to impose the duel's conditions. The challenged had the choice of terms, *unless* they had insulted a Noble House. He needed to make it look like Granger had insulted him...

What was he thinking? Granger *had* insulted him.

Draco flipped the book to the page of standard formulae, and found one that seemed appropriate.

I, Draco, of Most Ancient House, demand redress, for that I have thrice over helped you and offered you only my goodwill, and in return you falsely accused me of plotting against you,

Draco had to stop and take a breath, forcing down the seething anger; he was starting to genuinely *feel* the insult now, and he'd just written out the last phrase and underlined it without thinking, like it was an ordinary letter. After a moment's reflection, he decided to let it stand; it might not be the exact formal phrasing but it had a raw, angry tone that seemed appropriate.

which insult you committed before the eyes of Britain.

Thus I, Draco, compel you, Hermione, by custom, by law, by

"The seventeenth ruling of the thirty-first Wizengamot," Draco said aloud without looking, a line delivered in many plays; he sat straighter as he said it, feeling every pulse of the noble blood in his veins.

Thus I, Draco, compel you, Hermione, by custom, by law, by the 17th ruling of the 31st Wizengamot, to meet me in wizard's duel with terms: That we each come alone and in silence, speaking to none before or after,

If the duel went poorly, Draco could just say nothing and leave it at that. And if he did defeat Granger, he would have learned experimentally that he could beat her *again* in a public challenge. It wasn't cheating, but it was Science, which was almost as good.

contesting by magic solely, without death or lasting injury,

...where? Draco had been told about a room in Hogwarts that was good for duels, where everything valuable was already protected by wards, and there were no portraits to tattle on you... which one had it been again...

in the trophy room of the Castle of the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry,

And their *second* and public duel had better be *soon*, like tomorrow, it would take very little time for his reputation in Slytherin to go irretrievably to sludge. He needed to fight Granger for the first time *tonight*.

upon midnight's stroke that shall end this very day.

Draco, of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Malfoy.

Draco signed the formal parchment, and then drew forth his ordinary and lesser parchment, and his regular ink, for his post scriptum:

If you don't know how the rules work, Granger, here's how it is. You insulted a Most Ancient House, and I've got the lawful right to challenge. And if you affront the conditions of the duel, like by having Flitwick show up at the trophy room, or even just telling anyone else, my father will take you and your false honor straight to the Wizengamot.

Draco Malfo

On the last letter his quill pressed down on the parchment so viciously that the nib snapped off, creating a streak of ink and a small rip in the parchment, which Draco decided also looked appropriate.

That night at dinnertime, Susan Bones came to Harry Potter and told him that she thought Draco Malfoy was going to carry out his plot against Hermione very soon. She was warning all the members of SPHEW, and she'd warned Professor Sprout, and she'd warned Professor Flitwick, and she was going to send a letter to her Aunt tonight, and now she was warning Harry Potter, too. Only they couldn't quite talk about it with Padma—Susan said, looking very serious—because Padma was feeling torn between her loyalty to Hermione and her loyalty to her General.

Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres, who was at this point feeling more frustrated with the entire situation than anything really *productive*, snapped at her that *yes*, he knew something had to be done.

After Susan Bones left, Harry looked over at the other end of the Ravenclaw table, where Hermione had sat down away from him or Padma or Anthony or any of her other friends.

But Hermione didn't look like she was in a mood where somebody going over and bothering her would be taken very well.

Later, looking backward, Harry would think of how, in his SF and fantasy novels, people always made their big, important choices for big, important reasons. Hari Seldon had built his Foundation to rebuild the ashes of the Galactic Empire, rather than because he would look more important if he could be in charge of his own research group. Raistlin

Majere had severed ties with his brother because he wanted to become a god, not because he was incompetent at personal relationships and unwilling to take advice on how to do better. Frodo Baggins had taken the Ring because he was a hero who wanted to save Middle-Earth, not because it would've been too awkward not to. If anyone ever wrote a true history of the world— not that anyone ever could or would—probably 97% of all the key moments of Fate would turn out to be constructed of lies and tissue paper and trivial little thoughts that somebody could've just as easily thought differently.

Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres looked at Hermione Granger, where she'd sat down at the other end of the table, and felt a sense of reluctance to bother her when she looked like she was already in a bad mood.

So then Harry thought that it probably made more sense to talk to Draco Malfoy first, just so that he could absolutely positively definitely assure Hermione that Draco really wasn't plotting against her.

And later on after dinner, when Harry went down to the Slytherin basement and was told by Vincent that *the boss ain't to be disturbed...* then Harry *thought* that maybe he should see if Hermione would talk to him right away. That he should just get started on unraveling the whole mess before it raveled any further. Harry wondered if he might just be procrastinating, if his mind had just found a clever excuse to put off something unenjoyable-but-necessary.

He actually thought that.

And then Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres decided that he'd just talk to Draco Malfoy the next morning instead, after Sunday breakfast, and *then* talk to Hermione.

Human beings did that sort of thing all the time.

*

It was Sunday morning, on the 5th of April, 1992, and the simulated sky above the Great Hall of Hogwarts showed great torrents of rain pouring down in such density that the lightning flashes were diminished

and scattered into small pulses of white light that sometimes transformed the House tables, paling their faces and making all the students appear briefly to be ghosts.

Harry sat at the Ravenclaw table, wearily eating a waffle, waiting for Draco to make an appearance so that he could get started on sorting this whole thing out. There was a *Quibbler* being passed around which had somehow ended up with Hannah and Daphne on the front page, but it hadn't gotten to his place yet.

A few minutes later Harry finished eating his waffle, and then looked around *again* to see if Draco had arrived yet for breakfast at the Slytherin table.

It was odd.

Draco Malfoy was almost never late.

Since Harry was looking in the direction of the Slytherin table, he didn't see Hermione Granger entering through the huge doors of the Great Hall. Thus he was rather startled when he turned back and discovered Hermione sitting down directly beside him at the Ravenclaw table, just as if she hadn't not-done that for more than a week.

"Hi, Harry," Hermione said, her voice sounding almost exactly normal. She started to put toast on her plate and a selection of healthy fruits and vegetables. "How are you?"

"Within one standard deviation of my own peculiar little average," Harry automatically replied. "How are *you* doing? Did you sleep okay?"

There were dark bags under Hermione Granger's eyes.

"Why, yes, I'm fine," said Hermione Granger.

"Um," Harry said. He took a slice of pie onto his plate (as his brain was occupied with other things, Harry's hand simply took the tastiest thing within range, without evaluating complex concepts like whether he was ready to eat dessert). "Um, Hermione, I'm going to need to talk to you later today, is that okay?"

"Sure," said Hermione. "Why wouldn't it be?"

"Because—" Harry said. "I mean—you and I *haven't*—for the last few days—"

Shut up, suggested an internal part of Harry that seemed to have been recently allocated for governing Hermione-related issues.

Hermione Granger didn't look like she was paying much attention to him in any case. She just stared down at her plate, and then, after about ten seconds of awkward silence, began to eat her tomato slices, one after another, without pause.

Harry looked away from her and began to eat a slice of pie which, he discovered, had somehow materialized on his plate.

"So!" Hermione Granger suddenly said after she'd polished off most of her plate in silence. "Anything happening today?"

"Um..." Harry said. He looked around frantically, as though to find something-happening that he could use as conversational fodder.

And so Harry was one of the first to see it, and wordlessly point, although the sudden swell of whispers that swept through the Great Hall showed that a number of other people had seen it too.

The distinctive crimson tinge of the robes would have been recognizable anywhere, but it still took Harry's brain a few moments to place the faces. An Asianish-looking man, solemn, and today looking rather grim. A man with a piercing gaze that swept over the room, his long black hair waving behind him in a ponytail. A man thin and pale and unshaven, with a face so blank that it was like stone. It took Harry a few moment to place the faces, and remember the names, from that long-ago day in January when the Dementor had come to Hogwarts: *Komodo, Butnaru, Goryanof.*

"An Auror trio?" Hermione said in a strange bright voice. "Why, I wonder what they'd be doing here."

Dumbledore was in their company as well, looking as worried as Harry had ever seen him; and after a moment's pause while the old wizard's eyes scanned the Great Hall and the students whispering over their breakfasts, he pointed—

—straight at Harry.

"Oh, *now* what," Harry said under his breath. His inward thoughts were a lot more panicked than that, as he wondered frantically if anyone had connected him to the Azkaban breakout somehow. He looked at the Head Table, trying to make the glance casual, and realized that Professor Quirrell was nowhere to be seen, this morning—

The Aurors swept toward him with swift strides, Auror Goryanof approaching from the other side of the Ravenclaw as though to block any escape in that direction, Auror Komodo and Auror Butnaru approaching from Harry's side, the Headmaster following straight on Komodo's heels.

All conversation everywhere had ground to utter silence.

The Aurors reached Harry's place at the table, surrounding him from three angles.

"Yes?" Harry said, as normally as he could. "What is it?"

"Hermione Granger," Auror Komodo said in a toneless voice, "you are under arrest for the attempted murder of Draco Malfoy."

CHAPTER SEVENTY-NINE

TABOO TRADEOFFS, PART I

The words dropped into Harry's consciousness and shattered his thoughts into a hundred shards of incredulity, the shock of adrenaline running into so much confusion that—

"She—" Harry said. "She—she wouldn't—WHAT?"

The Aurors weren't paying any attention to him. Komodo spoke again, still in that colorless voice. "Mr. Malfoy has regained consciousness in St. Mungo's and named you, Hermione Granger, as his assaulter. He has repeated these accusations under two drops of Veritaserum. The Blood-Chilling Charm you cast upon Mr. Malfoy would have killed him if he had not been found and treated, and it must be presumed known to you that this was a fatal curse. I therefore arrest you upon the serious charge of attempted murder and you will be taken into Ministry custody to be interrogated under three drops of Veritaserum—"

"*Are you mad?*" the words burst out of Harry's mouth, as he shoved himself up from the Ravenclaw table, an instant before Auror Butnaru's hand clamped down hard upon his shoulder. Harry ignored it. "That's *Hermione Granger* you're trying to arrest, the nicest girl in Ravenclaw, she helps Hufflepuffs with their homework, she'd *die* before she tried to kill *anyone*—"

Hermione Granger's face had crumpled. "I did it," she whispered in a tiny voice. "It was me."

Another huge rock fell on Harry's thoughts and crushed their fragile order, bursting fragments of comprehension into dust.

Dumbledore's face seemed to have aged decades over the course of seconds. "Why, Miss Granger?" Dumbledore said, his own voice barely above a whisper. "Why would you do such a thing?"

"I'm," Hermione said, "I'm, I'm—sorry—I don't know why I—" She seemed to collapse in on herself, her voice was formed of nothing but sobs, and the only words that could be made out were, "I thought—killed him—sorry—"

And Harry should have said something, should have done something, should have jumped up out of his seat and stunned all three Aurors and then gone on to some incredibly clever next move, but the twice-shattered fragments of his thought processes could yield no output. Butnaru's hand pushed Harry gently but firmly back into his seat and Harry found himself *stuck* there like he'd been glued, he tried to grab his wand for a *Finite* and it wouldn't come out of his pocket, the three Aurors and Dumbledore escorted Hermione out of the Great Hall amid a rising storm of outcries and the doors began to swing shut behind them—nothing made sense, it was surreal beyond all reckoning, like he'd been transported into an alternate universe, and then Harry's mind flashed back to another day of confusion and in a moment of desperate inspiration he finally realized what the Weasley twins had done to Rita Skeeter, and his voice rose in a scream, "HERMIONE YOU DIDN'T DO IT YOU'VE BEEN FALSE-MEMORY-CHARMED!"

But the doors had already shut.

Minerva couldn't possibly have stood still, she paced back and forth through the Headmaster's office, the back of her mind half-expecting Severus or Harry to tell her to shut up and sit down, but neither the Potions Master or the Boy-Who-Lived seemed much concerned with her, both of their gazes focused on Albus Dumbledore where he had emerged from the Floo. There were sounds in the background that nobody heard. Severus seemed as passionless as ever, sitting in a small cushioned chair beside the Headmaster's desk. The old wizard stood terrible and upright by the still-burning fireplace, robed in black like a starless night,

radiating power and dismay. All her own thoughts were of utter confusion and horror. Harry Potter sat on a wooden stool with his fingers gripping the seat, and his eyes were fury and freezing ice.

At 6:33AM, Quirinus Quirrell had Flooed St. Mungo's from his office for immediate pickup of Draco Malfoy. Professor Quirrell had found Mr. Malfoy in the trophy room of Hogwarts, on the verge of death from the continuing effects of the Blood-Chilling Charm slowly lowering his body temperature. Professor Quirrell had immediately dispelled the Charm, cast stabilizing spells on Mr. Malfoy, and levitated him to his office to Floo him to St. Mungo's for further treatment. After this, Professor Quirrell had informed the Headmaster, stating the facts briefly before vanishing through the Floo; the Aurors, notified by St. Mungo's, had demanded his presence for questioning.

The clear intent of the Blood-Chilling Charm had been to kill Draco Malfoy so slowly that the wards of Hogwarts, set to detect sudden injury, would not trigger. Under interrogation, Professor Quirrell had told the Aurors that he had cast several tracking Charms upon Mr. Malfoy's person in January, shortly after Mr. Malfoy's return to Hogwarts from Yuletime break. Professor Quirrell had cast tracking Charms because he had learned of a person with a motive to harm Mr. Malfoy. Professor Quirrell had refused to identify this person. The tracking Charms which Professor Quirrell had cast were triggered by Mr. Malfoy's health falling below an absolute level, rather than by sudden changes, and had therefore alerted Professor Quirrell before Mr. Malfoy had died.

Two drops of Veritaserum, sufficient to prevent Mr. Malfoy from withholding any meliorating or moderating information in his statements, had shown that Mr. Malfoy had—legally under the laws of Noble Houses, illegally under the regulations of Hogwarts—challenged Hermione Granger to a duel. Mr. Malfoy had won the duel but had then, as he left, been attacked from behind by Miss Granger with a Stunning Hex. After this Mr. Malfoy knew nothing.

Three drops of Veritaserum, requiring her to volunteer all relevant information, had caused Hermione Granger to confess that she had stunned Draco Malfoy from behind, and then, in a fit of anger, cast the Blood-Chilling Charm on him, with the deliberate intention of killing

him slowly enough to evade identification from the Hogwarts wards, whose workings she had read about in *Hogwarts: A History*. She had been horrified at herself upon awakening the next morning, but had not told anyone of what she'd done, believing Draco Malfoy to be already dead—as he certainly would have been after seven hours, had his body's own magic not been resisting the effects of the Blood-Chilling Charm.

"Her trial," said Albus Dumbledore, "is set for tomorrow at noon."

"*What?*" the word burst out of Harry Potter. The Boy-Who-Lived didn't rise from his chair, but Minerva saw his fingers whiten where they gripped the wooden seat beneath him. "That's insane! You can't do a police investigation in one day—"

The Potions Master raised his voice. "This is not *Muggle* Britain, Mr. Potter!" Severus's face was as expressionless as ever, but the bite in his voice was sharp. "The Aurors have an accusation under Veritaserum and a confession under Veritaserum. So far as they are concerned, the investigation is *done*."

"Not quite," said Dumbledore, just as Harry seemed ready to explode. "I have insisted to Amelia that this matter be given the utmost scrutiny. Unfortunately, as the ill-fated duel was at midnight—"

"*Supposed* duel," Harry said sharply.

"As the *supposed* duel was at midnight—yes, you're quite right, Harry—it is beyond the range of any Time-Turner—"

"Also *supposedly*," the Boy-Who-Lived said coldly. "And rather *suspiciously*, since the alleged murder suspect doesn't know about Time-Turners. I hope that an invisible Auror was immediately sent back in time as far as possible to observe—"

Dumbledore inclined his head. "I went *myself,* Harry, the moment I heard. But by the time I reached the trophy room, Mr. Malfoy was already unconscious and Miss Granger had gone—"

"No," said Harry Potter. "You reached the trophy room and saw Draco unconscious. That is all you observed, Headmaster. You did not *observe* Hermione there, or watch her leave. Let us distinguish observation from inference." The boy's head turned to look at her. "Imperius, Obliviation, False Memory Charm, Legilimency. Professor McGona-

gall, am I leaving out any mind-affecting spell that could have made Hermione do this or make her believe she'd done it?"

"The Confundus Charm," she said. And the Dark Arts had never been her study, but she knew—"And certain Dark rituals. But none of those could be performed in Hogwarts without alarm."

The boy nodded, his eyes still directly addressing her. "Which of those spells can be detected? Which would the Aurors try to detect?"

"The Confundus Charm would wear off in a few hours," she said, after a moment to gather her thoughts. "Miss Granger would remember the Imperius. Obliviation cannot be detected by any known means, but only a Professor could have cast that spell upon a student without alarm from the Hogwarts wards. Legilimency—can only be detected by another Legilimens, I think—"

"I requested that Miss Granger be examined by the court Legilimens," said Dumbledore. "The examination showed—"

"Do we trust him?" said Harry.

"Her," said Dumbledore. "Sophie McJorgenson, whom I remember as an honest student of Ravenclaw, and she is bound by the Unbreakable Vow to tell the truth of what she sees—"

"Could someone else be Polyjuiced as her?" Harry Potter interrupted again. "What did you *observe,* Headmaster?"

Albus said heavily, "A person who looked like Madam McJorgenson told us that a single Legilimens had lightly touched Miss Granger's mind some months ago. That is from January, Harry, when I communicated with Miss Granger about the matter of a certain Dementor. That was expected; but what I did not expect was the rest of what Sophie found." The old wizard turned to gaze into the Floo fire, letting the orange flames reflect on his face. "As you say, Harry, a False Memory Charm is one possibility; they are, when cast perfectly, indistinguishable from true memory—"

"That doesn't surprise me," Harry interrupted. "Studies show that human memories are more or less rewritten every time we remember them—"

"Harry," Minerva said softly, and the boy's mouth clamped shut.

The old wizard continued. "—but a False Memory Charm of such quality requires as much time to create as a true memory. Creating a detailed memory of ten minutes would be ten minutes' work. And according to the court Legilimens," Albus's face now seemed more tired and lined than before, "Miss Granger has been obsessing over Mr. Malfoy since the day that Severus... yelled at her. She has been thinking of how Mr. Malfoy might be in league with Professor Snape, how he might be planning to harm her and harm Harry—imagining it for hours every day—it would be impossible to create false memories for so much time."

"The appearance of insanity..." Severus murmured softly, as though he were speaking to himself. "*Could* it be natural? No, it is too disastrous to be pure accident; too convenient for *someone,* I have no doubt. A Muggle drug, perhaps? But that would not be enough—Miss Granger's madness would have to be *guided*—"

"Ah!" Harry said suddenly. "I get it now. The *first* False Memory Charm was cast on Hermione after Professor Snape yelled at her, and showed, say, Draco and Professor Snape plotting to kill her. Then last night that False Memory was *removed* by Obliviation, leaving behind the memories of her obsessing about Draco for no apparent reason, at the same time she and Draco were given false memories of the duel."

Minerva blinked in startlement. It would have been a thousand years before she thought of that possibility.

The Potions Master was frowning thoughtfully, eyes intent. "The *reaction* to a False Memory Charm is hard to predict in advance, Mr. Potter, without Legilimency. The subjects do not always act as expected, when they first remember the false memories. It would have been a risky ploy. But I suppose that is one way Professor Quirrell could have done it."

"*Professor Quirrell?*" said Harry. "What motive does *he* have to—"

The Potions Master said dryly, "The Defense Professor is always a suspect, Mr. Potter. You will notice a trend, given time."

Albus raised up a hand, a silencing gesture, and their heads all turned to look at him. "But in this case there is another suspect," Albus said quietly. "Voldemort."

That deadliest of unspeakable words seemed to echo around the room, canceling all the heat from the orange flames of the fireplace.

"I do not know," the old wizard said slowly, "I know all too little, of the methods of Voldemort's immortality. He searched out those books before I did, I think. All I could find were ancient tales, scattered across too many volumes for him to remove. But to find truth among many stories is also a wizard's mastery, and this I have endeavored to do. There is a human sacrifice, a murder, of that I am certain; committed in coldest blood, the victim dying in horror. And old, old tales of wizards possessed, doing mad deeds, claiming the names of Dark Lords thought defeated; and there is usually a device, of that Dark Lord, which they wield..." Albus looked at Harry, the ancient eyes searching the younger. "I think, Harry—though you will call it only inference—that the act of murder splits the soul. That by ritual of blackest horror, the torn fragment of soul is chained to this world. To a material thing of this world. Which must be, or which then becomes, a device of power."

Horcrux. The terrible name echoed in Minerva's mind, though it seemed that—for what reason she did not know—Albus would not speak that word in front of Harry.

"And therefore," the old wizard finished quietly, "the remainder of the soul is bound to its chained part, lingering here when its body is destroyed. A sad and painful existence, I think it would be; less than spirit, less than the meanest ghost..." The old wizard's eyes were locked on Harry, who gazed back with his eyes narrowed. "It would take time for that mutilated soul to regain a mockery of life. That is why we have had our ten-year reprieve, I believe; why Voldemort did not return at once. But in time... that revenant would become capable of rising again." The old wizard spoke with grim precision. "It is clear, from the stories, that the Dark Lords who return by possessing another's form, wield lesser magics than they once knew. I do not think Voldemort would be satisfied with that. He would take some other avenue to life. But Voldemort was more Slytherin than Salazar, grasping at every opportunity. He would *use* his pitiful state, *use* his power of possession, if he had reason. If he could benefit by another's... inexplicable fury." Albus's voice had fallen to almost a whisper. "That is what I suspect happened to Miss

Granger."

Minerva's throat was very dry. "He's *here,*" she gasped. "*Here,* in *Hogwarts*—"

Then she stopped, because the *reason* Voldemort had come to Hogwarts—

The old wizard glanced at her only briefly, and said, still in that whisper, "I am sorry, Minerva, you were right."

Harry's voice was edged. "Right about what?"

"Voldemort's strongest avenue to life," Dumbledore said heavily. "The most desirable road for him, by which he would rise greater and more terrible than ever before. It is guarded here, within this castle—"

"Excuse me," Harry said politely. "Are you stupid?"

"Harry," she said, but there was no force in her voice.

"I mean, maybe you haven't noticed this, Headmaster Dumbledore, but this castle is full of CHILDREN—"

"*I had no choice!*" bellowed Dumbledore. The blue eyes were blazing now, beneath the half-moon spectacles. "I do not *own* it, that thing which Voldemort desires. It belongs to another, and is held here by *his* consent! I *asked* if it could be kept in the Department of Mysteries. But *he* would not permit that—he said it must be within the wards of Hogwarts, in the place of the Founders' protection—" Dumbledore passed his hand across his forehead. "No," the old wizard said in a quieter voice. "I cannot pass this blame to him. He is right. There is too much power in that thing, too much that men desire. I agreed that the trap should be laid behind the wards of Hogwarts, in the place of my own power." The old wizard bowed his head. "I knew Voldemort would worm his way here somehow, and planned to trap him. I did not think—I did not dream—that he would tarry in an enemy fortress one minute longer than he must."

"But," said Severus in some puzzlement, "what would the Dark Lord possibly gain by killing Lucius's only heir?"

"Point of order," Harry Potter said, a hard edge in his voice. "The motives of whoever's behind this are not the primary issue. Our top priority at this point is that an innocent Hogwarts student is in *trouble!*"

The green eyes locked with the blue, as Albus Dumbledore gazed back at the Boy-Who-Lived—

"Quite right, Mr. Potter," Minerva said, she hadn't even thought about it, the words just seemed to pop out of her lips. "Albus, who is watching over Miss Granger now?"

"Professor Flitwick has gone to her," the Headmaster said.

"She needs a *lawyer,*" Harry said. "Anyone who just blurts out 'I did it' to the police—"

"Unfortunately," Minerva said, her tone taking on some of Professor McGonagall's sternness without thinking, "I doubt a lawyer will be any use to Miss Granger at this point, Mr. Potter. She is to face the judgment of the Wizengamot, and they would be exceedingly unlikely to free her on a technicality."

Harry was looking at her with an utterly incredulous expression, as though suggesting that Hermione Granger didn't need a lawyer was akin to suggesting that she be set on fire.

"She is correct, Mr. Potter," Severus said quietly. "Few court processes in this country involve lawyers."

Harry lifted his glasses and rubbed his eyes, briefly. "Fine. How do we get Hermione off the hook, exactly? I suppose it's too much to hope that with all the lawyers gone, the judges understand the concept of 'common sense' and 'prior probability' well enough to realize that twelve-year-old girls basically never commit cold-blooded murders?"

"It is the Wizengamot that she faces," said Severus. "The oldest Noble Houses, and certain other wizards of influence." Severus's face twisted in something approaching his customary sarcasm. "As for them showing common sense—you might as well expect them to make you a bacon sandwich, Potter."

Harry nodded, his mouth set. "Exactly what sort of penalty is Hermione facing? Snapped wand and expulsion—"

"No," Severus said. "Nothing that light. Are you willfully misunderstanding, Potter? She is facing the *Wizengamot*. There is no set penalty. There is only the vote."

Harry Potter murmured, "*The rule of law, in complex times, has proved itself deficient; we much prefer the rule of men, it's vastly more efficient...*

There's no constraining legal rules at all, then?"

Light glinted off the old wizard's half-moon glasses; he spoke carefully, and not without anger. "Legally, Harry, we are dealing with a blood debt from Hermione Granger to the House of Malfoy. The Lord of Malfoy proposes a repayment of that debt, and then the Wizengamot votes on his proposal. That is all."

"But..." Harry said slowly. "Lucius was Sorted into Slytherin, he's *got* to realize that Hermione was just a pawn. Not the one he should actually be angry at. Right?"

"No, Harry Potter," Albus Dumbledore said heavily. "That is how you *wish* Lucius Malfoy would think. Lucius Malfoy himself... will not share your desire that he think that way."

Harry gazed at the Headmaster, his eyes growing colder, at the same time that Minerva herself had to clamp down harder on her own emotions, stop her pacing and try to breathe. She'd been trying not to think about it, trying to turn her thoughts away from it, but she knew. She'd known since the instant she'd heard. She could see it in Albus's eyes—

"Is she facing capital punishment?" Harry said quietly, and chills went all the way down Minerva's spine at the undertones of that voice.

"No!" Albus said. "No, not the Kiss, not Azkaban, not for a first-year in Hogwarts. Our country is not so lost, not yet."

"But Lucius Malfoy," Severus said tonelessly, "certainly will not be satisfied with only snapping her wand."

"All right," Harry said commandingly. "As I see it, we've got two essential lines of attack. Line one, find the real culprit. Line two, other leverage over Lucius. Professor Quirrell saved Draco's life, does that create a blood debt from House Malfoy to him that he could redeem to cancel Hermione's?"

Minerva blinked in startlement again.

"No," Dumbledore said. The old wizard shook his head. "It was a clever thought—but no, Harry, I'm afraid not. Even in the unlikely event that our Defense Professor reveals himself to be of a Noble House, there is an exception when the Wizengamot suspects that the life-debt may have been created deliberately, for that very purpose. And the Defense Professor is hardly above suspicion. Thus Lucius would argue."

Harry nodded once, face set. "So a commoner can have a blood debt to a Noble House, but not vice versa. Somehow I'm not surprised. But House Potter *does* count as a Noble House, from what I've heard. Headmaster, I know I said I wouldn't—but under the circumstances—that time Draco cast that torture hex on me, is that debt enough—"

"No," the old wizard said (even as she blurted "*What?*" and Severus lifted an eyebrow). "It would not have been enough, and now it is no debt at all. You are an Occlumens and cannot testify under Veritaserum. Draco Malfoy could be Obliviated of his own memory before he could testify—" Albus hesitated. "Harry... whatever you have done with Draco, you must assume that Lucius Malfoy will soon know of it."

Harry's head sank into his hands. "He'll give Draco Veritaserum."

"Yes," Albus said quietly.

The Boy-Who-Lived didn't say anything, as he sat with his head in his hands.

The Potions Master looked genuinely shocked. "Draco really *was* trying to help Miss Granger," Severus said. "You—Potter, you *actually*—"

"Turned him?" Harry said from between his hands. "I was about three-quarters done. Taught him the Patronus Charm and everything. I don't know what will happen now, though."

"Voldemort has struck a grave blow against us, this day," Albus said. The sound of old wizard's voice was like the look of the boy with his head in his hands. "He has taken two of our pieces, with one... No. I should have seen it earlier. He has taken two of *Harry's* pieces with one move. Voldemort has begun his game again, not against myself, but against *Harry*. Voldemort knows the prophecy, he knows who his last foe shall be. He is not waiting to face Hermione Granger and Draco Malfoy at Harry's side when they are grown. He is striking at them *now*."

"Maybe it's You-Know-Who and maybe it isn't," Harry said, his voice sounding a little unsteady. "Let's not narrow down the hypothesis space prematurely." Harry took a breath and lowered his hands. "The other thing we can try is to nail the real culprit before the trial—or at least find solid evidence that *someone* else did it."

"Mr. Potter," said Minerva, "Professor Quirrell told the Aurors that he knew of someone with a motive to harm Mr. Malfoy. Do *you* know who he was talking about?"

"Yes," Harry said, after a hesitation. "But I think I shall conduct that part of my investigation with the Defense Professor—just as I would not have Professor Quirrell in the room while we were discussing how to investigate *him*."

"He suspects me?" Severus said, then gave a short laugh. "Why, of course he does."

"My own plan," said Harry, "is to go look at the trophy room where the supposed duel took place and see if I can discover anything anomalous. If you can tell the investigating Aurors to let me through—"

"What investigating Aurors?" Severus said tonelessly.

Harry Potter took a deep breath, slowly let it out, and then spoke again. "In mystery books it usually takes longer than one day to solve a crime, but twenty-six hours is—no, *thirty* hours is eighteen hundred minutes. And I can think of at least one other important place to look for clues—though it'll have to be someone who can get into the Ravenclaw girls' dorm. Back when Hermione was fighting bullies, she was finding notes under her pillow each morning, telling her where to go—"

"*Albus...*" ground out Minerva.

"I did not send them," said the old wizard. His white eyebrows had lifted in surprise. "I knew nothing of this. You think she was being played, Harry?"

"It's a possibility," Harry said. "More so, because there's a part of this puzzle that you don't know about yet." Harry's voice lowered, grew more intense. "Headmaster, you already know that I got my father's invisibility cloak from someone who left a note under my pillow signed 'Santa Claus'. I think we have to assume that's the same person who left notes for Hermione—"

"Harry," the old wizard said, and hesitated momentarily. "Returning your father's cloak to you, does not seem to me like the act of a villain—"

"*Listen*," Harry Potter said urgently. "The part you *don't* know is that after Bellatrix Black escaped from Azkaban, I found another note under my pillow, also signed 'Santa Claus', saying that they'd heard you

were shutting me up inside Hogwarts, and that they were giving me an escape route to the Salem Witches' Institute in America. That note came with a deck of cards, in which the King of Hearts was supposedly a portkey—"

"*Mr. Potter!*" cried Professor McGonagall, she hadn't even thought before she spoke. "That could well be a *kidnapping attempt!* You should have told—"

"*Yes*, Professor, I did the sensible thing," the boy said levelly. "As *adapted to the circumstances*, I did the sensible thing. I told Professor Quirrell. And according to Professor Quirrell, that portkey goes to somewhere in London—it's definitely not strong enough to be an international portkey. Now it's *possible* that the person who sent the note is honest, and that the point in London is just a way station." The boy reached into his robes and took out a deck of cards, along with a folded paper note. "I will trust you *not* to go in guns blazing—I mean wands blazing—just in case the sender is an ally of mine, if not yours. But if this is a trap, I say we spring it *now*. And whoever it is, take them *alive* so we can exhibit them before the Wizengamot, I cannot overemphasize that part."

Severus rose from his chair, his eyes now intent, and moved toward Harry. "I'll need a hair of yours for Polyjuice, Mr. Potter—"

"Let us not be hasty!" said Albus. "We have not yet examined the notes sent to Miss Granger; there may be no resemblance after all. Severus, would you enter her dorm room and see if you can find those?"

Harry's eyebrows had raised, even as he stood to offer the Potions Master better access to his mess of hair. "You think two *different* people are running around Hogwarts leaving notes beneath pillows?"

Severus gave a brief sardonic laugh, as his hand moved forward and plucked a hair, which soon was being carefully wrapped in silk. "Quite possibly. If I have learned anything in my tenure as Head of Slytherin, I have learned what ridiculous messes arise when there is more than one plotter and more than one plan. But Headmaster—I think Mr. Potter is correct that I should follow this portkey and see where it leads."

Albus hesitated, and then nodded reluctantly. "I will speak to you before you go, then."

Even as Harry Potter left the room for his own investigations, Severus had spun on his heel and was striding swiftly toward the jar of Floo powder, his cloak rising behind him with his speed. "I'll get some raw Polyjuice, add the hair, and go. Headmaster, will you stand by to—"

"Albus," Minerva said, surprised at how steady her own voice was, "did you leave those notes under Mr. Potter's pillow?"

Severus's hand halted an instant before casting Floo powder into the fire.

Dumbledore nodded to her, though the accompanying smile seemed a bit hollow. "You know me far too well, my dear."

"And I suppose the portkey goes to a friendly home where Mr. Potter would be kept safe and sound until you arrived to pick him up and return him to Hogwarts?" Her voice tight—it was sensible, she could not deny it was sensible, but somehow it seemed a little cruel.

"It would have depended on the circumstances," the old wizard said quietly. "If Harry had gone so far—I might have let him make good his escape, for a time. Better to know where he was going, and ensure it was somewhere safe, with friends—"

"And to think," said Professor McGonagall, "that I had thought to reprimand Mr. Potter for not telling us about this important matter! Upbraid him for not having the sense to trust us!" Her voice had risen in volume. "I shall skip that lecture, I suppose!"

Severus was gazing at the Headmaster with narrowed eyes. "And the notes to Miss Granger—"

"The Defense Professor, very likely," the old wizard said. "Still—that is only a guess."

"I shall go look for them," Severus said. "And then, I suppose, start looking for You-Know-Who." A frown crossed the Potions Master's face. "A task at which I haven't the faintest idea of where to start. Do you know of any magics to find a soul, Headmaster?"

The Divination classroom was lit by the dim red light of a hundred small fires where burned a hundred kinds of incense, so that if you were to ask in one word what the room looked like, the answer would be 'smoke'. (Assuming you bothered to look at anything, when your nose was threatening to overload and die.) If your gaze could pierce those dank mists, you would see a tiny, cluttered room in which forty stuffed armchairs, most of them unused, were crammed around a small open space in the center of the room, where a circular trapdoor waited on your escape.

"The grim!" Professor Trelawney said in a quavering voice, as she peered into George Weasley's teacup. "The grim! It is a sign of death! One whom you know, George—someone you know is to die! And soon—yes, it shall be quite soon, I think—unless of course it is later—"

It would have been a good deal scarier, thought Fred and George, if she hadn't said the same thing to every single other student in their Divination class. They were hardly even thinking about it at this point; all their thoughts were on today's disaster—

The trapdoor in the floor flew open with a bang that caused Professor Trelawney to shriek and spill George's tea all over his robes, and then an instant later Dumbledore was whooshing up out of the floor with a bird of fire upon his shoulder.

"Fred!" the old wizard said commandingly. His robes were the black of a moonless night, his eyes hard like blue diamonds. "George! With me, now!"

There was an collective gasp and by the time Fred and George were climbing down the ladder after the Headmaster, the entire class was already speculating what role they'd played in the attempted murder of Draco Malfoy.

The trapdoor had hardly slammed shut above them before all nearby sounds muted and the old wizard spun on them and held out a hand and commanded, "Give me the map!"

"M-map?" said Fred or George in total shock. They'd never even suspected that Dumbledore suspected. "Why, w-we don't know what you're—"

"Hermione Granger is in trouble," said the old wizard.

"The Map is in our dorm," George or Fred said immediately. "Just give us a few minutes to get it and we'll—"

The wizard's arms swept them up as if they were hugging-pillows, there was a piercing cry and a flash of fire and then the three of them were in the third-year Gryffindor's boys' dorm.

A few moments later, Fred and George were handing over the Map to the Headmaster, wincing only slightly at the sacrilege of giving their precious piece of the Hogwarts security system to the person who actually owned it, and the old wizard was frowning at the apparent blankness.

"You've got to say," they explained, "*I solemnly swear that I am up to no good—*"

"I decline to lie," said the old wizard. He held the Map high and bellowed, "Hear me, Hogwarts! *Deligitor prodi!*" An instant later the Headmaster was wearing the Sorting Hat, which looked *scarily right* upon his head, as though Dumbledore had always been waiting for a patchwork pointed hat to complete his existence.

(Fred and George immediately memorized this phrase, just in case it would work for somebody besides the Headmaster, and began trying to think of pranks that would involve the Sorting Hat.)

The old wizard wasted not a moment before sweeping the Sorting Hat off his head and turning it upside-down—it was hard to tell with the Hat upside-down, but it looked a bit cross at the treatment—and then plunged in his hand and drew out a crystal rod. With this instrument he began tracing rune-like patterns on the Map, muttering strange incantations that sounded not quite like Latin and echoed in their ears in an unusually creepy fashion. In the midst of tracing one rune he looked up at both of them, fixing them with a sharp glare. "I will return this to you later, sons of Weasley. Go back to class."

"Yes, Headmaster," they said, and hesitated. "Ah—about Hermione Granger, is she really going to be bound to serve Draco Malfoy forever as his—"

"*Go,*" said the old wizard.

They went.

When he was alone in the room, the old wizard looked down at the map, which had now written upon itself a fine line drawing of the Gryffindor dorms in which they stood, the small handwritten *Albus P.W.B. Dumbledore* the only name left therein.

The old wizard smoothed the map, bent over it, and whispered, "Find Tom Riddle."

The interrogation room at the Department of Magical Law Enforcement was usually lit by a small orange light, so that the Auror interrogating you would be leaning toward your uncomfortable metal chair with most of their face in shadow, preventing you from reading their expression, even as they read yours.

As soon as Mr. Quirrell had entered the room, the small orange light had dimmed and begun flickering like a candle about to be blown out by the wind. The room was now lit by a sourceless ice-colored glow which illuminated all of Mr. Quirrell's pale skin like alabaster, except, somehow, his eyes, which stayed in darkness.

The Auror on duty outside had surreptitiously tried to dispel this effect four times without the slightest success, despite the fact that Mr. Quirrell had politely surrendered his wand upon being detained for interrogation, and had shown no sign of speaking any incantations nor exerting any other power.

"Quirinus... Quirrell," drawled the man now sitting across from where the Defense Professor had waited courteously. The interrogator had tawny hair that swept back like a lion's mane, with yellowish eyes set into the sternly lined face of a man late in his tenth decade. The man was, at this moment, leafing through a large folder of parchments that he had taken from a black and very solid-looking briefcase after he had limped into the room and sat down, seeming not to look at the face of the man he was interrogating. He had not introduced himself.

After some further leafing through parchments, carried out in silence, the Auror spoke again. "Born the 26th of September, 1955, to Quondia Quirrell, of an acknowledged tryst with Lirinus Lumblung..."

intoned the Auror. "Sorted into Ravenclaw... O.W.L.S. quite good... N.E.W.T.S. in Charms, Transfiguration... an Outstanding in Muggle Studies, impressive... Ancient Runes, and ah yes, Defense. An Outstanding in that as well. Went on to become quite the tourist, visiting all sorts of places. Portkey visas for Transylvania, the Forbidden Empire, the City of Endless Night... my my, *Texas*." The man looked up from the portfolio, eyes narrowed. "What were you doing *there*, Mr. Quirrell?"

"Sightseeing, mostly in the Muggle areas," the Defense Professor said easily. "As you say, I am quite the tourist."

The man listened to this with a frown, then looked back down, then up again. "I also see that you visited Fuyuki City in 1983."

The Defense Professor lifted an eyebrow in mild puzzlement. "What of it?"

"What did you do in Fuyuki City?" The question snapped out razor-sharp.

The Defense Professor frowned slightly. "Nothing of any account. I visited some better-known sights, some less-known sights, and aside from that, kept to myself."

"Really?" the Auror said softly. "I find that reply rather interesting."

"How so?" said the Defense Professor.

"Because there was no visa listed for Fuyuki City." The man slammed the folder shut. "You're not Quirinus Quirrell. Who the *hell* are you?"

The Potions Master walked quietly into the Ravenclaw girls' dorm, the first-year dorm room, a festive place where bronze and blue competed to be the color of stuffed animals, scarves and dresses, small bits of inexpensive jewelry, and posters of famous people. Hermione Granger's bed was easy to identify; it was the one that had been attacked by a book monster.

Nobody else seemed to be around, at that time of day, and a number of spells verified this.

The Potions Master searched under Hermione Granger's pillow, and beneath her bed, and then began going through her trunk, sorting through mentionable and unmentionable items without change of expression, and finally succeeded in drawing forth a set of papers describing places and times where bullies would be found, all of the papers signed only with an elaborate 'S'.

A brief burst of fire later, the papers were gone, and the Potions Master left to report the failure of his mission.

⁂

The Defense Professor was sitting calmly with his hands still folded in his lap. "If you consult Headmaster Dumbledore," said the Defense Professor, "you will find that he is well aware of this matter, and that I agreed to teach his Defense class on the explicit condition that no inquiry be made into my—"

In a lightning motion, the interrogator whipped out his wand and spat "*Polyfluis Reverso!*" at the same time that the Defense Professor sneezed, which somehow caused the mirror-silvered ray to disrupt in a shower of white sparks.

"Pardon me," the Defense Professor said politely.

The smile that the Auror gave had absolutely no mirth in it. "So where's the real Quirinus Quirrell, eh? Under an Imperius in the bottom of a trunk somewhere, while you take a hair now and then for your illegal Polyjuice?"

"You are making highly questionable assumptions," the Defense Professor said with an edged voice. "What makes you think I did not steal his body outright using incredibly Dark magic?"

This was followed by a certain pause.

"I suggest," the Auror said, "that you take this seriously, Mr. Whoever-You-Are."

"I'm sorry," said the Defense Professor, leaning back in his chair, "but I see little reason to humble myself on this particular occasion. What are you going to do, kill me?"

"I don't appreciate your humor," the Auror said softly.

"How unfortunate for you, Rufus Scrimgeour," said the Defense Professor. "You have my deepest sympathy." He tilted his head, seeming to study the interrogator; and even within the shadow of the ice-light, the eyes glinted.

⁂

Padma stared down at her plate.

"Hermione wouldn't just *do* that!" yelled Mandy Brocklehurst, who was practically in tears, in fact she *was* in tears, her voice would have been loud enough to silence the Great Hall if it hadn't been for all the other students also screaming at each other. "I—I bet Malfoy tried to—to *do* things to her—"

"Our General would *never* do that!" Kevin Entwhistle yelled even louder than Mandy.

"Of course he would!" shouted Anthony Goldstein. "Malfoy's the son of a *Death Eater!*"

Padma stared down at her plate.

Draco was the General of her army.

Hermione was the founder of S.P.H.E.W.

Draco had trusted her to be his second-in-command.

Hermione was her fellow Ravenclaw.

Both of them were her friends, maybe the two best friends she had besides family.

Padma stared down at her plate. She was glad the Sorting Hat hadn't offered her Hufflepuff. If she'd been Sorted into Hufflepuff it would probably have been much more painful, trying to decide where her divided loyalties lay...

She blinked and realized that her vision had gotten blurry again, and raised a trembling hand to wipe once more at her eyes.

Morag MacDougal snorted so loudly it was audible even amid the pandemonium of lunch, and said in a loud voice, "I bet Granger *cheated* in her battle yesterday, I bet that's why Malfoy challenged her -"

"All of you *Shut up!*" roared Harry Potter, as he hit the table with his fists so hard that plates rattled all the way along it.

At any other time it would have gotten Professors reprimanding him, this time it just got a few nearby students to look.

"I'd wanted to eat lunch," Harry Potter said, "and then get back to investigating, so I wasn't going to talk. But you're all being *silly*, and when the truth comes out you're going to regret what you said about innocent people. Draco didn't do anything, Hermione didn't do anything, they were both False-Memory-Charmed!" Harry Potter's voice had been rising on the last words. "*How is that not Bloody Obvious?*"

"You think we'll believe *that?*" Kevin Entwhistle yelled right back at him. "That's what everyone says! 'I didn't do it, it was all just a False Memory Charm!' You think we're *stupid?*"

And Morag nodded right along with him, with a condescending look.

The look that came over Harry Potter's face then made Padma flinch.

"I see," Harry Potter said, it wasn't a shout so Padma had to strain to hear it. "Professor Quirrell isn't here to explain to me how stupid people are, but I bet this time I can get it on my own. People do something dumb and get caught and are given Veritaserum. Not romantic master criminals, because *they* wouldn't get caught, *they* would have learned Occlumency. Sad, pathetic, incompetent criminals get caught, and confess under Veritaserum, and they're desperate to stay out of Azkaban so they say they were False-Memory-Charmed. Right? So your brain, by sheer Pavlovian association, links the idea of False Memory Charms to pathetic criminals with unbelievable excuses. You don't have to consider the specific details, your brain just *pattern-matches* the hypothesis into a bucket of things you don't believe, and you're done. Just like my father thought that magical hypotheses could never be believed, because he'd heard so many stupid people talking about magic. Believing a hypothesis that involves False Memory Charms is *low-status*."

"What are you *blithering* about?" said Morag, looking down her nose at the Boy-Who-Lived.

"You think we'd believe anything *you* say?" yelled a slightly older-looking Ravenclaw witch who Padma didn't recognize. "When *you*

turned Granger Dark?"

"And I'm not going to complain," Harry Potter said in an eerily calm voice, "about wizards not having any logic and believing the craziest things. Because I said that to Professor Quirrell once, and he just gave me this *look* and said that if I wasn't blinded by my upbringing I could think of a hundred more ridiculous things that lots of Muggles believe. What you're all doing is very human and very normal and doesn't make you *unusually* bad people, so I'm not going to complain." The Boy-Who-Lived rose up from his bench. "I'll see you all later."

And Harry Potter walked away from them, walked away from all of them.

"You're not thinking he's *right,* are you?" said Su Li from beside her, in a tone which made it clear what *she* thought.

"I—" said Padma. Her words seemed to be caught in her throat, her thoughts seemed to be caught in her head. "I—I mean—I—"

If you think hard enough you can do the impossible.

(It had always been an article of faith with Harry. There'd been a time when he'd acknowledged the laws of physics as ultimate limitations, and now he suspected there were no true limits at all.)

If you think *fast* enough you can sometimes do the impossible *quickly*...

...sometimes.

Only sometimes.

Not always.

Not *reliably*.

The Boy-Who-Lived stared around the trophy room, surrounded by awards and cups and plates and shields and statues and medals kept behind thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, of crystal glass displays. For as many centuries as Hogwarts had existed, this room had been accumulating details. A week, a month, maybe even a year, wouldn't have sufficed to take the 'examine' option on every item in the room. Harry

had asked Professor Flitwick if there was any way to detect damage to the wards around the crystal cases, verify the residue that a real duel should have left behind. Harry had raced through the Hogwarts library looking for spells to tell the difference between old fingerprints and new fingerprints, or to detect lingering exhalations in a room. And all these attempts at playing detective had failed.

There were no clues, none that he was smart enough to find.

Professor Snape had said that the portkey led to an empty house in London, with no sign of anyone or anything else.

Professor Snape hadn't found any notes in Hermione's dorm.

Headmaster Dumbledore had said that Voldemort's spirit was probably hiding out in the Chamber of Secrets where the Hogwarts security system couldn't find him. Harry had snuck into the Slytherin dungeons under the Cloak of Invisibility and spent the rest of the afternoon looking through all the obvious places, but he hadn't found anything snaky that answered back when spoken to. The entrance to the Chamber of Secrets, it seemed, hadn't been meant to be found in a day.

Harry had talked to all of Hermione's friends that would still talk to him, and none of them had remembered Hermione saying anything specific about why she'd believed that Draco was plotting against her.

Professor Quirrell hadn't come back from the Ministry as of dinnertime. The older students seemed to think that this year's Defense Professor would probably end up being blamed for the incident, and fired for teaching Hogwarts students to be too violent. They'd talked about the Defense Professor as though he were already gone.

Harry had used up all six hours from his Time-Turner, and there were still no clues, and he had to go to sleep now if he wanted to be functional at Hermione's trial the next day.

The Boy-Who-Destroyed-a-Dementor was standing in the middle of the Hogwarts trophy room, his wand dropped at his feet.

He was crying.

Sometimes you call your brain and it doesn't answer.

The trial of Hermione Granger started on schedule the next day.

CHAPTER EIGHTY

TABOO TRADEOFFS, PART II: THE HORNS EFFECT

The Most Ancient Hall of the Wizengamot is cool and dark, with concentric half-circles of stone rising up from the lowest center, and simple wooden benches set down upon those elevated half-circles. There is no source of light, but the chamber is well-lit, without any apparent cause or reason; it is simply a brute fact that the hall is well-lit. The walls like the floor are stone, dark stone, some elegant and mysterious conjugation of rock most fine to gaze upon, with a smooth texture that seems to flow and shift beneath its surface. This is the Most Ancient Hall, the oldest place of wizardry that has lasted into the modern day; every other place of power was destroyed in one war or another. This is the Hall of the Wizengamot, which is most ancient because the wars ended with the building of this place.

This is the Hall of the Wizengamot; there are older places, but they are hidden. Legend holds that the walls of dark stone were conjured, created, willed into existence by Merlin, when he gathered the most powerful wizards left in the world and awed them into accepting him as their chief. And when (the legend continues) the Seers continued to foretell that not enough had yet been done to prevent the end of the world and its magic, then (the story goes) Merlin sacrificed his life, and his wizardry, and his time, to lay in force the Interdict of Merlin. It was not an act without cost, for a place like this one could not be raised

again by any power still known to wizardkind. Nor yet destroyed, for those walls of dark stone would pass unharmed, and perhaps unwarmed, through the heart of a nuclear explosion. It is a pity that nobody knows how to make them anymore.

In the highest of the rising half-circles of the Wizengamot, on the topmost level of dark stone, there is a podium. At that podium stands an old man, with care-lined face and a silver beard that stretches down below his waist; this is Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore. His right hand bears a wand of power, upon his shoulder perches a bird of fire. His left hand holds a short rod, thin and featureless and forged of the same dark stone as the walls, and this is the Line of Merlin Unbroken, the device of the Chief Warlock. Karen Dutton bequeathed the Line to Albus Dumbledore on the last day of her life, scant hours after he returned half-dead from his defeat of Grindelwald with a phoenix flaming brightly at his side. She in turn received the Line from the perfectionist Nicodemus Capernaum, each wizard passing it to their chosen successor, back and back in unbroken chain to the day Merlin laid down his life. That (if you were wondering) is how the country of magical Britain managed to elect Cornelius Fudge for its Minister, and yet end up with Albus Dumbledore for its Chief Warlock. Not by law (for written law can be rewritten) but by most ancient tradition, the Wizengamot does not choose who shall preside over its follies. Since the day of Merlin's sacrifice, the most important duty of any Chief Warlock has been to exercise the highest caution in their choice of people who are both good and able to discern good successors. You would expect that chain of light to miss a step, sometime down through the centuries; that it would go astray at least once, and then never return. But it has not. The Line of Merlin continues, unbroken.

(Or so say those of Dumbledore's faction. Lord Malfoy would tell you otherwise. And in Asia they tell other tales entirely, which may not make Britain's version wrong.)

Upon the bottommost platform of the Ancient Hall there is a high-backed chair, legged and armed and without cushions, of dark metal rather than dark stone, which Merlin did not place there.

The Ministry building that grew up around this place is wood-

paneled and gold-washed, bright and fire-lit, filled with bustling foolishness. This place is different. It is the stone heart of magical Britain, and it is neither gold-washed nor wood-paneled, neither fire-lit nor bright.

Filing solemnly into this room are witches and wizards in plum-colored robes each embroidered with a silver W. They carry themselves with an air of seriousness showing that they are well aware that they are terribly, terribly important. They are meeting in the Most Ancient Hall, after all. They are the Lords and Ladies of the Wizengamot, and they consider themselves the greatest folk of the world's greatest magical country. Lesser folk have fallen before them on bended knee in supplication; they are powerful, they are wealthy, they are noble; are they not great?

Albus Dumbledore knows everyone in this room by name. He has taught many of them, though too few have learned. Some are his allies, some his opponents, the rest he courts within the careful dance of their neutrality. All of them, to him, are people.

The current Defense Professor of Hogwarts, if you asked him for his opinion of the Lords and Ladies, would say that while many of them are ambitious, few have any ambition. He would observe that the Wizengamot is exactly where someone like that would end up—that it is exactly the sort of opportunity you would grasp, if you had nothing better to do. Such folk are rarely interesting, but they are often useful; pieces to be manipulated, points to be scored, by the true players of the game.

Not among the rising half-circles, but off to one side among a raised arc for the spectators, next to a witch in pointed hat whose face is lined with apprehension, there sits a boy dressed in the most formal black robes that he owns. His eyes are green ice and abstraction, and he hardly glances at the Lords and Ladies as they bustle in. To him they are just a collection of murmuring plum-colored robes to decorate the wooden benches, visual background for the scene of the Most Ancient Hall. If there is an enemy here, or something to be manipulated, it is merely "the Wizengamot". The wealthy elites of magical Britain have collective force, but not individual agency; their goals are too alien and trivial for them to have personal roles in the tale. As of now, this present time, the boy neither likes nor dislikes the plum-colored robes, because his

brain does not assign them enough agenthood to be the subjects of moral judgment. He is a PC, and they are wallpaper.

This view is about to change.

Harry gazed unseeing around the hall of the Wizengamot; it looked quite old and historic and there was no doubt that Hermione could have lectured him about the place for hours on end. The plum-colored robes had stopped arriving, and Harry's pocketwatch, advancing at the rate of three minutes every half-hour, said that the trial was almost due to start.

Professor McGonagall was sitting beside him, and her eyes never left him for more than twenty consecutive seconds.

Harry had read the *Daily Prophet* that morning. The headline had been "Mad Muggleborn Tries to End Ancient Line" and the rest of the paper had been the same. When Harry was nine years old the IRA had blown up a British barracks, and he'd watched on TV as all the politicians contested to see who could be the most loudly outraged. And the thought had occurred to Harry—even then, before he'd known much about psychology—that it looked like *everyone* was competing to see who could be most angry, and *nobody* would've been allowed to suggest that anyone was being *too* angry, even if they'd just proposed the saturation nuclear bombing of Ireland. He'd been struck, even then, by an essential emptiness in the indignation of politicians—though he hadn't had the words to describe it, at that age—a sense that they were trying to score cheap points by hitting at the same safe target as everyone else.

Harry had always possessed that sense of hollowness about political indignation, but it was strange how very much more obvious it seemed, when you were reading a dozen articles in the *Daily Prophet* beating on Hermione Granger.

The leading article, written by some name that Harry didn't recognize, had called for the minimum age for Azkaban to be lowered, just so that the twisted mudblood who had defaced the honor of Scotland with her savage, unprovoked attack upon the last heir of a Most Ancient

House within the sacred refuge of Hogwarts could be sent to the Dementors that were the only punishment commensurate with the severity of her unspeakable crime. Only this would be enough to discourage any other foreign, subhuman brutes who similarly believed in their twisted insanity that they could evade the majesty of the Wizengamot's inevitable and merciless scourging of all that threatened the honorable nobility of etcetera etcetera etcetera.

The next article had said the same thing in less eloquent words.

Earlier, Albus Dumbledore had told him,

"I will not try to keep you from this trial." The old wizard's voice quiet and unyielding. "I can well foresee how that would go. But I would have you treat me with equal courtesy in return. The politics of the Wizengamot are delicate, and of them you know nothing. Dare any folly and it shall be to Hermione Granger's cost; and you will remember that folly for the rest of your days, Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres."

"I understand," Harry said. "I know. Just—if you're planning to pull a rabbit out of your hat and save the day at the last minute when everything seems lost, please tell me now instead of letting me sit and worry—"

"I would not do that to you," the old wizard said, a terrible weariness seeming to suffuse him as he turned to go. "Still less to Hermione. But I have no rabbits in my hat, Harry. We can only see what Lucius Malfoy wants."

There was a small sharp rap, a single brief sound that somehow silenced the entire room and caused Harry's head to jerk around and upward. High above, Dumbledore had just tapped his podium with the dark rod he held in his left hand.

"The ninetieth session of the two-hundred-and-eighth Wizengamot is convened at the request of Lord Lucius Malfoy," the old wizard said tonelessly.

At once, far to the side of the podium but also in the highest circle, rose a tall man with a mane of long white spilling down from his head over the shoulders of his plum-colored robes. "I present a witness for questioning under Veritaserum," Lucius Malfoy said, his cool tone clear throughout the room, smoothly controlled with only a slight undertone of righteous fury. "Let Hermione, the first Granger, be brought forth."

"I ask you all to remember that she is a first-year of Hogwarts," Dumbledore said. "I will brook no abuse of this witness—"

Someone in the benches quite audibly said "Pfah!" and there was a spread of disgusted snorts, even one or two jeers.

Harry stared at the plum-colored robes, his eyes narrowing.

And with the growing anger came something else, a rising sense of disquiet, of something horribly skewed, like reality itself was being disrupted. Harry knew that, somehow, but he couldn't figure out what was awry, or why his mind thought it was getting worse...

"*Order!*" Dumbledore bellowed. He rapped the stone rod twice against the podium, producing two more small clicks that overrode all noise. "I will have order here!"

The door through which the witness was brought forth was set directly beneath Harry's own seat, so it wasn't until the entire group had emerged fully into the stone hall that Harry saw—

—an Auror trio—

—Hermione's back was to Harry as she was brought out, he couldn't see her face—

—followed by a shining silver sparrow and a running moonlit squirrel—

—and the source of the horrible wrongness, half-hidden beneath a tattered cloak.

Harry shot to his feet before he could even think, it was only Professor McGonagall's sudden frantic grab on his wrist that stopped his hand going for his wand; and the Transfiguration Professor whispered desperately, "*Harry it's all right there's a Patronus*—"

It took a few seconds for Harry to remember himself. For the part of himself that understood that Hermione hadn't been directly exposed to a Dementor, to argue his other parts into something like sanity—

But animal Patronuses aren't perfect, said another voice inside his mind. *Or Dumbledore wouldn't see the form of a naked man painful to look upon. You felt it approaching, animal Patronus or no...*

Slowly, Harry Potter sat back down again as Professor McGonagall pulled down with her grip on his wrist.

But by then he'd already declared war on the country of magical Britain, and the idea of other people calling him a Dark Lord no longer seemed important one way or another.

Hermione's face became visible to him, as she sat down in the chair. She wasn't upright and defiant like she'd been in front of Snape, she wasn't crying like she'd been when the Aurors arrested her. She just sat there with a look of vacant horror as dark metal chains snaked out from the chair and bound her arms and legs.

Harry couldn't take it. Without even thinking he was trying to flee inside himself, flee into his dark side, pull the cold rage over himself like a shield. It took too long, he hadn't tried to go fully into his dark side since Azkaban. And then when his blood was something like cold, he looked up again, and saw Hermione in the chair again, and discovered that his dark side knew nothing about how to deal with this type of pain, it pierced through the coldness like a knife and didn't hurt less in the slightest.

"Why, if it isn't Harry Potter!" came a high, light female voice, sickly sweet and indulgent.

Slowly, Harry turned his head away from the chair and saw a smiling woman wearing so much makeup that her skin looked almost pink, sitting next to a man that Harry recognized from photographs as Minister Cornelius Fudge.

"Did you have something to say, Mr. Potter?" inquired the woman, as cheerfully as if this wasn't a trial.

Other people were also looking at him now.

Harry couldn't speak, all the words in his mind would have been stupid to speak aloud. He couldn't find anything to say that Neville could also have said. Dumbledore had warned Harry that if anyone *else* wanted the Boy-Who-Lived to speak, he must *pretend to be his age*—

"The Headmaster said I shouldn't ought to talk," the boy said, not quite able to keep the edge out of his voice.

"Oh, but you have *our* permission to talk!" the woman said brightly. "I'm sure the Wizengamot is always happy to hear from the Boy-Who-Lived!" Beside her, Minister Cornelius Fudge was nodding.

The woman's face was puffy and overweight, visibly pale beneath the makeup. Almost inevitably, a certain word came to mind, and that word was *toad.* Which, said Harry's logical part, shouldn't correlate to morality in any way. Only in Disney movies were ugly people more likely to be evil and vice versa; and those movies were probably scripted by writers who'd never been ugly. He'd give her a chance, everyone in this room deserved one chance...

"Because I got rid of the Dark Lord?" the boy said, and pointed at the Dementor where it was hovering behind Hermione's chair. "There's something in this room that's Darker."

The woman's face narrowed, growing a little stern. "I realize a young boy like yourself may be scared by them, Mr. Potter, but the Dementors are quite obedient to the Ministry of Magic. And they would, of course, be necessary to guard—"

"A twelve-year-old girl?" the boy yelled. "Those are the Darkest creatures in the whole world, I could feel it coming here even through the Patronus—the *wrongness* coming nearer—it's horribly evil and it—it'd eat everyone in this room, if it could! It shouldn't be let near any child, ever! Not me, not her, not anyone! You ought to vote to send it away!"

"We'll *certainly* have no such vote—" the toad-woman snapped.

"That's enough, Madam Umbridge, Mr. Potter," came Dumbledore's stern voice from high above. And then after a short pause, the old wizard went on, "Although, of course, the boy is correct on every count."

Some of the members of the Wizengamot were looking abashed at the Boy-Who-Lived's admonition, and a few others were nodding violently to the old wizard's words. But they were too few. Harry could see it. They were too few.

The Veritaserum was brought in then, and Hermione looked for a brief moment like she *was* about to sob, she was looking at Harry—no, at Professor McGonagall—and Professor McGonagall was mouthing words that Harry couldn't make out from his angle. Then Hermione swallowed three drops of Veritaserum and her face grew slack.

"Gawain Robards," said the smooth voice of Lucius Malfoy. "Your probity is known to all of us. If you would do the honors?"

One of the three Aurors stepped forward.

After the first few questions Harry looked away and stared off to one side with his fingers in his ears, as Hermione's brain played back the contents of the False Memory Charm. He couldn't handle the drug-dulled anguish in Hermione's voice as she recounted the false memories, and his dark side couldn't handle it either, and he'd already heard the contents summarized.

Harry's mind flashed back to another day of horror, and even though Harry had been on the verge of writing off Lord Voldemort's continued existence as the senility of an old wizard, it suddenly seemed horribly and uniquely plausible that the entity who'd Memory-Charmed Hermione was the very same mind that had—*made use of*—Bellatrix Black. The two events had a certain signature in common. To choose that this should happen, *plan* for this to happen—it would take more than evil, it would take *emptiness*.

Harry looked up for a moment, then, and saw that the plum-colored robes were watching, just watching.

Some time later, after all the stars in the night sky had gone cold and dark and the last light in the Universe had sputtered down to embers and gone black, the questioning of Hermione ended.

"If it pleases my Lords," said the voice of Lord Malfoy, "I should like to have the testimony of my son Draco, witnessed under two drops of Veritaserum, read aloud at this time."

Until she went after me in that battle, I wasn't plotting anything against Granger. But after that day I really was feeling insulted, I'd helped her all those times—

The sound that came from Hermione's throat was like she'd just been crushed under a falling stone, so huge that she couldn't cry or breathe, just a small sad gasp.

"Pardon me," said one witch from what seemed to be the Malfoy-aligned side of the room. "But Lord Malfoy, why would your son *help* this mudblood girl?"

"My son," Lucius Malfoy said in a heavy voice, "seems to have been listening to certain misguided ideas. He is young—and he has learned, now, we have all seen as a country, what such folly brings in repayment."

A few steps down along the visitor's benches, a man wearing a newsman's cap and a badge identifying him as belonging to the *Daily Prophet* was avidly scribbling with a long quill.

The few people who'd nodded along to Dumbledore earlier had rather sick looks on their faces. One witch in plum-colored robes quite deliberately stood up from what had seemed like Dumbledore's side of the room, and made her way over toward the Malfoy side.

The Auror went on reading, his voice monotone.

I'd been so tired from casting all those locking wards, I was weak when I cast the last one. I thought I was stronger than Granger but I wasn't certain, so I tested it empirically by challenging her to a duel, that's why I d-d-did it and also because if I'd won I was planning to beat her again the next day where everyone could see. Stupid Veritaserum. But she *didn't know about that when she tried to* kill *me! And I really was insulted by what she'd done, I really had helped her before and I hadn't been planning anything against her then, only* she *went after* me *in front of everyone!"*

When all the witness testimony was done, the deliberations of the Wizengamot began.

If you could call them that.

It seemed that many members of the Wizengamot were of the strong opinion that murder was bad.

The plum-colored robes on Dumbledore's side of the room were silent, the supposed forces of good saving their political capital for more winnable battles. And Harry could hear, as though Professor Quirrell were standing next to him, a dry voice in his mind; explaining to him that it would hardly have been to the politicians' own advantage to speak, just then.

But there was one wizard in the room whose status was high enough that he had, it seemed, transcended his caution against losing face; one wizard alone whose status was high enough that he could speak a word of sanity and escape unscathed. He alone spoke to defend Hermione, the man with a phoenix flaming bright upon his shoulder.

Only Albus Dumbledore spoke.

The Chief Warlock didn't raise the possibility that Hermione Granger was entirely innocent. That, the Headmaster had explained to

Harry, would not be believed, would only make it worse.

But Albus Dumbledore said, in one gentle reminder after another, that the perpetrator was a first-year girl in Hogwarts; that many had done foolish things during their youth; that a first-year in Hogwarts was simply too young to comprehend the consequences of her acts. He himself (the Chief Warlock said quietly) had attempted certain foolish things during his childhood, when he was well older than she.

Albus Dumbledore said that Hermione Granger had been beloved of all the Hogwarts faculty, and helped four Hufflepuff girls with their Charms homework, and had scored one hundred and three points for Ravenclaw over the course of the school year.

Albus Dumbledore said that nobody who knew Hermione Granger would be anything but shocked by these events. That they had, all of them, heard the horror in her voice as she recounted her testimony. And if some unusual madness had temporarily possessed her, then—his voice rising in stern command—she deserved nothing from them except sympathy and a healer's attentions.

And at the last, Albus Dumbledore reminded the Wizengamot, over cries of protest, that the charge was *attempted* murder and not murder. Albus Dumbledore said, over a rising storm of objections, that no lasting harm had come to anyone. And Albus Dumbledore begged them not to do worse themselves than anything that had yet been done—

"*Enough!*" bellowed Lucius Malfoy, and a show of hands ended the deliberations. The white-maned man stood tall and terrible, his silver cane held high in one hand like a gavel about to fall. "For what this mad woman has tried to do to my son—for the blood debt that she owes for trying to end the line of a Noble and Most Ancient House—I say that she will—"

"Azkaban!" roared a man with a scarred face, seated at Lord Malfoy's right hand. "Send the mad mudblood to Azkaban!"

"Azkaban!" cried another plum-colored robe, and then another, and another—

A click from the rod in Dumbledore's hand silenced the room. "You are out of order," the old wizard said sternly. "And your proposal is

barbaric, beneath the dignity of this assembly. There are things we do not do. Lord Malfoy?"

Lucius Malfoy had listened to this with an impassive face. "Well," Lord Malfoy said after a few moments. A cold gleam lit his eyes. "I had not planned to ask it. But if that is the will of the Wizengamot—then let her pay as any in her place would pay. Let it be Azkaban."

A great cheer of rage went up—

"Are you all *lost?*" cried Albus Dumbledore. "She is too young! Her mind would not withstand it! Not in three centuries has such a thing been done in Britain!"

"What will the other countries think of us?" said the sharp voice of a woman that Harry recognized as Neville's grandmother.

"Will *you* guard Azkaban after she goes there, Lord Malfoy?" said a stern old witch that Harry didn't know. "For my Aurors may decline to guard it, I fear, if small children are kept within."

"The deliberations are ended," Lucius Malfoy said coldly. "But if you are incapable of finding Aurors who can obey the vote of the Wizengamot, Madam Bones, you may relinquish the position; we can easily find another to serve in your place. The will of this Hall is clear. For the monstrosity of her crimes, the girl is to be tried as an adult and punished accordingly; ten years in Azkaban, the justice for attempted murder."

When the old wizard spoke again, his voice was lower. "Is there no alternative to this, Lucius? We may retire to my chambers to discuss it, if need be."

The tall man of the long white hair turned, then, to regard where the old wizard stood at the podium; and the two stared at each other for a long moment.

When Lucius Malfoy spoke again his voice seemed to tremble ever so slightly, as though the stern control on it was failing. "Blood calls for repayment, the blood of my family. Not for any price will I sell the blood debt owed my son. You would not understand that, who never had love or child of your own. Still, there is more than one debt owed to House Malfoy, and I think that my son, if he stood among us, would rather be repaid for his mother's blood than for his own. Confess your own crime to the Wizengamot, as you confessed it to me, and I shall—"

"Don't even think about it, Albus," said the stern old witch who had spoken before.

The old wizard stood at the podium.

The old wizard stood at the podium, his face twisting, untwisting—

"Stop it," said the old witch. "You know the answer you must give, Albus. It will not change for agonizing over it."

The old wizard spoke.

"No," said Albus Dumbledore.

"And you, Malfoy," continued the stern old witch, "I suppose all you really wanted this whole time was to ruin—"

"Hardly," said Lucius Malfoy, his lips now twisting into a bitter smile. "No, I have no purpose here but my son's vengeance. I only wished to show the Wizengamot the truth behind this old man's pretended heroism and his praise of that girl—that he would hardly think of sacrificing himself to save her."

"Cruelty worthy of a Death Eater indeed," said Augusta Longbottom. "Not that I'm implying anything, of course."

"Cruelty?" said Lucius Malfoy, the bitter smile still on his face. "I think not. I knew what his answer would be. I have ever warned you that he only plays his pretended part. If you believe in his hesitation, the more fool you. Remember that his answer was the same." The man raised his voice. "Let us vote, my friends. I think a show of hands will suffice for it. I do not imagine there will be many who choose to align themselves with murderers." The voice went cold, on the last note, the promise in it very clear.

"Look at the girl," said Albus Dumbledore. "See her, see the horror you are committing! She is—" The old wizard's voice broke. "She is afraid—"

The Veritaserum must have been wearing off, because Hermione Granger's face was twisting beneath the slackness, her limbs trembling visibly beneath the chains, as though she were trying to run, run from that chair, but was pressed down by weights larger than the enchanted metal links that bound her. Then there was a convulsive effort and Hermione's neck moved, her head twisted, enough to bring her eyes into line—

She looked at Harry Potter and though she didn't speak, it was absolutely clear what she was saying.

Harry
help me
please—

And in the Most Ancient Hall of the Wizengamot an icy voice rang out, speech the color of liquid nitrogen, pitched too high for that it came from too young a throat, and that voice said, "*Lucius Malfoy.*"

⁂

In the ancient and hallowed halls of the Wizengamot, people looked around and it took their eyes too long to find what they sought. It might have been high in pitch, it might have been under-loud for the words being spoken; and yet even so, you wouldn't have expected to hear that voice from a child.

It wasn't until Lord Malfoy spoke in return that people even realized where they should be looking.

"Harry Potter," said Lucius Malfoy. He did not incline his head.

Heads spun, eyes moved, and people focused on the messy-haired young boy standing near the weeping older witch. The boy stood merely chest-high with his shoes on, dressed in short robes of formal black. Though unless your eyes were keen indeed, you couldn't have seen, from all the way across the Hall, that famous and deadly scar beneath his messy hair.

"This folly does not become you, Lucius," said the boy. "Twelve-year-old girls do not go around committing murders. You are a Slytherin and an intelligent one. You know this is a plot. Hermione Granger was placed on this gameboard by force, by whatever hand lies behind that plot. *You* were surely intended to act just as you are acting now—except that Draco Malfoy was meant to be dead, and you were meant to be beyond all reason. But he is alive and you are sane. Why are you cooperating with your intended role, in a plot meant to take the life of your son?"

A storm seemed to be raging inside Lucius, the face beneath the flowing white hair threatening to crack open and spill something unguessable. The Lord of Malfoy seemed to almost speak once and then twice again, swallowing three unheard sentences before his lips parted for true. "A plot, you say?" Lord Malfoy said at last. His face was twitching, hardly controlled. "And whose plot would that be, then?"

"If I knew," said the boy, "I would have said so a good deal earlier. But anyone who had ever been Hermione Granger's classmate could tell you that she is a most unlikely murderess. She does, in fact, help Hufflepuffs with their homework. This was not a natural event, Lord Malfoy."

"Plot—or no plot—" Lucius's voice was trembling. "This mudblood filth has touched my son and for that I will end her. You should know that full well, *Harry Potter.*"

"It is questionable," the boy said, "to put it mildly, whether Hermione Granger actually cast that Blood-Cooling Charm. I do not know the exact circumstances or what spells were involved, but simple trickery would not have sufficed to make her do it. She did not act of her own will, and perhaps did not act at all. Your vengeance is being misdirected, Lord Malfoy, and deliberately so. It is not a twelve-year-old girl who deserves your ire."

"And what do *you* care for her fate?" Lucius Malfoy's voice was rising. "What is *your* stake in this?"

"She is my friend," the boy said, "as Draco is my friend. It is possible that this blow was aimed at me, and not at House Malfoy at all."

Again the muscles jumped in Lucius's face. "And now you are lying to me—as you lied to my son!"

"Believe it or not," the boy said quietly, "I never willed anything but that Draco should know the truth—"

"*Enough!*" cried the Lord Malfoy. "Enough of your lies! Enough of your *games!* You do not understand—you would never understand—what it means that he is my son! I will not be denied this vengeance! No more! Never again! For the blood this girl owes House Malfoy, she shall go to Azkaban. And if I ever find another hand at work—even if it is your own—that hand shall be cut off as well!" Lucius Malfoy raised his deadly silver cane as though in command, his teeth clenched and his

lips drawn back in a snarl, like a wolf facing a dragon. "And if you have nothing better to say than that—be silent, Harry Potter!"

Harry's blood was hammering even beneath the ice of his dark side, the fear for Hermione, the part of him that wanted to lash out at Lucius and destroy him where he stood for his insolence and his *stupidity*–but Harry didn't have the *power*, he didn't even have a single vote in the Wizengamot—

Draco had said that Lucius was scared of him, for some unknown reason. And Harry could see it in the rictus that Lord Malfoy's face had become, drawn and tight, that it was taking all his courage for him to tell Harry to shut up.

So Harry said, his voice cool and deadly, hoping to hell that it meant something, "You will earn my enmity if you do this thing, Lucius..."

Someone in the lower rows of what was evidently the blood-purist side of the Wizengamot, who was looking down at the young boy rather than up at Lord Malfoy, laughed in outright incredulity. Other plum-colored robes began to laugh as well.

Lord Malfoy gazed at him with hard dignity, as that laughter spread. "If you want the enmity of the House of Malfoy, you shall have it, *child*."

"Now really," said the woman in too much pink makeup, "I think this has gone on quite long enough, wouldn't you say, Lord Malfoy? The boy will miss his classes."

"Indeed he will," said Lucius Malfoy, and then raised his voice again. "I call the vote! By show of hands, let the Wizengamot acknowledge the blood debt owed to the Noble and Most Ancient House of Malfoy, for the attempted murder of its last scion and ending of its line, by Hermione, the first Granger!"

Hands shot up one after another, and the secretary who sat in the bottom circle began to make marks on parchment to tally them, but it was obvious which way the majority had gone.

And Harry screamed inside his mind, a frantic call for help to any part of himself that would offer a way out, a strategy, an idea. But there was nothing, there was nothing, he'd played his last cards and lost. And then with a last convulsive desperation Harry plunged himself into his dark side, pushed himself into his dark side, seizing at its deadly clarity, offering his dark side anything if it would only solve this problem for him; and at last the lethal calm came over him, the true ice finally answering his call. Beyond all panic and despair his mind began to search through every fact in its possession, recall everything it knew about Lucius Malfoy, about the Wizengamot, about the laws of magical Britain; his eyes looked at the rows of chairs, at every person and every thing within range of his vision, searching for any opportunity it could grasp—

CHAPTER EIGHTY-ONE

TABOO TRADEOFFS, PART III

In rising half-circles of dark stone, a great sea of upraised hands.

The Lords and Ladies of the Wizengamot, in plum-colored robes marked with a silver 'W', stared down in stern rebuke at a young girl trembling in chains. If they had, in any particular ethical system, damned themselves, they clearly thought quite highly of themselves for having done so.

Harry's breath was trembling in his chest. His dark side had come up with a plan—and then rotated itself back out again because speaking too icily would not be to Hermione's advantage; a fact which the only-half-cold Harry had somehow not realized...

"The vote carries, in favor," intoned the secretary, when all the tallying was done, and the upraised hands fell back down. "The Wizengamot recognizes the blood debt owed by Hermione Granger to House Malfoy for the attempted murder of its scion and ending of its line."

Lucius Malfoy was smiling in grim satisfaction. "And now," said the white-maned wizard, "I say that her debt shall be paid—"

Harry clenched his fists beneath the bench and shouted, "By the debt owed from House Malfoy to House Potter!"

"Silence!" snapped the woman in too much pink makeup sitting next to Minister Fudge. "You've disrupted these proceedings quite enough already! Aurors, escort him out!"

"Wait," said Augusta Longbottom from the top tier of seats. "What debt is this?"

Lucius's hands whitened on his cane. "House Malfoy owes no debt to you!"

It wasn't the world's most solid hope, it was based on one newspaper article from a woman who'd been False-Memory-Charmed, but Rita Skeeter had seemed to find it plausible, that Mr. Weasley had allegedly owed James Potter a debt because...

"I'm surprised you've forgotten," Harry said evenly. "Surely it was a cruel and painful period of your life, laboring under the Imperius curse of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, until you were freed of it by the efforts of House Potter. By my mother, Lily Potter, who died for it, and by my father, James Potter, who died for it, and by me, of course."

There was a brief silence within the Most Ancient Hall.

"Why, what an excellent point, Mr. Potter," said the old witch who'd been identified as Madam Bones. "I, too, am quite surprised that Lord Malfoy would forget such a significant event. It must have been such a happy day for him."

"Yes," said Augusta Longbottom. "He must have been so grateful."

Madam Bones nodded. "House Malfoy could not possibly deny that debt—unless, perhaps, Lord Malfoy is to tell us that he has misremembered something? I should take quite a professional interest in that. We are always trying to improve our picture of those dark days."

Lucius Malfoy's hands gripped the silver snake-handle of his cane like he was about to strike with it, unleash whatever power it kept—

Then the Lord Malfoy seemed to relax, and a chill smile came over his face. "Of course," he said easily. "I do confess I had not understood, but the child is quite correct. But I do not quite think the two debts cancel—House Potter was only trying to save itself, after all—"

"Not so," Dumbledore said from above.

"—and therefore," intoned Lucius Malfoy, "I demand monetary compensation as well, for the redemption of the blood debt owed my son. That, too, is the law."

Harry felt a strange inward flinch. That had also been in the newspaper article, Mr. Weasley had demanded an additional ten thousand Galleons—

"How much?" said the Boy-Who-Lived.

Lucius was still wearing the cold smile. "One hundred thousand Galleons. If you have not that much in your vault, I suppose I must accept a promissory note for the remainder."

A roar of protest went up from Dumbledore's side of the room, even some of the plum-colored robes in the middle looked shocked.

"Shall we put it to vote of the Wizengamot?" said Lucius Malfoy. "I think few of us would like to see the little murderess go free. By a show of hands, that additional compensation of one hundred thousand Galleons would be required to cancel the debt!"

The clerk began tallying, but that vote was also clear.

Harry stood there, breathing deeply.

You'd better not even have to think about this, Harry's inner Gryffindor said threateningly.

It's a major purchase, observed Ravenclaw. *We ought to spend a lot of time thinking about it.*

It shouldn't have been hard. It *shouldn't* have. Two million pounds was only money, and money was only worth what it could buy...

It was strange how much psychological attachment you could have to 'only money', or how painful it could be to imagine losing a bank vault full of gold that you hadn't even imagined existed just one year earlier.

Kimball Kinnison wouldn't hesitate, said Gryffindor. *Seriously. Like, snap decision. What sort of hero are you? I already hate you just for having to think about it for longer than 50 milliseconds.*

This is real life, said Ravenclaw. *Losing all your money is a lot more painful for real people in real life than in heroic books.*

What? demanded Gryffindor. *Whose side are you on?*

I wasn't advocating for a particular answer, said Ravenclaw, *I was just saying it because it was true.*

Could a hundred thousand Galleons be used to save more than one life if spent some other way? said Slytherin. *We have research to do, battles to fight, the difference between being 40,000 Galleons rich and being 60,000 Galleons in debt is not trivial—*

So we'll just use one of our ways to make money fast and earn it all back, said Hufflepuff.

It's not certain those will work, said Slytherin, *and a lot of them require starting cash—*

Personally, said Gryffindor, *I vote that we save Hermione and then gang up and kill our inner Slytherin.*

The clerk's voice said that the tally had been recorded and the vote had passed...

Harry's lips opened.

"I accept your offer," said Harry's lips, without any hesitation, without any decision having been made; just as if the internal debate had been pretense and illusion, the true controller of the voice having been no part of it.

It was clear that Lucius Malfoy had not been expecting that reply.

The Lord Malfoy's mask of calm shattered, his eyes widened, he stared at Harry in sheer blank astonishment. His mouth had opened slightly, though he wasn't speaking, and if he was making any peculiar noises it couldn't be heard over the roar of simultaneous gasps from the Wizengamot—

A tap of stone silenced the crowd.

"No," said the voice of Dumbledore.

Harry's head jerked around to stare at the ancient wizard.

Dumbledore's lined face was pale, the silver beard was visibly trembling, he looked like he was in the final throes of a terminal illness. "I'm—sorry, Harry—but this choice is not yours—for I am still the guardian of your vault."

"*What?*" said Harry, too shocked to compose his reply.

"I cannot let you go into debt to Lucius Malfoy, Harry! I cannot! You do not know—you do not realize—"

Die.

Harry didn't even know which part of himself had spoken, it might have been a unanimous vote, the pure rage and fury pouring through him. For an instant he thought that the sheer force of the anger might take magical wing and fly out to strike the Headmaster, send him tumbling back dead from the podium—

But when that mental voice had spoken, the old wizard was still standing there, gazing at Harry, long dark wand in his right hand, short black rod in his left.

And Harry's eyes also went to the red-golden bird with its claws resting on the shoulder of Dumbledore's black robes, silent when no phoenix should have been silent. "Fawkes," Harry said, his voice sounding strange in his own ears, "can you scream at him for me?"

The fiery bird on the old wizard's shoulder didn't scream. Maybe the Wizengamot had demanded that a spell of silence be put on the creature, otherwise it probably would have been screaming the whole time. But Fawkes hit his master, one golden wing buffeting the old wizard's head.

"I cannot, Harry!" the old wizard said, the agony clear in his voice. "I am doing as I must do!"

And Harry knew, then, as he looked at the red-golden bird, what he had to do as well. It should have been obvious from the beginning, that solution.

"Then I too will do what I must," Harry said up to Dumbledore, as though the two of them stood alone in the room. "You do realize that, don't you?"

The old wizard shook his trembling head. "You will change your mind when you are older—"

"I'm not talking about that," Harry said, his voice still strange in his own ears. "I mean that I will not allow Hermione Granger to be eaten by Dementors under any circumstances. Period. Regardless of what any law says, and no matter what I have to do to stop it. Do I still need to spell it out?"

A strange male voice spoke from somewhere far away, "Be sure that the girl is taken directly to Azkaban, and put under extra guard."

Harry waited, staring at the old wizard, and then spoke again. "I will go to Azkaban," Harry said to the old wizard, as though they stood alone in the world, "before Hermione can be taken there, and start snapping my fingers. It may cost me my life, but by the time she gets there, there won't be an Azkaban anymore."

Some members of the Wizengamot gasped in surprise.

Then a greater number started laughing.

"How would you even get there, little boy?" someone said, from among those who were laughing.

"I have my ways of going places," said the boy's distant voice. Harry kept his eyes on Dumbledore, on the old wizard staring at him in shock. Harry didn't look directly at Fawkes, didn't give his plan away; but in his mind he prepared to summon the phoenix to transport him, prepared to fill his mind with light and fury, to call for the fire-bird with all his might, he might have to do it upon the instant if Dumbledore pointed his wand—

"Would you truly?" the old wizard said to Harry, also as if the two of them stood alone in the room.

The room went silent again as everyone stared in shock at the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, who seemed to be taking the mad threat completely seriously.

The old wizard's eyes were locked only on Harry. "Would you risk everything—everything—only for her?"

"Yes," Harry said back in reply.

That's the wrong answer, you know, said Slytherin. *Seriously.*

But it's the true answer.

"You will not see reason?" said the old wizard.

"Apparently not," Harry said back.

The gazes stayed locked.

"This is terrible folly," said the old wizard.

"I am aware of this," answered the hero. "Now get out of my way."

Strange light glinted in the ancient blue eyes. "As you will, Harry Potter, but know that this is not over."

The rest of the world faded back into existence.

"I withdraw my objection," said the old wizard, "Harry Potter may do as he wishes," and the Wizengamot exploded in a roar of shock, only to be silenced by a final tap of the stone rod.

Harry turned his head back to look at Lord Malfoy, who looked like he'd seen a cat turn into a person and start eating other cats. To call the look confused did not begin to describe it.

"You would truly..." Lucius Malfoy said slowly. "You would truly pay a hundred thousand Galleons, to save one mudblood girl."

"I think there's about forty thousand in my Gringotts vault," Harry said. It was strange how that was *still* causing more internal pain than the thought of taking an over-fifty-percent risk to his life to destroy Azkaban. "As for the other sixty thousand—what are the rules, exactly?"

"It comes due when you graduate Hogwarts," the old wizard said from high above. "But Lord Malfoy has certain rights over you before then, I fear."

Lucius Malfoy stood motionless, frowning down at Harry. "Who is she to you, then? *What* is she to you, that you would pay so much to keep her from harm?"

"My friend," the boy said quietly.

Lucius Malfoy's eyes narrowed. "By the report I received, you cannot cast the Patronus Charm, and Dumbledore knows this. The power of a single Dementor nearly killed you. You would not dare venture near Azkaban in your own person—"

"That was in January," said Harry. "This is April."

Lucius Malfoy's eyes remained cool and calculating. "You pretend you can destroy Azkaban, and Dumbledore pretends to believe it."

Harry did not reply.

The white-haired man turned slightly, toward the center of the half-circle, as though to address the greater Wizengamot. "I withdraw my offer!" shouted the Lord of Malfoy. "I will not accept the debt to House Potter in payment, not even for a hundred thousand Galleons! The girl's blood debt to House Malfoy stands!"

Again the roar of many voices. "Dishonorable!" someone cried. "You acknowledge the debt to House Potter, and yet you would—" and then that voice cut off.

"I acknowledge the debt, but the law does not strictly oblige me to accept it in cancellation," said Lord Malfoy with a grim smile. "The girl is no part of House Potter; the debt I owe House Potter is no debt to her. As for the *dishonor*—" Lucius Malfoy paused. "As for the grave shame I feel at my ingratitude toward the Potters, who have done so much for me—" Lucius Malfoy bowed his head. "May my ancestors forgive me."

"Well, boy?" called the scarred man sitting at Lord Malfoy's right hand. "Go and destroy Azkaban, then!"

"I'd like to see that," said another voice. "Will you be selling tickets?"

It went without saying that Harry didn't pick this particular moment to give up.

The girl is no part of House Potter—

He had, in fact, seen the obvious way out of the dilemma almost instantly.

It might have taken him longer if he hadn't recently overheard a number of conversations between older Ravenclaw girls, and read a certain number of Quibbler stories.

He was, nonetheless, having trouble accepting it.

This is ridiculous, said a part of Harry which had just dubbed itself the Internal Consistency Checker. *Our actions here are completely incoherent. First you feel less emotional reluctance to risk your bloody Life and probably Die for Hermione, than to part with a stupid heap of gold. And now you're balking just at getting married?*

System Error.

You know what? said Internal Consistency Checker. *You're stupid.*

I didn't say no, thought Harry. *I was just saying System Error.*

I vote for destroying Azkaban, said Gryffindor. *It needs to be done anyway.*

Really, really stupid, said Internal Consistency Checker. *Oh, screw this, I'm assuming control of our body.*

The boy took a deep breath, and opened his mouth—

By this point Harry Potter had entirely forgotten the existence of Professor McGonagall, who had been sitting there this whole time undergoing a number of interesting changes of facial expression which Harry had not been looking at because he was distracted. It would have been overly harsh to say that Harry had forgotten her because he did not consider her a PC. It could be more kindly said that Professor McGonagall was not visibly a solution to any of his current problems, and therefore she was not part of the universe.

So Harry, who at this point had a fair amount of adrenaline in his bloodstream, startled and jumped quite visibly when Professor McGonagall, her eyes now blazing with impossible hope and the tears on her cheek half-dried, leapt to her feet and cried, "*With me, Mr. Potter!*" and,

without waiting for a reply, tore down the stairs that led to the bottom platform where waited a chair of dark metal.

It took a moment, but Harry ran after; though it took him longer to reach the bottom, after Professor McGonagall vaulted half the stairs with a strange catlike motion and landed with the astonished-looking Auror trio already pointing their wands at her.

"Miss Granger!" cried Professor McGonagall. "Can you speak yet?"

Much as with Professor McGonagall, there was a certain sense in which it could be said that Harry had forgotten about the existence of Hermione Granger, because Harry had been tilting his neck back to look upward rather than downward, and because he hadn't considered her a solution to any of his current problems. Though it was hardly certain, in fact it wasn't at all probable, that Harry remembering to look at Hermione or think about what she must be feeling, would have helped anything in the slightest.

Harry reached the bottom of the stairs and saw Hermione Granger full on—

Without thinking, without being able to help himself, Harry shut his eyes, but he'd seen.

Her school robes around her neck, soaked all the way through with tears.

The way she'd been looking away from *him*.

And the eye of memory and sympathy, which could not be shut, which could not look away, knew that Hermione had recounted the worst shame of her life in front of the nobility of magical Britain and Professor McGonagall and Dumbledore and Harry; and then been sentenced to Azkaban where she would be exposed to Dementors until she went mad and died; and then she'd heard that Harry was going to give away all his money and go into debt to save her, and maybe even sacrifice his life

and with the Dementor standing only a few paces behind her

she hadn't said anything...

"Y-yes," whispered the voice of Hermione Granger. "I c-can talk."

Harry opened his eyes again and saw her face, now looking at him. It didn't say anything like what he thought Hermione was feeling, faces

couldn't say anything that complicated, all facial muscles could do was contort themselves into knots.

"H-H-Harry, I-I'm so, I'm so—"

"Shut up," Harry suggested.

"s-s-sorry—"

"If you'd never met me on the train you wouldn't be in any trouble right now. So shut up," said Harry Potter.

"Both of you stop being silly," Professor McGonagall said in her firm Scottish accent (it was strange how much that helped). "Mr. Potter, hold out your wand so that Miss Granger's fingers can touch it. Miss Granger, repeat after me. Upon my life and magic—"

Harry did as he was bid, thrusting his wand forward to touch Hermione's fingers; and then Hermione's faltering voice said, "Upon my life and magic—"

"I swear service to the House of Potter—" said Professor McGonagall.

And Hermione, without waiting for any further instructions, said, the words spilling out of her in a rush, "I swear service to the House of Potter, to obey its Master or Mistress, and stand at their right hand, and fight at their command, and follow where they go, until the day I die."

All those words had been blurted out in a desperate gasp before Harry could have thought or said anything, if he'd been mad enough to interrupt.

"Mr. Potter, repeat these words," said Professor McGonagall. "I, Harry, heir and last scion of the Potters, accept your service, until the end of the world and its magic."

Harry took a breath and said, "I, Harry, heir and last scion of the Potters, accept your service, until the end of the world and its magic."

"That's it," said Professor McGonagall. "Well done."

Harry looked up, and saw that the entire Wizengamot, whose existence he'd forgotten, was staring at them.

And then Minerva McGonagall, who *was* Head of House Gryffindor even if she didn't always act like it, looked up high above at where Lucius Malfoy stood; and she said to him before the entire Wizengamot, "I regret every point I ever gave you in Transfiguration, you vile little worm."

Whatever Lucius was about to say in reply was silenced by a tap of the short rod in Dumbledore's hand. "Ahem!" said the old wizard from his podium of dark stone. "This session has carried on quite considerably, and if it is not dismissed soon, some of us may miss their entire luncheon. The law of this matter is clear. You have already voted on the terms of the bargain, and Lord Malfoy cannot legally decline it. As we have far exceeded our allotted time, I now, in accordance with the last decision of the survivors of the eighty-eighth Wizengamot, adjourn this session."

The old wizard tapped the rod of dark stone three times.

"You fools!" shouted Lucius Malfoy. The white hair was shaking as though in a wind, the face beneath was pale with fury. "Do you think you'll get away with what you've done today? Do you think that girl can try to murder my son and escape unscathed?"

The toad-like pink-makeup woman, whose name Harry could no longer remember, was standing up from her seat. "Why, of course not," she said with a sickening smile. "After all, the girl *is* still a murderess, and I think the Ministry shall be watching her affairs quite closely—it hardly seems wise that she should be allowed to wander the streets, after all—"

Harry was fed up at this point.

Without waiting to listen, Harry turned on his heel and strode forward in long steps toward—

The horror only he could truly see, the absence of color and space, the wound in the world, above which floated a tattered cloak; most imperfectly guarded by a running moonlit squirrel and fluttering silver sparrow.

His dark side had also noticed, when it was looking through the entire room for anything that could possibly be used as a weapon, that the enemy had been foolish enough to bring a Dementor into Harry's presence. That was a powerful weapon indeed, and one that Harry might wield better than its supposed masters. There had been a time in Azkaban when Harry had told twelve Dementors to turn and go, and they had gone.

The Dementors are Death, and the Patronus Charm works by thinking about happy thoughts instead of Death.

If Harry's theory was correct, that one sentence would be all it took to pop the Aurors' Patronus Charms like a soap bubble, and ensure that nobody within reach of his voice could cast another one.

I am going to cancel the Patronus Charms and prevent any more Patronuses from being cast. And then my Dementor, flying faster than any broomstick, is going to Kiss everyone here who voted to send a twelve-year-old girl to Azkaban.

Say that, to set up the if-then expectation, and wait for people to understand and laugh. Then speak the fatal truth; and when the Aurors' Patronuses winked out to prove the point, either people's *anticipations* of the mindless void, or Harry's threat of its destruction, would make the Dementor obey. Those who had sought to compromise with the darkness would be consumed by it.

It was the other solution his dark side had devised.

Ignoring the gasps rising from behind him, Harry crossed the radius of the Patronuses, strode to a single pace from Death. Its unhindered fear burst around him like a whirlpool, like stepping next to the sucking drain of some huge bathtub emptying out its water; but with the false Patronuses no longer obscuring the level on which they interacted, Harry could reach the Dementor even as it could reach him. Harry looked straight into the pulling vacuum and—

the Earth among the stars

all his triumph at saving Hermione

someday the reality of which you are a shadow will cease to exist

Harry took all the silver emotion that fueled his Patronus Charm and *shoved* it at the Dementor; and expected Death's shadow to flee from him—

—and as Harry did that, he flung his hands up and shouted "BOO!"

The void retreated sharply away from Harry until it came up against the dark stone behind.

In the hall there was a deathly silence.

Harry turned his back on the empty void, and looked up at where the toad-woman stood. She was pale beneath the pink makeup, her mouth opening and closing like a fish.

"I make you this one offer," said the Boy-Who-Lived. "I never learn that you've been interfering with me or any of mine. And you never find out why the unkillable soul-eating monster is scared of me. Now sit down and shut up."

The toad-woman fell back down to her bench without a word.

Harry looked further up.

"A riddle, Lord Malfoy!" the Boy-Who-Lived shouted across the Most Ancient Hall. "I know you weren't in Ravenclaw, but try to answer this one anyway! What destroys Dark Lords, frightens Dementors, and owes you sixty thousand Galleons?"

For an instant Lord Malfoy stood there with eyes slightly widened; then his face fell back into calm scorn, and his voice spoke coolly in reply. "Are you openly threatening me, Mr. Potter?"

"I'm not threatening you," said the Boy-Who-Lived. "I'm *scaring* you. There's a difference."

"Enough, Mr. Potter," said Professor McGonagall. "We shall be late for afternoon Transfiguration as it is. And do come back here, you're still terrifying that poor Dementor." She turned to the Aurors. "Mr. Kleiner, if you would!"

Harry strode back to them, as the Auror addressed moved forward and pressed a short rod of dark metal to the dark metal chair, muttering an inaudible word of dismissal.

The chains slithered back as smoothly as they had come forth; and Hermione pushed herself out of the chair as fast as she could, and half-ran and half-staggered forward a few steps.

Harry held out his arms—

—and Hermione half-jumped half-fell into Professor McGonagall's arms, beginning to sob hysterically.

Hmpfh, said a voice inside Harry. *I kind of thought we'd earned that one ourselves.*

Oh, shut up.

Professor McGonagall was holding Hermione so firmly that you might have thought it was a mother holding her daughter, or maybe granddaughter. After a few moments Hermione's sobs slowed, and then stopped. Professor McGonagall suddenly shifted her stance and grabbed

onto her more tightly; the girl's hands were dangling limply, now, and her eyes were closed—

"She'll be fine, Mr. Potter," Professor McGonagall said softly in Harry's direction, without looking at him. "She just needs a few hours in one of Madam Pomfrey's beds."

"All right, then," Harry said. "Let's get her to Madam Pomfrey's."

"Yes," said Dumbledore, as he descended to the bottom of the dark stone stairs. "Let us all go home, indeed." His blue eyes were locked on Harry, as hard as sapphires.

The Lords and Ladies of the Wizengamot are departing their wooden benches, leaving as they came, looking rather nervous.

The vast majority are thinking 'The Dementor was frightened of the Boy-Who-Lived!'

Some of the shrewder ones are already wondering how this will affect the delicate power balance of the Wizengamot—if a new piece has appeared upon the gameboard.

Almost none are thinking anything along the lines of 'I wonder how he did that.'

This is the truth of the Wizengamot: Many are nobles, many are wealthy magnates of business, a few came by their status in other ways. Some of them are stupid. Most are shrewd in the realms of business and politics, but their shrewdness is circumscribed. Almost none have walked the path of a powerful wizard. They have not read through ancient books, scrutinized old scrolls, searching for truths too powerful to walk openly and disguised in conundrums, hunting for true magic among a hundred fantastic fairy tales. When they are not looking at a contract of debt, they abandon what shrewdness they possess and relax with some comfortable nonsense. They believe in the Deathly Hallows, but they also believe that Merlin fought the dread Totoro and imprisoned the Ree. They know (because that too is part of the standard legend) that a powerful wizard must learn to distinguish the truth among a hundred

plausible lies. But it has not occurred to them that they might do the same.

(Why not? Why, indeed, would wizards with enough status and wealth to turn their hands to almost any endeavor, choose to spend their lives fighting over lucrative monopolies on ink importation? The Headmaster of Hogwarts would hardly see the question; of course most people should not be powerful wizards, just as most people should not be heroes. The Defense Professor could explain at great and cynical length why their ambitions are so trivial; to him, too, there is no puzzle. Only Harry Potter, for all the books he has read, is unable to understand; to the Boy-Who-Lived the life choices of the Lords and Ladies seem incomprehensible—not what a good person would do, nor yet an evil person either. Now which of the three is most wise?)

For whatever reason, then, most of the Wizengamot has never walked the path that leads to powerful wizardry; they do not seek out what is hidden. For them, there is no *why*. There is no explanation. There is no causality. The Boy-Who-Lived, who was already halfway into the magisterium of legend, has now been promoted all the way there; and it is a brute fact, simple and unexplained, that the Boy-Who-Lived frightens Dementors. Ten years earlier they were told that a one-year-old boy defeated the most terrible Dark Lord of their generation, perhaps the most evil Dark Lord ever to live; and they just accepted that too.

You are not meant to question that sort of thing (they know in some unspoken way). If the most terrible Dark Lord in history, confronts an innocent baby—why, how could he *not* be vanquished? The rhythm of the play demands it. You are supposed to applaud, not stand up from your seat in the audience and say 'Why?' It is just the story's conceit, that in the end the Dark Lord is brought down by a little child; and if you are going to question that, you might as well not attend the play in the first place.

It does not occur to them to second-guess the application of such reasoning to the events they have seen with their own eyes in the Most Ancient Hall. Indeed, they are not consciously aware that they are using story-reasoning on real life. As for scrutinizing the Boy-Who-Lived with

the same careful logic they would use on a political alliance or a business arrangement—what brain would associate to *that,* when a part of the legendary magisterium is at hand?

But there are a very few, seated on those wooden benches, who do *not* think like this.

There are a certain few of the Wizengamot who have read through half-disintegrated scrolls and listened to tales of things that happened to someone's brother's cousin, not for entertainment, but as part of a quest for power and truth. They have already marked the Night of Godric's Hollow, as reported by Albus Dumbledore, as an anomalous and potentially important event. They have wondered why it happened, if it did happen; or if not, why Dumbledore is lying.

And when an eleven-year-old boy rises up and says "Lucius Malfoy" in that cold adult voice, and goes on to speak words one simply would not expect to hear from a first-year in Hogwarts, they do not allow the fact to slip into the lawless blurs of legends and the premises of plays.

They mark it as a clue.

They add it to the list.

This list is beginning to look somewhat alarming.

It doesn't particularly help when the boy yells "BOO!" at a Dementor and the decaying corpse presses itself flat against the opposite wall and its horrible ear-hurting voice rasps, "*Make him go away.*"

CHAPTER EIGHTY-TWO

TABOO TRADEOFFS, FINAL

Phoenix travel was a sensation entirely unlike Apparition or portkeys. You caught on fire—you definitely felt yourself catching on fire, even though there was no pain—and instead of burning to ashes, the fire burned all the way through you and you *became* fire, and then you went out in one place and blazed up in another. It didn't sicken the stomach like portkeys or Apparition, but it was a rather unnerving experience nonetheless. If the underlying truth of phoenix travel really was becoming a specific instantiation of a more general Fire, then that seemed to hint you could potentially burn *anywhere*—even in the distant past, or in another universe, or in two places at once. You might go out in one place and blaze up in a hundred others, and the you who arrived at Hogwarts would never know the difference. Though Harry had read what he could about phoenixes, trying to figure out how to get one of his own, and there'd been no hint of anything remotely like that capability.

Harry caught fire and went out and blazed up somewhere else; and just like that he, and the Headmaster, and the unconscious form of Hermione Granger held in the Headmaster's arms, were occupying another place; with Fawkes above them all. A calm, warm room of bright stone columns, skylit on all four sides, populated by white beds in long rows, four of which had silencing veils drawn around them, and the rest empty.

In one corner of Harry's vision, a surprised-looking Madam Pomfrey was turning toward them. Dumbledore seemed to pay the senior healer no heed, as he carefully laid down Hermione on an unoccupied white bed.

From a distant corner there was a flash of green, and from out of a fireplace strode Professor McGonagall, brushing herself off slightly from the Floo ashes.

The old wizard turned from the bed and reached one of his arms around Harry again; and then the Boy-Who-Lived and his wizard vanished in another burst of fire.

When Harry had fully lit up again he was standing in the Headmaster's office, amid the noises of a dozen dozen inexplicable gidgets.

The young boy took a step away from the old wizard and then turned on him, emerald and sapphire eyes meeting.

The two of them did not speak for a time, looking at each other; as though all they had to speak could be said only by stares, and not said in any other way.

In time the boy enunciated words slowly and precisely.

"I cannot believe that a phoenix is still upon your shoulder."

"The phoenix chooses but once," said the old wizard. "They might perhaps leave a master who chooses evil over good; they will not leave a master forced to choose between one good and another. Phoenixes are not arrogant. They know the limits of their own wisdom." Stern indeed, that ancient gaze. "Unlike you, Harry."

"Choose between one good and another," Harry echoed flatly. "Like Hermione Granger's life, versus a hundred thousand Galleons." The rage and indignation Harry wanted to put into his voice wasn't quite there, for some reason, maybe because—

"You are hardly in a position to speak to me of that, Harry Potter." The Headmaster's voice was deceptively soft. "Or what was that look of reluctance that I saw upon your face, there in the Most Ancient Hall?"

The sense of inward hollowness grew worse. "I was looking for other alternatives," Harry bit out. "Some way to save her that *didn't* lose the money."

Wow, said Ravenclaw. *You just told an outright lie. Not only that, I think you actually* believed *it for the seconds it took to say it. That's kinda scary.*

"*Is* that what you were thinking, Harry?" The blue eyes were keen, and there was a terrifying moment when Harry wondered if the world's most powerful wizard could see right past his Occlumency barriers.

"*Yes,*" Harry said, "I flinched away from the pain of losing all the money in my vault. But I *did* it! *That's* what counts! And *you*—" The indignation that had faltered out of Harry's voice returned. "You *actually* put a price on Hermione Granger's life, and you put it below a hundred thousand Galleons!"

"Oh?" the old wizard said softly. "And what price do you put on her life, then? A million Galleons?"

"Are you familiar with the economic concept of 'replacement value'?" The words were spilling from Harry's lips almost faster than he could consider them. "Hermione's replacement value is *infinite!* There's nowhere I can go to buy another one!"

Now you're just talking mathematical nonsense, said Slytherin. *Ravenclaw, back me up here?*

"Is Minerva's life also of infinite worth?" the old wizard said harshly. "Would you sacrifice Minerva to save Hermione?"

"Yes and yes," Harry snapped. "That's part of Professor McGonagall's job and she knows it."

"Then Minerva's value is not infinite," said the old wizard, "for all that she is loved. There can only be one king upon a chessboard, Harry Potter, only one piece that you will sacrifice any other piece to save. And Hermione Granger is not that piece. Make no mistake, Harry Potter, this day you may well have lost your war."

And if the old wizard's words hadn't hit quite so hard, and quite so close to home, Harry might not have said what he said then.

"Lucius was right," Harry ground out. "You never had a wife, you never had a daughter, you've never had anything but war—"

The old wizard's left hand closed hard upon Harry's wrist, bony fingers digging into the still-developing muscle of Harry's arm, and for

a moment Harry was paralyzed with the shock of it, he had forgotten what it meant that adults were stronger.

Albus Dumbledore did not seem to notice. He only turned, dragging Harry with him, and moved forward in hard steps toward the wall of the room.

"*Phoenix's price.*"

Harry was pulled up along the black stairs.

"*Phoenix's fate.*"

The room of black pedestals, silver light falling on shattered wands.

"You think," yelled Harry, after his lips unlocked, "that you can win any argument, just by standing here?"

The old wizard ignored him, dragging Harry across the room. His right hand, no longer holding his wand, grabbed up a vial of silver fluid—

Harry blinked in shock; the vial of silver fluid had been standing next to a picture of *Dumbledore,* or so it had appeared to Harry in the brief moment before he was dragged past.

Past the end of all the pedestals, at the farthest part of the room, rose a great stone basin with runes carved into it that Harry didn't recognize. The center was a shallow depression filled with transparent liquid, and into this the old wizard dumped the canister of silver fluid, which at once began to spread out, to swirl, to set the entire basin glowing eerie white.

The old wizard's hand let go of Harry's arm and gestured to the glowing basin, commanding harshly, "Look!"

As requested, Harry stared at the glowing water.

"Put your head into the Pensieve, Harry Potter." The old wizard's voice was stern.

Harry had heard that word before, but he couldn't remember where. "What—does this do—"

"Memories," the old wizard said. "You will see my memory. My oath that it is safe. Now look into the Pensieve, Ravenclaw, if you still care anything at all for your precious truth!"

That was a request that Harry could not deny, and he stepped forward and thrust his head into the glowing water.

Harry was sitting behind the desk in the Headmaster's office of Hogwarts, and his wrinkled hands that clutched at his head were spotted with age and white hairs.

"He is all that I have!" wept a voice, very strange was Dumbledore's voice as Dumbledore himself remembered it, from the inside it seemed far less stern and wise. "The last of my family! All that I have left!"

No emotion had been allowed to pass through the Pensieve, only the physical sensation of seeming to speak the words. Harry heard the utter desolation in Dumbledore's words, the sounds that seemed to come from Harry's own throat, but Harry did not feel it beyond the hearing.

"You've got no choice," said a harsh voice.

The eyes moved, the field of vision jumped to a man that Harry didn't recognize, in clothing tinged with Auror crimson but made of solid leather with many pockets.

His right eye was overlarge, with an electric-blue pupil that constantly darted and moved.

"You cannot ask this of me, Alastor!" Dumbledore's voice was wild. "Not this! Anything but this!"

"I'm not asking," growled the man. "Voldie's the one who's asking, and you're going to tell him no."

"For money, Alastor?" Dumbledore's voice was begging. "Only for money?"

"You ransom Aberforth, you lose the war," the man said sharply. "That simple. One hundred thousand Galleons is nearly all we've got in the war-chest, and if you use it like this, it won't be refilled. What'll you do, try to convince the Potters to empty their vault like the Longbottoms already did? Voldie's just going to kidnap someone else and make another demand. Alice, Minerva, anyone you care about, they'll all be targets if you pay off the Death Eaters. That's not the lesson you should be trying to teach them."

"If I do this I will have no one. No one." Dumbledore's voice broke, the world tilted as the outlooking head fell down into the ancient hands, and awful sounds came from not-Harry's throat as he began to sob like a child.

"Shall I tell Voldie's messenger no?" said Alastor's voice, now strangely gentle. "You don't have to do it yourself, old friend."

"No—I will say it myself—I must—"

The memory ended with a shock and Harry ripped his head out of the glowing water, gasping as though he'd been deprived of air.

The transition between scenes, between decade-old reality and present moment, was another jolt to Harry's mind; in some fashion his immersion in the past had unanchored him. The broken old man sobbing in his office had been another person in another era, Harry had understood that much; someone softer—

Before it had all vanished like dissipating smoke, returning the *now,* the present day.

Terrible and stern stood the ancient wizard, like he was carven from stone; beard woven of thread like iron, half-moon glasses like mirrors, and the pupils behind as sharp and unyielding as black diamond.

"Do you also wish to see my brother as he died under the Cruciatus?" said Albus Dumbledore. "Voldemort sent me that memory as well!"

"And that—" Harry was having trouble producing a voice, for the growing sickness in his chest. "*That* was when—" The words seemed to burn in his throat, as the awful knowledge dawned on him, the horrible understanding. "That was when you burned Narcissa Malfoy alive in her own bedroom."

Albus Dumbledore's gaze was cold as he answered. "To that question only a fool would say yea or nay. What matters is that the Death Eaters believe I killed her, and that belief kept safe the families of all who served the Order of the Phoenix—until this day. Now do you understand what you have done? What you have done to your *friends,* Harry Potter, and to any that stand with you?" The old wizard seemed to grow still taller and more terrible, as his voice rose louder. "You have made them all targets, and targets they will remain! Until you prove, the only way it can be proven, that you are no longer willing to pay such prices!"

"And is it true?" Harry said. There was a buzzing sensation filling him, his body growing more distant. "What Draco said, that Narcissa Malfoy never got her hands dirty, that she was only Lucius's wife? She was an enabler, I get that, but I can't back that deserving being *burned alive*."

"Nothing less would have convinced them that I was done with hesitation." The old wizard's voice brooked no question and no refusal. "Always I was too reluctant to do as I must, always it was others who paid the cost of my mercy. So Alastor told me from the beginning, but I did not listen to him. You, I expect, shall prove better at such decisions than I."

"I'm surprised," Harry said, amazed that his voice was almost steady. "I would have expected the Death Eaters to go after another Light family and start a cycle of escalating retaliation, if you didn't get them all with your first strike."

"If my opponent had been Lucius, perhaps." Dumbledore's eyes were like stones. "I am told that Voldemort laughed at the news, and proclaimed to his Death Eaters that I had finally grown, and was at last a worthy opponent. Perhaps he was right. After the day I condemned my brother to his death, I began to weigh those who followed me, balancing them one against another, asking who I would risk, and who I would sacrifice, to what end. It was strange how many fewer pieces I lost, once I knew what they were worth."

Harry's jaw seemed locked, like it took a massive effort to make his lips move. "But then it's not like Lucius was deliberately taking Hermione for ransom," Harry's voice said thinly. "From Lucius's perspective, someone else broke the truce first. So with that in mind, how many Galleons *was* Hermione worth, exactly? Leaving aside the Danegeld thing, if it was just some ordinary threat to her life, how much should I have paid to save her? Ten thousand Galleons? Five thousand?"

The old wizard did not answer.

"It's a funny thing," Harry said, his voice wavering like something seen through underwater. "Do you know, the day I went in front of the Dementor, what my worst memory was? It was my parents dying. I heard their voices and everything."

The old wizard's eyes widened behind the half-moon glasses.

"And here's the thing," Harry said, "here's the thing I've been thinking about over and over. The Dark Lord gave Lily Potter the chance to walk away. He said that she could flee. He *told* her that dying in front of the crib wouldn't save her baby. 'Step aside, foolish woman, if you have any sense in you at all—'" An awful chill came over Harry as he spoke those words from his own lips, but he shook it off and continued. "And afterward I kept thinking, I couldn't seem to stop myself from thinking, wasn't the Dark Lord *right?* If only Mother had stepped away. She tried to curse the Dark Lord but it was suicide, she had to have *known* that it was suicide. Her choice wasn't between her life and mine, her choice was for herself to live or for both of us to die! If she'd only done the logical thing and walked away, I mean, I love Mum too, but Lily Potter would be alive right now and she would be my mother!" Tears were blurring Harry's eyes. "Only now I understand, I know what Mother must have felt. She *couldn't* step aside from the crib. She couldn't! Love doesn't walk away!"

It was like the old wizard had been struck, struck by a chisel that shattered him straight down the middle.

"What have I said?" the old wizard whispered. "What have I said to you?"

"I don't know!" shouted Harry. "I wasn't listening either!"

"I—I'm sorry, Harry—I—" The old wizard pressed his hands to his face, and Harry saw that Albus Dumbledore was weeping. "I should not have said, such things to you—I should not, have resented, your innocence—"

Harry stared at the wizard for another second, and then Harry turned and marched out of the black room, down the stairs, through the office—

"I really don't know why you're still on his shoulder," Harry said to Fawkes.

—out the oaken door and into the endlessly turning spiral.

Harry had arrived in the Transfiguration classroom before anyone else, before even Professor McGonagall. There was Charms class earlier, for his year, but that he hadn't even bothered trying to attend. Whether Professor McGonagall would make today's class he didn't know. There was something ominous about all the empty desks beside him, the absence at the board. As if he stood alone in Hogwarts, with all his friends departed.

According to the class schedule, today's lesson was on sustained Transfigurations, all the rules of which Harry had learned by heart back when he was Transfiguring a huge rock into the small diamond that shone on his pinky finger. It would be a theoretical subject, rather than practical, for the rest of the class; which was a pity, because he could have used a dose of Transfiguration's trance.

Harry noted distantly that his hand was trembling, to the point where he had trouble undoing the pouch's drawstring as he drew forth the Transfiguration textbook.

You were monstrously unfair to Dumbledore, said the voice Harry had been calling Slytherin, only now it also seemed to be the Voice of Economic Sensibility and maybe also Conscience.

Harry's eyes dropped down to his textbook, but the section was so familiar it might as well have been a blank parchment.

Dumbledore fought a war against a Dark Lord who deliberately set out to break him in the cruelest possible way. He had to choose between losing his war and his brother. Albus Dumbledore knows, he learned in the worst possible way, that there are limits to the value of one life; and it almost broke his sanity to admit it. But you, Harry Potter—you *already knew better.*

"Shut up," the boy whispered to the empty Transfiguration classroom, though there was nobody there to hear it.

You'd already read about Philip Tetlock's experiments on people asked to trade off a sacred value against a secular one, like a hospital administrator who has to choose between spending a million dollars on a kidney to save a five-year-old, and spending the million dollars to buy other hospital equipment or pay physician salaries. And the subjects in the experiment became indignant and wanted to punish the hospital administrator for even thinking about the choice. Do you remember reading about that, Harry Potter?

Do you remember thinking how very stupid that was, since if hospital equipment and doctor salaries didn't also save lives, there would be no point in having hospitals or doctors? Should the hospital administrator have paid a billion pounds for that liver, even if it meant the hospital going bankrupt the next day?

"Shut up!" the boy whispered.

Every time you spend money in order to save a life with some probability, you establish a lower bound on the monetary value of a life. Every time you refuse to spend money to save a life with some probability, you establish an upper bound on the monetary value of life. If your upper bounds and lower bounds are inconsistent, it means you could move money from one place to another, and save more lives at the same cost. So if you want to use a bounded amount of money to save as many lives as possible, your choices must be consistent with some *monetary value assigned to a human life; if not then you could reshuffle the same money and do better. How very sad, how very hollow the indignation, of those who refuse to say that money and life can ever be compared, when all they're doing is forbidding the strategy that saves the most people, for the sake of pretentious moral grandstanding...*

Harry's head dropped into his hands.

You knew *that, and you still said what you did to Dumbledore.*

You deliberately tried *to hurt Dumbledore's feelings.*

He's *never tried to hurt* you, *Harry Potter, not once.*

Harry's head dropped into his hands.

Why had Harry said what he'd said, to a sad old ancient wizard who'd fought hard and endured more than anyone should ever have to endure? Even if the old wizard was wrong, did he deserve to be hurt for it, after all that had happened to him? Why was there a part of him that seemed to get angry at the old wizard beyond reason, lashing out at him harder than Harry had ever hit anyone, without thought of moderation once the rage had been raised, only to quiet as soon as Harry left his presence?

Is it because you know Dumbledore won't fight back? That no matter what you say to him, however unfair, he'll never use his own power against you, he'll never treat you the way you treat him? Is this the way you treat

people when you know they won't hit back? James Potter's bullying genes, manifesting at last?

Harry closed his eyes.

Like the Sorting Hat speaking inside his head—

What is the real reason for your anger?

What do you fear?

A whirlwind of images seemed to flash through Harry's mind, then, the past Dumbledore weeping into his hands; the present form of the old wizard, standing tall and terrible; a vision of Hermione screaming in her chains, in the metal chair, as Harry abandoned her to the Dementors; and an imagination of a woman with long white hair (had she looked like her husband?) falling amid the flames of her bedroom, as a wand was held upon her and orange light reflected from half-moon glasses.

Albus Dumbledore had seemed to think that Harry would be better at that sort of thing than him.

And Harry knew that he probably would be. He knew the math, after all.

But it was understood, somehow it was understood, that utilitarian ethicists didn't *actually* rob banks so they could give the money to the poor. The end result of throwing away all ethical constraint wouldn't *actually* be sunshine and roses and happiness for all. The prescription of consequentialism was to take the action that led to the best net consequences, not actions that had one positive consequence and wrecked everything else along the way. Expected utility maximizers were allowed to take common sense into account, when they were calculating their expectations.

Somehow Harry had understood that, even before anyone else had warned him he'd understood. Before he'd read about Vladimir Lenin or the history of the French Revolution, he'd known. It might have been his earliest science fiction books warning him about people with good intentions, or maybe Harry had just seen the logic for himself. Somehow he'd known from the very beginning, that if he stepped outside his ethics *whenever there was a reason,* the end result wouldn't be good.

A final image came to him, then: Lily Potter standing in front of her baby's crib and measuring the intervals between outcomes: the final out-

come if she stayed and tried to curse her enemy (dead Lily, dead Harry), the final outcome if she walked away (live Lily, dead Harry), weighing the expected utilities, and making the only sensible choice.

She would've been Harry's mother if she had.

"But human beings can't live like that," the boy's lips whispered to the empty classroom. "Human beings can't live like that."

CHAPTER EIGHTY-THREE

TABOO TRADEOFFS, AFTERMATH, PART I

When Padma entered the Transfiguration classroom, she saw that half the class had beaten her there, a strange, deathly silence pervading the room. Harry Potter sat alone in one corner, staring off into some unknown distance, his eyes half-lidded, nearly closed.

Rumor said that the Aurors had discovered that the Defense Professor had Polyjuiced as Granger to fool Malfoy.

Rumor said that Hermione had been bound by the Unbreakable Vow to be Draco Malfoy's slave.

Rumor said that Hermione had gotten the Dementor's Kiss.

But if *that* were true, Harry Potter wouldn't be sitting there, he would be—

Padma didn't know what General Potter would do. Her mind went blank, trying to think about it.

Even when Professor McGonagall got there, the silence hadn't broken. The Transfiguration Professor walked up to the board without a pause, erased it with a sweep of her hand, and then began to write.

"Today, children," began the calm professional voice of the Transfiguration Professor, just as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened that week, "we shall learn how much effort it takes to sustain a Transfiguration, and why, at your age, you should not even try. The original Form is not gone, only suppressed; and to maintain that suppression—"

"Excuse me," said Padma Patil. She knew her voice was shaking, she knew that she was trembling visibly, but she had to ask. "Excuse me, Professor, what happened with Miss Granger?"

The Transfiguration Professor paused at the board, and turned to look at Padma. The Professor should have looked stern, having been interrupted without a hand being raised, but instead her face was kindly. "You don't already know, Miss Patil? I expected that rumor would have spread."

"There's too many rumors," said Padma. "I don't know what's true."

Morag MacDougal raised her hand, then said without waiting to be called, "I told you, Padma, what's *true* is that the Wizengamot found Granger guilty and ordered her to get the Dementor's Kiss and they brought in the Dementor and Harry Potter glued it to the ceiling and wouldn't let it down until—"

"Oh, dear Merlin," said Professor McGonagall, her expression growing sharp, but then she visibly calmed herself. "The affair was utterly ridiculous and I shan't go into detail. Let it stand that Miss Granger is resting with Madam Pomfrey for now, and coming back to classes tomorrow. And if I catch anyone bothering her, I shall turn them into glass vases and drop them."

The entire class gasped at this; it wasn't so much that the threat was fatal, as that it broke the safety rules for Transfiguration.

Professor McGonagall turned back to her board—

From a corner of the classroom, another voice rose up. "What about Professor Quirrell?" said Terry Boot. "Has he been arrested?"

"The Aurors are only detaining him," said the Transfiguration Professor without turning around. "If they have not given back our Defense Professor by tomorrow, I shall ask the Headmaster to go fetch him. Though I may as well tell you now that the Board of Governors has scheduled a vote on whether Professor Quirrell's battles shall be allowed to continue."

Kevin Entwhistle spoke. "And General Malfoy? When's he getting back from St. Mungo's?"

The Transfiguration Professor paused in her drawing.

She turned around again, more slowly, this time.

"I *am* sorry, Mr. Entwhistle," said Professor McGonagall. Her face looked a little more lined than when she had entered the room. "Mr. Malfoy's health is in no danger, I am given to understand. Unfortunately, I have received an owl from Mr. Malfoy's father withdrawing him from Hogwarts. I am afraid he is not coming back."

CHAPTER EIGHTY-FOUR

TABOO TRADEOFFS, AFTERMATH, PART II

When Hermione Granger woke, she found herself lying in a soft, comfortable bed of the Hogwarts infirmary, with a square of setting sunlight falling on her midriff, warm through the thin blanket. Memory said that there would be a screen-sheet above her, either drawn around her bed or open, and that the rest of Madam Pomfrey's domain would lie beyond: the other beds, occupied or unoccupied, and bright windows set in the curvily-carven stone of Hogwarts.

When Hermione opened her eyes, the first thing she saw was the face of Professor McGonagall, sitting on the left side of her bed. Professor Flitwick wasn't there, but that was understandable, he'd stayed by her side all morning in the detention cell, his silver raven standing extra guard against the Dementor and his stern little face always turned outward toward the Aurors. The Head of Ravenclaw had surely spent way too much time on her, and probably had to get back to teaching his classes, instead of keeping watch on a convicted attempted-murderess.

She felt horribly, horribly sick and she didn't think it was because of any potions. Hermione would've started crying again, only her throat hurt, her eyes still burned, and her mind just felt tired. She couldn't have borne to weep again, couldn't find the strength for tears.

"Where are my parents?" Hermione whispered to the Head of House Gryffindor. Somehow it seemed like the worst thing in the world to face them, even worse than everything else; and yet she still wanted to see them.

The gentle look on Professor McGonagall's face Transfigured into something sadder. "I'm sorry, Miss Granger. Though it was not always so, we have found in recent years that it is wiser not to tell the parents of Muggleborns about any danger their child has faced. I should advise you also to remain silent, if you wish to stay at Hogwarts without trouble from them."

"I'm not being expelled?" the girl whispered. "For what I did?"

"No," said Professor McGonagall. "Miss Granger... surely you heard... I hope you heard Mr. Potter, when he said that you were innocent?"

"He was just saying that," she said dully. "To get me free, I mean."

The older witch shook her head firmly. "No, Miss Granger. Mr. Potter believes you were Memory-Charmed, that the whole duel never happened. The Headmaster suspects even Darker magics may have been involved—that your own hand might have cast the spell, but not your own will. Even Professor Snape finds the affair completely unbelievable, though he may not be able to say so publicly. He was wondering if Muggle drugs might have been used on you."

Hermione's eyes went on staring distantly at the Transfiguration Professor; she knew that she'd just been told something significant, but she couldn't find the energy to propagate any changes through her mind.

"Surely *you* don't believe it?" said Professor McGonagall. "Miss Granger, you cannot believe of yourself that you would turn to murder!"

"But I—" Her excellent memory helpfully replayed it for the thousandth time, Draco Malfoy telling her with a sneer that she'd never beat him when he wasn't tired, and then proceeding to prove just that, dancing like a duelist between the warded trophies while she frantically scrambled, and dealing the ending blow with a hex that sent her crashing against the wall and drew blood from her cheek—and then—then she'd—

"But you remember doing it," said the older witch, who was watching over her with kindly understanding. "Miss Granger, there is no need for a twelve-year-old girl to bear such dreadful memories. Say the word and I shall be happy to lock them away for you."

It was like a glass of warm water thrown into her face. "What?"

Professor McGonagall took out her wand, a gesture so practiced and quick that it seemed like pointing a finger. "I can't offer to rid you of the memories entirely, Miss Granger," the Transfiguration Professor said with her customary precision. "There may be important facts buried there. But there is a form of the Memory Charm which is reversible, and I shall be happy to cast that on you."

Hermione stared at the wand, feeling the stirrings of hope for the first time in almost two days.

Make it didn't happen... she'd wished that over and over again, for the hands of time to turn back and erase the horrible choice that could never, ever be undone. And if erasing the memory wasn't that, it was still a kind of release...

She looked back at Professor McGonagall's kindly face.

"You *really* don't think I did it?" Hermione said, her voice trembling.

"I am *quite* certain you would never do such a thing of your own will."

Beneath her blankets, Hermione's hands clutched at the sheets. "*Harry* doesn't think I did it?"

"Mr. Potter is of the opinion that your memories are entire fabrications. I can rather see his point."

Then Hermione's clutching fingers let go of the sheet, and she slumped back into the bed, from which she'd partially risen.

No.

She hadn't said anything.

She'd woken up and remembered what had happened last night, and it had been like—like—she couldn't find words even in her own thoughts for what it had been like. But she'd known that Draco Malfoy was already dead, and she hadn't said anything, hadn't gone to Professor Flitwick and confessed. She'd just dressed herself and gone down to breakfast and *tried to act normal* so that nobody would ever know, and she'd known it was wrong and Wrong and horribly horribly WRONG but she'd been so, so scared—

Even if Harry Potter was right, even if the duel with Draco Malfoy was a lie, she'd made *that* choice all by herself. She didn't deserve to forget that, or be forgiven for it.

And if she *had* done the right thing, gone straight to Professor Flitwick, maybe that would've—helped, somehow, maybe everyone would've seen then that she regretted it, and Harry wouldn't have had to give away all his money to save her—

Hermione shut her eyes, squeezed them shut really tight, she couldn't bear to start crying again. "I'm a horrible person," she said in a wavering voice. "I'm awful, I'm not heroic at all—"

Professor McGonagall's voice was very sharp, like Hermione had just made some dreadful mistake on her Transfiguration homework. "Stop being foolish, Miss Granger! *Horrible* is whoever did this to you. And as for being heroic—well, Miss Granger, you have already heard my opinion about young girls trying to involve themselves in such things before they are even fourteen, so I shall not lecture you on it again. I shall say only that you have just had an absolutely dreadful experience, which you survived as well as any witch in your year possibly could. Today you are allowed to cry as much as you like. Tomorrow you are going back to class."

That was when Hermione knew that Professor McGonagall couldn't help her. She needed someone to scold her, she couldn't be absolved if she couldn't be blamed, and Professor McGonagall would never do that for her, would never ask so much of a little Ravenclaw girl.

It was something Harry Potter wouldn't help her with either.

Hermione turned over in the infirmary bed, huddling into herself, away from Professor McGonagall. "Please," she whispered. "I want to talk—to the Headmaster—"

"Hermione."

When Hermione Granger opened her eyes a second time, she saw the care-lined face of Albus Dumbledore leaning over her bedside, looking almost as though *he'd* been crying, though that was impossible; and Hermione felt another stabbing pang of guilt for having bothered him so.

"Minerva said you wished to speak with me," the old wizard said.

"I—" Suddenly Hermione didn't know at all what to say. Her throat locked up, and all she could do was stammer, "I—I'm—"

Somehow her tone must have communicated the other word, the one she couldn't even say anymore.

"Sorry?" said Dumbledore. "Why, for what should you be sorry?"

She had to force the words out of her throat. "You were telling Harry—that he shouldn't pay—so *I* shouldn't—have done what Professor McGonagall said, I shouldn't have touched his wand -"

"My dear," said Dumbledore, "had you not pledged yourself to the House of Potter, Harry would have attacked Azkaban singlehandedly, and quite possibly won. That boy may choose his words carefully, but I have never yet known him to lie; and in the Boy-Who-Lived there is power that the Dark Lord never knew. He would indeed have tried to break Azkaban, even at cost of his life." The old wizard's voice grew gentler, and kinder. "No, Hermione, you have nothing at all for which to blame yourself."

"I could have *made* him not do it."

In Dumbledore's eyes a small twinkle appeared before it was lost to weariness. "Really, Miss Granger? Perhaps you should be Headmistress in my place, for I myself have no such power over stubborn children."

"Harry promised—" Her voice stopped. The awful truth was very hard to speak. "Harry Potter promised me—that he would never help me—if I told him not to."

There was a pause. The distant noises of the infirmary that had accompanied Professor McGonagall had ceased, Hermione realized, when Dumbledore had awoken her. From where she lay in bed she could see only the ceiling, and the top of one wall's windows, but nothing in her range of vision moved, and if there were sounds, she could not hear them.

"Ah," said Dumbledore. The old wizard sighed heavily. "I suppose it *is* possible that the boy would have kept his promise."

"I should—I should've—"

"Gone to Azkaban of your own will?" Dumbledore said. "Miss Granger, that is more than I would ever ask anyone to take upon themselves."

"But—" Hermione swallowed. She couldn't help but notice the loophole, anyone who wanted to get through the portrait-door to the Ravenclaw dorm quickly learned to pay attention to exact wordings. "But it's not more than you'd take on *yourself*."

"Hermione—" the old wizard began.

"Why?" said Hermione's voice, it seemed to be running on without her mind, now. "Why couldn't I be braver? I was going to run in front of the Dementor—for Harry—before, I mean, in January—so why—why—why couldn't I—" Why had the thought of being sent to Azkaban just completely *unglued* her, why had she forgotten everything about being Good—

"My dear girl," Dumbledore said. The blue eyes behind the half-moon glasses showed a complete understanding of her guilt. "I would have done no better myself, in my first year in Hogwarts. As you would be kind to others, be kinder to yourself as well."

"So I *did* do the wrong thing." Somehow she needed to say that, to be told that, even though she already knew.

There was a pause.

"Listen, young Ravenclaw," the old wizard said, "hear me well, for I shall speak to you a truth. Most ill-doers do not think of themselves as evil; indeed, most conceive themselves the heroes of the stories they tell. I once thought that the greatest evil in this world was done in the name of the greater good. I was wrong. Terribly wrong. There is evil in this world which knows itself for evil, and hates the good with all its strength. All fair things does it desire to destroy."

Hermione shivered in her bed, somehow it seemed very real, when Dumbledore said it.

The old wizard continued speaking. "You are one of the fair things of this world, Hermione Granger, and so that evil hates you as well. If you had stayed firm through even this trial, it would have struck you harder and yet harder, until you shattered. Do not think that heroes cannot be broken! We are only more difficult to break, Hermione." The old wizard's eyes had grown sterner than she had ever seen. "When you have been exhausted for many hours, when pain and death is not a passing fear but a certainty, then it is harder to be a hero. If I must speak

the truth—then today, yes, I would not waver in the face of Azkaban. But when I was a first-year in Hogwarts—I would have fled from the Dementor that you confronted, for my father had died in Azkaban, and I feared them. Know this! The evil that struck at you could have broken anyone, even myself. Only Harry Potter has it within him to face that horror, when he has come fully into his power."

Hermione's neck couldn't stare at the old wizard any longer; she let her head fall back, back to the pillow, where she stared up at the ceiling, absorbing what she could.

"Why?" Her voice trembled again. "Why would anyone be that evil? I don't understand."

"I, too, have wondered," said Dumbledore's voice, a deep sadness in it. "For thrice ten years I wondered, and I still do not understand. You and I will never understand, Hermione Granger. But at least I know now what true evil would say for itself, if we could speak to it and ask why it was evil. It would say, *Why not?*"

A brief flare of indignation inside her. "There's got to be a *million* reasons why not!"

"Indeed," said Dumbledore's voice. "A million reasons and more. We will always know those reasons, you and I. If you insist on putting it that way—then yes, Hermione, this day's trial broke you. But what happens *after* you break—that, too, is part of being a hero. Which you are, Hermione Granger, and will always be."

She raised her head again, staring at him.

The old wizard got up from beside her bed. His silver beard dipped down, as Dumbledore bowed to her gravely, and left.

She went on looking at where the old wizard had gone.

It should have meant something to her, should have touched her. Should have made her felt better inside, that Dumbledore, who had seemed so reluctant before, had now acknowledged her as a hero.

She felt nothing.

Hermione let her head fall back to the bed, as Madam Pomfrey came and made her drink something that seared her lips like the afterburn of spicy food, and smelled even hotter, and didn't taste like anything at all.

It meant nothing to her. She went on staring up at the distant stone tiles of the ceiling.

Minerva was waiting, doing her best not to hover, beside the double doors to the Hogwarts infirmary, she'd always thought of those doors as "the ominous gates" as a child in Hogwarts, and couldn't help but remember that now. Too much bad news had been spoken here—

Albus stepped out. The old wizard did not pause on the way out of the infirmary, only kept walking toward Professor Flitwick's office; and Minerva followed him.

Professor McGonagall cleared her throat. "Is it done, Albus?"

The old wizard nodded in affirmation. "If any hostile magic is cast on her, or any spirit touches her, I shall know, and come."

"I spoke to Mr. Potter after Transfiguration class," said Professor McGonagall. "He was of the opinion that Miss Granger should go to Beauxbatons, rather than Hogwarts, from now on."

The old wizard shook his head. "No. If Voldemort truly desires to strike at Miss Granger—he is tenacious beyond measure. His servants are returning to him, he could not have retrieved Bellatrix alone. Azkaban itself is not safe from his malice, and as for Beauxbatons—no, Minerva. I do not think Voldemort can essay such possessions often, or against stronger targets, or this year would have gone quite differently. And Harry Potter is here, whom Voldemort must fear whether he admits it or no. Now that I have warded her, Miss Granger will be safer within Hogwarts than without."

"Mr. Potter seemed to doubt that," Minerva said. She couldn't quite keep the edge from her voice; there was a part of her that agreed rather strongly. "He seemed to feel that common sense said Miss Granger should continue her education anywhere but Hogwarts."

The old wizard sighed. "I fear the boy has spent too much time among the Muggles. Always they reach for safety; always they imagine that safety can be reached. If Miss Granger is not safe within the center of our fortress, she shall be no safer for leaving it."

"Not everyone seems to think so," said Professor McGonagall. It had been almost the first letter she'd seen when she'd taken a quick look at her desk; an envelope of the finest sheepskin, sealed in greenish-silver wax, pressed into the image of a snake that rose and hissed at her. "I have received Lord Malfoy's owl withdrawing his son from Hogwarts."

The old wizard nodded, but did not break stride. "Does Harry know?"

"Yes." Her voice faltered, for a moment, remembering Harry's expression. "After class, Mr. Potter complimented Lord Malfoy's excellent good sense, and said that he would be writing Madam Longbottom advising her to do the same with her grandson, in case he was the next target. In the event that Mr. Longbottom's guardian was so negligent as to keep him in Hogwarts, Mr. Potter wanted him to have a Time-Turner, an invisibility cloak, a broomstick, and a pouch in which to carry them; also a toe-ring with an emergency portkey to a safe location, in case someone kidnaps Mr. Longbottom and takes him outside Hogwarts's wards. I told Mr. Potter that I did not think the Ministry would consent to such use of our Time-Turners, and he said that we should not ask. I expect he will want Miss Granger to receive the same, if she stays. And for himself Mr. Potter wants a three-person broomstick to carry in his pouch." She wasn't awed by the list of precautions. Impressed with the cleverness, but not awed; she was a Transfiguration Mistress, after all. But it still sent shivers of disquiet through her, that Harry Potter now thought Hogwarts as dangerous as spell research.

"The Department of Mysteries is not lightly defied," said Albus. "But for the rest—" The old wizard seemed to slump in on himself slightly. "We may as well give the boy what he wishes. And I will ward Neville also, and write Augusta to say that he should stay here over holiday."

"And finally," she said, "Mr. Potter says—this is a direct quote, Albus—whatever kind of Dark Wizard attractant the Headmaster is keeping here, he needs to get it out of this school, *now*." She couldn't stop the edge in her own voice, that time.

"I asked as much of Flamel," Albus said, the pain clear in his voice. "But Master Flamel has said—that even *he* can no longer keep safe the Stone—that he believes Voldemort has means of finding it wherever it is

hidden—and that he does not consent for it to be guarded anywhere but Hogwarts. Minerva, I am sorry, but it must be done—*must!*"

"Very well," said Professor McGonagall. "But for myself, I think that Mr. Potter is right on every single count."

The old wizard glanced at her, and his voice caught as he said, "Minerva, you have known me long, and as well as any soul still living—tell me, have I lost myself to darkness already?"

"What?" said Professor McGonagall in genuine surprise. Then, "Oh, Albus, no!"

The old wizard's lips pressed together tightly before he spoke. "For the greater good. I have sacrificed so many, for the greater good. Today I almost condemned Hermione Granger to Azkaban for the greater good. And I find myself—today, I found myself—beginning to resent the innocence that is no longer mine—" The old wizard's voice halted. "Evil done in the name of good. Evil done in the name of evil. Which *is* worse?"

"You are being silly, Albus."

The old wizard glanced at her again, before turning his eyes back to their way. "Tell me, Minerva—did you pause to weigh the consequences, before you told Miss Granger how to bind herself to the Potter family?"

She took an involuntary breath as she understood what she had done—

"So you did not." Albus's eyes were saddened. "No, Minerva, you must not apologize. It is well. For what you have seen of me this day—if your first loyalty is now to Harry Potter, and not to me, then that is right and proper." She opened her lips to protest, but Albus went on before she could say a word. "Indeed—indeed—that will be necessary and more than necessary, if the Dark Lord that Harry must defeat to come into his power is not Voldemort after all -"

"Not *this* again!" Minerva said. "Albus, it was You-Know-Who, not you, who marked Harry as his equal. There is no *possible* way that the prophecy could be talking about you!"

The old wizard nodded, but his eyes still seemed distant, fixed only on the road ahead.

The holding cell, well to the center of Magical Law Enforcement, was luxuriously appointed; more a remark on what adult wizards took for granted, than any special feeling toward prisoners. There was a self-reclining, self-rocking chair with plush, richly textured, self-warming cushions. There was a bookcase containing random books rescued from a bargain bin, and a full shelf of ancient magazines, including one from 1883. As for toiletries, well, it wasn't exactly luxurious, but there was a spell on the room which put all that business on hold; you weren't to go anywhere that the watching Auror couldn't see you. But aside from that, it was quite a pleasant little cell. The Defense Professor of Hogwarts was being detained, not arrested, not even intimidated. There was no evidence to indict him... except that a terrible and unusual crime had been committed at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and going by previous occasions the odds were five to one that the current Defense Professor was tangled up in it *somehow*. To this must be added the fact that nobody in the D.M.L.E. even knew who the Defense Professor *was*, and that the man had literally *sneezed* at all attempts to uncover his true identity. Why, no, they *hadn't* released 'Quirinus Quirrell' back to Hogwarts just yet.

Let us repeat this for emphasis:

The Defense Professor.

Was being detained.

In a cell.

The Defense Professor was staring at the watching Auror and humming.

The Defense Professor has not spoken a single word since he arrived in this particular cell. He has *only* been humming.

The humming started as a simple children's lullaby, the one that in Muggle Britain begins, *Lullaby, and goodnight...*

This tune was hummed, without variation, over and over, for seven minutes, to establish the underlying pattern.

Then began the elaborations upon the theme. Phrases hummed too slow, with long pauses in between, so that the listener's mind helplessly

waits and waits for the next note, the next phrase. And then, when that next phrase comes, it is so out of key, so unbelievably awfully out of key, not just out of key for the previous phrases but sung at a pitch which does not correspond to *any* key, that you would have to believe this person had spent hours deliberately practicing their humming just to acquire such perfect anti-pitch.

It bears the same semblance to music as the awful dead voice of a Dementor bears to human speech.

And this horrible, horrible humming is *impossible* to ignore. It is similar to a known lullaby, but it departs from that pattern unpredictably. It sets up expectations and then violates them, never in any constant pattern that would permit the humming to fade into the background. The listener's brain cannot prevent itself from expecting the anti-musical phrases to complete, nor prevent itself from noticing the surprises.

The only possible explanation for how this mode of humming came to exist is that it was deliberately designed by some unspeakably cruel genius who woke up one day, feeling bored with ordinary torture, who decided to handicap himself and find out whether he could break someone's sanity *just by humming at them*.

The Auror has been listening to this unimaginably dreadful humming for four hours, while being stared at by a huge, cold, lethal presence that feels equally horrible whether he looks at it directly or lets it hover at the corner of his vision—

The humming stopped.

There was a long wait. Time enough for false hope to rise, and be squashed down by the memory of previous disappointments. And then, as the interval lengthened, and lengthened, that hope rose again unstoppably—

The humming began once more.

The Auror cracked.

From his belt, the Auror took a mirror, tapped it once, and then said, "This is Junior Auror Arjun Altunay, I'm calling in code RJ-L20 on cell three."

"Code RJ-L20?" the mirror said in surprised tones. There was a sound of pages being flipped, then, "You want to be relieved because

a prisoner is attempting psychological warfare and succeeding?"

(Amelia Bones really is quite intelligent.)

"What'd the prisoner say to you?" said the mirror.

(This question is *not* part of procedure RJ-L20, but unfortunately Amelia Bones has failed to include an explicit instruction that the commanding officer should not ask.)

"He's—" said the Auror, and glanced back at the cell. The Defense Professor was now leaning in back in his chair, looking quite relaxed. "He was *staring* at me! And *humming!*"

There was a pause.

The mirror spoke again. "And you're calling in an RJ-L20 over that? You're sure you're not just trying to get out of watching him?"

(Amelia Bones is surrounded by idiots.)

"You don't understand!" yelled Auror Altunay. "It's really awful humming!"

The mirror transmitted a sound of muffled laughter in the background, sounding like it was coming from more than one person. Then speech again. "Mr. Altunay, if you don't want to be busted to Junior Auror Second Class, I suggest you buckle down and get back to work—"

"Strike that," a crisp voice said, sounding slightly remote due to its distance from the mirror.

(Which is why Amelia Bones often sits in on a coordination center of the D.M.L.E. while doing her Ministry-required paperwork.)

"Auror Altunay," said the crisp voice, seeming to approach closer to the mirror, "you will be relieved shortly. Auror Ben Gutierrez, the procedure for RJ-L20 does *not* say that you ask why. It says that you relieve the Auror who calls it in. *If* I find that Aurors seem to be abusing it, *I* will modify the procedure to prevent its abuse—" The mirror cut off abruptly.

The Auror turned back to look triumphantly at where the current Defense Professor of Hogwarts was leaning back in his cushioned chair.

That man then spoke the first words that had left his lips since he entered the cell.

"Goodbye, Mr. Altunay," said the Defense Professor.

A few minutes later, the door to the detention cell opened, and in walked a grey-haired woman, dressed in the crimson-tinged robes of an Auror without any sign of rank or other ornamentation, carrying a black leather folder under her left arm. "You're relieved," the old woman said abruptly.

There was a brief delay while Auror Altunay tried to explain what had been happening. This was cut short by a nod and a stark, simple finger pointing out the door.

"Good evening, Madam Director," said the Defense Professor.

Amelia Bones did not acknowledge this statement, but sat down abruptly in the vacated chair. The old witch opened the black folder and her gaze moved down to the parchments therein. "Possible hints to the identity of the current Hogwarts Defense Professor, as compiled by Auror Robards." The title parchment was turned, flipped aside. "The Defense Professor said that he was Sorted into Slytherin. Claimed that his family was killed by Voldemort. Said he had studied at a martial arts center in Muggle Asia which was destroyed by Voldemort. A request filed with the Department of International Magical Cooperation identifies this incident as the Oni Affair of 1969." Another parchment was flipped aside. "It also seems this Defense Professor gave a most stirring speech to his students, just before last Yule, castigating the previous generation for their disunity against the Death Eaters." The old witch looked up from the leather folder. "Madam Longbottom was rather taken with it, and insisted that I read the entire thing. The argument struck me as familiar, though I could not place it at the time. But then, of course, I had thought you dead."

The chief law enforcement officer of Magical Britain was now gazing sharply at the current Defense Professor of Hogwarts, across the pane of spell-reinforced glass separating them. The man in the cell returned the gaze equably, without apparent alarm.

"I shall not name any names," said the old witch. "But I shall tell a story, and see if it sounds familiar." Amelia Bones looked back down, turning to the next parchment. "Born 1927, entered Hogwarts in 1938, sorted into Slytherin, graduated 1945. Went on a graduation tour abroad and disappeared while visiting Albania. Presumed dead until 1970, when

he returned to magical Britain just as suddenly, without any explanation for the missing twenty-five years. He remained estranged from his family and friends, living in isolation. In 1971, while visiting Diagon Alley, he fended off an attempt by Bellatrix Black to kidnap the daughter of the Minister of Magic, and used the Killing Curse to slay two of the three Death Eaters accompanying her. Beyond this all Britain knows the story; need I continue it?" The old witch looked up from her folder again. "Very well. There was a trial in the Wizengamot, during which this young man was exonerated for his use of the Killing Curse, not least due to the efforts of his grandmother, the Lady of his House. He was reconciled with his family, and they held a House gathering to welcome his return. The guest of honor arrived at that gathering to find his entire family slain by Death Eaters, even to the house elves; and that he himself, of cadet line, was now the last remaining scion of a Most Ancient House."

The Defense Professor had not reacted at all to any of this, except that his eyes had half-closed, as though in weariness.

"The young man took up his family's seat in the Wizengamot, becoming among the most steadfast voices against You-Know-Who. Several times he led forces against the Death Eaters, fighting with skillful tactics and extraordinary power. People began to speak of him as the next Dumbledore, it was thought that he might become Minister of Magic after the Dark Lord fell. On the third of July, 1973, he failed to appear at a key Wizengamot vote, and was never heard from again. We assumed You-Know-Who had killed him. It was a grave blow to all of us, and matters went much the worse from that day on." The old witch's gaze was questioning. "I mourned you myself. What happened?"

The Defense Professor's shoulders moved lightly, a small shrug. "You make many assumptions," the Defense Professor said softly. "For myself, I would believe that man died years ago. But if that man is nonetheless alive—then it is clear he does not wish the fact announced, and has reasons enough for silence. That man was once of some help to you, it seems." The Defense Professor's lips curved in a cynical smile. "But I am no longer surprised when gratitude is fleeting. Is there yet more that you would demand from him?"

The old witch leaned back in her Auror's monitoring-chair, looking rather startled, maybe even hurt. "No—" she said after a moment. Her fingers tapped the leather folder; *nervously,* you might have thought, if you had believed that Amelia Bones could ever be nervous. "But your *House*—there are not many Ancient Houses remaining—"

"It shall matter little to this country whether eight Ancient Houses remain, or seven."

The old witch sighed. "What does Dumbledore think of this?"

The man in the detention cell shook his head. "He does not know who I am, and promised not to inquire."

The old witch's eyebrows rose. "How did he identify you to the Hogwarts wards, then?"

A slight smile. "The Headmaster drew a circle, and told Hogwarts that he who stood within was the Defense Professor. Speaking of which—" The tone went lower, flatter. "I am missing my classes, Director Bones."

"You seem to—*rest*, sometimes, in a peculiar manner. This has also been reported. And you seem to be *resting* more and more frequently, as time goes on." The old witch's fingers tapped the leather folder again. "I cannot recall reading of such a symptom, but when one hears of such a thing, one imagines... Dark Wizards fought, and terrible curses received..."

The Defense Professor remained expressionless.

"Do you require a healer's help?" said Amelia Bones. Her own mask had slipped, clearly showing the pain in her eyes. "Is there anything at all that can be done for you?"

"I agreed to teach Defense at Hogwarts," the man in the cell said flatly. "Draw your own conclusions, Madam. And I am missing my classes, of which there are not many left. I would return to Hogwarts, now."

⁂

When Hermione woke the third time (though it felt like she'd only closed her eyes for a moment) the Sun was even lower in the sky, almost

fully set. She felt a little more alive and, strangely, even more exhausted. This time it was Professor Flitwick who was standing next to her bed and shaking her shoulder, a tray of steaming food floating next to him. For some reason she'd thought Harry Potter ought to be leaning over her bedside, but he wasn't there. Had she dreamed that? She couldn't remember dreaming.

It developed (according to Professor Flitwick) that Hermione had missed dinner in the Great Hall, and was being woken to eat. And then she could go back to the Ravenclaw dorm, and her own bed, to sleep the rest of the night.

She ate in silence. There was a part of her that wanted to ask Professor Flitwick whether *he* thought she'd been Memory-Charmed or she'd tried to kill Draco Malfoy of her own will—

—*like she remembered doing*—

—but most of her was afraid to find out. *Afraid to find out* was a warning sign, according to Harry Potter and his books; but her mind felt tired, *bruised,* and she couldn't muster the strength to override it.

When she and Professor Flitwick left the infirmary they found Harry Potter sitting cross-legged outside the door, quietly reading a psychology textbook.

"I'll take her from here," said the Boy-Who-Lived. "Professor McGonagall said it would be all right."

Professor Flitwick seemed to accept this, and departed after a stern look at both of them. She couldn't imagine what the stern look was supposed to say, unless it was *don't try to kill any more students.*

The footsteps of Professor Flitwick faded, and the two of them stood alone outside the doors of the infirmary.

She looked at the green eyes of the Boy-Who-Lived, the mess of hair that didn't quite obscure the scar on his forehead; she looked upon the face of the boy who'd given all his money to save her without a second thought. There were feelings inside her—guilt, shame, embarrassment, other things as well—but no words. There was nothing she knew how to say.

"So," Harry said abruptly, "I did a quick skim through my psychology books to see what they said about post-traumatic stress disorder.

The old books said you should talk about the experience immediately afterward with a counselor. The newer research says that when they actually ran experiments, it turned out that talking about it immediately afterward made it worse. Apparently what you really ought to do is run with your mind's natural impulse to repress the memories and just not think about it for a while."

It was so *normal* for the way she and Harry usually talked that she felt a sudden burning in her throat.

We don't have to talk about it. That was what Harry had just said, more or less. It felt like cheating, maybe even like a lie. Nothing *was* normal. Everything wrong was still horribly wrong, everything left unsaid still needed to be said...

"Okay," said Hermione, because there wasn't anything else to say, anything else at all.

"I'm sorry I wasn't waiting when you woke up," Harry said, as they started to walk. "Madam Pomfrey wouldn't let me in, so I just stayed out here." He gave a small, sad-looking shrug. "I suppose I should be out there trying to run damage control on public relations, but... honestly I've never been good at that, I just end up speaking sharply at people."

"How bad is it?" She thought her voice should have come out in a whisper, a croak, but it didn't.

"Well—" Harry said with obvious hesitation. "The thing you've got to understand, Hermione, is that you had a lot of defenders at breakfast-time today, but everyone on your side was... *making stuff up*. Draco tried to kill you first, things like that. It was Granger versus Malfoy, that's how people saw it, like a seesaw where pushing his side down meant pushing your side up. I told them you were probably *both* innocent, that you'd both been Memory-Charmed. They didn't listen, both sides treated me like a traitor trying to play the middle. And then people heard that Draco had testified under Veritaserum that he'd been trying to help you before the battle—stop making that expression, Hermione, you didn't actually do anything to him. Anyway, all people understood was that the pro-Malfoy faction had been right and the pro-Granger faction had been wrong." Harry gave a small sigh. "I *told* them that when the truth came out later they'd be embarrassed..."

"How bad is it?" she said again. This time her voice did come out weaker.

"Remember Asch's conformity experiment?" Harry said, turning his head to give her a serious look.

Her mind was *slow to remember* for a few seconds, which frightened her, but then the reference came back. In 1951, Solomon Asch had taken some experimental subjects, and each one had been put among a row of other people who looked like them, seeming like other experimental subjects, but actually confederates of the experimenter. They'd shown a reference line on a screen, labeled X, next to three other lines, labeled A, B, and C. The experimenter had asked which line X was the same length as. The correct answer had obviously been C. The other 'subjects', the confederates, had one after another said that X was the same length as B. The real subject had been put second-to-last in the order, so as not to arouse suspicion by being last. The test had been to see whether the real subject would 'conform' to the standard wrong answer of B, or voice the obviously correct answer of C.

75% of the subjects had 'conformed' at least once. A third of the subjects had conformed more than half the time. Some had reported afterward actually believing that X was the same length as B. And that had been in a case where the subjects hadn't known any of the confederates. If you put people around others who belonged to the same group as them, like someone in a wheelchair next to other people in a wheelchair, the conformity effect got even stronger...

Hermione had a sickening feeling where this was going. "I remember," she whispered.

"I gave the Chaos Legion anti-conformity training, you know. I had each Legionnaire stand in the middle and say 'Twice two is four!' or 'Grass is green!' while everyone else in the Chaos Legion called them idiots or sneered at them—Allen Flint did really good sneers—or even just gave them blank looks and then walked away. The thing you've got to remember is, *only* the Chaos Legion has ever practiced anything like that. Nobody else in Hogwarts even knows what conformity *is.*"

"Harry!" Her voice was wobbling. "How bad *is* it?"

Harry gave another sad-looking shrug. "Everyone in the second year

and above, since they don't know you. Everyone in Dragon Army. All of Slytherin, of course. And, well, most of the rest of magical Britain too, I think. Remember, Lucius Malfoy controls the *Daily Prophet*."

"Everyone?" she whispered. Her limbs had started to feel cold, like she'd just gotten out of an unheated swimming pool.

"What people really believe doesn't feel like a *belief*, it feels like the way the world *is*. You and I are standing in a private little bubble of the universe where Hermione Granger got Memory-Charmed. Everyone else is living in the world where Hermione Granger tried to murder Draco Malfoy. If Ernie Macmillian -"

Her breath caught in her throat. *Captain Macmillian -*

"—thinks he's ethically prohibited from being your friend now, well, he's trying to do the right thing as he understands it, in the world he thinks he lives in." Harry's eyes were very serious. "Hermione, you've told me a lot of times that I look down too much on other people. But if I expected too much of them—if I expected people to get things *right*—I really would hate them, then. Idealism aside, Hogwarts students don't *actually* know enough cognitive science to take responsibility for how their own minds work. It's not their fault they're crazy." Harry's voice was strangely gentle, almost like an adult's. "I know it's going to be harder on you than it would be on me. But remember, eventually the real culprit gets nailed. The truth comes out, everyone who was confidently wrong gets embarrassed."

"And if the real culprit doesn't get caught?" she said in a trembling voice.

...or if it turns out to be me after all?

"Then you can leave Hogwarts and go to the Salem Witches' Institute in America."

"*Leave Hogwarts?*" She'd never even thought of that possibility except as an ultimate punishment.

"I... Hermione, I think you might want to do that anyway. Hogwarts isn't a castle, it's insanity with walls. You *have* got other options."

"I'll..." she stammered. "I'll have... to think about it..."

Harry nodded. "At least nobody's going to try hexing you, not after what the Headmaster said at dinner tonight. Oh, and Ron Weasley came

up to me, looking very serious, and told me that if I saw you first, I should tell you that he's sorry for having thought badly of you, and he'll never speak ill of you again."

"*Ron* believes I'm innocent?" said Hermione.

"Well... he doesn't think you're *innocent,* per se..."

The whole Ravenclaw dorm went silent as the two of them walked in.

Staring at them.

Staring at her.

(She'd had nightmares like this.)

And then, one by one, people looked away from her.

Penelope Clearwater, the 5th-year prefect in charge of first-years, looked away slowly and deliberately, turning her head to face in another direction.

Su Li and Lisa Turpin and Michael Corner, all sitting at a table together, all of whom she'd helped with their homework at one time or another, all looked away, their faces suddenly nervous, the moment she tried to catch their eyes.

A third-year witch named Latisha Randle, whom S.P.H.E.W. had twice saved from Slytherin bullies, quickly bent back over her desk and started doing homework again.

Mandy Brocklehurst looked away from her.

If Hermione didn't burst into tears, then, it was only because she'd expected it, had played it out in her mind over and over again. At least people weren't screaming at her or shoving her or hexing her. They were just looking away—

Hermione walked very straight up to the staircaise that led toward the first-year girl's dorms. (She didn't see Padma Patil or Anthony Goldstein looking at her, those two lone heads turning to track her as she left.) From behind her, she heard Harry Potter saying in a very calm tone, "Now eventually the truth's going to come out, you all. So if you're all

that confident she's guilty, can I ask you all to sign this paper right here, saying that if she later turns out to be innocent, she gets to say 'I told you so' and then hold it over you for the rest of your lives? Step on up, one and all, don't be cowards, if you really believe you shouldn't be afraid to bet—"

She was halfway up the stairs when she realized that there would be other girls inside her dorm room, too.

⁂

The stars hadn't quite come out yet, only one or two of the brightest ones visible through the reddish-purple haze of the horizon, though the sun had fully sunk.

Hermione's hands dug into the harsh stone of the parapet guarding the small balcony, where she'd ducked out of the stairwell after realizing that—

—she couldn't just go back to bed—

—the words echoed in her mind like 'You can't go home again' ought to sound.

She stared out at the empty grounds, the fading sunset, the sprouting grass so far below.

Tired, she was tired, she couldn't think now, she needed to sleep. Professor Flitwick had told her that she needed to sleep, and there'd been yet another potion with her dinner. Maybe that was how wizarding society treated horrible traumas to innocent young girls, just made them sleep a lot afterward.

She should go to her room and sleep, but she was afraid to go someplace where other people were. Afraid of how they might look at her, or look away.

Fragments of thought chased themselves around a mind too exhausted to finish or connect them, as the night fully set in.

Why—

Why did all this happen—

Everything was fine a week ago—

Why—

From behind her came the creaky sound of an opening door.

She turned her head and looked.

Professor Quirrell was leaning against the doorway she'd walked through, silhouetted like a cardboard cutout by the light of the Hogwarts torches lit behind him, in the open door. She couldn't see his expression, though the doorway behind him was bright; his eyes, his face, everything she could see from here lay within night's shadow.

The Defense Professor of Hogwarts, number one on the list of people who might've done this. She hadn't even realized she *had* a suspect list until that moment.

The man stood within that doorway, saying nothing; and she couldn't see his eyes. What was he even *doing* there in the first place—

"Are you here to kill me?" said Hermione Granger.

Professor Quirrell's head tilted at that.

Then the Defense Professor started toward her, the dark silhouette raising one hand slowly and deliberately, as though to push her off the Ravenclaw tower—

"*Stupefy!*"

The burst of adrenaline overrode everything, she drew her wand without thinking, her lips formed the word of their own accord, the stunbolt leapt out of her wand and—

—*slowed to a stop* in front of Professor Quirrell's raised hand, rippling in midair like it was still trying to fly and making a slight hissing sound.

The red glow illuminated Professor Quirrell's face for the first time, showing a strange fond smile.

"Better," said Professor Quirrell. "Miss Granger, you are still a student in my Defense class. As such, if you consider me a threat, I do not expect you to just look at me sadly and ask if I am there to kill you. Minus two Quirrell points."

She was entirely unable to form words.

The Defense Professor flicked his forefinger casually at the suspended stunbolt, sending the hex shooting back over her head, far into the night, so that they stood again in darkness. Then Professor Quirrell walked out of the doorway, which swung shut behind him; and a soft white light

sprung up around the two of them, so that she could see his face once more, still with that strange fond smile.

"What are you—what are you *doing* here?"

A few more steps took Professor Quirrell to a higher part of the balcony's ramparts, where he put his elbows down on the stone, and leaned over heavily, looking up into the night.

"I came here straight upon being released by the Aurors, the moment I finished reporting to the Headmaster," said Professor Quirrell in a quiet voice, "because I am your teacher, and you are my student, and I am responsible for you."

Hermione understood, then; remembering what Professor Quirrell had said to Harry in the second Defense lesson of the year, about controlling his anger. She felt the flush of shame all the way down her chest. It took a moment after that for knowledge to override mortification, for her to force out the words—

"I—" said Hermione. "Harry thinks—that I *didn't*— lose my temper, I mean—"

"So I heard," said Professor Quirrell in rather dry tones. He shook his head, as though at the stars themselves. "The boy is fortunate that I have crossed the line from annoyance with his self-destructiveness, into sheer curiosity as to what he shall do next. But I agree with Mr. Potter's assessment of the facts. This murder was well-planned to evade detection both by the wards of Hogwarts and the Headmaster's timely eye. Naturally, in such a thoughtful murder, some innocent would be placed to take the blame." A brief, wry smile crossed the Defense Professor's lips, though he wasn't looking at her. "As for the notion that you did it yourself—I consider myself a talented teacher, but even I could not teach such murderous intent to a student as obstinate and untalented as Hermione Granger."

The part of her brain that said *What?* in indignation wasn't anywhere near loud enough to reach her lips.

"No..." said Professor Quirrell. "That is not why I am here. You have made no effort to hide your dislike for me, Miss Granger. I thank you for that lack of pretense, for I much prefer true hate to false love.

But you are still my student, and I have a word to say to you, if you will hear it."

Hermione looked at him, still fighting down the aftereffects of the adrenaline from before. The Defense Professor seemed to be just staring up at the dark sky, in which the stars were becoming visible.

"I was going to be a hero, once," said Professor Quirrell, still looking upward. "Can you believe that, Miss Granger?"

"No."

"Thank you again, Miss Granger. It is true nonetheless. Long ago, long before your time or Harry Potter's, there was a man who was hailed as a savior. The destined scion, such a one as anyone would recognize from tales, wielding justice and vengeance like twin wands against his dreadful nemesis." Professor Quirrell gave a soft, bitter laugh, looking up at the night sky. "Do you know, Miss Granger, at that time I thought myself already cynical, and yet... well."

The silence stretched, in the cold and the night.

"In all honesty," said Professor Quirrell, looking up at the stars, "I still don't understand it. They should have known that their lives depended on that man's success. And yet it was as if they tried to do everything they could to make his life *unpleasant.* To throw every possible obstacle into his way. I was not naive, Miss Granger, I did not expect the power-holders to align themselves with me so quickly—not without something in it for themselves. But their power, too, was threatened; and so I was shocked how they seemed content to step back, and leave to that man all burdens of responsibility. They sneered at his performance, remarking among themselves how they would do better in his place, though they did not condescend to step forward." Professor Quirrell shook his head as though in bemusement. "And it was the strangest thing—the Dark Wizard, that man's dread nemesis—why, those who served *him* leapt eagerly to their tasks. The Dark Wizard grew crueler toward his followers, and they followed him all the more. Men fought for the chance to serve *him*, even as those whose lives depended on that other man made free to render his life difficult... I could not understand it, Miss Granger." Professor Quirrell's face was in shadow, as he looked upward. "Perhaps, by taking on himself the curse of action, that man re-

moved it from all others? Was that why they felt free to hinder his battle against the Dark Wizard who would have enslaved them all? Believing men would act in their own interest was not cynicism, it turned out, but sheerest optimism; in reality men do not meet so high a standard. And so in time that one realized he might do better fighting the Dark Wizard alone, than with such followers at his back."

"So—" Hermione's voice sounded strange in the night. "You left your friends behind where they'd be safe, and tried to attack the Dark Wizard all by yourself?"

"Why, no," said Professor Quirrell. "I stopped trying to be a hero, and went off to do something else I found more pleasant."

"*What?*" said Hermione without thinking at all. "That's *horrible!*"

The Defense Professor turned his head down from the sky to regard her; and she saw, in the light of the doorway, that he was smiling—or at least half his face was smiling. "Are you going to tell me, Miss Granger, that I am an awful person? Well, perhaps I am. But then are people who never even try to be heroes still worse? If I had never done anything at all, like them, would you have thought better of me?"

Hermione opened her mouth and then found that, once again, she didn't have anything to say. It wasn't right to walk away from being a hero, you couldn't just *do* that, but she didn't *want* to say that everyone who wasn't a hero was nothing, that was Quirrell-thinking...

The smile, or half-smile, had disappeared. "You were foolish," the Defense Professor said quietly, "to expect any lasting gratitude from those you tried to protect, once you named yourself a heroine. Just as you expected that man to go on being a hero, and called him horrible for stopping, when a thousand others never lifted a finger. It was only *expected* that you should fight bullies. It was a tax you owed, and they accepted it like princes, with a sneer for the lateness of your payment. And you have already witnessed, I wager, that their fondness vanished like dust in the wind once it was no longer in their interest to associate with you..."

The Defense Professor slowly straightened off the balcony, standing almost straight, turning to regard her fully.

"But you don't have to be a hero, Miss Granger," said Professor Quirrell. "You can stop anytime you please."

That idea...

...*had* occurred to her before, several times over the last two days.

People become who they are meant to be, by doing what is right, Headmaster Dumbledore had told her. The trouble was that there seemed to be two different right things to do. There was the part of her which said that *right* was to go on being a heroine, and stay at Hogwarts, she didn't know what was going on but a heroine wouldn't just run away.

And there was also the voice of common sense saying that young children shouldn't ever stay around danger, that was what adults were for; the voice of every school poster that said not to take candy from strangers. That was also right.

Hermione Granger stood there on that balcony, looking at Professor Quirrell silhouetted by the emerging stars, and she didn't understand; she didn't understand how the Defense Professor could be gazing at her with his face showing concern; she didn't understand the notes of pain in the Defense Professor's voice that caught at her; she didn't understand *why* she was being told all this.

"You don't even like me, Professor," said Hermione.

A small smile flickered on Professor Quirrell's face. "I suppose I could go on about how I am angered that this affair has taken up my valuable time and disrupted my Defense classes. But mostly, Miss Granger, you are my student, and whatever other professions I may have once held, I think I have been a good teacher at Hogwarts, have I not?" Suddenly Professor Quirrell's eyes seemed very tired. "As your teacher, then, I am advising you that you have other career options. I should not like to see anyone else going down my path."

Hermione swallowed. It was a side of Professor Quirrell she'd never seen or imagined, and it was eating away at her preconceptions.

Professor Quirrell watched her for a moment, and then looked away from her again, back up at the stars. When he spoke this time his voice was quieter. "Someone here is targeting you, Miss Granger, and I cannot ward you as I warded Mr. Malfoy. The Headmaster has prevented it, for what he claims to be good reasons. It is easy to become fond of

Hogwarts, I know, for I am fond of it as well. But in France they take a different view of the Ancient Houses than in Britain; and Beauxbatons would not mistreat you, I think. Whatever else you imagine of me, I swear that if you asked me to see you safely in Beauxbatons, I would do all in my power to convey you there."

"I can't just—" Hermione said.

"But you *can,* Miss Granger." Now the pale blue eyes watched her intently. "Whatever you wish to make of your life, you cannot attain it at Hogwarts, not anymore. This place is ruined for you now, even leaving aside all other threats. Simply ask Harry Potter to command you to go to Beauxbatons and live out your life in peace. If you stay here, he is your master in the eyes of Britain and its laws!"

She hadn't even been thinking about that, it paled so much in comparison to being eaten by Dementors; it had been important to her before, but now it all seemed childish, unimportant, pointless, so why were her eyes burning?

"And if that fails to move you, Miss Granger, consider also that Mr. Potter has, just today at lunchtime, threatened Lucius Malfoy, Albus Dumbledore, and the entire Wizengamot because he cannot think sensibly when something threatens to take you from him. Are you not frightened of what he will do next?"

It made sense. Terrible sense. Dreadful awful sense.

It made *too much* sense—

She couldn't have described it in words, what triggered the realization, unless it was the sheer *pressure* that the Defense Professor was exerting on her.

That if the Defense Professor *was* behind this whole thing—then Professor Quirrell had done it all *just to get her out of the way of his plans for Harry.*

Without any conscious decision, she shifted her weight to the other foot, her body moving away from the Defense Professor—

"So you think I am the one responsible?" said Professor Quirrell. His voice sounded a little sad as he said it, and her own heart almost stopped from hearing it. "I suppose I cannot blame you. I am the Defense Professor of Hogwarts, after all. But Miss Granger, even *assuming* that I am

your enemy, common sense should still tell you to get away from me *very quickly*. You cannot use the Killing Curse, so the correct tactic is to Apparate away. I do not mind being the villain of your imagination if it makes matters clearer. Leave Hogwarts, and leave me to those who can handle me. I will arrange for the transportation to be through some family of good repute, and Mr. Potter will know to blame me if you do not arrive safely."

"I—" She was feeling cold, the night air chilling her skin, or maybe being chilled by it. "I've got to think about it—"

Professor Quirrell shook his head. "No, Miss Granger. Your departure will take time for me to arrange, and I have less time left than you may think. This decision may be painful for you, but it should not be ambiguous; much weighs in the balance of these scales, but not evenly. I must know tonight whether you intend to go."

And if not—

Was the Defense Professor warning her deliberately? That if she didn't run, he would strike again?

Why would it matter so much, what did Professor Quirrell want to *do* with Harry?

Hermione Granger, I shall be less subtle than is usual for a mysterious old wizard, and tell you outright that you cannot imagine how badly things could go if the events surrounding Harry Potter turn to ill.

The most powerful wizard in the world had told her that, when he was talking about how important it was that she *not* stop being Harry's friend.

Hermione swallowed, she swayed a little where she stood, on the stone balcony of a magical castle. Suddenly the whole deadly absurdity of the situation seemed to rise up and grab her by the throat, that twelve-year-old girls *shouldn't* be in danger, *shouldn't* be thinking about such things, that Mum would want her to RUN AWAY and her father would have a heart attack if he even knew she was being faced with the question.

And she knew, then, as Harry and Dumbledore had both tried to warn her, that everything she'd ever thought about being a heroine had been mistaken. That there wasn't really any such thing as heroes, outside

of stories. There was just horrible danger, and being arrested by Aurors and put in cells next to Dementors, pain and fear and—

"Miss Granger?" said the Defense Professor.

She said nothing. All the words were blocked in her throat.

"I need a decision, Miss Granger."

She kept her jaw locked, didn't let any words come out.

Finally the Defense Professor sighed. Slowly the white light failed, and slowly the door behind him swung open, so that he was once again a black silhouette against the opening. "Good night, Miss Granger," he said, and turned his back to her, and walked away into Hogwarts.

It took a while for her breathing to slow down again. Whatever had happened here tonight, it didn't feel anything like victory. She'd fought so hard just to stop herself from saying *Yes* in the face of the Defense Professor's pressure, and now she didn't even know if she'd done the right thing.

When she walked back into the light herself (after exhaustion had overtaken everything and sleep was once more a possibility), she thought she heard it as she was within the doorway, from behind her and above her, a distant cawing cry.

But it wasn't meant for her, she knew, so she started climbing up the stairs toward her dorm room.

The other girls were probably asleep by now, and wouldn't look at her, or look away—

She felt the tears start, and this time she didn't stop them.

CHAPTER EIGHTY-FIVE

TABOO TRADEOFFS, AFTERMATH, PART III: DISTANCE

Slow and hard, the long stairway that led to the peak of Ravenclaw. From the inside, the stairway seemed like a straight upward slope, though from the outside you could see that it logically had to be a spiral. You could only get to the top of the Ravenclaw tower by making that long climb without shortcuts, stone step by stone step; passing beneath Harry's shoes, pushed down by his wearying legs.

Harry had seen Hermione safely off to bed.

He had lingered in the Ravenclaw common room long enough to collect a few signatures that might be useful to Hermione later. Not many students had signed; wizards hadn't been trained to think in the put-up-or-shut-up, stick-your-neck-out-and-make-a-prediction-or-stop-pretending-to-believe-in-your-theory rules of Muggle science. Most of them hadn't seen anything *incongruent* about being too nervous to sign an agreement saying that Hermione got to hold it over them for the rest of their lives if they were wrong, while acting outwardly confident that she was guilty. But just having demanded the signatures would make the point after the truth came out, if anyone ever again suspected Hermione of anything Dark. She wouldn't have to go through this *twice,* at least.

After that Harry had left the common room quickly, because all the kindly forgiving sentiments he'd reasoned out were getting harder and harder to remember. Sometimes Harry thought the deepest split in his

personality wasn't anything to do with his dark side; rather it was the divide between the altruistic and forgiving Abstract Reasoning Harry, versus the frustrated and angry Harry In The Moment.

The circular platform at the top of the Ravenclaw tower wasn't the tallest place in Hogwarts, but the Ravenclaw tower jutted out from the main body of the castle, so you couldn't see down into the top platform from the Astronomy tower. A quiet place to think, if you had an awful lot to think about. A place where few other students ever came—there were easier niches of privacy, if privacy was all you wanted.

The night-lit torches of Hogwarts were far below. The platform itself offered few obstructions; the stairs emerged from an uncovered gap in the floor, rather than an upright door. From this place, then, the stars were as visible as they ever were on Earth.

The boy lay down in the center of the platform, heedless of his robes that might be dirtied, dropping his head to rest upon the rock-tiled floor; so that, except for a few half-seen crenellations of stone at vision's edge, and a sliver of crescent moon, reality became starlight.

The pinpoints of light in dark velvet twinkled, wavering and returning, a different kind of beauty from their steady brilliance in the Silent Night.

Harry gazed out abstractly, his mind on other things.

This day your war against Voldemort has begun...

Dumbledore had said that, after the Incident with Rescuing Bellatrix from Azkaban. That had been a false alarm, but the phrase expressed the sentiment well.

Two nights ago his war had begun, and Harry didn't know with *who*.

Dumbledore thought it was Lord Voldemort, returned from the dead, making his first move against the boy who had defeated him last time.

Professor Quirrell had put detection wards on Draco, fearing that Hogwarts's mad Headmaster would try to frame Harry for the death of Lucius's son.

Or Professor Quirrell had set up the entire thing, and *that* was how he'd known where to find Draco. Severus Snape thought the Hogwarts Defense Professor was an obvious suspect, even *the* obvious suspect.

And Severus Snape himself might or might not be even remotely trustworthy.

Someone had declared war against Harry, their first strike had been meant to take out Draco and Hermione both, and it was only by the barest of margins that Harry had saved Hermione.

You couldn't call it victory. Draco had been removed from Hogwarts, and if that wasn't death, it wasn't clear how it could be undone, or what shape Draco might be in when he got back. The country of magical Britain now thought Hermione an attempted-murderer, which might or might not make her decide to do the sane thing and leave. Harry had sacrificed his entire fortune to undo his loss, and that card could only be played once.

Some unknown power had struck at him, and if that blow had been partially deflected, it had still hit *really hard.*

At least his dark side hadn't asked anything of him in exchange for saving Hermione. Maybe because his dark side *wasn't* an imaginary voice like Hufflepuff; Harry might *imagine* his Hufflepuff part as wanting different things from himself, but his dark side wasn't like that. His "dark side", so far as Harry could tell, was a different way that Harry sometimes *was*. Right now, Harry wasn't angry; and trying to ask what "dark Harry" wanted was a phone ringing unanswered. The thought even seemed a little strange; could you owe something to a different way you sometimes were?

Harry stared up at the random stars, the scattered twinkling lights that human brains couldn't help but pattern-match into imaginary constellations.

And then there was that promise Harry had sworn.

Draco to help Harry reform Slytherin House. And Harry to take as an enemy whomever Harry believed, in his best judgment as a rationalist, to have killed Narcissa Malfoy. If Narcissa had never gotten her own hands dirty, if indeed she'd been burned alive, if the killer hadn't been tricked—those were all the conditions Harry could remember making. He probably should've written it down, or better yet, never made a promise requiring that many caveats in the first place.

There were plausible outs, for the sort of person who'd let themselves rationalize an out. Dumbledore hadn't *actually* confessed. He hadn't come right out and said he'd done it. There were plausible reasons for an actually-guilty Dumbledore to behave that way. But it was *also* what you'd expect to see, if someone else had burned Narcissa, and Dumbledore had taken credit.

Harry shook his head, flattening one side of his hair and then another against the stone-tiled floor. There was still a final out, Draco could still release him from the oath at any time. He could, at least, describe the situation to Draco, and talk about options with him, when they met again. It didn't seem like a very likely prospect for release—but the idea of talking something over honestly was enough to satisfy the part of himself that demanded adherence to oaths. Even if it only meant delaying, it was better than taking a good man as an enemy.

But is *Dumbledore a good man?* asked the voice of Hufflepuff. *If Dumbledore burned someone alive—wasn't the whole point that good people may kill, but never kill with suffering?*

Maybe he killed her instantly, said Slytherin, *and then lied to Lucius about the burning-alive part. But... if there was* any *possibility of the Death Eaters magically verifying how Narcissa died... and if being caught in a lie would've endangered Light-side families...*

Be careful what we cleverly rationalize, warned Gryffindor.

You have to expect reputational effects on how other people treat you, said Hufflepuff. *If you decide there's sufficient reason to burn a woman alive, one of the predictable side effects is that good people decide you've crossed the line and have to be stopped. Dumbledore should've expected that. He's got no right to complain.*

Or maybe he expects us to be smarter, said Slytherin. *Now that we know this much of the truth—no matter the exact details of the full story—can we really believe that Dumbledore is a terrible, terrible person who ought to be our enemy? In the middle of a horrible bloody war, Dumbledore set* one *enemy civilian on fire? That's only bad by the standards of comic books, not by any sort of realistic historical standard.*

Harry stared up at the night sky, remembering history.

In real life, in real wars...

During World War II, there had been a project to sabotage the Nazi nuclear weapons program. Years earlier, Leo Szilard, the first person to realize the possibility of a fission chain reaction, had convinced Fermi not to publish the discovery that purified graphite was a cheap and effective neutron moderator. Fermi had wanted to publish, for the sake of the great international project of science, which was above nationalism. But Szilard had persuaded Rabi, and Fermi had abided by the majority vote of their tiny three-person conspiracy. And so, years later, the only neutron moderator the Nazis had known about was deuterium.

The only deuterium source under Nazi control had been a captured facility in occupied Norway, which had been knocked out by bombs and sabotage, causing a total of twenty-four civilian deaths.

The Nazis had tried to ship the deuterium already refined to Germany, aboard a civilian Norwegian ferry, the *SS Hydro.*

Knut Haukelid and his assistants had been discovered by the night watchman of the civilian ferry while they were sneaking on board to sabotage it. Haukelid had told the watchman that they were escaping the Gestapo, and the watchman had let them go. Haukelid had considered warning the night watchman, but that would have endangered the mission, so Haukelid had only shaken his hand. And the civilian ship had sunk in the deepest part of the lake, with eight dead Germans, seven dead crew, and three dead civilian bystanders. Some of the Norwegian rescuers of the ship had thought the German soldiers present should be left to drown, but this view had not prevailed, and the German survivors had been rescued. And that had been the end of the Nazi nuclear weapons program.

Which was to say that Knut Haukelid had killed innocent people. One of whom, the night watchman of the ship, had been a *good* person. Someone who'd gone out of his way to help Haukelid, at risk to himself; from the kindness of his heart, for the highest moral reasons; and been sent to drown in turn. Afterward, in the cold light of history, it had looked like the Nazis had never been close to getting nuclear weapons after all.

And Harry had never read anything suggesting that Haukelid had acted wrongly.

That was war in real life. In terms of total damage and who'd gotten hit, what Haukelid had done was considerably *worse* than what Dumbledore might have done to Narcissa Malfoy, or what Dumbledore had possibly done to leak the prophecy to Lord Voldemort to get him to attack Harry's parents.

If Haukelid had been a comic-book superhero, he'd have somehow gotten all the civilians off the ferry, he would've attacked the German soldiers directly...

...rather than let a single innocent person die...

...but Knut Haukelid hadn't been a superhero.

And neither had been Albus Dumbledore.

Harry closed his eyes, swallowing hard a few times against the sudden choking sensation. It was abruptly very clear that while Harry was going around trying to live the ideals of the Enlightenment, Dumbledore was the one who'd actually *fought in a war*. Nonviolent ideals were cheap to hold if you were a scientist, living inside the *Protego* bubble cast by the police officers and soldiers whose actions you had the luxury to question. Albus Dumbledore seemed to have started out with ideals at least as strong as Harry's own, if not stronger; and Dumbledore hadn't gotten through his war without killing enemies and sacrificing friends.

Are you so much better than Haukelid and Dumbledore, Harry Potter, that you'll be able to fight without a single casualty? Even in the world of comic books, the only reason a superhero like Batman even looks *successful is that the comic-book readers only notice when Important Named Characters die, not when the Joker shoots some random nameless bystander to show off his villainy. Batman is a murderer no less than the Joker, for all the lives the Joker took that Batman could've saved by killing him. That's what the man named Alastor was trying to tell Dumbledore, and afterward Dumbledore regretted having taken so long to change his mind. Are you really going to try to follow the path of the superhero, and never sacrifice a single piece or kill a single enemy?*

Fatigued, Harry turned his attention away from the dilemma for a moment, opened his eyes again to regard the hemisphere of night, which required no decisions from him.

Near the edge of his vision, the pale white crescent of the Moon, the light from which had left one-and-a-quarter seconds ago, around 375,000 kilometers of distance in Earth's space of simultaneity.

Above and to the side, Polaris, the North Star; the first star Harry had learned to identify in the sky, by following the edge of the Big Dipper. That was actually a five-star system with a brilliant central supergiant, 434 light-years from Earth. It was the first 'star' whose name Harry had ever learned from his father, so long ago that he couldn't have guessed how old he'd been.

The dim fog that was the Milky Way, so many billions of distant stars that they became an indistinct river, the plane of a galaxy that stretched 100,000 light-years across. If Harry had experienced any sense of wonder when he'd *first* been told that, he'd been too young for him to remember now that first time, across a few years' distance.

In the center of the constellation Andromeda, the star Andromeda, which was really the Andromeda Galaxy. The nearest galaxy to the Milky Way, 2.4 million light-years away, containing an estimated trillion stars.

Numbers like those made 'infinity' pale by comparison, because 'infinity' was just featureless and blank. Thinking that the stars were 'infinitely' distant was a lot less scary than trying to work out what 2.4 million light-years amounted to in meters. 2.4 million light-years, times 31 million seconds in a year, times a photon moving at 300,000,000 meters per second...

It was strange to think that such distances might *not* be unreachably far away. Magic was loose in the universe, things like Time-Turners and broomsticks. Had any wizard ever tried to measure the speed of a portkey, or a phoenix?

And the human understanding of magic couldn't possibly be anywhere *near* the underlying laws. What would you be able to do with magic if you *really* understood it?

A year ago, Dad had gone to the Australian National University in Canberra for a conference where he'd been an invited speaker, and he'd taken Mum and Harry along. And they'd all visited the National Museum of Australia, because, it had turned out, there was basically

nothing else to do in Canberra. The glass display cases had shown rock-throwers crafted by the Australian aborigines—like giant wooden shoehorns, they'd looked, but smoothed and carved and ornamented with painstaking care. In the 40,000 years since anatomically modern humans had migrated to Australia from Asia, nobody had invented the bow-and-arrow. It really made you appreciate how *non-obvious* was the idea of Progress. Why would you even think of Invention as something important, if all your history's heroic tales were of great warriors and defenders instead of Thomas Edison? How could anyone have suspected, while carving a rock-thrower with painstaking care, that someday human beings would invent rocket ships and nuclear energy?

Could you have looked up into the sky, at the brilliant light of the Sun, and deduced that the universe contained greater sources of power than mere fire? Would you have realized that if the fundamental physical laws permitted it, someday humans would tap the same energies as the Sun? Even if nothing you could imagine doing with rock-throwers or woven pouches—no pattern of running across the savannah and nothing you could obtain by hunting animals—would accomplish that even in imagination?

It wasn't like modern-day Muggles had gotten anywhere near the limits of what Muggle physics said was possible. And yet like hunter-gatherers conceptually bound to their rock-throwers, most Muggles lived in a world defined by the limits of what you could do with cars and telephones. Even though Muggle physics explicitly permitted possibilities like molecular nanotechnology or the Penrose process for extracting energy from black holes, most people filed that away in the same section of their brain that stored fairy tales and history books, well away from their personal realities: *Long ago and far away, ever so long ago.* No surprise, then, that the wizarding world lived in a conceptual universe bounded—not by fundamental laws of magic that nobody even knew—but just by the surface rules of known Charms and enchantments. You couldn't observe the way magic was practiced nowadays and *not* be reminded of the National Museum of Australia, once you realized what you were seeing. Even if Harry's first guess had been mistaken, one way or another it was still inconceivable that the *fundamental* laws of the universe contained

a special case for human lips shaping the phrase 'Wingardium Leviosa'. And yet even that fumbling grasp of magic was enough to do things that Muggle physics said should be *forever impossible:* the Time-Turner, water conjured out of nothingness by *Aguamenti.* What were the *ultimate* possibilities of invention, if the underlying laws of the universe permitted an eleven-year-old with a stick to violate almost every constraint in the Muggle version of physics?

Like a hunter-gatherer trying to look up at the Sun, and guess that the universe had to be shaped in a way that allowed for nuclear energy...

It made you wonder if maybe twenty thousand million million million meters wasn't so much distance, after all.

There was a step beyond Abstract Reasoning Harry which he could take, given time enough to compose himself and the right surroundings; something beyond Abstract Reasoning Harry, as that was beyond Harry In The Moment. Looking up at the stars, you could try to imagine what the distant descendants of humanity would think of your dilemma—in a hundred million years, when the stars would have spun through great galactic movements into entirely new positions, every constellation scattered. It was an elementary theorem of probability that if you knew what your answer would be after updating on future evidence, you ought to adopt that answer right now. If you *knew* your destination, you were already there. And by analogy, if not quite by theorem, if you could guess what the descendants of humanity would think of something, you ought to go ahead and take that as your own best guess.

From that vantage point the idea of killing off two-thirds of the Wizengamot seemed a lot less appealing than it had a few hours earlier. Even if you *had* to do it, even if you knew for a solid fact that it would be the best thing for magical Britain and that the complete Story of Time would look worse if you didn't do it... even as a necessity, the deaths of sentient beings would still be a tragedy. One more element of the sorrows of Earth; the Most Ancient Earth from which everything had begun, long ago and far away, ever so long ago.

He is not like Grindelwald. There is nothing human left in him. Him you must destroy. Save your fury for that, and that alone—

Harry shook his head slightly, tilting the stars a little in his vision,

as he lay on the stone floor looking upward and outward and forward in time. Even if Dumbledore was right, and the true enemy was utterly mad and evil... in a hundred million years the organic lifeform known as Lord Voldemort probably wouldn't seem much different from all the other bewildered children of Ancient Earth. Whatever Lord Voldemort had done to himself, whatever Dark rituals seemed so horribly irrevocable on a merely human scale, it wouldn't be beyond curing with the technology of a hundred million years. Killing him, even if you *had* to do it to save the lives of others, would be just one more death for future sentient beings to be sad about. How could you look up at the stars, and believe anything else?

Harry stared up at the twinkling lights of Eternity and wondered what the children's children's children would think of what Dumbledore had maybe-done to Narcissa.

But even if you tried framing the question that way, asking what humanity's descendants would think, it still drew only on your own knowledge, not theirs. The answer still came from inside yourself, and it could still be mistaken. If you didn't know the hundredth decimal digit of pi yourself, then you didn't know how the children's children's children would calculate it, for all that the fact was trivial.

⁂

Slowly—he'd been lying there, looking at the stars, for longer than he'd planned—Harry sat up from the ground. Pushing himself to his feet, the muscles protesting, he walked over to the edge of the stone platform at the height of the Ravenclaw tower. The stone crenellations surrounding the edge of the tower weren't high, not high enough to be safe. They were markers, clearly, rather than railings. Harry didn't approach too close to the edge; there was no point in taking chances. Looking down at the Hogwarts grounds below, he was predictably feeling a sense of dizziness, the wobbly affliction called vertigo. His brain was alarmed, it seemed, because the ground below was so *distant*. It might have been fully 50 meters away.

The lesson, it seemed, was that things had to be *incredibly* close by before your brain could comprehend them well enough to feel fear.

It was a rare brain that could feel strongly about anything, if it wasn't close in space, close in time, near at hand, within easy reach...

Before, Harry had imagined that going to Azkaban would require planning and cooperation from a grownup confederate. Portkeys, broomsticks, invisibility spells. Some way of getting to the bottom levels without the Aurors noticing, so he could carve his way into the central pit where the shadows of Death waited.

And that had been enough to put the prospect away, into the future, safely apart from the *now*.

He hadn't realized until today that it might be as simple as finding Fawkes and telling the phoenix that it was time.

Memories were rising up again, memories that Harry could never manage to forget for long. Though the stones beneath his feet were not smooth like metal, though the moonlit sky stretched all around him, somehow it was very easy to imagine himself trapped in a long metal corridor lit by dim orange light.

The night was quiet, quiet enough for memories to be clearly audible.

No, I didn't mean it, please don't die!

No, I didn't mean it, please don't die!

Don't take it away, don't don't don't—

The world blurred, and Harry wiped his eyes with his sleeve.

If *Hermione* had been the one behind that door—

If Hermione had been put in Azkaban, Harry would have called the phoenix and gone there and burned away every last Dementor and it wouldn't have made a single difference how crazy it was or what else he'd wanted to do with his life. That was just—that was—that was just how it was.

And the woman who *was* behind that door—wasn't there someone, somewhere, to whom she too was precious? Wasn't it only Harry's distance from her life that was preventing his brain from being driven to Azkaban to *save her no matter what?* What would it have taken to compel him? Would he have needed to know her face? Her name? Her favorite color? Would he have been driven to Azkaban to save Tracey

Davis? Would he have been compelled there to save Professor McGonagall? Mum and Dad—there wasn't even any question. And that woman had said she was someone's mother. How many people had wished for the power to break Azkaban? How many prisoners of Azkaban dreamed nightly of such a miraculous rescue?

None. It's a happy thought.

Maybe he *should* harrow Azkaban. All he had to do was find Fawkes and tell him it was time. Visualize the center of the Dementor's pit as he'd seen it from the broomstick, and let the phoenix take him there. Cast the True Patronus Charm at point-blank range and to hell with what came after.

All he had to do was go find Fawkes.

It might be as simple as thinking of the flame, calling for the fire-bird in his heart—

A star flashed in the night.

By the time Harry's eyes had jumped with a reflex action trained on meteor showers, another part of him was surprised that the astronomical phenomenon was still there; a faint star whose brightness was slowly visibly waxing. There was a startled moment when Harry wondered whether he was seeing, not a meteor, but a nova or supernova—could you *see* them getting brighter like that? Was the first stage of a nova supposed to be that yellow-orange color?

Then the new star moved again, and seemed to grow as well as brightening. It looked *closer* suddenly, no longer so far away that distance became moot. Like what you thought was a star, turning out to be an airplane, a lighted form whose shape you could actually see...

...no, not a plane...

The realization seemed to spread out from Harry's chest in a wave of prickling, sweat preparing to break out.

...a bird.

A piercing cry split the night, echoing from the rooftops of Hogwarts.

The approaching creature trailed fire as it flew, shedding golden flames like sparks from its feathers as the mighty wings beat and beat again. Even as it swooped up in a great curve to hover a few paces away

from Harry, even as the flames surrounding its passage diminished, the creature seemed no dimmer, no less bright; as though some unseen Sun shone upon it and illuminated it.

Great shining wings red like a sunset, and eyes like incandescent pearls, blazing with golden fire and determination.

The phoenix's beak opened, and let out a great caw that Harry understood as though it had been a spoken word:

COME!

Not even realizing, the boy stumbled back from the edge of the rooftop, eyes still locked on the phoenix, his whole body trembling and tensed, his fists clutching and releasing at his side; stepping back, stepping away.

The phoenix cawed again, a desperate, pleading, sound. It didn't come through in words, this time, but it came through in feelings, an echo of everything that Harry had ever felt about Azkaban and every temptation to *action,* to just *do* something about it, the desperate need to do something *now* and not delay any longer, all spoken in the cry of a bird.

Let's go. It's time. The voice that spoke came from inside Harry, not from the phoenix; from so deep inside it couldn't be given a separate name like 'Gryffindor'.

All he had to do was step forward and touch the phoenix's talons, and it would take him where he needed to be, where he kept thinking he ought to be, down into the central pit of Azkaban. Harry could see the image in his mind, shining with unbearably clarity, the image of himself suddenly smiling with joyous release as he threw all his fears away and *chose*—

"But I—" Harry whispered, not even aware of what he was saying. Harry lifted his shaking hands to wipe at his eyes from which tears had sprung, as the phoenix hovered before him with great wing-sweeps. "But I—there's other people I also have to save, other things I have to do—"

The fire-bird let out a piercing scream, and the boy flinched back as though from a blow. It wasn't a command, it wasn't an objection, it was the *knowledge*—

The corridors lit by dim orange light.

It felt like a tightening compulsion in Harry's chest, the desire to just *do* it and get it over with. He might die, but if he didn't die he could feel *clean* again. Have principles that were more than excuses for inaction. It was *his* life. His to spend, if he chose. He could do it any time he wanted...

...if he wasn't a good person.

The boy stood there on the rooftop, his own eyes locked with two points of fire. The stars might have had time to shift in their constellations while he stood there, agonizing over the decision...

...that wouldn't...

...change.

The boy's eyes flickered once to the stars above; and then he looked at the phoenix.

"Not yet," the boy said in a voice hardly audible. "Not yet. There's too much else I have to do. Please come back later, when I've found others who can cast the True Patronus—in six months, maybe—"

Without word, without sound, a sphere of fire surrounded the bird's form, crackling and blazing with white and crimson veins as though it meant to consume that which lay within; and when the fire dispersed into grey smoke, no phoenix remained.

There was silence on the top of the Ravenclaw tower. The boy gradually lowered his hands from his ears, pausing only to wipe at his wet cheeks.

Slowly, the boy turned—

Then cried out and leapt back and almost fell off the Ravenclaw tower; though the misstep would hardly have mattered, with that other wizard standing there.

"And so it was done," Albus Dumbledore said, almost in a whisper. "So it was done." Fawkes was on his shoulder, staring at where the other phoenix had been with an indecipherable avian gaze.

"*What are you doing here?*"

"Ah?" said the ancient man standing on the roof-platform's opposite corner. "I felt the presence of a creature Hogwarts did not know, and came to see, of course." Slowly the old wizard's shaking hand came up to remove the half-moon glasses, his other hand wiped at his eyes and forehead with his robe's sleeve. "I dared—I dared not speak—I knew, I knew this choice above all choices must be your own—"

A strange apprehension was beginning to fill Harry, welling up in him like a sick feeling in his stomach.

"That everything depended on this," Albus Dumbledore said, still in that almost-whisper, "that much I knew. But which choice led into darkness, that I could not guess. At least the choice was your own."

"I don't—" Harry said, and then his voice stopped.

A terrible hypothesis, rising in credibility...

"The phoenix comes," said the old wizard. "To those who would fight, to those would act even at cost of their lives, the phoenix comes. Phoenixes are not wise, Harry, they know no means to judge us, save witnessing the choice. I thought it was to my death I went, when the phoenix took me to fight Grindelwald. I did not know that Fawkes would sustain me, and heal me, and stay by my side—" The old wizard's voice quavered, for a moment. "It is not spoken of—you should realize, Harry, why it is never spoken of—if the one knew, the phoenix could not judge. But to you, Harry, I may say it now, for the phoenix comes only once."

The old wizard walked across the top of the Ravenclaw tower to where a boy stood rooted in dawning horror, in dawning and utter horror.

In my duel with Grindelwald I could not win, only fight him for long hours until he collapsed in exhaustion; and I would have died of it afterward, if not for Fawkes—

Harry didn't even know he was speaking, until the whisper had escaped him—

"Then I *could* have—"

"Could you have?" said the ancient wizard, his voice sounding far older than his normal tones. "Three times, now, a phoenix has come for my student. One did send hers away, and the grief of it broke her, I think.

And the last was cousin to your young friend Lavender Brown, and he—" The old wizard's voice cracked. "He did not return, did poor John, and he saved none of those he meant to save. It is said, among the few scholars of phoenix-lore, that not one in four returns from their ordeal. And even if you did survive—for the life you must lead, Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres—the choices you must make and the path you must walk—to always hear the phoenix's cries—who is to say it would not have driven you mad?" The old wizard raised his sleeve again, drawing it once more across his face. "I had more joy of Fawkes's companionship, in the days before I fought Voldemort."

The boy did not seem to be listening, all his eyes were on the red-gold bird on the ancient wizard's shoulder. "Fawkes?" the boy said in shaking voice. "Why won't you look at me, Fawkes?"

Fawkes craned his head to peer at the boy curiously, then turned back and resumed gazing at his master.

"See?" said the old wizard. "He does not reject you. Fawkes may not be interested in you in quite that way, now; and he knows—" the wizard smiled wryly,"—that you are not exactly loyal to his master. But one to whom the phoenix comes at all—cannot be one whom a phoenix would dislike." The wizard's voice fell to a whisper again. "There never was a bird seen on Godric Gryffindor's shoulder. Though it is not written even in his secrets, I think he must have sent his phoenix away, before he chose the red and gold for his colors. Perhaps the guilt of it urged him to greater lengths than he ever would have dared otherwise. Or it might have taught him humility, and respect for human frailty, and failure..." The wizard bowed his head. "I truly do not know if your choice was wise. I truly do not know if it was the right thing, or the wrong thing. If I knew, Harry, I would have spoken. But I—" Dumbledore's voice broke, then. "I am nothing but a foolish young boy who has become a foolish old man, and I have no wisdom."

Harry couldn't breathe, the nausea seeming to fill and overflow his whole body, stomach locked solid. He was suddenly and terribly certain that he had failed, in some final sense failed, failed this very night—

The boy whirled and ran out to the curb of the Ravenclaw rooftop. "Come back!" His voice cracked, rising to a shriek. *"Come back!"*

Final Aftermath:

She came awake with a gasp of horror, she woke with an unvoiced scream on her lips and no words came forth, she could not understand what she had seen, *she could not understand what she had seen—*

"What time is it?" she whispered.

Her golden jeweled alarm clock whispered back, "Around eleven at night. Go back to sleep."

Her sheets were soaked in sweat, her nightclothes soaked in sweat, she took her wand from beside the pillow and cleaned herself up before she tried to go back to sleep and eventually succeeded.

Sybill Trelawney went back to sleep.

In the Forbidden Forest, a centaur woken by a nameless apprehension ceased scanning the night sky, having found only questions there and no answers; and with a folding of his many legs, Firenze went back to sleep.

In the distant lands of magical Asia, an ancient witch named Fan Tong, sleeping the tired days away, told her anxious great-great-grandson that she was fine, it had only been a nightmare, and went back to sleep.

In a land where Muggleborns received no letters of any kind, a girl-child too young to have a name of her own was rocked in the arms of her annoyed but loving mother until she stopped crying and went back to sleep.

None of them slept well.

CHAPTER EIGHTY-SIX
MULTIPLE HYPOTHESIS TESTING

(International news headlines of April 7th, 1992:)

Toronto Magical Tribune:

ENTIRE BRITISH WIZENGAMOT
REPORTS SEEING 'BOY-WHO-LIVED'
FRIGHTEN A DEMENTOR

EXPERT ON MAGICAL CREATURES:
"NOW YOU'RE JUST LYING"

FRANCE, GERMANY ACCUSE BRITAIN
OF MAKING THE WHOLE THING UP

New Zealand Spellcrafter's Diurnal Notice:

WHAT DROVE BRITISH LEGISLATURE INSANE?
COULD OUR GOVERNMENT BE NEXT?

EXPERTS LIST TOP 28 REASONS
TO BELIEVE IT'S ALREADY HAPPENED

American Mage:

WEREWOLF CLAN TO BECOME
FIRST INHABITATNTS OF WYOMING

The Quibbler:

MALFOY FLEES HOGWARTS
AS VEELA POWERS AWAKEN

Daily Prophet:

LEGAL TRICKS FREE
"MAD MUGGLEBORN"
AS POTTER THREATENS MINISTRY
WITH ATTACK ON AZKABAN

*
* *

Hypothesis: Voldemort
(April 8th, 1992, 7:22pm)

The four of them gathered once more around the ancient desk of the Headmaster of Hogwarts, with its drawers within drawers within drawers, wherein all the past paperwork of the Hogwarts School was stored; legend had it that Headmistress Shehla had once gotten lost in that desk, and was, in fact, still there, and wouldn't be let out again until she got her files organized. Minerva didn't particularly look forward to inheriting those drawers, when she inherited that desk someday—if any of them survived.

Albus Dumbledore was seated behind his desk, looking grave and composed.

Severus Snape was standing next to the dead Floo and its ashes, hovering ominously like the vampire that students sometimes accused him of pretending to be.

Mad-Eye Moody had been meant to join them, but was yet to arrive.

And Harry...

A boy's small, thin frame, perched on the arm of his chair, as though the energies running through him were too great to allow ordinary seating. Set face, sweaty hair, intent green eyes, and within it all, the jagged lightning-bolt of his never-healing scar. He seemed grimmer, now; even compared to a single week earlier.

For a moment Minerva flashed back to her trip to Diagon Alley with Harry, what seemed like ages and ages ago. There'd been this somber boy *inside* that Harry, somehow, even then. This wasn't entirely her own fault, or Albus's fault. And yet there was something almost unbearably sad about the contrast between the young boy she'd first met, and what magical Britain had made of him. Harry had never had much of an ordinary childhood, she'd gathered; Harry's adoptive parents had said to her that he'd spoken little and played less with Muggle children. It was painful to think that Harry might have had only a few months of playing beside the other children in Hogwarts, before the war's demands had stripped it all away. Maybe there was another face that Harry showed to the children his own age, when he wasn't staring down the

Wizengamot. But she couldn't stop herself from imagining Harry Potter's childhood as a heap of firewood, and herself and Albus feeding the wooden branches, piece by piece, into the flames.

"Prophecies are strange things," said Albus Dumbledore. The old wizard's eyes were half-lidded, as though in weariness. "Vague, unclear, meaning escaping like water held between loose fingers. Prophecy is ever a burden, for there are no answers there, only questions."

Harry Potter was sitting tensely. "Headmaster Dumbledore," said the boy with soft precision, "my friends are being targeted. Hermione Granger almost went to Azkaban. The war has begun, as you put it. Professor Trelawney's prophecy is key information for weighing up the balance of my hypotheses about what's going on. Not to mention how silly it is—and *dangerous*—that the Dark Lord knows the prophecy and *I don't*."

Albus looked a grim question at her, and she shook her head in reply; in whatever unimaginable way Harry had discovered that Trelawney had made the prophecy and that the Dark Lord knew of it, he hadn't learned that much from her.

"Voldemort, seeking to avert that very prophecy, went to his defeat at your hands," the old wizard said then. "His knowledge brought him only harm. Ponder that carefully, Harry Potter."

"Yes, Headmaster, I do understand that. My home culture also has a literary tradition of self-fulfilling and misinterpreted prophecies. I'll interpret with caution, rest assured. But I've already guessed quite a bit. Is it safer for me to work from partial guesses?"

Time passed.

"Minerva," said Albus. "If you would."

"The one..." she began. The words came falteringly to her throat; she was no actress. She couldn't imitate the deep, chilling tone of the original prophecy; and yet somehow that tone seemed to carry all the *meaning*. "The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches... born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies..."

"*And the Dark Lord shall mark him as his equal,*" came Severus's voice, making her jump within her chair. The Potions Master loomed tall by the fireplace. "*But he shall have power the Dark Lord knows not... and*

either must destroy all but a remnant of the other, for those two different spirits cannot exist in the same world."

That last line Severus spoke with so much foreboding that it chilled her bones; it was almost like listening to Sybill Trelawney.

Harry was listening with a frown. "Can you repeat that?" said Harry.

"*The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches, born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month—*"

"Actually, hold on, can you write that down? I need to analyze this *carefully—*"

This was done, with both Albus and Severus watching the parchment hawklike, as though to make sure that no unseen hand reached in and snatched the precious information away.

"Let's see..." Harry said. "I'm male and born on July 31st, check. I did in fact vanquish the Dark Lord, check. Ambiguous pronoun in line two... but I wasn't born yet so it's hard to see how my parents could have thrice defied *me.* This scar is an obvious candidate for the mark..." Harry touched his forehead. "Then there's the power the Dark Lord knows not, which probably refers to my scientific background—"

"No," said Severus.

Harry looked at the Potions Master in surprise.

Severus's eyes were closed, his face tightened in concentration. "The Dark Lord could obtain that power by studying the same books as you, Potter. But the prophecy did not say, *power the Dark Lord has not.* Nor even, *power the Dark Lord cannot have.* She spoke of *power the Dark Lord knows not*... it will be something stranger to him than Muggle artifacts. Something perhaps that he cannot comprehend at all, even having seen it..."

"Science is not a bag of technological tricks," Harry said. "It's not just the Muggle version of a wand. It's not even knowledge like memorizing the periodic table. It's a different way of *thinking.*"

"Perhaps..." the Potions Master murmured, but his voice was skeptical.

"It is hazardous," Albus said, "to read too far into a prophecy, even if you have heard it yourself. They are things of exceeding frustration."

"So I see," Harry said. His hand rose up, rubbed the scar on his forehead. "But... okay, if *this* is really all we know... look, I'll just put it bluntly. How do you *know* that the Dark Lord actually survived?"

"*What?*" she cried. Albus just sighed and leaned back in the vast Headmaster's chair.

"Well," Harry said, "imagine how this prophecy sounded back when it was made. You-Know-Who learns the prophecy, and it sounds like I'm destined to grow up and overthrow him. That the two of us are meant to have a final battle where either of us must destroy all but a remnant of the other. So You-Know-Who attacks Godric's Hollow and *immediately* gets vanquished, leaving behind *some* remnant which may or may not be his disembodied soul. Maybe the Death Eaters are his remnant, or the Dark Mark. This prophecy could already be fulfilled, is what I'm saying. Don't get me wrong—I do realize that my interpretation sounds stretched. Trelawney's phrasing doesn't seem natural for describing *only* the events that historically happened on October 31st, 1981. Attacking a baby and having the spell bounce off, isn't something you'd normally call 'the power to vanquish'. But if you think of the prophecy as being about *several* possible futures, only *one* of which was actually realized on Halloween, then the prophecy could already be complete."

"But—" Minerva blurted. "But the raid on Azkaban—"

"*If* the Dark Lord survived, then sure, he's the most likely suspect for the Azkaban breakout," Harry said reasonably. "You could even say that the Azkaban breakout is Bayesian evidence for the Dark Lord surviving, because an Azkaban breakout is more likely to happen in worlds where he's alive than worlds where he's dead. But it's not *strong* Bayesian evidence. It's not something that *can't possibly happen* unless the Dark Lord is alive. Professor Quirrell, who *didn't* start from the assumption that You-Know-Who was still around, had no trouble thinking of his own explanation. To him, it was obvious that some powerful wizard might want Bellatrix Black because she knew a secret of the Dark Lord's, like some of his magical knowledge that he'd told to only her. The priors against anyone surviving their body's death are very low, even if it's magically possible. *Most* times it doesn't happen. So if it's *just* the Azkaban breakout... I'd have to say formally that it isn't enough Bayesian

evidence. The improbability of the evidence assuming that the hypothesis is false, is not commensurate with the prior improbability of the hypothesis."

"No," Severus said flatly. "The prophecy is not yet fulfilled. I would know if it were."

"Are you *sure* of that?"

"Yes, Potter. If the prophecy had already come true, I would *understand* it! I heard Trelawney's words, I remember Trelawney's voice, and if I knew the events that matched the prophecy, I would *recognize* them. What has already happened... does *not* fit." The Potions Master spoke with certainty.

"I'm not really sure what to do with that statement," Harry said. His hand rose up, absently rubbed at his forehead. "Maybe it's just what you *think* happened that doesn't fit, and the true history is different..."

"Voldemort *is* alive," Albus said. "There are other indications."

"Such as?" Harry's reply was instant.

Albus paused. "There are terrible rituals by which wizards have returned from death," Albus said slowly. "That much, anyone can discern within history and legend. And yet those books are missing, I could not find them; it was Voldemort who removed them, I am sure—"

"So you *can't* find any books on immortality, and that proves that You-Know-Who has them?"

"Indeed," said Albus. "There is a certain book—I will not name it aloud—missing from the Restricted Section of the Hogwarts library. An ancient scroll which should have been at Borgin and Burkes, with only an empty place on a shelf to show where it was—" The old wizard stopped. "But I suppose," the old wizard said, as though to himself, "you will say that even if Voldemort tried to make himself immortal, it does not prove that he succeeded..."

Harry sighed. "Proof, Headmaster? There are only ever probabilities. If there are known, particular books on immortality rituals which are missing, that increases the probability that someone attempted one. Which, in turn, raises the prior probability of the Dark Lord surviving his death. This I concede, and thank you for contributing the fact. The question is whether the prior probability goes up *enough*."

"Surely," Albus said quietly, "if you concede even a *chance* that Voldemort survived, that is worth guarding against?"

Harry inclined his head. "As you say, Headmaster. Though once a probability drops low enough, it's also an error to go on obsessing about it... Given that books on immortality are missing, and that this prophecy would sound *somewhat* more natural if it refers to the Dark Lord and I having a future battle, I agree that the Dark Lord being alive is a probability, not just possibility. But other probabilities must *also* be taken into account—and in the probable worlds where You-Know-Who is *not* alive, someone else framed Hermione."

"Foolishness," Severus said softly. "Utter foolishness. The Dark Mark has not faded, nor has its master."

"See, *that's* what I mean by formally insufficient Bayesian evidence. Sure, it sounds all grim and foreboding and stuff, but is it *that* unlikely for a magical mark to stay around after the maker dies? Suppose the mark is certain to continue while the Dark Lord's sentience lives on, but *a priori* we'd only have guessed a twenty percent chance of the Dark Mark continuing to exist after the Dark Lord dies. Then the observation, 'The Dark Mark has not faded' is five times as likely to occur in worlds where the Dark Lord is alive as in worlds where the Dark Lord is dead. Is that really commensurate with the prior improbability of immortality? Let's say the prior odds were a hundred-to-one against the Dark Lord surviving. If a hypothesis is a hundred times as likely to be false versus true, and then you see evidence five times more likely if the hypothesis is true versus false, you should update to believing the hypothesis is twenty times as likely to be false as true. Odds of a hundred to one, times a likelihood ratio of one to five, equals odds of twenty to one that the Dark Lord is dead—"

"*Where* are you getting all these numbers, Potter?"

"That *is* the admitted weakness of the method," Harry said readily. "But what I'm *qualitatively* getting at is why the observation, 'The Dark Mark has not faded', is not adequate support for the hypothesis, 'The Dark Lord is immortal.' The evidence isn't as extraordinary as the claim." Harry paused. "Not to mention that even if the Dark Lord is alive, he doesn't *have* to be the one who framed Hermione. As a cun-

ning man once said, there could be more than one plotter and more than one plan."

"Such as the Defense Professor," Severus said with a thin smile. "I suppose I must agree that he is a suspect. It was the Defense Professor last year, after all; and the year before that, and the year before *that*."

Harry's eyes dropped back to the parchment in his lap. "Let's move on. Are we *certain* that this Prophecy is accurate? Nobody messed with Professor McGonagall's memory, maybe edited or subtracted a line?"

Albus paused, then spoke slowly. "There is a great spell laid over Britain, recording every prophecy said within our borders. Far beneath the Most Ancient Hall of the Wizengamot, in the Department of Mysteries, they are recorded."

"The Hall of Prophecy," Minerva whispered. She'd read about that place, said to be a great room of shelves filled with glowing orbs, one after another appearing over the years. Merlin himself had wrought it, it was said; the greatest wizard's final slap to the face of Fate. Not all prophecies conduced to the good; and Merlin had wished for at least those spoken of in prophecy, to know what had been spoken *of* them. That was the respect Merlin had given to their free will, that Destiny might not control them from the outside, unwitting. Those mentioned within a prophecy would have an glowing orb float to their hand, and then hear the prophet's true voice speaking. Others who tried to touch an orb, it was said, would be driven mad—or possibly just have their heads explode, the legends were unclear on this point. Whatever Merlin's original intention, the Unspeakables hadn't let anyone enter in centuries, so far as she'd heard. *Works of the Ancient Wizards* had stated that later Unspeakables had discovered that tipping off the subjects of prophecies could interfere with seers releasing whatever temporal pressures they released; and so the heirs of Merlin had sealed his Hall. It did occur to Minerva to wonder (now that she'd spent a few months around Mr. Potter) how anyone could possibly *know* that; but she also knew better than to ask Albus, in case Albus tried to tell her. Minerva firmly believed that you only ought to worry about Time if you were a clock.

"The Hall of Prophecy," Albus confirmed lowly. "Those who are spoken of in a prophecy, may listen to that prophecy there. Do you see

the implication, Harry?"

Harry frowned. "Well, I could listen to it, or the Dark Lord... oh, my *parents*. Those who had thrice defied him. They were also mentioned in the prophecy, so they could hear the recording?"

"If James and Lily heard anything different from what Minerva reported," Albus said evenly, "they did not say so to me."

"You took James and Lily *there?*" Minerva said.

"Fawkes can go to many places," Albus said. "Do not mention the fact."

Harry was staring directly at Albus. "Can *I* go to this Department of Mysteries place and hear the recorded prophecy? The original tone of voice might be helpful, from what I've heard."

Light glinted from the reflection of Albus's half-moon glasses as the old wizard slowly shook his head. "I think that would be unwise," Albus said. "For reasons beyond the obvious. It is dangerous, that place which Merlin made; more dangerous to some people than others."

"I see," Harry said tonelessly, and looked back down at the parchment. "I'll take the prophecy as assumed accurate for now. The next part says that the Dark Lord has marked me as his equal. Any ideas on what that means exactly?"

"Surely not," said Albus, "that you must imitate his ways, in any wise."

"I'm not *dumb*, Headmaster. Muggles have worked out a thing or two about temporal paradoxes, even if it's all theoretical to them. I won't throw away my ethics just because a signal from the future claims it's going to happen, because then that becomes the only reason why it happened in the first place. Still, what *does* it mean?"

"I do not know," said Severus.

"Nor I," she said.

Harry took out his wand, turned it over in his hands, gazing meditatively at the wood. "Eleven inches, holly, with a core of phoenix feather," Harry said. "And the phoenix whose tail feather is in this wand, only ever gave one other, which Mr... what was his name, Olive-something... made into the core of the Dark Lord's wand. *And* I'm a

Parselmouth. It seemed like a lot of coincidence even then. And now I find out there's a prophecy stating that I'll be the Dark Lord's equal."

Severus's eyes were thoughtful; the Headmaster's gaze, unreadable.

"Could it be," Minerva said falteringly, "that You-Know-Who—that Voldemort—transferred some of his own powers to Mr. Potter, the night he gave him that scar? Not something he intended to do, surely. Still... I don't see how Mr. Potter could be his *equal,* if he had any less magic than the Dark Lord himself..."

"Meh," said Harry, still looking meditatively at his wand. "I'd fight the Dark Lord without any magic at all, if I had to. *Homo sapiens* didn't become the dominant species on this planet by having the sharpest claws or hardest armor—though I suppose some of that point may be lost on wizards. Still, it's beneath my dignity as a human being to be scared of anything that isn't smarter than I am; and from what I've heard, on that particular dimension the Dark Lord wasn't very scary."

The Potions Master spoke, his voice taking on some of his customary contemptuous drawl. "You imagine yourself more intelligent than the Dark Lord, Potter?"

"Yes, in fact," said Harry, pulling back the left sleeve of his robes, and rolling up the shirtsleeve beneath to expose the bare elbow. "Oh, that reminds me! Let's make sure nobody here has the clearly visible tattoo in the standard, easily checkable location which would mark them as a secret enemy spy."

Albus made a quieting gesture that halted the Potions Master before he could say anything scathing. "Tell me, Harry," Albus said, "how would *you* have crafted the Dark Mark?"

"Nonstandard locations," Harry said promptly, "not easily found without embarrassment and fuss, though of course any security-conscious person would check anyway. Make it smaller, if possible. Overlay another non-magical tattoo to obscure the exact shape—better yet, cover it with a layer of fake skin—"

"Cunning indeed," Albus said. "But tell me, suppose you could craft any conditions you wished into the Mark, fading it or raising it as you wished. What would you do then?"

"Make it completely invisible at all times," Harry said in tones of stating the obvious. "You don't want there to be any detectable difference between a spy and a non-spy."

"Suppose you are more cunning still," Albus said. "You are a master of trickery, a master of deception, and you employ your abilities to the fullest."

"Well—" The boy stopped, frowning. "It seems unnecessarily complicated, more like a tactic a villain would use in a role-playing game than something you'd try in a real-life war. But I suppose you could put fake Dark Marks on people who aren't really Death Eaters, and keep the Dark Marks on the real Death Eaters invisible. But then there's the question of why people would start believing in the first place that the Dark Mark identified a Death Eater... I'd have to think about it for at least five minutes, if I were going to take the problem seriously."

"I ask you this," Albus said, still in that mild tone, "because I did indeed, in the early days of the war, perform such tests as you suggested. The Order survived my folly only because Alastor did not trust in the bare arms we saw. I had thought, afterward, that the bearers of the Mark might hide it or show it at their will. And yet when we hied Igor Karkaroff before the Wizengamot, that Mark showed clear on his arm, for all that Karkaroff wished to protest his innocence. What true rule may govern the Dark Mark, I do not know. Even Severus is still bound by his Mark not to reveal its secrets to any who do not know them."

"Oh, well *that* makes it *obvious*," Harry said promptly. "Wait, hold on—you were a *Death Eater?*" Harry transferred his stare to Severus.

Severus returned a thin smile. "I still am, so far as they know."

"Harry," said Albus, eyes only for the boy. "What do you mean, that makes it obvious?"

"Information theory 101," the boy said in a lecturing tone. "Observing variable X conveys information about variable Y, if and only if the possible values of X have different probabilities given different states of Y. The instant you hear about anything whatsoever that varies between a spy and a nonspy, you should immediately think of exploiting it to distinguish spies from nonspies. Similarly, to distinguish reality from lies, you need a process which behaves differently in the presence

of truth and falsehood—that's why 'faith' doesn't work as a discriminant, while 'make experimental predictions and test them' does. You say someone with the Dark Mark can't reveal its secrets to anyone who doesn't already know them. So to find out how the Dark Mark operates, write down every way you can imagine the Dark Mark *might* work, then watch Professor Snape try to tell each of those things to a confederate—maybe one who doesn't know what the experiment is about—I'll explain binary search later so that you can play Twenty Questions to narrow things down—and whatever he *can't* say out loud is true. His silence would be something that behaves differently in the presence of true statements about the Mark, versus false statements, you see."

Minerva's mouth was hanging open, she realized; and she closed it abruptly. Even Albus looked surprised.

"And after that, like I said, *any* behavioral difference between spies and nonspies can be used to identify spies. Once you've identified at least one magically censored secret of the Dark Mark, you can test someone for the Dark Mark by seeing if they can reveal that secret to somebody who doesn't already know it—"

"Thank you, Mr. Potter."

Everyone looked at Severus. The Potions Master was straightening, his teeth bared in a grimace of angry triumph. "Headmaster, I can now speak freely of the Mark. If we know we are caught for a Death Eater, before others who have not yet seen our bare arms, our Mark reveals itself whether we will it or no. But if they have already seen our arms bare, it does not reveal itself; nor if we are only being tested from suspicion. Thus the Dark Mark seems to identify Death Eaters—but only those already found, you perceive."

"Ah..." Albus said. "Thank you, Severus." He closed his eyes briefly. "That would indeed explain why Black escaped even Peter's notice... ah, well. And Harry's proposed test?"

The Potions Master shook his head. "The Dark Lord was no fool, despite Potter's delusions. The moment such a test is suspected, the Mark ceases to bind our tongues. Yet I could not hint at the possibility, but only wait for another to deduce it." Another thin smile. "I would award you a good many House points, Mr. Potter, if it would not compromise

my cover. But as you can see, the Dark Lord was quite cunning." His gaze grew more distant. "Oh," Severus breathed, "he was *very* cunning indeed..."

Harry Potter sat still for a long moment.

Then—

"No," Harry said. The boy shook his head. "No, that can't *actually* be true. First of all, we're talking about the kind of logic puzzle that would appear in chapter *one* of a Raymond Smullyan book, nowhere *near* the level of what Muggle scientists do for a living. And second, for all I know, it took the Dark Lord five months of thinking to invent the puzzle I just solved in five seconds—"

"Is it *that* inconceivable to you, Potter, that anyone could be so intelligent as yourself?" The Potions Master's voice held more curiosity than scorn.

"It's called a base rate, Professor Snape. The evidence is equally compatible with the Dark Lord inventing that puzzle over the course of five months or over the course of five seconds, but in any given population there'll be many more people who can do it in five months than in five seconds..." Harry pasted a hand against his forehead. "Darn it, how can I explain this? I suppose, from your perspective, the Dark Lord came up with a clever puzzle and I cleverly solved it and that makes us look *equal*."

"I remember your first day of Potions class," the Potions Master said dryly. "I think you have a ways still to go."

"Peace, Severus," Albus said. "Harry has already accomplished more than you know. Yet tell me, Harry—why *do* you believe the Dark Lord is less than you? Surely he is a damaged soul in many ways. But cunning for cunning—you are not yet ready to face him, I would judge; and I know the full tally of your deeds."

The frustrating thing about this conversation was that Harry *couldn't say his actual reasons for disagreeing,* which violated several basic principles of cooperative discourse.

He couldn't explain how Bellatrix had really been removed from Azkaban—not by You-Know-Who in any guise, but by the combined wits of Harry and Professor Quirrell.

Harry didn't want to say in front of Professor McGonagall that the existence of brain damage implied that there were no such things as souls. Which made a successful immortality ritual... well, not *impossible,* Harry certainly intended to forge a road to magical immortality *someday*, but it would be a *lot harder* and require *much more ingenuity* than just binding an already-existent soul to a lich's phylactery. Which no intelligent wizard would bother doing in the first place, if they knew their souls were immortal.

And the true and honest reason Harry knew the Dark Lord couldn't have been *that* smart... well... there wasn't any tactful way to say it, but...

Harry had *been* to a convocation of the Wizengamot. He'd *seen* the laughable 'security precautions', if you could call them that, guarding the deepest levels of the Ministry of Magic. They didn't even have the Thief's Downfall which goblins used to wash away Polyjuice and Imperius Curses on people entering Gringotts. The obvious takeover route would be to Imperius the Minister of Magic and a few department heads, and owl a hand grenade to anyone too powerful to Imperius. Or owl them knockout gas, if you needed them alive and in a state of Living Death to take hairs for Polyjuice potions. Legilimency, False Memories, the Confundus Charm—it was ridiculous, the magical world was *supersaturated* with ways to cheat. Harry might not do any of those things himself, during his own takeover of Britain, since he was constrained by Ethics... well, Harry *might* do some of the lesser ones, since Polyjuice or a temporary Confundus or read-only Legilimency all sounded better than an extra day of Azkaban... but...

If Harry hadn't been constrained by Ethics, it was possible he could've wiped out the eviller sections of the Wizengamot that day; all by himself, using only a first-year's magical power, on account of being clever enough to figure out Dementors. Though Harry might not have

been in such a great political position after that, the surviving Wizengamot members might've found it easy and cheap to disavow his actions for P.R. purposes and condemn him, even if the smarter ones realized it was for the greater good... but *still.*

If you were completely unrestrained by ethics, armed with the ancient secrets of Salazar Slytherin, had dozens of powerful followers including Lucius Malfoy, and it took you more than ten years to *fail* to overthrow the government of magical Britain, it meant you were stupid.

"How can I put this..." Harry said. "Look, Headmaster, you've got ethics, there's a lot of battle tactics you don't use because you're not evil. And you fought the Dark Lord, a tremendously powerful wizard who wasn't so restrained, and you held him off *anyway*. If You-Know-Who had been super-smart *on top of that*, you'd be *dead. All* of you. You'd have died *instantly*—"

"Harry," Professor McGonagall said. Her voice was faltering. "Harry, we almost *did* all die. More than half the Order of the Phoenix died. If not for Albus—Albus Dumbledore, the greatest wizard in two centuries, Harry—we surely would have perished."

Harry passed a hand across his forehead. "I'm sorry," Harry said. "I'm not trying to minimize what you went through. I know that You-Know-Who was a completely evil, incredibly powerful Dark Wizard with dozens of powerful followers, and that's... bad, yes, definitely bad. It's just..." *All that isn't on remotely the same threat scale as the enemy being smart, in which case they Transfigure botulinum toxin and sneak a millionth of a gram into your teacup.* Was there any safe way to convey that concept without citing specifics? Harry couldn't think of one.

"Please, Harry," said Professor McGonagall. "Please, Harry, I beg you—*take the Dark Lord seriously!* He is more dangerous than—" The senior witch seemed to be having trouble finding words. "He is *far* more dangerous than Transfiguration."

Harry's eyebrows went up before he could stop himself. A dark chuckle came from Severus Snape's direction.

Um, said the voice of Ravenclaw within him. *Um, honestly Professor McGonagall is right, we're not taking this as seriously as we'd take a scientific problem. The difficult thing is to react* at all *to new information, instead*

of just flushing it out the window. Right now it looks like we didn't shift belief at all *after encountering an unexpected, important argument. Our dismissal of Lord Voldemort as a serious threat* was *originally based on the Dark Mark being blatantly stupid. It would require a focused effort to de-update and suspect the whole garden-path of reasoning we went down based on that false assumption, and we're* not *putting in that effort right now.*

"All right," Harry said, just as Professor McGonagall seemed to be about to speak again. "All right, to take this seriously, I need to stop and think for five minutes."

"Please do," said Albus Dumbledore.

Harry closed his eyes.

His Ravenclaw side divided into three.

Probability estimate, said Ravenclaw One, who was acting as moderator. *That the Dark Lord is alive, and as smart as we are, and hence a genuine threat.*

Why aren't all his enemies already dead? said Ravenclaw Two, who was prosecuting.

Note, said Ravenclaw One, *we had already thought of that argument so we can't use it to shift belief* again *each time we rehearse it.*

But what's the actual flaw in the logic? said Ravenclaw Two. *In worlds with a smart Lord Voldemort, everyone in the Order of the Phoenix died in the first five minutes of the war. The world doesn't look like that, so we don't live in that world. QED.*

Is that really certain? asked Ravenclaw Three, who'd been appointed as the defender. *Maybe there was some reason Lord Voldemort* wasn't *fighting all-out back then—*

Like what? demanded Ravenclaw Two. *Furthermore, whatever your excuse, I demand that the probability of your hypothesis be penalized in accordance with its added complexity—*

Let Three talk, said Ravenclaw One.

Okay... look, said Ravenclaw Three. *First of all, we don't* know *that anyone can take over the Ministry just with mind control. Maybe magical Britain is really an oligarchy and you need enough military power to intimidate the family heads into submission—*

Imperius them too, interjected Ravenclaw Two.

—and the oligarchs have Thief's Downfall in the entrances to their *homes—*

Complexity penalty! cried Ravenclaw Two. *More epicycles!*

—oh, be reasonable, said Ravenclaw Three. *We haven't actually* seen *anyone taking over the Ministry with a couple of well-placed Imperius curses. We don't* know *that it can actually be done that easily.*

But, said Ravenclaw Two, *even taking that into account... it really seems like there should've been* some *other way. Ten years of failure, really? Using only conventional terrorist tactics? That's just... not even* trying.

Maybe Lord Voldemort did have more creative ideas, replied Ravenclaw Three, *but he didn't want to tip his hand to* other *countries' governments, didn't want* them *to know how vulnerable they were and install Thief's Downfall in* their *Ministries. Not until he had Britain as a base and enough servants to subvert* all *the other major governments simultaneously.*

You're assuming he wants to conquer the whole world, noted Ravenclaw Two.

Trelawney prophesized that he would be our equal, intoned Ravenclaw Three solemnly. *Therefore, he wanted to take over the world.*

And if he is your equal, and you do have to fight him—

For an instant, Harry's mind tried to imagine the specter of two *creative* wizards fighting an all-out-war against each other.

Harry had noted all the Charms and Potions in his first-year books that could be creatively used to kill people. He hadn't been able to help himself. Literally. He'd *tried* to stop his brain from doing it each time, but it was like looking at a fish and trying to stop your brain from noticing it was a fish. What someone could creatively do with seventh-year, or Auror-level, or ancient lost magic such as Lord Voldemort had possessed... didn't bear thinking about. A magically-superpowered creative-genius psychopath wasn't a 'threat', it was an extinction event.

Then Harry shook his head, dismissing the gloomy line his reasoning had been going down. The question was whether there was a significant probability of facing anything so terrible as a Dark Rationalist in the first place.

Prior odds that someone attempting an immortality ritual would actually have it work...

Call it one to a thousand, at a generous overestimate; it was not the case that roughly one wizard in a thousand survived their death. Though, admittedly Harry didn't have data on how many had attempted immortality rituals first.

What if the Dark Lord is *as smart as us?* said Ravenclaw Three. *You know, the way Trelawney prophesied him being our* equal. *Then he would* make *his immortality ritual work. P.S., don't forget that 'destroy all but a remnant of the other' line.*

Requiring that level of intelligence was an additional burdensome detail; prior odds of a random population member being that intelligent were low...

But Lord Voldemort wasn't a randomly selected wizard, he was one particular wizard in the population who'd come to everyone's attention. The puzzle of the Mark implied a certain minimum level of intelligence, even if (hypothetically) the Dark Lord had taken longer to think it through. Then again, in the Muggle world, all of the extremely intelligent people Harry knew about from history had *not* become evil dictators or terrorists. The closest thing to that in the Muggle world was hedge-fund managers, and none of *them* had tried to take over so much as a third-world country, a point which put upper bounds on both their possible evil and possible goodness.

There were hypotheses where the Dark Lord was smart and the Order of the Phoenix *didn't* just instantly die, but those hypotheses were more complicated and ought to get complexity penalties. After the complexity penalties of the further excuses were factored in, there would be a large likelihood ratio from the hypotheses 'The Dark Lord is smart' versus 'The Dark Lord was stupid' to the observation, 'The Dark Lord did not instantly win the war'. That was probably worth a 10:1 likelihood ratio in favor of the Dark Lord being stupid... but maybe not 100:1. You couldn't actually say that 'The Dark Lord instantly wins' had a probability of *more* than 99 percent, assuming the Dark Lord started out smart; the sum over all possible excuses would be more than .01.

And then there was the Prophecy... which might or might not have *originally* included a line about how Lord Voldemort would *immediately* die if he confronted the Potters. Which Albus Dumbledore had then

edited in Professor McGonagall's memory, in order to lure Lord Voldemort to his doom. If there *was* no such line, the Prophecy did sound *somewhat* more like You-Know-Who and the Boy-Who-Lived were destined to have some later confrontation. But in *that* case, it was less likely that Dumbledore would've come up with a plausible-sounding excuse not to take Harry to the Hall of Prophecy...

Harry was wondering if he could even *get* a Bayesian calculation out of this. Of course, the point of a subjective Bayesian calculation wasn't that, after you made up a bunch of numbers, multiplying them out would give you an exactly right answer. The real point was that the *process* of making up numbers would force you to tally all the relevant facts and weigh all the relative probabilities. Like realizing, as soon as you actually *thought* about the probability of the Dark Mark not-fading *if* You-Know-Who *was* dead, that the probability wasn't low enough for the observation to count as strong evidence. One version of the process was to tally hypotheses and list out evidence, make up all the numbers, do the calculation, and then throw out the final answer and go with your brain's gut feeling *after* you'd forced it to really *weigh* everything. The trouble was that the items of evidence weren't conditionally independent, and there were multiple interacting background facts of interest...

...well, *one* thing at least was certain.

If the calculation could be done at all, it was going to take a piece of paper and a pencil.

In the fireplace at one side of the Headmaster's office, the flames suddenly flared up, turning from orange to bright billious green.

"Ah!" said Professor McGonagall into the uncomfortable non-silence. "That would be Mad-Eye Moody, I suppose."

"Let this matter bide for now," the Headmaster said in some relief, as he too turned to regard the Floo. "I believe we are about to receive some news regarding it, as well."

Hypothesis: Hermione Granger
(April 8th, 1992, 6:53pm)

Meanwhile in the Great Hall of Hogwarts, as the students who didn't have secret meetings with the Headmaster bustled about their dinner around four huge tables—

"It's funny," Dean Thomas said thoughtfully. "I didn't believe the General when he said that what we learned would change us forever, and we'd never be able to return to a normal life afterward. Once we knew. Once we saw what *he* could see."

"I know!" said Seamus Finnigan. "I thought it was just a joke too! Like, you know, everything else General Chaos ever said ever."

"But now—" Dean said sadly. "We *can't* go back, can we? It'd be like going back to a Muggle school after having been to Hogwarts. We've just... we've just got to stay around each other. That's all we can do, or we'll go crazy."

Seamus Finnigan, next to him, just nodded wordlessly and ate another bite of veldbeest.

Around them, the conversation at the Gryffindor table continued. It wasn't as *relentless* as it'd been yesterday, but now and then the topic wandered back.

"Well, there must've been *some* sort of love triangle," said a second-year witch named Samantha Crowley (she never answered when asked if there was any relation). "The question is, which ways was it *going* before it all went wrong? Who was in love with who—and whether or not that person loved them back—I don't know *how* many possibilities there are—"

"Sixty-four," said Sarah Varyabil, a blossoming beauty who probably should've been Sorted into Ravenclaw or Hufflepuff instead. "No, wait, that's wrong. I mean, if nobody loved Malfoy and Malfoy didn't love anyone then he wouldn't really be part of the love triangle... this is going to take Arithmancy, could you all wait two minutes?"

"It's so *sad,*" said Sherice Ngaserin, who actually had tears in her eyes. "They were just—they were just so *obviously* meant to be together!"

"You mean Potter and Malfoy?" said a second-year named Colleen Johnson. "I know—their families hated each other so much, there's no way they *couldn't* fall in love—"

"No, I mean all three of them," said Sherice.

This produced a brief pause in the huddled conversation. Dean Thomas was quietly choking on his lemonade, trying not to make any sounds as it trickled out of his mouth and soaked into his shirt.

"*Wow,*" said a dark-haired witch by the name of Nancy Hua. "That's really... *sophisticated* of you, Sherice."

"Look, you all, we need to keep this realistic," said Eloise Rosen, a tall witch who'd been General of an army and hence spoke with an air of authority. "We *know*—because she kissed him—that Granger was in love with Potter. So the only reason she'd try to kill Malfoy is if she knew that she was losing Potter to him. There's no need to make it all sound so complicated—you're all acting like this is a play instead of real life!"

"But even if Granger was in love, it's still funny that she'd just *snap* like that," said Chloe, whose black robes combined with her night-black skin to make her look like a darkened silhouette. "I don't know... I think maybe there's more to this than just a romance novel gone wrong. I think maybe most people haven't got any idea at all what's going on."

"*Yes! Thank you!*" burst out Dean Thomas. "Look—don't you realize—like Harry Potter *told* us all—if you didn't *predict* that something would happen, if it took you completely by surprise, then what you believed about the world when you *didn't* see it coming, isn't enough to explain..." Dean's voice trailed off, as he saw that nobody was listening. "It's *completely hopeless,* isn't it?"

"You hadn't figured that out yet?" said Lavender Brown, who was sitting across the table from her two fellow former Chaotics. "How'd you ever make Lieutenant?"

"Oh, you two be quiet!" Sherice snapped at them. "It's obvious you both want the three of them for yourselves!"

"I mean it!" Chloe said. "What if what's *really* going on is different from all the, you know, *normal* things that all the *ordinary* people are

talking about? What if somebody—*made* Granger do what she did, just like Potter was trying to tell everyone?"

"I think Chloe's right," said a foreign-looking boy wizard who always introduced himself as 'Adrian Turnipseed', though his parents had actually named him Mad Drongo. "I think this whole time there's been..." Adrian lowered his voice ominously, "...a *hidden hand*..." Adrian raised his voice again, "shaping all that's happened. One person who's been behind *everything*, from the beginning. And I don't mean Professor Snape, either."

"You don't mean—" gasped Sarah.

"Yes," Adrian said. "The *real* one behind it all is—*Tracey Davis!*"

"That's what I think too," Chloe said. "After all—" She glanced around rapidly. "Ever since that thing with the bullies and the ceiling—even the trees in the forests around Hogwarts look like they're *shaking*, like they're *afraid*—"

Seamus Finnigan was frowning thoughtfully. "I think I see where Harry gets his... *you know*... from," Seamus said, lowering his voice so that only Lavender and Dean could hear.

"Oh, I totally know what you mean," Lavender said. She didn't bother to lower her own voice. "It's a wonder he didn't crack and just start killing everyone *ages* ago."

"Personally," Dean said, also in a quieter voice, "I'd say the really scary part is—that could've been *us.*"

"Yeah," said Lavender. "It's a good thing *we're* all perfectly sane now."

Dean and Seamus nodded solemnly.

Hypothesis: G.L.
(April 8th, 1992, 8:08pm)

The Floo-Fire of the Headmaster's office blazed a bright pale-green, the fire concentrating in on itself into a spinning emeraldine whirlwind, and then flared even brighter and spit a human figure into the air—

There was a blur of motion as the resolving figure snapped up a wand, smoothly spinning with the Floo's momentum like a ballet dance step, so that his firing arc covered the entire 360-degree arc of the room; and then just as abruptly, the figure stopped in place.

In the first instant that Harry saw that man, before Harry even took in the eye, he noticed the scars on the hands, the scars on the face, like the man had been burned and cut over his entire body; though only the man's hands and face were visible, of all his flesh. The rest of the man's body was hidden, encased not in robes, but in leather that looked more like armor than clothing; dark gray leather, matching the man's mess of grayed hair.

The next thing that Harry's vision comprehended was the brilliant blue eye occupying the right side of the man's face.

One part of Harry's mind realized that the person whom Professor McGonagall had named 'Mad-Eye Moody' was the same as the one Dumbledore had called 'Alastor', within the memory Dumbledore had shown Harry; an image from before whatever event had scarred every inch of the man's body and taken a chunk out of his nose—

And another part of his mind noticed the jolt of adrenaline. Harry had drawn his wand in sheer reflex when the man had spun out of the Floo like that, there'd been something about it that felt like *ambush,* Harry's hand had already started to level his wand for a *Somnium* before he'd managed to stop himself. Even now the armored man was holding his wand level, not pointed at any particular person but covering the whole room, and that wand was already in perfect line with his eyes, like a soldier sighting down a gun. There was danger in the man's stance and the set of his boots, danger in the leather armor he wore and danger in that brilliant blue eye.

When the scarred man spoke, addressing the Headmaster, his voice was edged. "I suppose you think this room is secure?"

"There are only friends here," Dumbledore said.

The man's head jerked toward Harry. "That include *him*?"

"If Harry Potter is not our friend," Dumbledore said gravely, "then we are all certainly doomed; so we may as well assume that he is."

The man's wand stayed level, not quite pointing at Harry. "Boy almost drew on me just then."

"Er..." Harry said. He noticed that his hand was still tightly holding the wand, and consciously relaxed his hand and dropped it back to his side. "Sorry about that, you looked a bit... combat-ready."

The scarred man's wand moved slightly away from where it had almost pointed at Harry, though it didn't lower, and the man let out a short bark of laughter. "Constant vigilance, eh, lad?" said the man.

"It's not paranoia if they really are out to get you," Harry recited the proverb.

The man turned fully toward Harry; and insofar as Harry could read any expression on the scarred face, the man now looked *interested*.

Dumbledore's eyes had regained some of the brilliant twinkle that they'd had before the Azkaban breakout, a smile beneath his silver mustache as though that smile had never left. "Harry, this is Alastor Moody, called also Mad-Eye, who will command the Order of the Phoenix after me—if anything should happen to me, that is. Alastor, this is Harry Potter. I have every hope the two of you shall get along *fantastically*."

"I've heard a good deal about you, boy," said Mad-Eye Moody. His one dark natural eye stayed fixed on Harry, while the point of brilliant blue spun frantically, seeming to rotate all the way around within its socket. "Not all of it good. Heard they're calling you the Dementor Spooker, in the Department."

After some consideration, Harry decided to reply with a knowing smile.

"How'd you pull off that one, boy?" the man said softly. Now his blue eye was fixed on Harry as well. "I had a little chat with one of the Aurors who escorted the Dementor there from Azkaban. Beth Martin

said it came straight from the pit, and no-one gave it any special instructions along the way. Of course, she could be lying."

"There wasn't any sneaky trick to that one," Harry said. "I just did it the hard way. Of course, I could also be lying."

Dumbledore was leaning back in his chair, chuckling in the background, like he was just another device in the Headmaster's Office and that was the sound he made.

The scarred man turned back to face the Headmaster, though his wand stayed pointed low and in Harry's general direction. When he spoke his voice was gruff and businesslike. "I have a lead on a recent host of Voldie's. You're certain his shade is in Hogwarts now?"

"Not *certain*—" Dumbledore began.

"Say *what?*" Harry interrupted. After having nearly concluded that the Dark Lord didn't exist, it was a shock to hear it being discussed that matter-of-factly.

"Voldie's host," Moody said shortly. "The one he possessed before he took over Granger."

"If the tales speak true," Dumbledore said, "there is some device of power which binds Voldemort's shade to this world; and by that means he may bargain with a host for possession of their body, conferring on them some portion of his power and his pride—"

"So the obvious question is who's gained too much power too quickly," Moody said abruptly. "And it turns out that there's a fellow who's gone and banished the Bandon Banshee, staked an entire rogue vampire clan in Asia, tracked down the Wagga-Wagga Werewolf, and exterminated a pack of ghouls using a tea-strainer. *And* he's milking it for all it's worth; there's been talk of the Order of Merlin. Seems to have turned into a charmer and a politician, not just a powerful wizard."

"Dear me," murmured Dumbledore. "Are you certain that he is not relying on his own skills?"

"Checked his grades," Moody said. "Record shows Gilderoy Lockhart received a Troll in his Defense O.W.L.S., didn't bother with the N.E.W.T. Just the sort of sucker to take the deal Voldie was offering." The blue eye whirled crazily within its socket. "Unless you remember

Lockhart as a student, and think he had enough potential to do all that by himself?"

"No," said Professor McGonagall. She frowned. "Not a chance, I should say."

"I fear I must agree," Dumbledore said with an undertone of pain. "Ah, Gilderoy, you poor fool..."

Moody's grin was more like a snarl. "Three in the morning work for you, Albus? Lockhart should be at his home tonight."

Harry listened to this with increasing alarm, wondering if even the *Ministry* had any rules about magistrates needing to issue warrants—never mind the illegal vigilante organization Harry now seemed to have joined. "Excuse me," Harry said. "What *exactly* happens at three in the morning?"

There must have been something in Harry's voice that gave him away, because the scarred man whirled on him. "You have a problem with that, boy?"

Harry paused, trying to figure out how to phrase this to the stranger—

"You want to take him down yourself?" pressed the scarred man. "Get revenge for your parents, eh?"

"No," Harry said as politely he could. "Honestly—look, if we knew for *certain* he was a willing host for You-Know-Who, that's one thing, but if we're *not* sure and you're heading off to kill him—"

"Kill?" Mad-Eye Moody snorted. "It's what's locked up in his head," Moody tapped his forehead, "that we need from him, boy. If we're lucky, Voldie can't wipe the sucker's memories as easy as in his living days, and Lockhart will remember what the horcrux looked like."

Harry mentally noted down the word *horcrux* for future research, and said, "I'm just worried that someone innocent—what sounds like a pretty decent person, if he *did* do all that himself—might be about to get hurt."

"Aurors hurt people," the scarred man said shortly. "Bad people, if you're lucky. Some days you won't be lucky, and that's all there is to it. Just remember, Dark Wizards hurt a lot more people than we do."

Harry took a deep breath. "Can you at least *try* not to hurt this person, in case he's *not*—"

"What is a first-year doing in this room, Albus?" demanded the scarred man, now whirling to face the Headmaster. "And don't tell me it's for what he did when he was a baby."

"Harry Potter is not an ordinary first-year," the Headmaster said quietly. "He has already accomplished feats impossible enough to shock even me, Alastor. His is the only intellect in the Order which might someday match that of Voldemort himself, as you or I never could."

The scarred man leaned over the Headmaster's desk. "He's a liability. Naive. Doesn't know a bloody thing about what war's like. I want him out of here and all his memories of the Order wiped before one of Voldie's servants plucks them straight out of his mind—"

"I'm an Occlumens, actually."

Mad-Eye Moody directed a narrow look at the Headmaster, who nodded.

And then the scarred man turned to face Harry, their gazes meeting.

The sudden fury of the Legilimency attack almost made Harry fall off his chair, as a blade of white-hot steel cut into the imaginary person at the forefront of his mind. Harry hadn't had a chance to practice since Mr. Bester's training, and Harry very nearly lost his grip on the imaginary person the back-of-his-mind was pretending to be, as that person's world turned into searing lava and a furious probe of questions. Harry almost lost his grip on only *pretending* to hallucinate, only *pretending* to be the imaginary person that was screaming in shock and pain as the Legilimency tore apart his sanity and reshaped him to believe that he was on fire—

Harry managed to break eye contact, dropping his eyes to Moody's chin.

"You're out of practice, boy," Moody said. Harry wasn't looking at the man's face, but his voice was deadly grim. "And I'll warn you of this but once. Voldie isn't like any other Legilimens in recorded history. He doesn't need to look you in the eyes, and if your shields are that rusty he'd creep in so softly you'd never notice a thing."

"Duly noted," Harry said to the scarred chin. Harry was more shaken than he'd have admitted; Mr. Bester hadn't been anywhere near that powerful, and had never tested Harry like *that*. Pretending to be someone hurting that much had... Harry couldn't find words for describing what it felt like to contain an imaginary person in that much pain, but it hadn't been *normal*. "Do I get any credit for being an Occlumens in the first place?"

"So you're think you're all grown up already, eh? Look me in the eyes!"

Harry strengthened his shields, and looked once more into the dark grey eye and the brilliant blue.

"Ever watched someone die?" asked Mad-Eye Moody.

"My parents," Harry said evenly. "I recovered the memory in January when I went in front of a Dementor to learn the Patronus Charm. I remember You-Know-Who's voice—" A chill went through Harry's body, his wand twitching in his hand. "My main tactical report is that You-Know-Who could speak the Killing Curse in less than half a second, but you probably already knew that."

There was a gasp from Professor McGonagall's direction, and Severus's face had tightened.

"All right," Mad-Eye Moody said softly. A strange, thin grin twisted up the lips within the scarred face. "I'll make you the same offer I'd make to any trainee Auror. Land one touch on me, boy—one hit, one spell—and I'll concede your right to talk back to me."

"Alastor!" exclaimed Professor McGonagall's voice. "Surely that's an unreasonable test! Mr. Potter, whatever his other merits, does not have a hundred years of fighting experience!"

Harry's eyes made a lightning dart around the room, passing over the peculiar devices, glancing past Dumbledore and Severus and the Sorting Hat, settling briefly here and there. Harry couldn't see Professor McGonagall from where he was, but that didn't matter. There was only one device he'd really wanted to look at, and the point of all the other glances had just been to conceal which one.

"All righty," Harry said, and hopped off his chair, ignoring Professor McGonagall's inhalation and the Potions Master's snort of disbelief.

Dumbledore's eyebrows had lifted, and Moody was grinning like a tiger. "Be sure to wake me up in forty minutes if he does get me." Harry settled into a duelist's starting stance, his wand held low. "Let's go, then—"

⁂

Harry opened his eyes, his head feeling like it had been stuffed with cotton wool.

Everyone else was gone from the Headmaster's office, the Floo-Fire dimmed; only Dumbledore still waited behind the desk.

"Hello, Harry," the Headmaster said quietly.

"I didn't even see him *move*," Harry marvelled, muscles creaking as he sat up.

"You were standing two paces away from Alastor Moody," said Dumbledore, "and you took your eye off his wand."

Harry nodded, as he took the Cloak of Invisibility out of his pouch. "I mean—I was taking the dueling stance so that he'd think I was a standard idiot and underestimate me—but I have to admit, *that* was impressive."

"So you planned it all along, Harry?" Dumbledore said.

"Of course," Harry said. "Note how I'm doing this as soon as I wake up, rather than pausing to think of it."

Harry drew the hood of the Cloak over his head, and glanced back up at the wall clock he'd surreptitiously glanced at earlier.

It had then shown around twenty-three minutes after eight, and now it was five minutes after nine.

⁂

Minerva stared as the boy put himself into the dueling stance, his wand held low. For a second Minerva wondered if Harry might possibly—no, that was completely ridiculous, it was *Mad-Eye Moody* and that was beyond impossible. Of course that was what she'd thought about his partial Transfiguration, too...

"Let's go, then," Harry said and fell over.

Severus gave a single chuckle. "Mr. Potter has his points, I must confess," the Potions Master said. "Though I would never say it while he was awake, and if you repeat the words I shall deny them, for the boy's ego is quite large enough already. Mr. Potter does have his points, Mad-Eye, but duelling is not among them."

Mad-Eye's own chuckle was lower and grimmer. "Oh, yes," said Mad-Eye. "Only fools duel. Standing like that and waiting for me to attack, what *was* the boy thinking? Why, I ought to give him a scar, to remember this occasion—"

"Alastor!" barked Albus, just as she cried "Stop!", Severus dashed forward, and Mad-Eye Moody deliberately leveled his wand on Harry Potter's body.

"*Stupefy!*"

Mad-Eye's body seemed to almost flicker as he spun on his wooden foot like lightning, faster than she'd ever seen anyone move without magic, the red Stunning Hex passing through the suddenly empty air and barely missing Severus to crash into the opposite wall, and by the time her eyes jerked back to Moody there were seventeen radiant orbs in the pattern of a *Sagitta Magica,* visible for only an instant before they streaked brilliance and struck *something* that fell to the floor with a thud—

⁂

"Hello again, Harry," said Dumbledore.

"I cannot *believe* that guy's reaction time," Harry said, brushing off his Cloak as he stood up from where he'd been lying invisible on the floor, unseen by his previous self. "I can't believe his movement speed either. I'm going to have to figure out some way to zap him without speaking an incantation that gives it away..."

⁂

- and then Mad-Eye ducked hard and fast, his hands hitting flat on the floor. She almost didn't see the two tiny white threads passing through the space he'd been, but her eyes went to the blue spark when the threads impacted on one of the Headmaster's devices, and by the time she managed to turn her eyes back, Mad-Eye had spun smoothly up to his feet, his wand was dancing unseeably fast and there was another thudding sound—

⁂

"Hello again, Harry."

"Pardon me, Headmaster, but could you let me go down your stairs, and then come back up again, before I make the final jump backward? This is going to take longer than one hour of preparation—"

⁂

Minerva gaped at Mad-Eye Moody, who hadn't lowered his wand in the slightest; and Severus had a look on his face that was almost like shock.

"Well, boy?" said Mad-Eye Moody. "What else have you got?"

Harry Potter's head appeared, floating in midair as an invisible hand drew back the hood of his invisibility cloak.

"That eye," said Harry Potter. There was a strange fierce light in the boy's eyes. "That isn't any ordinary device. It can see right through my invisibility cloak. You dodged my Transfigured taser as soon as I started raising it, even though I didn't speak any incantations. And now that I've watched it again—you spotted all my Time-Turned selves the moment you Flooed into this room, didn't you?"

Mad-Eye Moody was smiling, the same teeth-bared grin she'd seen him wear as they'd faced off against Voldemort himself. "Spend a hundred years hunting Dark wizards, and you see everything," said Moody. "I once arrested a young Japanese who tried a similar trick. He found out the hard way that his shadow replica technique was no match for this eye of mine."

"You see in all directions," Harry Potter said, that strange fierce light still in his gaze. "No matter where that eye is pointing, it sees everything around you."

Moody's tiger-grin grew wider. "There's no more of you in this room, now," Mad-Eye said. "Think that's because you'll give up after this time, or because you'll win? Any bets, boy?"

"It's my final attempt because I decided to stake my last three hours on one shot," said Harry Potter. "As for whether I win—"

There was a blur filling the whole air of the Headmaster's office. Mad-Eye Moody leapt to one side with blinding speed and an instant later Harry's head darted backward as he cried "*Stuporfy!*"

Three shimmers in the air went past Harry's moving head, just as a red bolt erupted from Harry's location, shooting past Moody as he dodged in yet another direction—

If she'd blinked, she would have missed it, the red bolt making an angled turn in midair and slamming into Moody's ear.

Moody fell.

Harry Potter's floating head dropped to the height of a first-year on their hands and knees, then dropped further to the ground, his face showing sudden exhaustion.

Minerva McGonagall said, "What in *Merlin's name* just—"

*

"So you went to Flitwick, then," Moody said. The retired Auror was now sitting in a chair, drinking long draughts from a restorative in a bottle he'd taken off his belt.

Harry Potter nodded, now sitting in his own chair instead of perched on an armrest. "I tried the Defense Professor first, but—" The boy grimaced. "He... wasn't available. Well, I'd decided it was worth risking five House points, and if you say a risk is worth it, you can't complain when you have to pay up. Anyway, I figured that if you had an eye that saw things other people couldn't see, then as Isaac Asimov pointed out in *Second Foundation*, the weapon to use is a brilliant light. Read enough

science fiction, you know, and you'll read everything at least once. Anyway, I told Professor Flitwick that I needed a Charm that would make a huge number of shapes, bright and flickering and filling the whole office, but invisible, so only your eye could see them. I had no idea what it would even *mean* to cast an illusion and then make it invisible, but I figured if I didn't mention that out loud, Professor Flitwick would just do it anyway, and he did. Turns out there was no spell like that I could cast myself, but Flitwick Charmed me a one-time device for it—though I had to persuade him that it wasn't cheating, since nothing could *possibly* be cheating against an Auror who'd lived long enough to retire. And then I still didn't see how I could hit you, when you were moving that fast. So I asked about targeted spells, and that was when Flitwick showed me that hex I cast at the end, the Swerving Stunner. It's one of Professor Flitwick's own inventions—he's a champion duellist as well as a Charms Master—"

"I know that, son."

"Sorry. Anyway, the Professor says he left the duelling circuit before he got a chance to use that spell, since it only works as a finishing move on an unshielded opponent. The hex gets as close to the target as possible along its original trajectory, and then once it detects that the target is getting more distant again, the hex turns in midair and heads straight for the target. It can only swerve once—but the incantation sounds very close to 'Stupefy' and the hex is the same red color, so if the enemy thinks it's a regular Stunning Hex and tries a normal dodge, that midair retargeting will finish them off. Oh, and the Professor requested that none of us talk about his special move, just in case he does get a chance to use it during competition someday."

"But—" said Professor McGonagall. She glanced at Mad-Eye Moody, who was nodding his approval, and at Severus, who was keeping his face decidedly blank. "Mr. Potter, you just stunned *Mad-Eye Moody!* The most famous Dark wizard hunter in the history of the Auror Office! That should've been impossible!"

Moody let out a dark chuckle. "What's *your* answer to that one, kid? I'm curious."

"Well..." Harry said. "First of all, Professor McGonagall, neither of

us were fighting seriously."

"Neither of you?"

"Of course," Harry said. "In a serious fight, Mr. Moody would've dropped all my copies immediately without waiting for them to attack. And on my side, if it was *actually* necessary to take down the most famous Auror in the history of the office, I'd get Headmaster Dumbledore to do it for me. And beyond that... since that *wasn't* a real fight..." Harry paused. "How can I put this? Wizards are used to duels where people fight back and forth with spells for a while. But if two Muggles with guns stand in a small room and fire bullets at each other... then whoever hits first, wins. And if one of them is deliberately missing his shots, giving the other person one chance after another—like Mr. Moody gave me one chance after another—well, you'd have to be pretty pathetic to lose."

"Oh, not *that* pathetic," Moody said with a slightly threatening grin.

Harry didn't seem to notice. "You might say that Mr. Moody was testing me to see if I would try to *fight* him, or try to *win.* That is, whether I'd carry out the *role* of somebody fighting—use standard spells I already knew, even though I didn't expect the *consequences* of that action to be victory—or if I'd search through unusual plans until I found something that *could* win. Like the difference between a student who sits in class because that's what students do, versus a student who cares enough to ask themselves what it takes to *actually* learn a piece of material, and practices however necessary—you see, Professor McGonagall? When you look at it that way—realize that Mr. Moody was giving me chances, and that I shouldn't attack in the first place unless I think I can win—then I don't come out looking so well, since it actually took me three tries to get him. Plus, like I said, in a real fight Mr. Moody could've turned *himself* invisible, or put up shields—"

"Don't go relying too much on shields, boy," Mad-Eye said. The leather-clad Auror took another sip from his restorative flask. "What you learn in your first year at the academy doesn't stay true forever, not against the strongest Dark Wizards. Every shield ever made, there's some curse that goes straight through it, if you're not quick enough to cast the counter. And there's one curse that goes through everything,

and it's a curse any Death Eater will use."

Harry Potter nodded gravely. "Right, some spells are impossible to block. I'll remember that, in case anyone casts the Killing Curse at me. Again."

"That kind of cleverness gets people killed, boy, and don't you forget it."

A sad-sounding sigh from the Boy-Who-Lived. "I know. Sorry."

"So, son. You had something to say about when Albus and I go after Lockhart?"

Harry opened his mouth, then paused. "I won't tell you how to run a war," the Boy-Who-Lived said eventually. "I don't have any experience at that. All I know is that there are consequences. Please be advised that my own assessment is that Lockhart is probably innocent, so if you can avoid hurting him without too much risk—" The boy shrugged. "I don't know the cost. Just please, if you can, be careful not to hurt him if he's innocent."

"If I can," said Moody.

"And—you're aiming to look through his mind for evidence about the Dark Lord, aren't you? I don't know what the rules are in magical Britain about admissible evidence—but everyone's always guilty of breaking *some* law or another, there's just too many laws. So if it's *not* about the Dark Lord, don't turn him in to the Ministry, just Obliviate him and go, okay?"

Moody frowned. "Son, nobody gains power that fast without being up to *something*."

"Then leave it for the ordinary Aurors, if and when they find evidence the ordinary way. Please, Mr. Moody. Call it a quirk of my Muggle upbringing, but if it's *not* about the war I don't want us to be the evil police who break into people's houses in the middle of the night, rummage through their minds and send them off to Azkaban."

"I don't see the sense of it, son, but I suppose I could do you the favor."

"Is there aught else, Alastor?" inquired Albus.

"Yes," said Moody. "About that Defense Professor of yours—"

Hypothesis: Gilderoy Lockhart: END

Hypothesis: Dumbledore
(April 9th, 1992, 5:32pm)

As Professor Quirrell slowly raised up his tea, the teacup jerked in midair, sending the dark translucent liquid just barely slopping over the side, so that only three single drops crawled down the side of the teacup. Harry would have missed it, if he hadn't happened to be watching closely; for Professor Quirrell's hand was perfectly steady on the cup before and after.

If that small jerky motion advanced to a constant tremor, it would be the end of any non-wandless magic for the Defense Professor. Wandwork had no room for trembling fingers. How much that would *actually* handicap Professor Quirrell, if at all, Harry couldn't guess. The Defense Professor was certainly capable of wandless magic, yet still tended to use a wand for larger things—but for him that might only be a convenience...

"Insanity," said Professor Quirrell, as he carefully sipped from his tea—he was looking at the teacup, not at Harry, which was unusual for him—"can be a signature all its own."

The Defense Professor's small office was silent, the sound-warded room quiet in a way the Headmaster's office never could be. Sometimes the two of them both happened to finish exhaling or inhaling at the same time; and then there was an auditory emptiness that was almost a sound in itself.

"I'll agree with that in one sense," Harry said. "If somebody tells me that everyone is *staring* at them and that their underwear is being dusted with thought-controlling powder, I know they're psychotic, because that's the standard signature of psychosis. But if you tell me that *anything* confusing points to Albus Dumbledore as a suspect, that

seems... overreaching. Just because I can't see a purpose doesn't mean there *is* no purpose."

"Purposeless?" said Professor Quirrell. "Oh, but the madness of Dumbledore is not that he is purposeless, but that he has too many purposes. The Headmaster might have planned this to make Lucius Malfoy throw away his game for vengeance on you—or it might be a dozen other plots. Who knows what the Headmaster thinks he has reason to do, when he has found reason to do so many strange things already?"

Harry had politely declined tea, even knowing that Professor Quirrell would know what it meant. He'd considered bringing his own can of soda—but had decided against that as well, after realizing how easy it would be for the Defense Professor to teleport in a bit of potion, even if the two of them couldn't touch each other with direct magic.

"I have seen a little now of Dumbledore," Harry said. "Unless everything I have seen is a lie, I find it difficult to believe that he would plot to send any Hogwarts student to Azkaban. Ever."

"Ah," the Defense Professor said softly, the tiny reflection of the teacup gleaming in his pale eyes. "But perhaps that is another signature, Mr. Potter. You have not yet comprehended the perspective of a man like Dumbledore. If he must, in some sufficiently noble cause, sacrifice a student—why, who would he choose, but she who declared herself a heroine?"

That gave Harry some pause. It might just be hindsight bias, but that *did* seem to concentrate some of that hypotheses's probability mass onto framing Hermione in particular. Similarly, Professor Quirrell *had* predicted in advance that Dumbledore might target Draco...

But if it's you behind all of this, Professor, you might have shaped your plans to frame the Headmaster, and taken care to cast suspicion on him in advance.

The concept of 'evidence' had something of a different meaning, when you were dealing with someone who had declared themselves to play the game at 'one level higher than you'.

"I see your point, Professor," Harry said evenly, giving no hint of his other thoughts. "So you think it most probable that it was the Headmaster who framed Hermione?"

"Not necessarily, Mr. Potter." Professor Quirrell drained his teacup in one swallow and then set it down, the cup making a sharp rap as it descended. "There is also Severus Snape—though what he might think to gain from this, I could not guess. Thus he is not my prime suspect either."

"Then who is?" Harry said, somewhat puzzled. Professor Quirrell surely wasn't about to reply 'You-Know-Who'—

"The Aurors have a rule," said Professor Quirrell. "Investigate the victim. Many would-be criminals imagine that if they are the apparent victims of a crime, they shall not be suspected. So many criminals imagine it, indeed, that every senior Auror has seen it a dozen times over."

"You're not seriously trying to convince me that *Hermione*—"

The Defense Professor was giving Harry one of those slit-eyed *looks* that meant he was being stupid.

Draco? Draco had been interrogated under Veritaserum—but Lucius might have had enough control to subvert Aurors to... oh.

"You think *Lucius Malfoy* set up *his own son?*" Harry said.

"Why not?" Professor Quirrell said softly. "From Mr. Malfoy's recorded testimony, Mr. Potter, I gather that you enjoyed some success in changing Mr. Malfoy's political views. If Lucius Malfoy learned of that earlier... he might have decided that his *former* heir had become a liability."

"I don't buy it," Harry said flatly.

"You are being wantonly naive, Mr. Potter. The history books are full of family disputes turned murderous, for inconveniences and threats far less than those which Mr. Malfoy posed to his father. I suppose next you will tell me that Lord Malfoy of the Death Eaters is far too gentle to wish his son such harm." A tinge of heavy sarcasm.

"Well, yes, frankly," Harry said. "Love is real, Professor, a phenomenon with observable effects. Brains are real, emotions are real, and love is as much a part of the real world as apples and trees. If you made experimental predictions without taking parental love into account, you'd have a heck of a time explaining why my own parents didn't abandon me at an orphanage after the Incident with the Science Project."

The Defense Professor did not react to this at all.

Harry continued. "From what Draco says, Lucius prioritized him over important Wizengamot votes. That's significant evidence, since there's less expensive ways to fake love, if you just want to fake it. And it's not like the prior probability of a parent loving their child is *low*. I suppose it's possible that Lucius was just taking on the *role* of a loving father, and he renounced that role after he learned Draco was consorting with Muggleborns. But as the saying goes, Professor, one must distinguish possibility from probability."

"All the better the crime," the Defense Professor said, still in that soft tone, "if no one would believe it of him."

"And how would Lucius even Memory-Charm Hermione in the first place, without setting off the wards? *He's* not a Professor—oh, right, you think it's Professor Snape."

"Wrong," said the Defense Professor. "Lucius Malfoy would trust no servant with that mission. But suppose some Hogwarts Professor, intelligent enough to cast a well-formed Memory Charm but of no great fighting ability, is visiting Hogsmeade. From a dark alley the black-clad form of Malfoy steps forth—he would go in person, for this—and speaks to her a single word."

"*Imperio*."

"*Legilimens,* rather," said Professor Quirrell. "I do not know if the Hogwarts wards would trigger for a returning Professor under the Imperius Curse. And if I do not know, Malfoy probably does not know either. But Malfoy is a perfect Occlumens at least; he might be able to use Legilimency. And for the target...perhaps Aurora Sinistra; none would question the Astronomy Professor moving about at night."

"Or even more obviously, Professor Sprout," said Harry. "Since she's the last person anyone would suspect."

The Defense Professor hesitated minutely. "Perhaps."

"Actually," Harry said then, putting a thoughtful frown on his face, "I don't suppose you know offhand if any of the current Professors at Hogwarts were around back when Mr. Hagrid got framed in 1943?"

"Dumbledore taught Transfiguration, Kettleburn taught Magical Creatures, and Vector taught Arithmancy," Professor Quirrell said at once. "And I believe that Bathsheda Babbling, now of Ancient Runes,

was then a Ravenclaw prefect. But Mr. Potter, there is no reason to suppose that anyone besides You-Know-Who was involved in *that* affair."

Harry shrugged artfully. "Seemed worth asking the question, just to check. Anyway, Professor, I agree it's possible that some outsider Legilimized a member of Hogwarts staff—and then Obliviated them afterward, there's no way anyone would forget that part. But I *don't* think Lucius Malfoy is a probable candidate for the mastermind. It's possible but not probable that all of Lucius's apparent love for Draco was just a sense of duty, and that it all went up in a puff of smoke. It's possible though not probable that everything Lucius did in front of the Wizengamot was just an act. People's outsides do not always resemble their insides, like you said. But there's one piece of evidence that doesn't fit at all."

"And that would be?" said the Defense Professor, his eyes half-lidded.

"Lucius tried to reject a hundred thousand Galleons for Hermione's life. I saw how surprised the Wizengamot was, when Lucius said he was refusing it despite the rules of honor. The Wizengamot didn't *expect* that of him. Why *wouldn't* he just take the money while acting all indignant and pretending to grit his teeth? He wouldn't actually care that much about throwing Hermione into Azkaban."

There was a pause. "Perhaps the role he was playing ran away with him," said Professor Quirrell. "It does happen, Mr. Potter, in the heat of the moment."

"Perhaps," Harry said. "But it's still one more *improbability* to be postulated—and by the time you have to add up that many excuses in a theory, it can't be at the top of the list anymore. Anything else in particular you think I ought to think about, within the range of all other possibilities?"

There was a long silence. The Defense Professor's eyes dropped down to look at the empty teacup before them, seeming unusually distant.

"I suppose I can think of one final suspect," the Defense Professor said at last.

Harry nodded.

The Defense Professor didn't seem to notice, but only spoke on. "Has the Headmaster has told you anything—even a hint—about Professor Trelawney's prophecy?"

"*Huh?*" Harry said automatically, converting his own sudden shock into the best dissembling he could manage. It probably was at the wrong level to fool Professor Quirrell but Harry *certainly* couldn't take time to think before replying—*wait, but how on Earth would Professor Quirrell know about* that – "Professor Trelawney made a prophecy?"

"You *were* there to hear its beginning," Professor Quirrell said, frowning. "You called out to the entire school that the prophecy could not be about you, since you were not coming here, you were already here."

HE IS COMING. THE ONE WHO WILL TEAR APART THE VERY—

And that was as far as Professor Trelawney had gotten before Dumbledore had grabbed her and vanished.

"Oh, *that* prophecy," Harry said. "Sorry! It went clear out of my mind."

Harry thought he'd put too much force into the end statement, and was 80%-expecting Professor Quirrell to say, *Aha, now Mr. Potter, what is this mysterious* other *prophecy you went to such lengths to deny—*

"That is foolish," the Defense Professor said sharply, "if indeed you are telling me the truth. Prophecies are not trivial things. I have racked my brain much over the little that I heard, but such a small fragment is simply too little."

"You think the one who's coming is the one who might've framed Hermione?" said Harry. As his mind allocated yet another hypothesis, *uncertain predicate referent, he-who-is-coming.*

"With no offense meant to Miss Granger," the Defense Professor said with another frown, "her life or death does not seem that important. But someone *was* to come—one who, in your interpretation, was not already there—and someone so significant, and unknown as a player... who knows what *else* they may have done?"

Harry nodded, and mentally sighed because he was going to have to redo his Lord-Voldemort odds calculation with yet another piece of

evidence in the mix.

Professor Quirrell spoke with eyes half-lidded, looking out like through slits. "More than the question of whom the prophecy spoke—who was meant to *hear* it? It is said that fates are spoken to those with the power to cause them or avert them. Dumbledore. Myself. You. As a distant fourth, Severus Snape. But of those four, Dumbledore and Snape would often be in Trelawney's presence. You and I are the ones who would not have spent much time around her before that Sunday. I think it quite likely that the prophecy was meant for one of *us*—before Dumbledore took the prophetess away. *Did* the Headmaster say nothing more to you?" Professor Quirrell's voice was demanding now. "I thought I heard too much force in that denial, Mr. Potter."

"Honestly, no," Harry said. "It had honestly slipped clear out of my mind."

"Then I am rather put out with him," Professor Quirrell said softly. "In fact, I think that I am angry."

Harry said nothing. He didn't even sweat. It might've been a poor reason for confidence, but on this particular score, Harry did happen to be innocent.

Professor Quirrell nodded once, sharply, as though in acknowledgment. "If there is nothing more to say between us, Mr. Potter, you may go."

"I can think of one *other* suspect," Harry said. "Someone you didn't put on your list at all. Would you analyze him to me, Professor?"

There was another of those moments of silence that was almost a sound in itself.

"As for *that* suspect," the Defense Professor said softly, "I think you shall prosecute him on your own, Mr. Potter, without help from me. I have heard such requests before, and experience leads me to refuse. Either I will do too good a job of prosecuting myself, and convince you that I am guilty—or else you will decide that my prosecution was too half-hearted, and that I am guilty. I will remark only this in my defense—that I would have needed a very good reason indeed to jeopardize your fragile alliance with the heir to House Malfoy."

Hypothesis: The Defense Professor
(April 8th, 1992, 8:37pm)

"...so I fear I must take my leave," Dumbledore was saying gravely. "I promised Quirinus... that is to say, I promised the Defense Professor... that I would not make any attempt to uncover his true identity, in my own person or any other."

"And why'd you make a fool promise like that, then?" snapped Mad-Eye Moody.

"It was an unalterable condition of his employment, or so he said." Dumbledore glanced at Professor McGonagall, a wry smile briefly flitting over his face. "And Minerva made it clear to me that Hogwarts *required* a competent Defense Professor this year, even if I had to haul Grindelwald out of Nurmengard and prevail on old affections to persuade him to take the position."

"I did not *quite* phrase it in that fashion—"

"Your expression said it for you, my dear."

And so soon the four of them—Harry, Professor McGonagall, the Potions Master, and Alastor Moody aka 'Mad-Eye'—were ensconced all by themselves in the Headmaster's office.

It was strange how the Headmaster's office seemed... *unbalanced*... without the Headmaster in it. If you didn't have the ancient wizened master to make it all seem *solemn*, you were just four people trying to have a serious meeting while surrounded by bizarre, noisy gidgets. Clearly visible from where Harry had perched himself on his chair's arm was a truncated-conical object, like a cone with its top snipped off, slowly spinning around a pulsating central light which it shaded but did not obscure; and each time the inner light pulsated, the assembly made a *vroop-vroop-vroop* sound that sounded oddly distant, muffled like it was

coming from behind four solid walls, even though the spinning-conical-section thingy was only a meter or two away.

Vroop... vroop... vroop...

And then there were the various still-breathing bodies of Harry Potter he'd stashed in one quiet corner, cleaning up a mess that was his own in more ways than one. (Only one body *wasn't* inside a copy of the Invisibility Cloak; but then it merely took a small effort of concentration for Harry to perceive his other selves beneath the Cloak of which he was master—an effort which Harry had carefully *not* put forth earlier, to avoid getting advance temporal information he wanted to determine by his own decision.) The sad thing was that by this point, having his own body visibly lying in a corner didn't seem all that crazy. It was just... Hogwarts.

"All right, then," Moody said, looking rather sour about it. From within his leather armor, the scarred man took out a black folder. "This is a copy of what Amelia's people put together. She almost certainly knows we've got it, but it's all off the books, that clear? Anyway—"

And Moody told them who the Department of Magical Law Enforcement thought 'Quirinus Quirrell' really was. A seemingly ordinary Hogwarts student (though talented enough that he'd been only narrowly beaten out for the Head Boy position) who'd gone vacationing in Albania after his graduation, disappeared, returned after 25 years, and then been caught up in the Wizarding War—

"It was murdering the House of Monroe that made Voldie's name," Moody said. "Until then, he was just another Dark Wizard with delusions of grandeur and Bellatrix Black. But after that—" Moody snorted. "Every fool in the country flocked to serve him. You would've *hoped* the Wizengamot would turn serious, once they realized Voldie was willing to kill their own sacred selves. And that's just what the bastards did—*hope* that some other bastard would turn serious. None of the cowards wanted to step in front. It was Monroe, Crouch, Bones, and Longbottom. That was nearly everyone in the Ministry who'd dare say a word that might give Voldie offense."

"That was how your House came to be ennobled, Mr. Potter," injected the solemn voice of Professor McGonagall. "There is an ancient

law that if anyone ends a Most Ancient House, whoever avenges that blood will be made Noble. To be sure, the House of Potter was already older than some lines called Ancient. But yours was titled a Noble House of Britain after the end of the war, in recognition that you had avenged the Most Ancient House of Monroe."

"Flush of gratitude and all that," Mad-Eye Moody said sourly. "It didn't last, but at least James and Lily got a fancy title and a useless medal to take to their graves. But that's leaving out eight years of complete horror after Monroe disappeared and Regulus Black—he was Monroe's private source in the Death Eaters, we're pretty sure—was executed by Voldie. Like a dam breaking and gore flooding out, drowning the whole country. Albus bloody Dumbledore himself had to step into Monroe's shoes, and that was barely enough for us to survive."

Harry listened with an odd sense of unreality. Some of it *felt* right, matched up with observation—especially with the speech Professor Quirrell had made before Christmas—and yet...

This was *Professor Quirrell* they were talking about.

"So that's who the Department thinks is your Defense Professor," Mad-Eye Moody finished up his account. "Now what do *you* think, son?"

"Well..." Harry said slowly. *It is also possible to have a mask behind the mask.* "The obvious next thought is that this 'David Monroe' person died in the war after all, and this is just someone else pretending to be David Monroe pretending to be Quirinus Quirrell."

"That's *obvious?*" said Professor McGonagall. "Dear Merlin..."

"Really, boy?" said Mad-Eye Moody, his blue eye spinning rapidly. "I'd say that's a little... *paranoid.*"

You don't know Professor Quirrell, Harry did not say. "It's an easy theory to test," Harry said out loud. "Just check whether the Defense Professor remembers something about the war that the real David Monroe would've known. Though I suppose, if he's playing the part of David Monroe *pretending* to be someone else, he has a good excuse to *pretend* he's pretending he doesn't know what you're talking about—"

"A *little* paranoid," said the scarred man, his voice rising. "*Not paranoid enough! CONSTANT VIGILANCE!* Think about it, lad—what if

the *real* David Monroe never came back from Albania?"

There was a pause.

"I see..." Harry said.

"Of course you do," Professor McGonagall said. "Don't mind me, please. I'll just sit here quietly going mad."

"In this line of work, if you survive, you learn that there's three kinds of Dark Wizards," Moody said grimly; his wand wasn't pointed at anyone, it was angled slightly downward, but it was in his hand. It had never left his hand since the moment he'd entered the room. "There's Dark Wizards that have one name. There's Dark Wizards that have two names. And there's Dark Wizards that change names like you and I change clothes. I saw 'Monroe' go through three Death Eaters like he was snapping twigs. There's not many wizards that good at age forty-five. Dumbledore, maybe, but not many others."

"Perhaps that is true," said the Potions Master from where he was lurking. "But what of it, Mad-Eye? Whatever his identity, Monroe was surely the Dark Lord's enemy. I've heard Death Eaters curse his name even after they thought him dead. They feared him well."

"So far as Defense Professors are concerned," Professor McGonagall said primly, "I shall take it and be grateful."

Moody swung around to glare at her. "Just where the devil was 'Monroe' all those years he was gone, eh? Maybe he thought he could make a name for himself in Britain by opposing Voldie, and vanished away when he found out he was wrong. Then why'd he come back *now,* hah? What's his *new* plan?"

"He, ah..." Harry ventured tentatively. "He *says* he always wanted to be a great Defense Professor because all the best fighting wizards have taught at Hogwarts. And he kind of *is* being an incredibly good Defense Professor, actually... I mean, if he just wanted to keep up a disguise, he could get away with *much* sloppier work..."

Professor McGonagall was nodding firmly.

"Naive," Moody said flatly. "I suppose you all haven't wondered if your Defense Professor set up the whole House of Monroe to be wiped out?"

"*What?*" cried Professor McGonagall.

"Our mystery wizard hears about a missing kid from a Most Ancient House of Britain," Moody said. "Steps into the shoes of 'David Monroe', but stays away from the real Monroe family. But eventually the House is bound to notice something wrong. So this imposter somehow prods Voldie into wiping them all out—maybe leaked a password they'd given him for their wards—and then he was a Lord of the Wizengamot!"

There seemed to be a fight going on inside Harry's mind between Hufflepuff One, who'd never trusted the Defense Professor in the first place; and Hufflepuff Two, who was far too loyal to Harry's friend, Professor Quirrell, to believe something like that just because Moody said so.

It is *kind of obvious, though,* observed his Slytherin part. *I mean, do you actually believe that under natural circumstances, anyone would end up as the last heir to a Most Ancient House AND Lord Voldemort killed his family AND he has to avenge his martial arts sensei? If anything I'd say he went too far over the top in setting up his new identity as the ideal literary hero. That sort of thing doesn't happen in real life.*

This from an orphan who was raised unaware of his heritage, commented Harry's Inner Critic. *With a prophecy about him. You know, I don't think we've ever read a story about two equally destined heroes competing to see who's cliched enough to take down the villain—*

Yes, replied the central Harry over the distant vroop-ing noise in the background, *it's a very sad life we lead and YOU'RE NOT HELPING.*

There's only one thing to do at this point, said Ravenclaw. *And we all know what it is, so why argue?*

But, Harry replied, *how* do *we test experimentally whether or not Professor Quirrell is the original David Monroe? I mean, what sort of observable behaves differently, depending on whether he's the real David Monroe or an impostor?*

"What do you want me to do about it, Mad-Eye?" Professor McGonagall was demanding. "I can't—"

"You can," the scarred man said, glaring at her fiercely. "Just fire the bloody Defense Professor."

"You say that *every* year," said Professor McGonagall.

"Yes, and I'm always right!"

"Constant vigilance or no, Alastor, the students must be taught!"

Moody snorted. "Pfah! I swear the curse gets worse every year, as you lot get more and more reluctant to let them go. Your precious Professor Quirrell would have to *be* Grindelwald in disguise, to get himself sent off!"

"Is he?" Harry couldn't help asking. "I mean, could he *actually* be—"

"I check Grindie's cell every two months," Moody said. "He was there in March."

"Could the person in the cell be a ringer?"

"I administer a blood test for his identity, son."

"Where do you keep the blood you use as a reference?"

"In a safe place." Something like a smile was stretching the scarred lips. "Have you considered the Auror Office after you graduate?"

"Alastor," Professor McGonagall said reluctantly. "The Defense Professor *does* have a... health condition. I suppose you will call it suspicious in itself—but it is by no means certain that it will be any ill-doing on his part which prevents us from renewing his employment."

"Yes, his little naptimes," Moody said darkly. "Amelia thinks he stepped into the path of a high-level curse. Sounds to *me* more like a Dark ritual gone wrong!"

"You've no proof of that!" Professor McGonagall said.

"That man might as well be wearing a sign saying 'Dark Wizard' in glowing green letters over his head."

"Ah..." Harry said. It didn't seem like an especially good time to ask what Mr. Moody thought of the 'not all sacrificial rituals are evil' standpoint. "Excuse me, but you said earlier that Professor Quirrell—I mean the old David Monroe—I mean the Monroe from the seventies—anyway, you said that person used the Killing Curse. What does that imply? Does somebody have to be a Dark Wizard to use it?"

Moody shook his head. "I've used it myself. All it takes is power and a certain *mood*." The grimacing lips were showing teeth. "The first time I cast it was against a wizard named Gerald Grice, and you can ask me what *he* did after you graduate Hogwarts."

"But why is it Unforgiveable, then?" Harry said. "I mean, a Cutting Hex can kill someone too. So why's it any better to use a Reducto instead

of Avada Kedav-"

"Shut your mouth!" Moody said sharply. "Someone might take it the wrong way, your saying that incantation. You *look* too young to cast it, but there's such a thing as Polyjuice. And to answer your question, boy, there's two reasons why that spell's in the blackest book. The first is that the Killing Curse strikes directly at the soul, and it'll just keep going until it hits one. Straight through shields. Straight through *walls.* There's a *reason* why even Aurors fighting Death Eaters weren't allowed to use it before the Monroe Act."

"Ah," said Harry. "That does seem like an excellent reason to ban—"

"I'm not finished, son. The second reason is that the Killing Curse doesn't *just* take a powerful bit of magic. You've got to *mean* it. You've got to *want* someone dead, and not for the greater good, either. Killing Grice didn't bring back Blair Roche, or Nathan Rehfuss, or David Capito. It wasn't for justice, or to stop him doing it again. *I wanted him dead.* You understand now, lad? You don't have to be a Dark Wizard to use that spell—but you can't be Albus Dumbledore, either. And if you're arrested for killing with it, there's no possible defense."

"I... see," murmured the Boy-Who-Lived. *You can't want the person dead as an instrumental value on the way to some positive future consequence, you can't cast it if you believe it's a necessary evil, you have to actually want them dead for the sake of being dead, as a terminal value in your utility function.* "A magically embodied preference for death over life, striking within the plane of pure life force... that does sound like a difficult spell to block."

"Not difficult," Moody snapped. "*Impossible.*"

Harry nodded gravely. "But David Monroe—or whoever—used the Killing Curse against a couple of Death Eaters even *before* they wiped out his family. Does that mean he already had to hate them? Like, the martial arts story was probably true?"

Moody shook his head slightly. "One of the dark truths of the Killing Curse, son, is that once you've cast it the first time, it doesn't take much hate to do it again."

"It damages the mind?"

Again Moody shook his head. "No. It's the killing that does that. Murder tears the soul—but that's just the same if it's a Cutting Hex. The Killing Curse doesn't crack your soul. It just takes a cracked soul to cast." If there was a sad expression on the scarred face, it could not be read. "But that doesn't tell us much about Monroe. The ones like Dumbledore who'll never be able to cast the Curse all their lives, because they never crack no matter what—they're the rare ones, very rare. It only takes a little cracking."

There was a strange heavy feeling in Harry's chest. He'd wondered what exactly it had meant, that Lily Potter had tried to cast the Killing Curse at Lord Voldemort with her last breath. But surely it was forgiveable, it was *right* and *proper* for a mother to hate the Dark Wizard who was coming to kill her baby, mocking her for how she couldn't stop him. There was something wrong with you as a parent if you *couldn't* cast Avada Kedavra, in that situation. And no other spell could've gone past the Dark Lord's shields; you'd have to at least *try* to hate the Dark Lord enough to want him dead for the sake of dead, if that was the only way to save your baby.

It only takes a little cracking...

"Enough," said Professor McGonagall. "What would you have us do?"

Moody's smile twisted. "Get rid of the Defense Professor and see if all your troubles mysteriously clear up. Bet you a Galleon they do."

Professor McGonagall looked like she was in pain. "Alastor—but—will *you* teach the classes, if—"

"Ha!" said Moody. "If I ever say yes to that question, check me for Polyjuice, because it's not me."

"I'll test it experimentally," Harry said. And then, as everyone looked at him, "I'll ask Professor Quirrell a question that the real David Monroe would know—like who else was in the Slytherin class of 1945, or something like that—hopefully without making it obvious. It won't be definitive proof, he could've studied the role, but it would be evidence. Still, Mr. Moody, even if Professor Quirrell isn't the original Monroe, I'm not sure that getting rid of him is a free action. He saved my life twice—"

"*What?*" demanded Moody. "When? How?"

"Once when he knocked down a bunch of witches who were summoning me toward the ground, once when he figured out that the Dementor was draining me through my wand. And if Professor Quirrell *wasn't* the one who set up Draco Malfoy in the first place, then he saved Draco Malfoy's life, and things would be a lot worse if he hadn't. If the Defense Professor *isn't* behind it all—he's not someone we can afford to just get rid of."

Professor McGonagall nodded firmly.

HYPOTHESIS: SEVERUS SNAPE
(APRIL 8TH, 1992, 9:03PM)

Harry and Professor McGonagall now stood on the slowly turning stairs, turning without descending; or at least *one* Harry stood upon those stairs—his other three selves had been left behind in the Headmaster's office.

"Can I ask you a private question?" Harry said, when he thought they were far enough away not to be heard. "And in particular, private from the Headmaster."

"Yes," Professor McGonagall said, not quite sighing. "Though I hope you realize that I cannot *do* anything which conflicts with my duties to—"

"Yes," Harry said, "that's exactly what I need to ask you about. In front of the Wizengamot, when Lucius Malfoy was saying that Hermione was no part of House Potter and that he wouldn't take the money, you told Hermione how to swear that oath. I want to know, if something like that comes up again, if your first duty is to the Hogwarts

student Hermione Granger, or to the head of the Order of the Phoenix, Albus Dumbledore."

Professor McGonagall looked like someone had hit her in the face with a cast-iron frying-pan, a few minutes earlier, and now she'd been told that somebody was about to do it again, and not to flinch.

Harry flinched a little himself. Somewhere along the line he needed to pick up the knack of *not* phrasing things to hit as hard as he possibly could.

The walls rotated around them, behind them, and somehow, they descended.

"Oh, Mr. Potter," Professor McGonagall said with a low exhalation. "I... *wish* you wouldn't ask me such questions... oh, Harry, I wasn't thinking then, not at all. I only saw a chance to help Miss Granger and... I *was* Sorted into Gryffindor, after all."

"You've got a chance to think now," Harry said. It was all coming out wrong, but he had to say it *anyway,* because—"I'm not asking you to be loyal to *me.* But if you do know—if you *are* sure—what you'll do if it comes down to an innocent Hogwarts student versus the Order of the Phoenix a second time..."

But Professor McGonagall shook her head. "I'm *not* sure," the Transfiguration Professor whispered. "I don't know if it was the right choice even then. I'm sorry. I can't decide such awful things!"

"But you'll do *something* if it happens again," Harry said. "Indecision is also a choice. You can't just *imagine* having to make an immediate decision?"

"No," Professor McGonagall said, sounding a little stronger; and Harry realized that he'd accidentally offered a way out. The Professor's next words confirmed Harry's fears. "Such a dreadful choice as that, Mr. Potter—I think I should not make it until I must."

Harry gave an internal sigh. He supposed he had no right to expect Professor McGonagall to say anything else. In a moral dilemma where you lost something either way, making the choice would *feel* bad either way, so you could temporarily save yourself a little mental pain by refusing to decide. At the cost of not being able to plan anything in advance, and at the cost of incurring a huge bias toward inaction or waiting until

too late... but you couldn't expect a witch to know all that. "All right," Harry said.

Though it wasn't right at all, not really. Dumbledore might want that debt removed, Professor Quirrell would also want Harry out of that debt. And if the Defense Professor *was* David Monroe, or could convincingly *appear* to be David Monroe, then Lord Voldemort technically hadn't *exterminated* the House of Monroe. In which case somebody might be able to pass a Wizengamot resolution revoking the Noble status of House Potter, which had been granted for avenging the Most Ancient House of Monroe.

In which case Hermione's vow of service to a Noble House might be null and void.

Or maybe not. Harry didn't know anything about the legalities, especially not whether House Potter got the money *back* if someone managed to send Hermione to Azkaban. Just because you lost something might not mean the payment was returned, legally speaking. Harry wasn't sure and he didn't dare ask a magical solicitor...

...it would have been nice to be able to trust at least one adult to take Hermione's side instead of Dumbledore's, if an issue like that threatened to come up.

The stairs they were upon ceased rotating, and they were before the backs of the great stone gargoyles, which rumbled aside, revealing the hallway.

Harry stepped out—

A hand caught at Harry's shoulder.

"Mr. Potter," Professor McGonagall said in a low voice, "why did you to tell me to keep watch over Professor Snape?"

Harry turned around again.

"You told me to keep watch, and see if he'd changed," Professor McGonagall went on, her tone urgent. "*Why* did you say that, Mr. Potter?"

It took a moment, at this point, for Harry to think back and remember why he *had* said that. Harry and Neville had rescued Lesath Lestrange from bullies, and then Harry had confronted Severus in the hallway and, at least according to the Potions Master's own words, 'almost died'—

"I learned something that made me worry," Harry said after a moment. "From someone who made me promise not to tell anyone else." Severus had made Harry swear that their conversations wouldn't be shared with anyone, and Harry was still bound by it.

"*Mr.* Potter—" began Professor McGonagall, and then exhaled, the flash of sharpness disappearing as quickly as it had come. "Never mind. If you cannot say, you cannot say."

"Why do *you* ask?" Harry said.

Professor McGonagall seemed to hesitate—

"All right, let me be more specific," Harry said. After Professor Quirrell had done it to *him* several times, Harry was starting to get the hang of it. "What change have you *already* observed in Professor Snape that you're trying to decide whether to tell me about?"

"Harry—" the Transfiguration Professor said, and then closed her mouth.

"I obviously know *something* you don't," Harry said helpfully. "See, this is why we can't always put off trying to decide our awful moral dilemmas."

Professor McGonagall closed her eyes, drew in a deep breath, pinched the bridge of her nose and squeezed it several times. "All right," she said. "It's a subtle thing... but worrying. How can I put this... Mr. Potter, have you read many books that young children are not meant to read?"

"I've read *all* of them."

"Of course you have. Well... I don't quite understand it myself, but for so long as Severus has been employed in this school, stalking about in that awful stained cloak, there has been a *certain sort of girl* that stares at him with longing eyes—"

"You say that like it's a bad thing?" Harry said. "I mean, if there's one thing I *did* understand from those books, it's that you're not supposed to question people's preferences."

Professor McGonagall gave Harry a *very* strange look.

"I mean," Harry said again, "from what I've read, when I'm a bit older there's something like a 10% chance that *I'll* find Professor Snape attractive, and the important thing is for me to just accept whatever I—"

"*In any case, Mr. Potter,* Severus has always been entirely indifferent to the stares of those young girls. But now—" Professor McGonagall seemed to realize something, and hastily said, her hands rising in warding, "Please don't mistake me, Professor Snape *certainly* has not taken advantage of any young witches! Absolutely not! He has never even so much as smiled at one, not that I ever heard. He has told the young girls to stop gaping at him. And if they stare at him regardless, he looks away. That I have seen with my own eyes."

"Er..." Harry said. "Sorry, but just because I've *read* those books doesn't mean I understood them. What does all that *mean?*"

"That he is *noticing*," Professor McGonagall said in a low voice. "It is a subtle thing, but now that I have seen it, I am certain. And *that* means... I am very much afraid... that the bond which held Severus to Albus's cause... may have weakened, or even broken."

2 + 2 = ...

"Snape and Dumbledore?" Then Harry heard the words that had just come out of his mouth, and hastily added, "Not that there's anything wrong with that—"

"No!" said Professor McGonagall. "Oh, for pity's sake—I can't explain it to you, Mr. Potter!"

The other shoe finally dropped.

He was still *in love with my mother?*

This seemed somewhere between beautifully sad, and pathetic, for around five seconds before the *third* shoe dropped.

Of course, that was before I gave him my helpful relationship advice.

"I see," Harry said carefully after a few moments. There were times when saying 'Oops' didn't fully cover it. "You're right, that's not a good sign."

Professor McGonagall put both hands over her face. "Whatever you're thinking right now," she said in a slightly muffled voice, "which I assure you is *also* wrong, I don't want to hear about it, ever."

"So..." Harry said. "If, like you said, the bond that held Professor Snape to the Headmaster *has* broken... what would he do then?"

There was a long silence.

What would he do then?

Minerva lowered her hands, gazing down at the upturned face of the Boy-Who-Lived. One simple question shouldn't have caused her so much dismay. She'd known Severus for years; the two of them bound, in some strange way, by the prophecy they'd both heard. Though Minerva suspected, from what she knew of the rules of prophecy, that she had only *overheard* it herself. It had been Severus's acts which had brought about the prophecy's fulfillment. And the guilt, the heartbreak which had come of that choice, had been tormenting the Potions Master for years. She couldn't imagine who Severus would be without it. Her mind went blank, trying to imagine; her thoughts an empty parchment.

Surely Severus was no longer the man he'd once been, that angry and terribly foolish young man who'd brought the prophecy before Voldemort in exchange for being admitted into the Death Eaters. She'd known him for years, and surely Severus was no longer that man...

Did she really know him at all?

Had *anyone* ever seen the real Severus Snape?

*

"I don't know," Professor McGonagall finally said. "I truly don't know at all. I can't even imagine. Do *you* know anything of this, Mr. Potter?"

"Er..." Harry said. "I think I can say that my own evidence points in the same direction as yours. I mean, it increases the probability that Professor Snape isn't in love with my mother anymore."

Professor McGonagall closed her eyes. "I give up."

"I don't know of anything wrong he's done apart from that, though," Harry added. "I assume the Headmaster cleared you to ask me about this?"

Professor McGonagall looked away from him, staring at the wall. "Please don't, Harry."

"All right," Harry said, and turned and hurried out into the hallways, hearing Professor McGonagall more slowly walking after, and the rumbling sound of the gargoyles moving into place.

It was the morning after next, during Potions class, that Harry's *potion of cold resistance* boiled over his cauldron with a green froth and mildly nauseating smell, and Professor Snape, looking more resigned than disgusted, told Harry to stay after class. Harry had his own suspicions about this affair, and as soon as class let out—Hermione, as usual for the last few days, being the first to flee out the door—the door swung shot and locked behind the departing students.

"I apologize for ruining your potion, Mr. Potter," Severus Snape said quietly. There was upon his face the strange sad look that Harry had seen only once before, in a hallway some time ago. "It will not be reflected in your grades. Please, sit down."

Harry sat back down at his desk, filling up the time by scrubbing a bit more at the green stain on the wooden surface, as the Potions Master incanted a few privacy spells.

When the Potions Master was done, he spoke again. "I... do not know how to broach this topic, Mr. Potter, so I will simply say it... before the Dementor, you recovered your memory of the night your parents died?"

Harry silently nodded.

"If... I know it must not be a pleasant memory, but... if you could tell me what happened...?"

"Why?" Harry said. His voice was solemn, definitely *not mocking* the pleading look that Harry had never expected to see from that person. "I wouldn't think that would be a pleasant thing for you to hear either, Professor—"

The Potions Master's voice was almost a whisper. "I have imagined it every night these last ten years."

You know, said Harry's Slytherin side, *it might not be such a good idea to give him closure, if his guilt-based loyalties are already wavering—*

Shut up. Overruled.

It wasn't something that Harry could *actually* bring himself to deny. He took one suggestion from his Slytherin side, and that was it.

"Will you tell me *exactly* how you came to learn about the Prophecy?" Harry said. "I'm sorry to make this a trade, I *will* tell you afterward, only, it could be really important—"

"There is little to say. I had come to be interviewed by the Deputy Headmistress for the position of Potions Master, and so I was waiting outside the room of the Hog's Head Inn when the applicant before me, Sybill Trelawney, came to seek the position of Professor of Divination. As soon as Trelawney finished speaking her words, I fled, forsaking my chance at Hogwarts's Mastery, and went to the Dark Lord." The Potions Master's face was drawn and tight. "I did not even pause to consider why that riddle might have come to me, before I sold it to another."

"A *job interview*?" Harry said. "Where you and Professor Trelawney both happened to be applying, and Professor McGonagall was interviewing? That seems... like rather a large coincidence..."

"Seers are the pawns of time, Mr. Potter. Coincidence is beneath them, and they are above it. I was the one meant to hear that prophecy and become its fool. Minerva's presence made no final difference to how it came about. There was no Memory Charm as you supposed, I do not know why you thought that, but there was no Memory-Charm, there could have been no Memory-Charm. The voice of a seer has a quality, an enigma which even Legilimency cannot share, how could that be imbued in a false memory? Do you think the Dark Lord would believe my mere words? The Dark Lord seized my mind and saw the mystification there, even if he could not seize the mystery, and so he knew the prophecy had been true. The Dark Lord could have killed me then, having taken what he wanted—I was a fool indeed to go to him—but he saw something in me I do not know, and took me into the Death Eaters, though on his terms rather than mine. That is how I brought it about, brought it all about, from beginning to end, always my own doing." Severus's voice had gone rather hoarse, and his face was filled with naked pain. "Now

tell me, please, how did Lily die?"

Harry swallowed twice, and began his recounting.

"James Potter shouted for Lily to run away with me, that he would hold off You-Know-Who."

"You-Know-Who said—" Harry stopped, the chills going all over his own skin, his own muscles tightening as if in preparing for a seizure. The memory was returning strongly, now, accompanied by cold and darkness in association. "He used... the Killing Curse... and then he came upstairs somehow, I think he must have flown, I don't remember any footsteps on stairs or anything like that... and then my mother said, 'No, not Harry, please not Harry!' or something like that. And the Dark Lord—his voice was so high, like water whistling out of a teakettle only *cold*—the Dark Lord said—"

Stand aside, woman! For you I am not come, only the boy.

The words were very clear in Harry's memory.

"—he told my mother to get out of his way, that he was only there for *me*, and my mother begged him to have mercy, and the Dark Lord said—"

I give you this rare chance to flee.

"—that he was being generous and giving her a chance to run, but he wouldn't bother fighting her, and even if she died, she couldn't save me—" Harry's voice was unsteady, "- and so she ought to get out of his way. And that was when my mother begged the Dark Lord to take her life instead of mine—and the Dark Lord—the Dark Lord said to her—and his voice was lower this time, like he was dropping a pose—"

Very well, I accept the bargain.

"—he said that he accepted her offer, and that she should drop her wand so he could kill her. And then the Dark Lord waited, just waited. I, I don't know what Lily Potter was thinking, it hadn't even made sense in the first place, what she said, it wasn't like the Dark Lord would kill her and then just *leave,* when he'd come there for me. Lily Potter didn't say anything, and then the Dark Lord started laughing at her and it was horrible and—and she finally tried the only thing left that wasn't abandoning me or just giving up and dying. I don't know if she even could've, if the spell would've worked for her, but when you think about, she had

to try. The last thing my mother said was 'Avada Ke—' but the Dark Lord started his own curse as soon as she said 'Av' and he said it in less than half a second and there was a flash of green light and then—and then—*and then*—"

"That's enough."

Slowly, like a body floating to the surface of water, Harry returned from wherever he'd been.

"That's enough," the Potions Master said hoarsely. "She died... Lily died without pain, then? The Dark Lord... did not do anything to her, before she died?"

She died thinking that she'd failed, and that the Dark Lord was going to kill her baby next. That's pain.

"He—the Dark Lord didn't torture her—" Harry said. "If that's what you're asking."

Behind Harry, the door unlocked itself and swung open.

Harry left.

It was Friday, April 10th, of 1992.

CHAPTER EIGHTY-SEVEN

HEDONIC AWARENESS

THURSDAY, APRIL 16TH, 1992.

The school was almost deserted now, nine-tenths of the students having gone home for the Easter holiday, just about everyone she knew missing. Susan had stayed behind, her grand-aunt being quite busy, as had Ron for reasons she didn't know—maybe the Weasley family was poor enough that feeding all the children for an extra week would've been a noticeable strain? It all worked out well enough, since Ron and Susan were just about the only ones left who'd still talk to her. (At least that she wanted to talk back *to.* Lavender was still nice to her, and Tracey was, um, Tracey, but neither of them were quite *relaxing* to spend a free hour around; and in any case, neither of those two had stayed over for the Easter hols.)

If she couldn't go *home*—and she wasn't allowed to go home, her parents had been lied-to and told she'd had Glowpox—then an almost-empty Hogwarts was the next best thing.

She could even visit the library without people staring at her, since there were no lessons and nobody was trying to do schoolwork.

It would be a mistake to think that Hermione drooped about the corridors weeping all day long. Oh, she'd cried a lot the first two days, of course, but two days had been enough. There were parts of Harry's borrowed books about that, how even people who were paralyzed in car accidents weren't nearly as unhappy as they'd expected to be, six months later, just like lottery winners weren't nearly as happy as they'd expected. People adjusted, their happiness levels went back to their happiness set point, life went on.

A shadow fell over where Hermione was reading her current book and she whirled around, the wand hidden on her lap coming up to point directly at the surprised face of—

"Sorry!" Harry Potter said, hastily holding up his palms to show his left hand empty, and his right hand holding a small red-velvet pouch. "Sorry. Didn't mean to startle you."

There was an awful silence, her heartbeat increasing and her palms starting to sweat as Harry Potter just looked at her. She'd *almost* talked to him, on the first morning of the rest of her life; but when she'd come down to breakfast Harry Potter had looked so *awful*—so she hadn't sat down beside him at the breakfast-table, just quietly eaten in her own little bubble of nobody else sitting next to her, and it had been horrible, but Harry hadn't come to her, and... she just hadn't talked to him, since then. (It wasn't hard to avoid everyone, if you stayed out of the Ravenclaw common room, and ran out of classes before anyone could talk to you.)

And ever since she'd been wondering what Harry thought of her now—if he hated her for having lost all his money—or if he really *was* in love with her and that's why he'd done it— or if he'd given up on her keeping pace with him because *she* couldn't *frighten Dementors*—she couldn't face him now, she just couldn't, she spent sleepless nights worrying what Harry thought of her now, and she was afraid, and she'd been avoiding the boy who'd spent all his money to save her, and she was a horrible ungrateful wretch, and a terrible person and -

Then her eyes glanced down to see that Harry was reaching into the red-velvet pouch and taking out a heart-shaped red-foil-wrapped sweet, and her brain melted down like chocolate left out in the sun.

"I was going to give you more space," said Harry Potter, "only I was reading up on Critch's theories about hedonics and how to train your inner pigeon and how small immediate positive and negative feedbacks secretly control most of what we actually do, and it occurred to me that you might be avoiding me because seeing me made you think of things that felt like negative associations, and I really *didn't* want to let that run any longer without doing something about it, so I got ahold of a bag of chocolates from the Weasley twins and I'm just going to give you one

every time you see me as a positive reinforcement if that's all right with you—"

"*Breathe*, Harry," Hermione said without thinking about it.

It was the first word she'd spoken to him since the day of the trial.

The two of them stared at each other.

The books stared at them from the surrounding shelves.

They stared some more at each other.

"You're supposed to eat the chocolate," Harry said, holding out the heart-shaped sweet like a Valentine. "Unless just being given a chocolate feels good enough to count as a positive reinforcement, in which case you probably need to put it in your pocket or something."

She knew that if she tried speaking again she'd fail, so she didn't try.

Harry's head slumped a bit. "*Do* you hate me now?"

"*No!*" she said. "No, you shouldn't think that, Harry! Just—just—just *everything!*" She realized that her wand was still pointed at Harry, and she lowered it. She was trying very hard not to burst out into tears. "*Everything!*" she repeated, and couldn't find any better to say than that, although she was certain that Harry wanted to tell her to be specific.

"I think I understand," Harry said cautiously. "What're you reading?"

Before she could stop him, them, Harry bent over the library-desk to see the book she was reading, leaning his head forward before she could think to grab the book away—

Harry stared at the open page.

"The World's Wealthiest Wizards and How They Got That Way," Harry read off the book's title from the top. "Number sixty-five, Sir Gareth, owner of a transportation company that won the 19th-century shipping wars... monopoly on oh-tee-threes... I see."

"I s'pose you're going to tell me that I don't need to worry about anything and you'll take care of it all?" It came out sounding harsher than she would've wanted, and she felt another stab of guilt for being such a terrible person.

"Nah," Harry said, sounding oddly cheerful. "I can put myself in your shoes well enough to know that if *you* paid a bunch of money to save *me, I'd* be trying to pay it back. I'd know it was silly on some level,

and I'd *still* be trying to pay it back all by myself. There's no way I wouldn't understand *that*, Hermione."

Hermione's face screwed up and she felt moisture in the corners of her eyes.

"Fair warning, though," Harry went on, "I might solve the debt to Lucius Malfoy myself if I see a way before you do, it's more important to get that sorted immediately than *which* one of us gets it sorted. Anything interesting so far?"

Three-quarters of her was running in circles and smashing into trees as she tried to figure out the implications of everything Harry had just said (*did* he still respect her as a heroine? or did that mean he thought she *couldn't* do it on her own?) and meanwhile a much more sensible part of Hermione flipped back the book to page 37 which had the most promising entry she'd seen so far (though in her imagination she always did it on her own and took Harry completely by surprise)—"I thought this seemed quite interesting," her voice said.

"Number fourteen, 'Crozier', true name unknown," Harry read. "Wow, that is... that is the gaudiest checkered top hat I've ever seen. Wealth, at least six hundred thousand Galleons... so around thirty million pounds, not enough to make a Muggle famous, but good enough for the smaller wizard population, I guess. Rumored to be a modern alias of the six-century-old Nicholas Flamel, the only known wizard to succeed at the incredibly difficult alchemical procedure for creating the Philosopher's Stone, which enables the transmutation of base metals into gold or silver as well as... the Elixir of Life which indefinitely prolongs the youth and health of the user... Um, Hermione, this seems obviously false."

"I've read more references to Nicholas Flamel," Hermione said. "*The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts* says he secretly trained Dumbledore to stand up to Grindelwald. There's a lot of books that take the story seriously, not just this one... you think it's too good to be true?"

"No, of course not," said Harry. Harry pulled out the chair next to her own, at the small table, and sat down beside her in his accustomed place on her right, just like he'd never left; she had to choke back a catch in her throat. "The idea of 'too good to be true' isn't causal reasoning,

the universe doesn't check if the output of the equations is 'too good' or 'too bad' before allowing it. People used to think that airplanes and smallpox vaccines were too good to be true. Muggles have figured out ways to travel to other stars without even using magic, and you and I can use our wands to do things that Muggle physicists think are literally impossible. I can't even imagine what we could rule out the *real* laws of magic being able to do."

"So what's the problem, then?" Hermione said. Her voice sounded more normal now, in her own ears.

"Well..." Harry said. The boy reached over her own outstretched arm, his robes brushing hers, and tapped the artist's illustration of an ominously glowing red stone dripping scarlet liquid. "Problem one is that there's no logical reason why the *same* artifact would be able to transmute lead to gold *and* produce an elixir that kept someone young. I wonder if there's an official name for that in the literature? Like the 'turned up to eleven effect', maybe? If everyone can see a flower, you can't get away with saying flowers are the size of houses. But if you're in a flying saucer cult, since nobody can see the alien mothership anyway, you can say it's the size of a city, or the size of the Moon. Observable things have to be constrained by evidence, but when somebody makes up a story, they can make the story as extreme as they want. So the Philosopher's Stone gives you unlimited gold *and* eternal life, not because there's a single magical discovery that would produce both of those effects, but because someone made up a story about a super happy thingy."

"Harry, there's a lot of things in magic that aren't sensible," she said.

"Granted," said Harry. "But Hermione, problem two is that not even *wizards* are crazy enough to casually overlook the implications of *this*. *Everyone* would be trying to rediscover the formula for the Philosopher's Stone, whole *countries* would be trying to capture the immortal wizard and get the secret out of him—"

"It's not a *secret.*" Hermione flipped the page, showing Harry the diagrams. "The instructions are right on the next page. It's just so difficult that only Nicholas Flamel's *done* it."

"So entire countries would be trying to kidnap Flamel and force *him*

to make more Stones. Come on, Hermione, even wizards wouldn't hear about *immortality* and, and," Harry Potter paused, his eloquence apparently failing him, "and *just keep going.* Humans are crazy, but they're not *that* crazy!"

"Not everyone thinks the same way *you* do, Harry." He did have a point, but... *how* many different references had she come across to Nicholas Flamel? Besides *World's Wealthiest Wizards* and *Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts,* there'd also been *Stories of Moderately Ancient Times* and *Biographies of the Justly Famous...*

"All right then, *Professor Quirrell* would've kidnapped this Flamel guy. It's what an evil person *or* a good person or just a *selfish* person would do if they had any sense. The Defense Professor knows a lot of secrets and he wouldn't miss *that* one." Harry sighed and looked up; she followed his gaze, but he was apparently just looking at the larger library, the rows and rows and rows of bookcases. "I don't mean to mess with your project," said Harry, "and I certainly don't mean to discourage you, but... Honestly, Hermione, I'm not sure you're going to find any good ideas for making money in a book like this. Like the old joke about how if an economist sees a twenty-pound note lying in the street, they won't bother picking it up, because if it were real, someone else would've picked it up already. Any way of making lots of money that everyone *knows* about to the point where it's in books like this... you see what I'm saying? It can't be possible for everyone to make a thousand Galleons a month in three easy steps, or everyone would be doing it."

"So? That wouldn't stop *you,*" Hermione said, her voice now roughening again. "You do impossible things all the time, I bet you've done something impossible in the last *week* and you didn't bother *telling* anyone."

(There was a slight pause, which, if Miss Granger had known, was exactly the length of pause you'd make if you'd fought Mad-Eye Moody and won exactly eight days earlier.)

"Not in the last seven days, no," Harry said. "Look... part of the trick of doing the impossible is being selective about *which* impossibilities you challenge, and only trying when you have a special advantage. If there's a money-making method in this book that sounds difficult for

a wizard, but it's easy if we can use Dad's old Mac Plus, *then* we'd have a plan."

"I *know that,* Harry," Hermione said, her voice wavering only slightly. "I was looking to see if there was anything here I *could* figure out how to do. I thought, maybe the difficult part about making a Philosopher's Stone was that the alchemical circle had to be super precise, and I could get it right by using a Muggle microscope—"

"That's *brilliant,* Hermione!" The boy rapidly drew his wand, said "*Quietus,*" and then continued after the small noises of the rowdier books had died down. "Even if the Philosopher's Stone is just a myth, the same trick might work for other difficult alchemies—"

"Well, it *can't* work," Hermione said. She'd flown across the library to look up the only book on alchemy that wasn't in the Restricted Section. And then—she remembered the crushing letdown, all the sudden hope dissipating like mist. "Because *all* alchemical circles have to be drawn 'to the fineness of a child's hair', it isn't any finer for some alchemies than others. And wizards *have* Omnioculars, and I haven't heard of any spells where you use Omnioculars to magnify things and do them exactly. I should've realized that!"

"Hermione," Harry said seriously, as he started to dig down into the red-velvet pouch again, "don't punish yourself when a bright idea doesn't work out. You've got to go through a *lot* of flawed ideas to find one that might work. And if you send your brain negative feedback by frowning when you think of a flawed idea, instead of realizing that idea-suggesting is good behavior by your brain to be encouraged, pretty soon you won't think of any ideas at all." Harry put down two heart-shaped chocolates beside the book. "Here, have another chocolate. Besides the one from earlier, I mean. This one is to reinforce your brain for generating a good candidate strategy."

"I suppose you're right," Hermione said in a small voice, but she didn't touch the chocolate. She started to turn the pages back to 167, where she'd been reading before Harry had come in.

(Hermione Granger did not require *bookmarks,* of course.)

Harry was leaning over slightly, his head almost touching her shoulder, watching the pages as she turned them, as though he might be able to

glean valuable information from glimpsing the page for only a quarter-second. Breakfast hadn't been long ago, and she could clearly identify, from the faint scent of his breath, that Harry'd eaten banana pudding for dessert.

Harry spoke again. "So with all that said... and please take this as a positive reinforcement... did you really try to invent a way to *mass-produce immortality* so that I could *pay off my debt to Lucius Malfoy*?"

"Yes," she said in an even smaller voice. Even when she *tried* to think like Harry, it seemed she hadn't yet got the knack of it. "So what've you been doing this whole time, Harry?"

Harry made a disgusted face. "Trying to collect evidence on the whole 'Who Framed Hermione Granger' mystery."

"I..." Hermione looked up at Harry. "Shouldn't I... be trying to solve my *own* mystery, though?" It hadn't been her first thought, her first priority, but now that Harry mentioned it...

"That wouldn't work in this case," Harry said soberly. "There's too many people who'll talk to me and not you... and I'm also sorry to say that some of them made me promise not to talk to anyone else. Sorry, I don't think you can help much on this one."

"Okay, I guess," Hermione said leadenly. "Fine. You do everything. You gather all the clues and talk to all the suspects while I just sit here in the library. Let me know after it turns out that it was Professor Quirrell who did it."

"Hermione..." Harry said. "Why is it so important *who* does what? Shouldn't it be more important to get everything solved, than who solves it?"

"I guess you're right," Hermione said. She lifted her hands to press up at her eyes. "I guess it doesn't matter any more. Everyone's going to think—I *know* it's not your fault, Harry, you were—you were being Good, you were a perfect gentleman —but no matter what I do now, they'll all think that I'm just—someone for you to rescue." She paused, and said, with her voice quivering, "And maybe they're *right*, Harry."

"Whoa, whoa, hold on there a second—"

"I can't scare Dementors. I can get Outstandings in Charms class, but I can't scare Dementors."

"*I've got a mysterious dark side!*" Harry hissed, after his head turned around to scan the library. (There was one boy in a distant corner, who did look in their direction occasionally, but he would've been too far away to hear anything even without the Quieting Barrier.) "I've got a dark side that *definitely* isn't a child, and who knows what other crazy magical stuff going on in my head—Professor Quirrell claimed that I become whoever I believe I am—that's all *cheating,* don't you see, Hermione? There's an arrangement that the school administration made that I'm not supposed to talk about, so that the Boy-Who-Lived could have more time to study every day, I'm *cheating* and you're *still beating me in Charms class.* I'm—I'm probably not—the Boy-Who-Lived probably isn't even something that you could properly call a child—and you're *still competing* with that. Don't you realize, if it *wasn't* for people paying attention to me, you'd look like the most powerful witch to come along in a century? When you can fight three older bullies by yourself, and win?"

"I don't know," she said, pressing her hands again over her eyes, with her voice wavering. "All I know is—even if that's all *true*—nobody's ever going to see me for myself anymore, ever."

"All right," Harry said after a while. "I see what you mean. Instead of the famous Potter-and-Granger research team, there'll be Harry Potter and his lab assistant. Um... here's an idea. How about if I *don't* focus on making money for a while? I mean, the debt doesn't come due until I graduate Hogwarts. So you can do it yourself and show the world you've still got it. And if you coincidentally crack the secret of immortality along the way, we'll just call it a bonus."

The thought of Harry relying on *her* to come up with a solution seemed... like a crushing burden of responsibility to dump on a poor traumatized twelve-year-old girl, and she wanted to hug him for offering her a way to restore her self-respect as a heroine, and it was what she *deserved* for being a horrible person and speaking sharply to Harry all the time, when all along he'd been a truer friend to her than she'd ever been to him, and it was good that he still thought she could do things, and...

"Is there some amazing rational thing you do when your mind's run-

ning in all different directions?" she managed.

"My own approach is usually to identify the different desires, give them names, conceive of them as separate individuals, and let them argue it out inside my head. So far the main persistent ones are my Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, Gryffindor, and Slytherin sides, my Inner Critic, and my simulated copies of you, Neville, Draco, Professor McGonagall, Professor Flitwick, Professor Quirrell, Dad, Mum, Richard Feynman, and Douglas Hofstadter."

Hermione considered trying this before her Common Sense warned that it might be a dangerous sort of thing to pretend. "There's a copy of *me* inside your head?"

"Of course there is!" Harry said. The boy suddenly looked a bit more vulnerable. "You mean there *isn't* a copy of me living in *your* head?"

There *was,* she realized; and not only that, it talked in Harry's exact voice.

"It's rather unnerving now that I think about it," said Hermione. "I do have a copy of you living in my head. It's talking to me right now using your voice, arguing how this is perfectly normal."

"Good," Harry said seriously. "I mean, I don't see how people could be friends without that."

She continued reading her book, then, Harry seeming content to watch the pages over her shoulder.

She'd gotten all the way to number seventy, Katherine Scott, who'd apparently invented a way to turn small animals into lemon tarts, when she finally worked up the courage to speak.

"Harry?" she said. (She was leaning a bit away from him now, though she didn't realize it.) "If there's a copy of Draco Malfoy in your head, does that mean you're friends with Draco Malfoy?"

"Well..." Harry said. He sighed. "Yeah, I'd been meaning to talk with you about this anyway. I kind of wish I'd talked to you sooner. Anyway, how can I put this... I was corrupting him?"

"What do you mean *corrupting*?"

"Tempting him to the Light Side of the Force."

Her mouth just stayed open.

"You know, like the Emperor and Darth Vader, only in reverse."

"*Draco Malfoy*," she said. "Harry, do you have *any idea*—"

"Yes."

"—the sort of things Malfoy has been *saying* about me? What he said he'd *do* to me, as soon as he got the chance? I don't know what he told to *you,* but Daphne Greengrass told me what Malfoy says when he's in Slytherin. It's *unspeakable,* Harry! It's unspeakable in the completely literal sense that I can't say it out loud!"

"When was this?" Harry said. "At the start of the year? Did Daphne say *when* this was?"

"No," Hermione said. "Because it doesn't matter when, Harry. Anyone who said things—like Malfoy said—they can't be a good person. It doesn't matter what you tempted him to, he's still a rotten person, because no matter *what* a good person would *never*—"

"You're wrong." Harry said, looking her straight in the eyes. "I can guess what Draco threatened to do to you, because the second time I met him, he talked about doing it to a ten-year-old girl. But don't you see, on the day Draco Malfoy arrived in Hogwarts, he'd spent his whole previous life being raised by *Death Eaters.* It would've required a *supernatural intervention* for him to have *your* morality given *his* environment—"

Hermione was shaking her head violently. "*No,* Harry. Nobody has to *tell* you that hurting people is wrong, it's not something you don't do because the teacher says it's not allowed, it's something you don't do because—because you can *see when people are hurting,* don't you know that, Harry?" Her voice was shaking now. "That's not—that's not a *rule* people follow like the rules for algebra! If you can't *see* it, if you can't feel it *here,*" her hand slapped down over the center of her chest, not quite where her heart was located, but that didn't matter because it was all really in the brain anyway, "then you just don't have it!"

The thought came to her, then, that Harry might *not* have it.

"There's history books you haven't read," Harry said quietly. "There's books you haven't read yet, Hermione, and they might give you a sense of perspective. A few centuries earlier—I think it was definitely still around in the seventeenth century—it was a popular village entertainment to take a wicker basket, or a bundle, with a dozen live cats in it, and—"

"Stop," she said.

"—roast it over a bonfire. Just a regular celebration. Good clean fun. And I'll give them this, it was cleaner fun than burning women they thought were witches. Because the way people are built, Hermione, the way people are built to *feel* inside—" Harry put a hand over his own heart, in the anatomically correct position, then paused and moved his hand up to point toward his head at around the ear level, "—is that they hurt when they see their *friends* hurting. Someone inside their circle of concern, a member of their own tribe. That feeling has an off-switch, an off-switch labeled 'enemy' or 'foreigner' or sometimes just 'stranger'. That's how people are, if they don't *learn* otherwise. So, no, it does *not* indicate that Draco Malfoy was inhuman or even unusually evil, if he grew up believing that it was fun to hurt his enemies—"

"If you believe that," she said with her voice unsteady, "if you *can* believe that, then you're evil. People are always responsible for what they do. It doesn't matter what anyone *tells* you to do, you're the one who does it. Everyone knows that—"

"*No they don't!* You grew up in a post-World-War-Two society where 'I vas only followink orders' is something *everyone knows* the bad guys said. In the fifteenth century they would've called it honourable fealty." Harry's voice was rising. "Do you think you're, you're just *genetically* better than everyone who lived back then? Like if you'd been transported back to fifteenth-century London as a baby, you'd realize *all on your own* that burning cats was wrong, witch-burning was wrong, slavery was wrong, that every sentient being ought to be in your circle of concern? Do you think you'd *finish* realizing all that by the first day you got to Hogwarts? Nobody ever *told* Draco he was personally responsible for becoming more ethical than the society he grew up in. And *despite that*, it only took him four months to get to the point where he'd grab a Muggleborn falling off a building." Harry's eyes were as fierce as she'd ever seen him. "I'm not *finished* corrupting Draco Malfoy, but I think *he's done pretty well so far.*"

The problem with having such a good memory was that she *did* remember.

She remembered Draco Malfoy grabbing her wrist, so hard she'd had

a bruise afterward, while she was falling off the roof of Hogwarts.

She remembered Draco Malfoy helping her up, after that mysterious tripping jinx had sent her stumbling into the Slytherin Quidditch Captain's plate of food.

And she remembered—it was, in fact, the reason she'd brought up the topic in the first place—how she'd felt when she'd heard Draco Malfoy's testimony under Veritaserum.

"Why didn't you *tell* me any of this?" Hermione said, and despite herself, her voice rose in pitch. "If I'd *known*—"

"It wasn't my secret to tell you," Harry said. "Draco's the one who would've been at risk, if his father had found out."

"I'm not stupid, Mr. Potter. What's the *real* reason you didn't tell me, and what were you *actually* doing with Mr. Malfoy?"

"Ah. Well..." Harry broke eye contact with her, and looked down at the library table.

"Draco Malfoy told the Aurors under Veritaserum that he wanted to know if he could beat me, so he challenged me to a duel to *test it empirically*. Those were his *exact words* according to the transcript."

"Right," Harry said, still not meeting her eyes. "Hermione Granger. Of *course* she'll remember the exact wording. It doesn't matter if she's chained to her chair, on trial for murder in front of the entire Wizengamot—"

"What were you *really* doing with Draco Malfoy?"

Harry winced, and said, "Probably not *quite* what you're thinking, but..."

The horror scaled and scaled within her, and finally broke loose.

"*You were doing SCIENCE with him?*"

"Well—"

"*You were doing SCIENCE with him? You were supposed to be doing science with ME!*"

"It wasn't like that! It's not like I was doing *real* science with him! I was just, you know, *teaching* him some harmless bits of Muggle science, like elementary physics with algebra and so on—it's not like I was doing original magical research with him, the way I was with you—"

"And I suppose you didn't tell *him* about *me,* either?"

"Um, of course not?" Harry said. "I've been doing science with him since October, and he wasn't exactly ready to hear about you then—"

The inexpressible sense of betrayal inside her was welling and welling, taking over everything, her rising voice, her glaring eyes, her nose that she was certain was starting to run, the burning in her throat. She shoved herself up from the table and took a step back, the better to look down on her betrayer, and her voice was very nearly screeching as she yelled, "*That is not okay! You can't do science with two people at once!*"

"Er—"

"I mean, you can't do science with two different people and *not tell them about each other!*"

"Ah..." Harry said cautiously. "I *did* think of that, and I was very careful not to get your research mixed together with anything I did with him—"

"You were being *careful.*" She would have *hissed* it, if it had contained any Ss.

Harry raised a hand and rubbed at his messy hair, and somehow that made her want to scream at him even *more.* "Miss Granger," said Harry, "I think this conversation has become *metaphorical* on a level that's, um..."

"What?" she screeched at him, at the top of her lungs inside their Quieting barrier.

Then she realized and got so red that if she'd had an adult level of magical power her hair would have spontaneously caught on fire.

The lone other patron in the library, the Ravenclaw boy sitting in the far opposite corner, was staring wide-eyed at both of them while making a rather sad attempt to conceal it by holding up a book just below his face.

"Right," Harry said with a small sigh. "So, keeping *firmly in mind* that it was just a bad metaphor, and that *real scientists* collaborate with each other *all the time,* I don't think that I was cheating. Scientists often keep quiet about projects they're working on. You and I are doing research that we're keeping secret, and there were reasons not to tell Draco Malfoy in particular—he wouldn't have stayed around me at all, in the

beginning, if he'd known I was your friend and not your rival. And Draco would've been the one at risk if I'd told anyone else about *him*—"

"Is that really all?" she said. "*Really,* Harry? You didn't want both of us to *feel special*, like we were the *only* ones you wanted to be with and the *only* ones who got to be with you?"

"That was *not* why I—"

Harry paused.

Harry looked at her.

All the blood was rushing back into her face, there probably should've been steam coming out of her ears, which in turn should've been melting off her head with the liquid flesh running down into her neck, as she realized what she'd just blurted out.

Harry was staring at her in dawning and complete terror.

"Well..." she said in a rather high-pitched voice, "it's... oh, I don't know, Harry! *Is* it just a metaphor? When a boy spends a hundred thousand Galleons to save a girl from certain doom, she's entitled to wonder, don't you think? It's like being bought flowers, only, you see, rather *more* so—"

Harry shoved himself up from the table and took a staggering step back, even as he brought up his arms to wave frantically. *"That's not why I did it! I did it because we're friends!"*

"Just friends?"

Harry Potter's breathing was starting to scale up toward hyperventilation. "Very good friends! Extra-special friends, even! Best friends forever, possibly! But not *that* kind of friends!"

"Is it really that awful to think about?" she said with a catch in her voice. "I mean—I'm not saying *I'm* in love with *you,* but—"

"Oh, you're not? Thank *goodness.*" Harry brought up the sleeve of his robe and wiped across his forehead. "Look, Hermione, please don't misunderstand, I'm sure you're a wonderful person -"

She took a staggering step back.

"—but—even with my dark side—"

"Is *that* what this is about?" said Hermione. "But I—I wouldn't—"

"No, no, I mean, I have a mysterious dark side and probably other weird magic stuff going on, you *know* I'm not a normal child, not really—"

"It's okay to not be normal," she said, feeling increasingly desperate and confused. *"I'm* okay with it—"

"But *even with all that weird magical stuff* letting me be more adult than I should be, I haven't gone through puberty yet and there's no hormones in my bloodstream and my brain is *physically incapable* of falling in love with anyone. So I'm not in love with you! I couldn't possibly be in love with you! For all I know at this point, six months from now my brain is going to wake up and decide to fall in love with Professor Snape! Er, can I take it from this that you *have* been through puberty?"

"Eep," said Hermione in a high-pitched sound. She swayed where she stood, and a moment later Harry was rushing over to her side and helping lower her to sit on the ground, bracing her body with firm hands.

The fact was that she *had* staggered over to Professor McGonagall's office back in December, not in total surprise because she'd done her reading, but still rather *queasily* and it was with great relief that she'd learned that witches had Charms to deal with the inconveniences and *what was Harry even doing asking a poor innocent girl a question like that—*

"Look, I'm *sorry*," Harry said frantically. "I really didn't mean most of that the way it sounded! I'm sure that anyone taking the outside view of the whole situation and offering betting odds on who I finally married would assign a higher probability to you than anyone else I can think of—"

Her intelligence, which had barely been starting to pull itself together, promptly exploded into sparks and flame.

"—though not necessarily a probability higher than fifty percent, I mean, from the outside view there's a lot of other possibilities, and who I like before I hit puberty probably isn't all that strongly *diagnostic* of who I'll be with seven years later—I don't want to sound like I'm *promising* anything—"

Her throat was making some sort of high-pitched sounds and she wasn't really listening to exactly what. All her universe had narrowed to Harry's terrible, terrible voice.

"—and besides I've been reading about evolutionary psychology, and, well, there are all these suggestions that one man and one woman living together happily ever afterward may be more the exception rather than the rule, and in hunter-gatherer tribes it was more often just staying together for two or three years to raise a child during its most vulnerable stages—and, I mean, considering how many people end up horribly unhappy in traditional marriages, it seems like it might be the sort of thing that needs some clever reworking—especially if we actually do solve immortality—"

⁂

Tano Wolfe, of fifth-year Ravenclaw, slowly stood up from his library desk, from which vantage point he'd just watched Granger flee the library, sobbing. He hadn't been able to hear the argument, but it had clearly been one of *those.*

Slowly and with his knees trembling, Tano approached the Boy-Who-Lived, who was staring in the direction of the library doors, still vibrating from the force of how they'd been slammed.

Tano didn't particularly want to do this, but Harry Potter *had* been Sorted into Ravenclaw. The Boy-Who-Lived was, technically, his fellow Ravenclaw. And that meant there was a Code.

The Boy-Who-Lived didn't say anything as Tano approached him, but his gaze wasn't friendly.

Tano swallowed, laid a hand on Harry Potter's shoulder, and recited, his voice cracking only slightly, "Witches! Go figure, huh?"

"*Remove your hand before I cast it into the outer darkness.*"

The library doors slammed open again in the wake of another departure.

CHAPTER EIGHTY-EIGHT

TIME PRESSURE, PART I

April 16th, 1992.
12:07pm.
Lunchtime.

Harry stomped over to the mostly-deserted Gryffindor table, determining at a glance that lunch today was breen and Roopo balls. The ambient conversation, Harry could likewise hear, was Quidditch-related; an auditory environment which rated somewhat worse than the sound of rusty chainsaws, but better than what the Ravenclaw table was still *blithering* about Hermione. Gryffindor House, at least, had started out less sympathetic to Draco Malfoy and had more political incentive to wish that everyone would just forget certain unfortunate facts; and if that wasn't the right reason for silence, it was at least silence. Dean and Seamus and Lavender were all gone for the holidays, but at least that left...

"What was all that ruckus at the Head Table?" Harry said to the Weasley-twin group-mind, as he began to serve himself his own plate. "It looked like it was just ending as I walked in."

"Our beloved, but clumsy Professor Trelawney—"

"Seems to have gone and dropped an entire soup tureen on herself—"

"Not to mention Mr. Hagrid."

A quick glance at the Head Table confirmed that the Divination Professor was waving her wand frantically as the half-Giant dabbed at his clothes. Nobody else seemed to be paying much attention, even Professor McGonagall. Professor Flitwick was standing on his chair as usual, the Headmaster seemed to be absent again (he'd been gone most days of

the holiday), Professors Sprout and Sinistra and Vector were eating in their usual grouping, and—

"You know," Harry said, as he turned his head away to stare at the ceiling illusion of a clear blue sky, "that still creeps me out sometimes."

"What does?" said Fred or George.

The powerful and enigmatic Defense Professor was 'resting' or whatever-the-heck-was-wrong-with-him, his hands making fumbling, hesitant grabs at a chicken-leg that seemed to be eluding him on the plate.

"Eh, nothing," said Harry. "I'm not quite used to Hogwarts, yet."

Harry continued to eat in moderate silence, as various Weasleys discussed some bizarre mind-affecting substance called Chudley Cannons.

"What sort of deep mysterious thoughts are you thinking?" said a young-looking witch with short hair, sitting nearby. "I mean, just curious. I'm Brienne, by the way." She was gazing at him with one of those looks which Harry had firmly decided to just ignore until he was older.

"So," Harry said, "you know those really simple Artificial Intelligence programs like ELIZA that are programmed to use words in syntactic English sentences only they don't contain any understanding of what the words mean?"

"Of course," the witch said. "I have a dozen of them in my trunk."

"Well, I'm pretty sure my understanding of girls is somewhere around that level."

A sudden hush fell.

It took a few seconds for Harry to realize that, no, the entire Great Hall wasn't staring at *him*, and then Harry twisted his head around to look.

The figure who'd just staggered into the Great Hall appeared to be Mr. Filch, Hogwarts's token hallway monitor; who, along with his predatory cat Mrs. Norris, constituted a low-level random encounter whom Harry often breezed past wearing his epic-level Deathly Hallow. (Harry had once consulted the Weasley twins about pulling some sort of prank on this deserving target, whereupon Fred or George had quietly pointed out that Mr. Filch was never seen to use a wand, which was odd, really, considering how many spells would be useful in that position,

and it made you wonder why Dumbledore had given the man a position at Hogwarts, and Harry had shut up.)

Right now Mr. Filch's brown clothing was disarrayed and soaked with sweat, his shoulders were visibly heaving as he breathed, and his everpresent cat was missing.

"Troll—" gasped Mr. Filch. "In the dungeons—"

⁂

Minerva McGonagall stood up from the Head Table so quickly that her chair fell to the ground behind her.

"Argus!" she cried. "What happened to you?"

Argus Filch staggered forward from the huge doors, his upper body streaked and dotted with small crimson dots as though someone had spattered steak sauce over his face. "Troll—grey—twice as tall as me—it—it—" Argus Filch covered his face with his hands. "It ate Mrs. Norris—ate her all up, in just one bite—"

Minerva felt a stab of dismay in her other self, she hadn't liked the other cat very much but the two of them had still been felines.

An uproar started from the Great Hall. Severus stood up from the Head Table, somehow doing so without drawing any visible attention to himself, and strode out the huge doors without another word.

Of course, Minerva thought, *the third-floor corridor—this could be a distraction—*

She mentally consigned all such matters to Severus's care, drew her wand, raised it high, and let out five sharp cracks of purple fire.

There was stunned silence but for Argus's broken sobs.

"It seems we have a dangerous creature loose in Hogwarts," she said to the faculty at the Head Table. "I will ask you all to aid in searching the halls." Then she turned to the stunned and watching students, and raised her voice. *"Prefects—lead your houses back to the dormitories immediately!"*

Percy Weasley leaped up from the Gryffindor table. "Follow me!" he said in a high voice. "Stick together, first-years! No, not *you*—" but by

that time the other prefects were raising their own voices as a renewed babble sprang up.

Then a clear, cool voice spoke under the sudden rush of sound.

"Deputy Headmistress."

She turned.

The Defense Professor was calmly wiping off his hands on a napkin as he stood up from the Head Table. "With respect," said the man of unknown identity, "you are not expert in battle tactics, madam. In this situation, it would be wiser to—"

"I do apologize, Professor," said Professor McGonagall, as she turned toward the great doors. Filius and Pomona had already risen to follow her, with Rubeus Hagrid towering over all of them as the half-giant stood up. She'd been through similar experiences too many times, at this point. "Sad experience has taught me that on occasions such as these, it is not a good time to take any advice the current Defense Professor may offer. Indeed, I think it wise that the two of us search for the troll together, so that no suspicions may be cast upon you for any untoward events which occur during that time."

Without any hesitation, the Defense Professor swung smoothly on the Gryffindor table and clapped his hands with a sound like a floor cracking through.

"Michelle Morgan of House Gryffindor, second in command of Pinnini's Army," the Defense Professor said calmly into the resulting quiet. "Please advise your Head of House."

Michelle Morgan climbed up onto her bench and spoke, the tiny witch sounding far more confident than Minerva remembered her being at the start of the year. "Students walking through the hallways would be spread out and impossible to defend. All students are to remain in the Great Hall and form a cluster in the center... *not* surrounded by tables, a troll would jump right over tables... with the perimeter defended by seventh-year students. From the armies only, no matter how good they are at *duelling,* so they don't get in each other's lines of fire." Michelle hesitated. "I'm sorry, Mr. Hagrid, but—it wouldn't be safe for you, you should stay behind with the students. And Professor Trelawney shouldn't confront a troll on her own either," Michelle sounded much

less apologetic about this part, "but if she's paired with Professor Quirrell the two of them together can form an additional trusted and effective battle unit. That concludes my analysis, Professor."

"Adequate, for being put on the spot," the Defense Professor said. "Twenty Quirrell points to you. But you neglect the still simpler point that *home* does not mean *safe,* and a troll is strong enough to rip a portrait door off its hinges—"

"Enough," Minerva snapped. "Thank you, Miss Morgan." She looked to the watching tables. "Students, you will do as she said." Turned back to the Head Table. "Professor Trelawney, you will accompany the Defense Professor—"

"Ah," Sybill said falteringly. Beneath her overdone makeup and mess of shawls, the woman looked rather pale. "I'm afraid—I'm not entirely well today—indeed, I feel rather faint—"

"You won't have to fight the troll," Minerva said sharply, her patience taxed as usual when dealing with the woman. "Just stay with the Defense Professor and do not let him out of your sight for an instant, you must be able to testify afterward that you were with him at all times." She turned to Rubeus. "Rubeus, I am leaving you in charge here. Keep them safe." The huge man straightened at this, losing his glum look and nodding proudly to her.

Then Minerva looked at the students, and raised her voice. "It should go entirely without saying that anyone leaving the Great Hall *for any reason,* will be expelled. No excuses will be accepted. Am I understood?"

The Weasley twins, with whom she'd been making direct eye contact, nodded respectfully.

She turned without another word and marched off toward the hall doors with the other Professors behind her.

On the far side of the room, unnoticed on the wall, a clock showed 12:14pm.

...and he still didn't realize.

Tick.

As Harry stared with narrowed eyes at where the Professors had gone out, wondering what was actually going on and what it meant, as the students came together into a more defensible mass and wands flicked to levitate the tables out of their way, Harry still didn't realize.

Tick.

"Shouldn't the Professors *all* have formed up into pairs?" said an older Gryffindor student whose name Harry didn't know. "I mean—it'd be slower, but it'd be safer, I think—"

Tick.

Someone else replied to this, raising her voice, but Harry didn't catch much of it, the gist was that mountain trolls were highly magic-resistant and incredibly strong and could regenerate but they were still *noisy* so if you heard them coming, it shouldn't be that hard for a Hogwarts Professor to wrap them up in Vadim's Unbreakable something something.

Tick.

And Harry still didn't realize.

Tick.

The crowd noises were subdued, people were talking in low voices to each other while they glanced around, listening for the sound of a crashing door or an angry roar.

Tick.

Some students were speculating in whispers about what the Defense Professor could possibly be trying to achieve by smuggling in a troll, and whether he was angry that Professor McGonagall had caught on to his attempted distraction, and what it was a distraction *from.*

Tick.

And the thought still didn't come to Harry, not until after all the students had formed a mass of perhaps a hundred bodies patrolled by proudly grim-looking seventh-year-students with their wands all pointed outward, and somebody suggested doing a headcount, and someone else replied sarcastically that this might have made sense on some other day, but right now practically everyone was gone for the spring holiday and nobody really knew how many students were supposed to be in the room, let alone if any were missing.

Tick.

That was when Harry wondered where Hermione was.

Tick.

Harry looked over at where the Ravenclaws had clustered, he didn't see Hermione but then everyone was packed tightly-enough together that you wouldn't expect to see smaller students through the crowd, amid the upper-years.

Tick.

Harry then looked over at the Hufflepuffs to see if he could spot Neville, and even though Neville was standing behind a much taller student, Harry's visual processing managed to spot him almost immediately. Hermione wasn't with the Hufflepuffs either, not that Harry could see—and she certainly wouldn't be with the Slytherins—

Tick.

Harry pushed his way through the packed crowd, stepping beside or around older students and in one case just ducking between their legs, until he was standing among the Ravenclaws and could definitely verify that, nope, no Hermione.

Tick.

"Hermione Granger!" Harry said loudly. "Are you here?"

Nobody answered.

Tick.

Somewhere in the back of his mind was a rising sense of horror, as other parts of him tried to decide exactly how much to panic. The first Defense class of the year was rather fuzzy in Harry's mind, but he distantly remembered something about trolls being able to track prey that was alone and undefended.

Tick.

Another track of thought searched frantically through inchoate possibilities, what could he *do* exactly? It wasn't 3pm yet so he couldn't reach this *now* using his Time-Turner. Even if he could sneak out of the room—there had to be some way to put on his Cloak without being noticed, some sort of distraction he could use—he had no idea *where* Hermione was, and Hogwarts was huge.

Tick.

Another part of his mind tried to model possibilities. From what that other student had said, trolls weren't *silent* predators, they were noisy—

Hermione won't have any idea it's a troll, so she'll go investigate the noise. She's a heroine, isn't she?

—but Hermione now had an invisibility cloak and a broomstick in her pouch. Harry had insisted on that part for both her and Neville, and Professor McGonagall had told him it'd been done. That ought to be enough to let Hermione get away, even if she was lousy on a broomstick. All she had to do was get onto a section of roof, it was a clear day and sunlight was supposed to be bad for trolls somehow, Harry remembered that part and therefore Hermione would remember it exactly. And surely, even if Hermione wanted to prove herself again, she couldn't possibly be dumb enough to attack a mountain troll.

Tick.

She wouldn't.

Tick.

That just wasn't *her.*

Tick.

And then it occured to Harry that somebody had previously tried to frame Hermione Granger for murder using Memory Charms. Had done so inside Hogwarts, without setting off any alarms. And had arranged for Draco to die slowly enough that it wouldn't set off the wards until at least six hours later when nobody could use a Time-Turner to check. And that whoever was clever enough to infiltrate a troll past the ancient wards of Hogwarts without the Headmaster coming to investigate the strange creature, could be clever enough to *also* take the obvious step of jinxing Hermione's magic items...

Tick.

There was a part of him that felt something like slowly rising panic as perspective shifted, a Necker Cube changing orientation, what the *hell* had Harry been thinking, letting Hermione and Neville be kept inside Hogwarts just because of them being given a few stupid trinkets, that wasn't going to stop anyone who wanted to *kill them*.

Tick.

Another part of his mind put up resistance, that possibility wasn't *certain*, it was complex and the probability could easily be under 50%. It was easy to imagine going into a huge panic in front of everyone and then Hermione getting back from the washrooms outside the Great Hall. Or if the troll ended up not going anywhere near her... like in the story of the boy who cried wolf, nobody would believe him the next time if she really was in trouble; it could use up reputational credit that he would later need for something else...

Tick.

Harry recognized an instance of the fear-of-embarrassment schema that stopped most people from ever doing anything under conditions of uncertainty, and squashed it down hard. Even then it was strange how much willpower it took to muster the decision to shout out loud in front of everyone, if he just hadn't seen Hermione in the crowd it was going to be embarrassing...

Tick.

Harry drew in a deep breath and shouted as loudly as he could, *"Hermione Granger! Are you here?"*

The students all turned to look at him. Then some of them turned around to look around themselves. The noise around the room went down in volume as some conversations stilled.

"Has anyone seen Hermione Granger since—since around ten-thirty today or so? *Does anyone have any idea where she might be?"*

The background babble stilled further.

Nobody raised their voice to shout anything at him, in particular not, *Don't worry, Harry, I'm right here.*

"Oh, Merlin," somebody said from nearby, and then the background babble started up again, taking on a new and excited tone.

Harry stared down at his hands, shutting out the yammering and tried to think, think, *THINK*—

Tick.

Tick.

Tick.

Susan Bones and a redheaded boy with a battered-looking wand both shoved their way through the crowd to Harry at the same time.

"We've got to let the Professors know somehow—"

"We've got to go find her—"

"Find her?" Susan snapped, rounding on the other boy. "How'll we do *that*, Captain Weasley?"

"We'll go off and *look* for her!" Ron Weasley snapped back.

"Are you nuts? There's already Professors searching the hallways, what makes you think we've got any better chance than them of running across General Granger? Only *we'll* get eaten by the troll! And then expelled!"

It was odd, how sometimes hearing bad ideas made the right idea obvious by contrast.

"All right everyone! Listen up!"

People turned to look.

"QUIET! EVERYONE! SHUT UP!"

Harry's throat ached after that, but he had everyone's attention.

"I have a broomstick," Harry said as loudly as he could manage with his throat still hurting. He'd remembered Azkaban, and the broomstick which had only sat two, when he'd requested one that could carry three. "It's a 3-seater. I need one seventh-year from the armies to come with me. We're going to fly through the hallways as fast as possible looking for Hermione Granger, pick her up, and come back immediately. Who's with me?"

The Great Hall became entirely silent, then.

Students glanced at each other uneasily. The younger students looked expectantly at the older students, while they in turn turned to look at the students who were guarding the perimeter. Most of those were staring straight ahead, pointing their wands just in case the troll picked that moment to burst through a wall.

No one moved.

No one spoke.

Harry Potter spoke again. "We're not going to *fight* the troll. If we see it we'll just fly away and there's no way it'll be able to keep up with us on a broomstick. I'll take responsibility for squaring it with the administration. *Please.*"

People went on looking at other people.

Harry stared at the silent crowd, the dozen seventh-years looking sternly outward, feeling the coldness coming over him. Somewhere in the back of his mind, Professor Quirrell was laughing scornfully and mocking the idea that ordinary fools would ever do something useful of their own will, without a wand pointed at their heads...

Tick.

The standard remedy for bystander apathy was to focus on a single individual. "All right," Harry said, trying to keep the commanding voice of the Boy-Who-Lived who didn't doubt obedience. "Miss Morgan, come with me, now. We've got no time to waste."

The witch he'd named turned from where she'd been staring steadily out at the perimeter, her expression aghast for the one second before her face closed up.

"The Deputy Headmistress ordered us all to stay *here*, Mr. Potter."

It took an effort for Harry to unclench his teeth. "Professor Quirrell didn't say that and neither did you. Professor McGonagall isn't a tactician, she didn't think to check if we had missing students and *she* thought it was a good idea to start marching students through the hallways. But Professor McGonagall *understands* after her mistakes are pointed out to her, you saw how she listened to you and Professor Quirrell, and I'm certain that she wouldn't want us to just ignore the fact that Hermione Granger is *out there, alone—*"

Tick.

"I'd expect the Professor to say she'd not wish any more students roaming the halls. The Professor said if anyone left for any reason, they'd

be expelled. Maybe *you* don't need to worry because you're the Boy-Who-Lived, but the rest of us *do!*"

Tick.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, Professor Quirrell was just laughing at him. Expecting some *normal* person to act without perfect strategic clarity, without a clear focus of responsibility on them personally, when they had a *good excuse to do nothing*... "A student's life is at stake," Harry said in a level voice. "She could be fighting the troll right now. Out of curiosity, does that mean anything to you at all?"

Tick.

Miss Morgan's face twisted. "You—you're the Boy-Who-Lived! Just go off by yourself and snap your fingers, if you want to help her!"

Tick.

Harry was hardly even aware of what he was saying. "That's just cleverness and bluffing, I don't have any power like that in real life, a young girl needs your help *now are you a Gryffindor or not?*"

"Why are you saying any of this to *me?*" cried Miss Morgan. "I wasn't left in charge here! Mr. Hagrid was!"

There was an awkward pause that suffused the whole room.

Harry spun to look up at the huge half-giant towering over the crowd of students, as all other heads also turned toward him as one.

"Mr. Hagrid," Harry said, trying to keep his voice commanding. "You need to authorize this expedition and you need to do it now."

Rubeus Hagrid looked conflicted, though that was hard to judge with his vast head so surrounded by his unshorn beard and locks; only his eyes looked alive, embedded in all that hair. "Eh..." said the half-giant. "I was tol' to keep yeh all safe—"

"Great, now can we also keep Hermione Granger safe? You know, the student framed for *a murder she did not commit* who needs *someone to help her?*"

The half-giant startled as Harry spoke the words.

Harry stared at the enormous man, desperately willing him to pick up on the hint, hoping the words hadn't given it away to anyone else—he couldn't be just muscle, surely James and Lily had been friends with this man out of more than pity—

"Framed?" called out an anonymous voice, from somewhere over near where the Slytherins gathered. "Ha, are you still on that? It'd serve her right if she did get eaten."

There was some laughter, even as cries of indignation came from elsewhere.

The half-giant's face firmed up. "Yeh stay here, lad," Mr. Hagrid said in a booming tone that was probably meant to be gentle. "I'll go and look fer her meself. Truth is, trolls can be a mite tricky—yeh've got to catch 'em by an ankle and dangle 'em just right, or they'll rip yeh clean in half—"

"Can you ride a broomstick, Mr. Hagrid?"

"Eh—" Rubeus Hagrid frowned. "No."

"Then you can't search fast enough. *Sixth-years! Calling all sixth-years! Are there any sixth-years here who aren't worthless cowards?*"

Silence.

"Fifth years? Mr. Hagrid, tell them they're authorized to go with me and keep me safe! *I'm trying to be sensible, damn it!*"

The half-giant wrung his hands with an agonized expression. "Eh—I—"

Something snapped inside Harry and he started to stride directly toward the doors to the Great Hall, pushing aside anyone who didn't get out of his way as though they were doughy statues. (He didn't run, because running was an invitation for somebody to stop you.) Somewhere in his mind he was moving through an empty room filled with mechanical puppets by whose meaningless lip-moving noises he'd been *distracted—*

A huge figure interposed itself in his way.

Harry looked up.

"I can't let yeh do that, Harry Potter, not yeh of all people. There's strange things afoot in this castle, and someone might be after Miss Granger—or they might be after *yeh."* Rubeus Hagrid's voice was regretful but firm, and his gigantic hands lay at his side like forklifts. "I can't let yeh go out there, Harry Potter."

"Stupefy!"

The red bolt crashed into the side of Hagrid's head and made the huge man startle. His head snapped around faster than anything that large should've moved, and bellowed, *"What do yeh think yeh're doing!"* at the young form of Susan Bones.

"Sorry!" she screamed. *"Incendium! Glisseo!"*

The huge man's hands, now slapping at the fire in his beard, didn't quite manage to catch himself as he crashed to the floor, but it didn't matter by then because Harry was past him and—

Neville Longbottom stepped in front of him, looking desperate but determined, the Hufflepuff boy's wand already level in his hand.

Harry's hand went for his wand in a sheer reflex action, he barely managed to check himself before Neville could fire on him, staring at his Lieutenant as though the world had gone mad.

"Harry!" Neville burst out. "Harry, Mr. Hagrid's right, you *can't*, this could all be a trap, they could be after *you*—"

All of Neville's muscles went rigid and he toppled to the ground, stiff as a board.

A pale-looking Ron Weasley stepped out from behind Neville, his own wand level, and said, "Go."

"Ron, you madman, what are you doing—" came a voice distantly identifiable as Miss Clearwater's boyfriend, but Harry was already dashing for the door without looking back, even as Ron's voice and Susan's voice rose again in incantation. There was a huge indignant bellow, and unknown voices began to yell.

Then Harry was through, his hand reaching into his pouch and his voice was saying *"broomstick",* as behind him the great doors began to swing shut again.

Harry continued running through the Entrance Hall even as the long three-person broomstick and its sets of stirrups began to protrude from the pouch, repeating a number of swearwords in his head and thinking *this is what happens when you try to be sensible* with the part of his mind that wasn't trying to figure out a search pattern to cover places where Hermione might be. The Library was on the third floor and practically on the other side of the castle... Harry had almost reached the great

marble staircase by the time the broomstick was in his hand and *"Up!"* he was in the air and accelerating up toward the second floor—

"Gah!" Harry screamed, and barely managed to spin his broom in the air so that he didn't impale one of the human figures lurking at the top of the stairs. There was a ghastly moment of trying not to fall off the broom, perform the twists that would keep him in the stirrups, despite being really close to the ground and having almost no room to maneuver and then—

"Fred? George?"

"We can't figure out how to find her!" one of the Weasley twins blurted, hands twisting in distress. "We snuck out because we thought we could find Miss Granger—there *has* to be a quick way to find anyone inside the Hogwarts castle, we're both sure of it—but we can't figure out what it is!"

Harry stared at both of them, from where he was hanging upside down from the broomstick where his desperate maneuver had brought him, and entirely by reflex his mouth said, "Well, *why* were you so sure you could find her?"

"We *don't know!*" cried the other Weasley twin.

"Have you been able to find people inside Hogwarts before?"

"Yes! We—" and the Weasley twin who was speaking stopped abruptly, both redheads staring off into the distance with a blank expression.

There was a thundering crash, as of two huge doors being shoved open by someone very, very strong.

Harry spun around in the air to present the two open stirrup-positions on the broomstick to the Weasley twins, he didn't say anything, there was no reason for them to give away their positions if they didn't have to. Time seemed to move too slowly as the Weasley twins scrambled into the stirrups, Harry's heart beating hard despite his mental calculation that Mr. Hagrid, running, shouldn't reach even the foot of the stairway in time. Then the two of them were accelerating *hard* and away toward the nearest corridor, the stone floor beneath them blurring and the walls seeming to make an audible whooshing sound (though that was just the wind in their ears) as they went past; Harry remembered

that he was riding a longer three-person broomstick barely in time to *slow down* for the next turn.

And now all the broomstick seats were occupied, but if they actually found Hermione then—Harry could put on the Cloak of Invisibility, that should hide him from the troll, and that would free up a seat for Hermione—

Harry ducked hard before a sudden archway took his head off.

"We found Jesse!" the Weasley twin seated behind Harry blurted. "I know we did! That time we needed to tell him that Filch was hunting for him!"

"How?" Harry said, most of his brain engaged in not dying in a horrible air accident. He should have slowed down for safety, but there was a tension rising in him, a sourceless dread. He *couldn't* slow down, something terrible would happen if he slowed down...

"We—" said the Weasley twin seated lower down. "We can't remember!"

Another sharp turn taken at, Harry estimated, roughly 0.3% of the speed of light, and they were going through a twisty curving corridor that Harry always took to get from the Great Hall to the library only it *wasn't* the shortest way if you were *on a broomstick,* he should've taken the long straight West Corridor instead—

The part of his brain that wasn't steering caught up with reality.

"Someone's been tampering with your minds!" Harry yelled, as he weaved through the curving corridor so fast that the tail-end Weasley sometimes lightly smacked into the wall as the length of the broomstick conflicted with Harry's maladapted air skills.

"*What?*" cried Fred or George.

"Whoever got to Hermione messed with your minds too!" It could be an Obliviation, it could be a False Memory that hadn't been planted right, but right now Harry couldn't *think*—

The broomstick turned and shot upward beside a spiral staircase, all three of them flattened themselves against the broomstick so they could make in through the gap in the ceiling that opened onto the third floor, and then they were in front of the library, the broomstick slowing to a halt with a shriek despite the lack of anything it could be friction-braking

against. Harry shot the Weasley twins a quick glance to *stay put*, as he clambered off the broomstick to shove open the doors of the library, controlling his breathing as he shoved his head inside.

Hermione Granger wasn't there.

Madam Pince, who was eating a sandwich at her desk, looked up with a sudden glare. "Library's closed!"

"Have you seen Hermione Granger?" Harry said.

"I said the library's *closed,* boy! Lunch hours!"

"This is extremely important. Have you seen Hermione Granger or do you have any idea where she might be?"

"No, now be off!"

"Do you have any fast way of contacting Professor McGonagall in an emergency?"

"Eh?" said the librarian, startled. She rose up from behind her desk. "What is—"

"Yes or no. Please answer immediately."

"Ah—there's the Floo—"

"She's not in her office," Harry said. "Do you have any other way of reaching her. Yes or no."

"Young man, I insist that you—"

Harry's brain flagged this as *I'm talking to NPCs again* and he spun on his heel and dashed back for the broomstick.

"Stop!" cried Madam Pince, bursting too late from the doors as Harry and the Weasley twins shot off again, out of the librarian's sight. The pressure in Harry's mind still rising, like a physical hand squeezing his chest, *he had to find Hermione* and he had no other notion of where she could be, unless it was the witches' dorms in the Ravenclaw tower and that he couldn't enter. Searching all of Hogwarts bordered on a mathematical impossibility, there probably was no continuous flight path that entered all the rooms at least once—*why* hadn't he thought to demand for Hermione and Neville and him to be given a set of those neat little mirrors the Aurors used to communicate—

The realization that he was being *stupid* hit Harry like a blow to the stomach. He didn't need mirrors to send a message, he hadn't needed mirrors since January. Harry slowed the broomstick to a halt in midair

of a hallway, his wand already coming into his hand, the driving will to *protect Hermione Granger* rising to the front of his mind like a sun of silver fire and flowing down his arm as he cried

"EXPECTO PATRONUM!"

and the blazing white humanoid burst into existence like a nova, the Weasley twins' voices crying aloud in shock.

"Tell Hermione Granger—that there's a troll loose in Hogwarts—it could be hunting for her—she needs to get into direct sunlight, now!"

The silver figure turned as though it was departing, and then vanished.

"Merlin's underpants," breathed Fred or George.

The silver outline blasted back into the world, and said in the strange outside version of Harry's own voice, "Hermione Granger says," the blazing figure's voice became higher-pitched, *"AHHHHHHHHH!"*

Time seemed to fracture, like everything was moving very quickly and slowly at the same time. A desperate impulse to accelerate the broomstick, fly at its maximum speed, only Harry didn't *know where*—

"If you know where she is," Harry shouted to the blazing humanoid figure, staring into it as though it were a sun, "then *take me to her!*"

The silver blaze moved and Harry accelerated after it, the Weasley twins giving out high-pitched shrieks behind him as he fired through the air like a cannonball, moving faster than sanity, he didn't focus on the walls whizzing past him or how fast he was moving, just followed the silver light through corridors and flying up staircases and blitzing through doors that Fred or George cried desperate incantations to open and it was *all still taking too much time,* somewhere deep inside Harry felt like he was sinking through molasses as windows and portraits shot past.

The broomstick screamed through a final turn that whacked one of the Weasley twins against the wall not quite as hard as a Bludger would hit, and then they followed the brilliant Patronus through an open space in the ceilings, blasting up and upwards, rising past one floor and then another in less than a breath.

His Patronus slowed to a halt (Harry braking hard in response) just as they reached the level of a wide-open floor space that that spread out

until it escaped the ceiling and turned into an outdoor terrace, a spread of tiled marble open to the air and sky—

CHAPTER EIGHTY-NINE

TIME PRESSURE, PART II

Cool blue fires clung to the floor in small masses, surrounding a blazing pool that seemed to burn with a deadlier, hotter blue.

In one narrow circle the marble tiles were scorched and shattered by some explosive spell that only the most prodigious of first-year witches could have cast, with the last of her strength.

On the terrace, *still moving* beneath the open sunlight, stood a great lumpy creature of dull granite-grey. Body like a boulder with small bald head perched on top like a stone, short legs thick as tree trunks with flat, horny feet. One hand held a tremendous stone club as long and as wide as an adult human, and the other hand held

The Weasley twins screamed.

Harry's Patronus shattered.

The troll snorted and spun around to face them, dropping

into the red pool that had spread out beneath its feet, raising its club high.

Then a Weasley cried an incantation and the club was torn from the troll's hand, smashed into its face so hard it drove the troll back for one of its steps, a blow that might have killed a Muggle. The troll gave a bellow of anger, its nose squashed and blood-spattered, and then the nose straightened once more, regenerated. The troll grabbed with both hands for the club, which shot away through the air but only barely dodged the grab.

"Lead it away, keep it off me," said a voice.

The levitated club moved backwards from the troll, from the terrace onto the wide-open floor beneath the ceiling; and the troll made a great prodigious leap that almost brought the club into its hands. Then

the troll made another great leap as the club moved to one side; and the broomstick moved forwards and Harry jumped off and ran towards where Hermione Granger was lying in a pool of her own blood with her legs eaten away to the upper thighs.

Harry's hands tore open the healer's kit from his pouch, grabbed one of the self-tightening tourniquets, wrapped them around one ragged tooth-marked stump, his hands briefly slipping in the blood, they didn't tremble, there wasn't any allowance for his hands to tremble. As the tourniquet formed a complete loop it tightened hard and more blood came out, but then the bleeding stopped on that thigh-stump, and Harry turned to the other. Part of his mind was screaming, screaming, screaming and even the part of him picking up the other self-tightening tourniquet heard it, but that also wasn't allowed.

The two Weasley twins were shouting spells, one after another in rapid-fire casting that would have had Harry unconscious in sixty seconds, sometimes the twins shouted two spells simultaneously in perfect coordination, but most of the spells were disrupting in harmless showers of sparks against the troll's skin. As the other tourniquet tightened itself in another pulse of blood, Harry looked up at a "*Diffindo!*" / "*Reducto!*" that made the troll's vulnerable eyes explode in twin showers of vitreous humor, but the troll only bellowed once more, its eyes already reforming.

"*Fire and acid!*" Harry shouted. "*Use fire or acid!*"

"*Fuego!*" / "*Incendio!*" Harry heard, but he wasn't looking, he was reaching for the syringe of glowing orange liquid that was the oxygenating potion, pushing it into Hermione's neck at what Harry hoped was the carotid artery, to keep her brain alive even if her lungs or heart stopped, so long as her brain stayed intact everything else could be fixed, it had to be possible for magic to fix it, it had to be possible for magic to fix it, it had to be possible for magic to fix it, and Harry pushed the plunger of the syringe all the way down, creating a faint glow beneath the pale skin of her neck. Harry then pushed down on her chest, where her heart should be, hard compressions that he hoped was moving the oxygenated blood around to where it could reach her brain, even if her heart might have stopped beating, he hadn't actually thought to check

her pulse.

Then Harry stared at the other things in his medical kit, his mind going blank as he tried to figure out what else of what was there, if anything, he could use. The screaming in that distant corner of his mind was getting louder, much louder, now that his hands had stopped their frantic motions. He was suddenly aware of the liquid sensation where blood had soaked through his robes and the knees of his pants.

From behind Harry came the sound of another bellow from the troll, and he heard one of the Weasley twins shout *"Deligitor prodeas!"* and then, *"HELP! Do something!"*

Harry twisted his head back to look, and saw that one of the Weasley twins was somehow now wearing the Sorting Hat on his head, facing off against the troll which held the huge stone club in both its hands, looking somewhat scorched now and with one or two smoking scars across its arms, but still intact.

And then the voice of the Hat bellowed in a voice so loud it seemed to shake the walls,

"GRYFFINDOR!"

A pulse of power burned the air, magic feeling almost tangible even to Harry's young senses, the troll jumped back a pace with a snort of surprise. Fred or George, with a strange look on his face, swept the Hat off his head with a motion smooth as a magician's trick, and reached in with one hand and drew forth a hilt whose pommel was a glowing ruby, followed by a wide crossguard of gleaming white metal, and a blade as long as a tall child. As the sword was revealed the air seemed to fill with a silent scream of fury.

Upon the blade was written in golden script, *nihil supernum.*

Then the Weasley twin raised the sword aloft as though the huge blade weighed nothing, and screamed and charged.

Harry's lips opened to say something, some long sentence like, *No, stop, you have no idea how to use a sword* but not even a single syllable left his lips before the sword sliced off the troll's right arm through the elbow, cutting through skin and flesh and bone like jelly; just as the already-swinging arc of the stone club smashed into the charging Weasley twin and sent him flying through the air above the marble floor, over the gap

out of which they'd risen on the broomstick, until that Weasley hit the wall on the opposite side and then collapsed into an unmoving heap.

The bright sword vanished down into the opening in the floor, clattering distantly as it dropped.

"Fred!" screamed George Weasley, and then *"VENTUS!"*

An invisible blow caught the troll and hurled it sideways through the air.

"*VENTUS!*"

The troll was hit again, blown to the edge of the floor and the gap leading downwards.

"VENTUS!"

But the troll had reached down and grabbed at the floor, its remaining hand cruching through marble to gain a firm hold. The third blow sent the troll's body over the gap; but the hand remained at the edge. And then the troll was pulling itself back up single-handedly, roaring.

George Weasley staggered, almost falling, his hand dropping to his side. "Harry—" the Weasley twin said in a strained voice, "Run -"

The remaining Weasley twin took a step sideways, slumped against the wall, and slid to the ground.

Time was fractured in Harry's mind, the world around him seemed to move slowly, distorted, or perhaps it was his own mind twisting and folding. He should have been moving, doing something, but a strange paralysis seemed to be stopping all his muscles, all his motions. Without any time for words, thoughts came in flashes of concepts: that if Harry ran away the troll would eat the Weasley twins as well as Hermione, that if Bludgers didn't kill wizards then Fred should still be alive, that the Weasley twins were more powerful spellcasters than him and they hadn't been able to hold back the troll, there was no time to Transfigure anything he didn't already possess, the troll seemed too agile to be lured over the edge of the terrace to fall off the sides of the Hogwarts castle, someone had enchanted the troll against sunlight before using it as a murder weapon and might also have strengthened it in other ways. And then a mental image of Hermione running from the troll, running for sunlight, finally reaching the bright terrace with the troll hot on her

heels, only to find that someone else had thought of that possibility, too.

The screaming horror in his mind was drowned out by another emotion.

Harry stood up.

On the other side of the room, the enemy had also risen, the unregenerating stump of one sword-cut arm still bloody.

intent to kill

The troll grasped its fallen club in its remaining hand, and gave a huge bellow, smashing the club into the floor and sending marble chips flying.

think purely of killing

The troll began to lumber towards where George had fallen, a thin string of drool trailing from the side of its lips.

grasp at any means to do so

Harry took five strides forward, and the enemy gave another bellow and turned away from George, its eyes focusing squarely on him.

censors off, do not flinch

The third most perfect killing machine in nature bounded towards him in leaping steps.

KILL

Harry's left hand already held the Transfigured diamond from his ring, his right hand already held his wand.

"Wingardium Leviosa."

Harry's wand directed the tiny jewel into the troll's mouth.

"Finite Incantatem."

The troll's head blew off its spine as the rock expanded back into its old form, and Harry stepped aside as the Enemy's body crashed where he'd been standing.

The enemy's head was already beginning to regenerate, the ragged stump of the jaw and spine smoothing over, the mouth completing itself and replacing its teeth.

Harry bent down and picked up the troll's head by its left ear. His wand jammed through the troll's left eye, plunging through the jelly-like

material and passing through the wide socket in the bone. Harry visualized a one-millimeter-wide cross-section through the enemy's brain, and Transfigured it into sulfuric acid.

The enemy stopped regenerating.

Harry threw the corpse over the edge of the terrace and turned back to Hermione.

Her eyes were moving, and focused on him.

Harry scrambled down beside her, ignoring the blood soaking more of his already-soaked robes. *You'll be all right,* his brain formed the sentence, but his lips wouldn't move. *You'll be all right, we'll find some magic to fix all this, put you back to normal, just hold on, don't—*

Hermione's lips were moving, just a tiny bit but they were moving.

"your... fault..."

Time froze. Harry should have told her not to talk, to save her breath, only he couldn't unblock his lips.

Hermione drew in another breath, and her lips whispered, "Not your fault."

Then she exhaled, and closed her eyes.

Harry stared at her with his mouth half-open, his breath caught in his throat.

"Don't do this," said his voice. He'd only been two minutes late.

Hermione suddenly convulsed, her arms twitching into the air as though reaching up for something, and her eyes flew open again. There was a burst of *something* that was magic and also more, a shout louder than an earthquake and containing a thousand books, a thousand libraries, all spoken in a single cry that was Hermione; too vast to be understood, except that Harry suddenly knew that Hermione had whited out the pain, and was glad not to be dying alone. For a moment it seemed like the outpouring of magic might hold, take root in the castle's stone; but then the outpouring ended and the magic faded, her body stopped moving and all motion halted as Hermione Jean Granger ceased to exist—

No.

Harry stood up from the body, swaying.

No.

There was a burst of flame and Dumbledore was standing there with Fawkes, his eyes filled with horror. "I felt a student die! What—"

The old wizard's eyes saw what lay upon the ground.

"Oh, no," whispered Albus Dumbledore. Fawkes gave a sad, mournful croon.

"Bring her back."

There was silence on the terrace. Fred Weasley had risen up into the air at a gesture from Dumbledore's wand and was floating towards them, surrounded by a reassuring pink glow.

"Harry—" the old wizard began. His voice cracked. "Harry—"

"Have Fawkes cry on her or whatever. Hurry up." The voice that spoke sounded perfectly calm.

"I, I can't, Harry, it's too late, she's dead—"

"I don't want to hear about it. If it was me lying there, you'd pull some kind of amazing rabbit out of your hat and save me, right, because the hero isn't allowed to die before the story's over. Well, she's the hero too, so whatever you were saving for that extra-special occasion, just go ahead and use it now. I promise I'll pay you back."

"There isn't anything I can do! Her soul has departed, she's passed on!"

Harry opened his mouth to scream out all his fury, and then closed it again. There wasn't any point in screaming, it wouldn't accomplish anything. The unbearable pressure rising inside him couldn't be let out that way.

Harry turned away from Dumbledore and looked down at where the remains of Hermione Granger were lying in a pool of blood. Part of his mind was hammering at the world around him, trying to make it go away, wake up from the nightmare and find himself back in his Ravenclaw dorm room with the morning sun shining through the curtains. But the blood remained and Harry didn't wake up, and another part of him already knew that this event was real, part of the same flawed world that included Azkaban and the Wizengamot chamber and

No

With a fracturing feeling, as though time was still torn to pieces around him, Harry turned away from Dumbledore and looked down

at the remains of Hermione Granger lying in a pool of blood with two tourniquets tied around her thigh-stumps, and decided

No.

I do not accept this.

There isn't any reason to accept it, not when there's magic in the world.

Harry would learn whatever he had to learn, invent whatever he had to invent, rip the knowledge of Salazar Slytherin from the Dark Lord's mind, discover the secret of Atlantis, open any gates or break any seals necessary, find his way to the root of all magic and reprogram it.

He would rip apart the foundations of reality itself to get Hermione Granger back.

sbreak

"The crisis is over," the Defense Professor said. "You may dismount, Madam."

Trelawney, who had been sitting behind him on the two-person broomstick that had just blazed through Hogwarts burning directly through all the walls and floors in their way, hastily pulled herself off and then sat down hard on the floor, a pace away from the red-glowing edges of a newly made gap in the wall. The woman was still breathing in gasps, bending over herself as though she were on the verge of vomiting out something larger than she was.

The Defense Professor had felt the boy's horror, through the link that existed between the two of them, the resonance in their magic; and he had realized that the boy had sought the troll and found it. The Defense Professor had tried to send an impulse to retreat, to don the Cloak of Invisibility and flee; but he'd never been able to influence the boy through the resonance, and hadn't succeeded that time either.

He'd felt the boy give himself over fully to the killing intention. That was when the Defense Professor had begun burning through the substance of Hogwarts, trying to reach the battle in time.

He'd felt the boy exterminate his enemy in seconds.

He'd felt the boy's dismay as one of his friends died.

He'd felt the fury the boy had directed at some annoyance who was likely Dumbledore; followed by an unknown resolution whose unyield-

ing hardness even he found adequate. With any luck, the boy had just discarded his foolish little reluctances.

Unseen by anyone, the Defense Professor's lips curved up in a thin smile. Despite its little ups and downs, on the whole this had been a surprisingly good day—

"HE IS HERE. THE ONE WHO WILL TEAR APART THE VERY STARS IN HEAVEN. HE IS HERE. HE IS THE END OF THE WORLD."

CHAPTER NINETY

ROLES, PART I

A simple *Innervate* from the Headmaster had awakened Fred Weasley, followed by a preliminary healing Charm for a broken arm and cracked ribs. Harry's voice had distantly told the Headmaster about the Transfigured acid inside the troll's head (Dumbledore had looked down over the side of the terrace and made a gesture before returning) and then about the Weasley twins' minds having been tampered with, carrying on a separate conversation that Harry remembered but could not process.

Harry still stood over Hermione's body, he hadn't moved from that spot, thinking as fast as he could through the sense of dissociation and fragmented time, was there anything he should be doing *now,* any opportunities that were passing irrevocably. Some way to reduce the amount of magical omnipotence that would be required later. A temporal beacon effect to mark this instant for later time travel, if he someday found a way to travel back further than six hours. There were theories of time travel under General Relativity (which had seemed much less plausible before Harry had run across Time-Turners) and those theories said you couldn't go back to before the time machine was built—a relativistic time machine maintained a continuous pathway through time, it didn't teleport anything. But Harry didn't see anything helpful he could do using spells in his lexicon, Dumbledore wasn't being very cooperative, and in any case this was several minutes after the critical location within Time

"Harry," the Headmaster whispered, laying his hand on Harry's shoulder. He had vanished from where he was standing over the Weasley twins and come into existence beside Harry; George Weasley had discontinously teleported from where he was sitting to be kneeling next to his

brother's side, and Fred was now lying straight with his eyes open and wincing as he breathed. "Harry, you must go from this place."

"Hold on," said Harry's voice. "I'm trying to think if there's anything else I can do."

The old wizard's voice sounded helpless. "Harry—I know you do not believe in souls—but whether Hermione is watching you now, or no, I do not think she would wish for you to be like this."

...no, it was obvious.

Harry leveled his wand at Hermione's body—

"Harry! What are you—"

—and poured *everything* down his arm into his hand—

"Frigideiro!"

"—doing?"

"Hypothermia," Harry said distantly, as he staggered. It'd been one of the spells he and Hermione had experimented on, a lifetime ago, so he was able to control it precisely, though it had taken a lot of power to affect that much mass. Hermione's body should now be at almost exactly five degrees Celsius. "People have been revived from cold water after more than thirty minutes without breathing. The cold protects you from brain damage, you see, it slows everything down. There's a saying Muggle doctors have, you're not dead until you're warm and dead—I think they even cool down the patient during some surgeries, if they have to stop someone's heart for a while."

Fred and George started sobbing.

Dumbledore's face was already streaked with tears. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "Harry, I'm so sorry, but you have to stop this." The Headmaster took Harry by the shoulders and pulled on him.

Harry allowed himself to be turned away from Hermione's body, walked forward as the Headmaster pushed him away from the blood. The Cooling Charm would buy him time. Hours at least, maybe days if he could manage to keep casting the spell on Hermione or if they stored her body somewhere cold.

Now there was time to think.

Minerva had seen Albus's face and she'd known something was wrong; there had been time for her to wonder what had happened, and even who had died; her mind flashing to Alastor, to Augusta, to Arthur and Molly, all the most likely targets at the start of Voldemort's second rise. She had thought that she had steeled herself, she had thought herself ready for the worst.

Then Albus spoke, and all the steel left her.

Not Hermione—no—

Albus gave her a brief space to weep; and then told her that Harry Potter, who had watched Miss Granger die, had seated himself outside the infirmary storeroom where Miss Granger's remains were being kept, refusing to move from the spot, and telling anyone who spoke to him to go away so he could think.

The only thing that had elicited any reaction from the boy was when Fawkes had tried to sing to him; Harry Potter had shrieked at the phoenix not to do that, his feelings were real, he didn't want magic trying to *heal* them like they were a disease. After that Fawkes had refused to sing again.

Albus thought that she might have the best chance of reaching Harry Potter now.

So she had to pull herself together, and clean up her face; there would be time later for private grief, when her surviving children no longer needed her.

Minerva McGonagall pulled together the dislocated pieces of herself, wiped her eyes a final time, and laid her hand on the doorknob of the infirmary section whose back storeroom was now being used, for the second time this century and for the fifth time since the castle of Hogwarts had been raised, as the resting place of a promising young student.

She opened the door.

Harry Potter's eyes gazed at her. The boy was sitting on the floor in front of the door to the back storeroom, and holding his wand in his lap. If those eyes were grieving, if they were empty, if they were even broken, it couldn't be seen from looking at the boy's face. There were

no dried tears on those cheeks.

"Why are you here, Professor McGonagall?" Harry Potter said. "I told the Headmaster I'd like to be left alone for a while."

She couldn't think of anything to say. *To help you—you're not all right* – but she didn't know what to say, there was nothing she could imagine saying that would make things better. She hadn't planned ahead before she'd walked into the room, having not been at her best.

"What are you thinking about?" Minerva said. It was the only sentence that came into her mind. Albus had told her that Harry had been saying, over and over, that he was thinking; and she had to get Harry talking, somehow.

Harry stared half at her and half past her, a tension coming into his face, as she held her breath.

It took a while before Harry spoke.

"I'm trying to think if there's anything I should be doing right now," said Harry Potter. "It's hard, though. My mind keeps on imagining ways the past could have gone differently if I'd thought faster, and I can't rule out that there might be a key insight in there somewhere."

"Mr. Potter—" she said falteringly. "Harry, I don't think it's healthy for you to be—thinking like that—"

"I disagree. It's not thinking that gets people killed." The words were spoken in a level monotone, as though reciting lines from a book.

"Harry," she said, hardly even thinking as she said it, "there's nothing you could have done—"

Something flickered in Harry's expression. His eyes seemed to focus on her for the first time.

"Nothing I could have *done?*" Harry's voice rose on the last word. *"Nothing I could have DONE? I've lost track of how many different ways I could've saved her! If I'd asked to have us all given communications mirrors! If I'd insisted on Hermione being taken out of Hogwarts and put in a school that isn't insane! If I'd snuck out immediately instead of trying to argue with normal people! If I'd remembered the Patronus earlier! If I'd thought through possible emergencies and trained myself to think about Patronuses earlier! Even at the very last minute it might not have been too late! I killed the troll and turned to her and she was still ALIVE and I just*

knelt next to her listening to her last words like an IDIOT instead of casting the Patronus again and calling Dumbledore to send Fawkes! Or if I'd just approached the whole problem from a different angle—if I'd looked for a student with a Time-Turner to send a message back in time *before* I found out about anything happening to her, instead of ending up with an outcome that can't be altered—I *asked* the Headmaster to go back and save Hermione and then fake everything, fake the dead body, edit everyone's memories, but Dumbledore said that he tried something like that once and it didn't work and he lost another friend instead. Or if I'd—if I'd only gone with—if, that night—"

Harry pressed his hands over his face, and when he removed them again, his face was calm and composed once more.

"Anyway," said Harry Potter, now in a monotone again, "I don't want to repeat that mistake, so I'm going to spend until dinnertime thinking if there's anything I should be doing. If I haven't thought of anything by then I'll go to dinner and eat. Now please go away."

She was aware now that tears were sliding down her cheeks, again. "Harry—Harry, you have to believe that this isn't your fault!"

"Of course it's my fault. There's no one else here who could be responsible for anything."

"No! You-Know-Who killed Hermione!" She was hardly aware of what she was saying, that she hadn't screened the room against who might be listening. "Not you! No matter what else you could've done, it's not you who killed her, it was Voldemort! If you can't believe that you'll go mad, Harry!"

"That's not how responsibility works, Professor." Harry's voice was patient, like he was explaining things to a child who was certain not to understand. He wasn't looking at her anymore, just staring off at the wall to her right side. "When you do a fault analysis, there's no point in assigning fault to a part of the system you can't change afterward, it's like stepping off a cliff and blaming gravity. Gravity isn't going to change next time. There's no point in trying to allocate responsibility to people who aren't going to alter their actions. Once you look at it from that perspective, you realize that allocating blame never helps anything unless you blame yourself, because you're the only one whose actions

you can change by putting blame there. That's why Dumbledore has his room full of broken wands. He understands that part, at least."

Some distant part of her mind made a note to wait until much later and then speak sharply to the Headmaster about what he was showing to impressionable young children. She might even scream at him this time. She'd been thinking about screaming at him anyway, because of Miss Granger—

"You're *not* responsible," she said, though her voice trembled. "It's the Professors—it's us who are responsible for student safety, not you."

Harry's eyes flicked back to her. "*You're* responsible?" There was a tightness in the voice. "You want me to hold you responsible, Professor McGonagall?"

She raised her chin and nodded. It would be better, by far, than Harry blaming himself.

The boy pushed himself up from where he was sitting on the floor, and took a step forward. "All right, then," Harry said in a monotone. "I tried to do the sensible thing, when I saw Hermione was missing and that none of the Professors knew. I asked for a seventh-year student to go with me on a broomstick and protect me while we looked for Hermione. I asked for help. I begged for help. And nobody helped me. Because you gave everyone an absolute order to stay in one place or they'd be expelled, no excuses. No matter what else Dumbledore gets wrong, he at least thinks of his students as people, not animals that have to be herded into a pen and kept from wandering out. You knew you weren't any good at military thinking, your first idea was to have us walking through the hallways, you knew some students there were better than you at strategy and tactics, and you still nailed us down in one room without any discretionary judgment. So when something you didn't foresee happened and it would've made perfect sense to send out a seventh-year student on a fast broom to look for Hermione Granger, the students knew you wouldn't understand or forgive. They weren't afraid of the troll, they were afraid of you. The discipline, the conformity, the *cowardice* that you instilled in them delayed me just long enough for Hermione to die. Not that I should've tried asking for help from normal people, of course, and I will change and be less stupid next time. But if I

were dumb enough to allocate responsibility to someone who isn't me, that's what I'd say."

Tears were streaming down her cheeks.

"That's what I'd tell you if I thought you could be responsible for anything. But normal people don't choose on the basis of consequences, they just play roles. There's a picture in your head of a stern disciplinarian and you do whatever that picture would do, whether or not it makes any sense. A stern disciplinarian would order the students back to their rooms, even if there was a troll roaming the hallways. A stern disciplinarian would order students not to leave the Hall on pain of expulsion. And the little picture of Professor McGonagall that you have in your head can't learn from experience or change herself, so there isn't any point to this conversation. People like you aren't responsible for anything, people like me are, and when we fail there's no one else to blame."

The boy strode forward to stand directly before her. His hand darted beneath his robes, brought forth the golden sphere that was the Ministry-issued protective shell of his Time Turner. He spoke in a dead, level voice without any emphasis. "This could've saved Hermione, if I'd been able to use it. But you thought it was your role to shut me down and get in my way. Nobody has died in Hogwarts in fifty years, you said that when you locked it, do you remember? I should've asked again after Bellatrix Black got loose from Azkaban, or after Hermione got framed for attempted murder. But I forgot because I was stupid. Please unlock it now before any of my other friends die."

Unable to speak, she brought forth her wand and did so, releasing the time-keyed enchantment she'd laced into the shell's lock.

Harry Potter flipped open the golden shell, looked at the tiny glass hourglass within its circles, nodded, and then snapped the case shut. "Thank you. Now go away." The boy's voice cracked again. "I have to think."

She closed the door behind her, an awful and still mostly-muffled sound escaping her throat—

Albus shimmered into existence beside her, taking on a brief garish hue as the Disillusionment wore off.

She did not jump, quite. "I've told you, stop doing that," Minerva said. Her voice sounded dull in her own ears. "That was private."

Albus flickered his fingers at the door behind her. "I was afraid Mr. Potter might do you some harm." The Headmaster paused, then said quietly, "I am very surprised that you stood there and took that."

"All I had to do was say 'Mr. Potter', and he would have stopped." Her voice had dropped almost to a whisper. "Just that, and he would have stopped. And then he would have had no one to say those awful things to, no one at all."

"I thought Mr. Potter's remarks were entirely unfair and undeserved," Albus said.

"If it had been you, Albus, you would not have threatened to expel anyone leaving the room. Can you honestly tell me otherwise?"

Albus's brows rose. "Your role in this disaster was tiny, your decisions quite sensible at the time, and it is only Harry Potter's perfect hindsight that lets him imagine otherwise. Surely you are wiser than to blame yourself for this, Minerva."

She knew perfectly well that Albus would be placing a picture of Hermione in that awful room of his, that it would occupy a place of honor. Albus would hold *himself* responsible, she was certain, even though he hadn't even been in Hogwarts at the time. But not her.

So you also don't think it's worth the trouble of holding me responsible...

She slumped against the nearest wall, trying not to let the tears emerge again; she'd never seen Albus weep save thrice. "You have always believed in your students, as I never have. They would not have been afraid of you. They would have known you would understand."

"Minerva—"

"I am not fit to succeed you as Headmistress. We both know it."

"You are wrong," Albus said quietly. "When the time comes, you will be the forty-fifth Headmistress of Hogwarts and you will do an excellent job of it."

She shook her head. "What now, Albus? If he will not listen to me, then who?"

⁂

It was perhaps half an hour later. The boy still guarded the door to where his best friend's body lay, sitting his vigil. He was staring downward, at his wand as it lay in his hands. Sometimes his face screwed up in thought, at other times it relaxed.

Although the door did not open, and there was no sound, the boy looked up. He composed his face. His voice, when he spoke, was dull. "I don't want company."

The door opened.

The Defense Professor of Hogwarts entered into the room and shut the door behind him, taking up careful position in a corner between two walls, as far away from the boy as the room permitted. A sharp sense of catastrophe had risen in the air between the two of them, and hung there unchanging.

"Why are you here?" said the boy.

The man tilted his head slightly. Pale eyes examined the boy as though he were a specimen of life from a distant planet, and correspondingly dangerous.

"I've come to apologize, Mr. Potter," the man said quietly.

"Apologize for what?" the boy said. "Why, what could *you* have done to prevent Hermione's death?"

"I should have thought to check for the presence of yourself, Mr. Longbottom, and Miss Granger, all of whom were obvious next targets," the Defense Professor said without hesitation. "Mr. Hagrid was not mentally equipped to command the student contingent. I should have ignored the Deputy Headmistress's request for silence, and told her to leave behind Professor Flitwick, who would have been better able to defend the students from any threat, and who could have maintained communication via Patronus."

"Correct." The boy's voice was razor-sharp. "I'd forgotten there was someone else in Hogwarts who could be responsible for things. So why

didn't you think of it, Professor? Because I don't believe that *you* were stupid."

There was a pause, and the boy's fingers whitened on his wand.

"You did not think of it either, Mr. Potter, at the time." There was a weariness in the Defense Professor's voice. "I am smarter than you. I think faster than you. I am more experienced than you. But the gap between the two of us is not the same as the gap between us and them. If you can miss something, then so can I." The man's lips twisted. "You see, I deduced at once that the troll was but a distraction from some other matter, and of no great importance in itself. So long as nobody sent the students wandering pointlessly through the halls, or uncaringly dispatched the young Slytherins to those very dungeons where the troll had been spotted."

The boy did not seem to relax. "I suppose that is plausible."

"In any case," said the man, "if there is anyone who can be said to be responsible for Miss Granger's death, it is myself, not you. It is I, not you, who should have—"

"I perceive that you have spoken to Professor McGonagall and that she has given you a script to follow." The boy did not bother keeping the bitterness from his voice. "If you have something to say to me, Professor, say it without the masks."

There was a pause.

"As you wish," the Defense Professor said emotionlessly. The pale eyes stayed keen and sharp. "I do regret that the girl is dead. She was a good student in my Defense class, and could have been an ally to you later. I would wish to console you for your loss, but I cannot see how to go about doing so. Naturally, if I find the ones responsible I shall kill them. You are welcome to join in should circumstances permit."

"How touching," the boy said, his voice cool. "You are not claiming to have liked Hermione, then?"

"Her charms were lost on me, I suspect. I no longer form such bonds easily."

The boy nodded. "Thank you for being honest. Is that all, Professor?"

There was a pause.

"The castle is scarred, now," said the man standing in the corner.

"What?"

"When a certain ancient device in my possession informed me that Miss Granger was on the verge of death, I cast that spell of cursed fire of which I once spoke. I burned through some walls and floors so that my broomstick could take a more direct path." The man still spoke tonelessly. "Hogwarts will not heal such wounds easily, if at all. I suppose it will be necessary to patch over the holes with lesser conjurations. I regret that now, since I was in any case too late."

"Ah," said the boy. He closed his eyes briefly. "You did want to save her. You wanted it so strongly that you made some sort of actual effort. I suppose your mind, if not theirs, would be capable of that."

A brief, dry smile from the man.

"Thank you for that, Professor. But I would like to be left alone now until dinnertime. You of all people will understand. Is that all?"

"Not quite," the man said. A tinge of sardonic dryness now returned to his voice. "You see, based on recent experiences, I am concerned that you may now intend to do something extremely foolish."

"Such as what?" said the boy.

"I am not quite sure. Perhaps you have decided that a universe without Miss Granger is devoid of value, and should be destroyed for the insults it has dealt you."

The boy smiled without any humor. "Your own issues are showing, Professor. I don't really go in for that sort of thing. Did you, at some point?"

"Not particularly. I have no great fondness for the universe, but I do live there."

There was a pause.

"What are you planning, Mr. Potter?" said the man in the corner. "You have come to some significant resolution, though you are trying to hide it from me. What do you now intend?"

The boy shook his head. "I'm still thinking, and would like to be left alone to do it."

"I recall an offer you once made to me, some months ago," said the Defense Professor. "Do you want someone intelligent to talk to? I will

understand if you are not pleasant to be around."

The boy shook his head again. "No, thank you."

"Well, then," said the Defense Professor. "What about someone who is powerful and not particularly bound by naive scruples?"

There was a hesitation, and then the boy once more shook his head.

"Someone who is knowledgeable of much secret lore, and magics that some might consider to be unnatural?"

There was a slight narrowing of the boy's eyes, so imperceptible that someone else might not have—

"I see," said the Defense Professor. "Go ahead and ask me about it, then. I give you my word that I will repeat nothing of it to the others."

The boy took a while to speak, and when he did it was in a cracked voice.

"I mean to bring Hermione back. Because there isn't an afterlife, and I'm not about to just let her—just *not be*—"

The boy pressed his hands over his face, and when he withdrew them, he once more seemed as dispassionate as the man standing in the corner.

The Defense Professor's eyes were abstract, and faintly puzzled.

"How?" the man said finally.

"However I have to."

There was another pause.

"Regardless of the risks," the man in the corner said. "Regardless of how dangerous the magic required to accomplish it."

"Yes."

The Defense Professor's eyes were thoughtful. "But what general approach did you have in mind? I presume that turning her corpse into an Inferius is not what you—"

"Would she be able to think?" the boy said. "Would her body still decay?"

"No, and yes."

"Then no."

"What of the Resurrection Stone of Cadmus Peverell, if it could be obtained for you?"

The boy shook his head. "I don't want an illusion of Hermione drawn from my memories. I want her to be able to *live* her *life*—" the

boy's voice cracked. "I haven't decided yet on an object-level angle of attack. If I have to brute-force the problem by acquiring enough power and knowledge to just *make it happen*, I will."

Another pause.

"And to go about *that*," the man in the corner said, "you will use your favorite tool, science."

"Of course."

The Defense Professor exhaled, almost like a sigh. "I suppose that makes sense of it."

"Are you willing to help, or not?" the boy said.

"What help do you seek?"

"Magic. Where does it come from?"

"I do not know," said the man.

"And neither does anyone else?"

"Oh, the situation is far worse than that, Mr. Potter. There is hardly a scholar of the esoteric who has not unraveled the nature of magic, and every one of them believes something different."

"Where do new spells come from? I keep reading about someone who invented a spell to do something-or-other but there's no mention of *how*."

A shrug of robed shoulders. "Where do new books come from, Mr. Potter? Those who read many books sometimes become able to write them in turn. How? No one knows."

"There are books on how to write—"

"Reading them will not make you a famous playwright. After all such advice is accounted for, what remains is mystery. The invention of new spells is a similar mystery of purer form." The man's head tilted. "Such endeavors are dangerous. The saying is that one should either not have children, or else wait until after they are grown. There is a reason why so many innovators seem to hail from Gryffindor, rather than Ravenclaw as might be expected."

"And the more powerful sorts of magics?" the boy said.

"A legendary wizard might invent one sacrificial ritual in his life, and pass on the knowledge to his heirs. To try inventing five such would be

suicide. That is why wizards of true power are those who have acquired ancient lore."

The boy nodded distantly. "So much for the direct solution, then. It would've been nice to just invent a spell for 'Raise Dead', 'Become God' or 'Summon Terminal'. Do you know anything about Atlantis?"

"Only what any scholar knows," the man said dryly. "If you would like to hear about the top eighteen standard theories—do not glare at me, Mr. Potter. If it were that simple, I would have done it many years earlier."

"I understand. Sorry."

There was a time of silence. The Defense Professor's gaze rested on the boy, the boy stared off seemingly at nothing.

"There's some magics I mean to learn. Spells I could've used earlier today, if I'd thought to study them beforehand." The boy's voice was cold. "Spells I'll need, if this sort of thing goes on happening. Most I expect I can just look up. Some I expect I can't."

The Defense Professor inclined his head. "I shall teach you almost any magic you wish to know, Mr. Potter. I do have some limits, but you may always ask. But what specifically do you seek? You lack the raw power for the Killing Curse and most other spells deemed forbidden—"

"That spell of cursed fire. I don't suppose it's a sacrificial ritual that even a child could use, if he dared?"

The Defense Professor's lips twitched. "It requires the permanent sacrifice of a drop of blood; your body would be lighter by that drop of blood, from that day forward. Not the sort of thing one would wish to do often, Mr. Potter. Strength of will is demanded for the cursed fire not to turn upon you and consume you; the usual practice is to first test one's will in lesser trials. And although it is not a primary element of the ritual, I am afraid that it does require more magic than you shall possess for another few years."

"Pity," the boy said. "It would've been nice to see the look on the enemy's face the next time they tried using a troll."

The Defense Professor inclined his head, his lips twitching again.

"What about Memory Charms? The Weasley twins were acting oddly and the Headmaster said he thinks they've been Obliviated. It

seems to be one of the enemy's favorite tricks."

"Rule Eight," said the Defense Professor. "Any technique which is good enough to defeat me once is good enough to learn myself."

The boy smiled humorlessly. "And I once heard about an adult casting Obliviate while she was almost completely drained, so it must not take too much magic to cast. It's not even considered Unforgiveable, though I can't imagine why not. If I could've made Mr. Hagrid remember a different set of orders—"

"It is not that straightforward," said the Defense Professor. "You are not powerful enough to use the False Memory Charm, and even a simple Obliviation will stretch the edge of your current stamina. It is a dangerous art, illegal to use without Ministry authorization, and I would caution you not to use it under circumstances where it would be inconvenient to accidentally erase ten years of someone's life. I wish I could promise you that I would obtain one of those highly guarded tomes from the Department of Mysteries, and pass it to you beneath a disguised cover. But what I must actually tell you is that you will find the standard introductory text in the north-northwest stacks of the main Hogwarts library, filed under M."

"Seriously," the boy said flatly.

"Indeed."

"Thank you for your guidance, Professor."

"Your creativity has become a great deal more practical, Mr. Potter, since I have known you."

"Thank you for the compliment." The boy did not look up from where he was again gazing down at the wand held between his hands. "I would like to go back to thinking now. Please explain to them on my behalf what happens if I am disturbed."

The door to the storeroom clicked open, and Professor Quirrell stepped out. His face had a dead, emotionless look to it; she would have

said that it reminded her of Severus, though Severus had never looked quite like that.

Even as the door clicked shut again, Minerva had thrown up a wordless Quieting barrier. The words spilled forth from her rapidly: "How did it go—you were in there for a while—is Harry talking now?"

Professor Quirrell paced swiftly across the room to the far wall near the entrance, looked back at her. The emotionlessness slid off his face, as though he were taking off a mask, leaving behind someone very grim. "I spoke to Mr. Potter as he expected me to speak, and avoided saying things that would annoy him. I do not think it consoled him. I do not think I have the knack."

"Thank you—it is good that he spoke at all—" She hesitated. "What did Mr. Potter say?"

"I am afraid that I promised him not to speak of it. And now... I think that I must visit the Hogwarts library."

"The *library?*"

"Yes," Professor Quirrell said. An uncharacteristic tension had come into his voice. "I intend to strengthen the security upon the Restricted Section with certain precautions of my own devising. The current wards are a joke. And Mr. Potter must be kept out of the Restricted Section *at all costs.*"

She stared at the Defense Professor, her heart suddenly in her throat.

Professor Quirrell continued speaking. "You will *not* tell the boy that I have said this much to you. You will confirm to Flitwick and Vector that the boy is to be diverted by the usual evasions if he asks precocious questions about spell creation. And though it is not my own area of expertise, Deputy Headmistress, if there is any way you can imagine to convince the boy to stop sinking further into his grief and madness—any way at all to undo the resolutions he is coming to—then I suggest you resort to it *immediately*."

CHAPTER NINETY-ONE

ROLES, PART II

Shortly after, there was another knock upon the storeroom door.

"If you actually care about my mental health," the boy said without looking up, "you will go away, leave me alone, and wait for me to come down to dinner. This isn't helping."

The door opened, and the one who had waited outside stepped in.

"Seriously?" the boy said flatly.

The door closed and clicked behind Severus Snape.

The Potions Master of Hogwarts wore none of his customary arrogance, or even the dispassionate guise that he ordinarily took in the Headmaster's office; his gaze was strange, as he looked down upon the boy guarding that door; his thoughts unfathomable.

"I also cannot imagine what the Deputy Headmistress is thinking," said the Potions Master of Hogwarts. "Unless I am meant to serve as a warning of where it will lead you, if you decide to take the blame for her death upon yourself."

The boy's lips pressed together. "Fine. Let's just skip ahead to the end of this conversation. You win, Professor Snape. I concede that you were more responsible for Lily Potter's death than I was responsible for Hermione Granger's death, and that my guilt can't stack up to your guilt. And then I ask you to go, and you tell them that it would probably be best to let me alone for a while. Are we done?"

"Almost," the Potions Master said. "I am the one who put the notes under Miss Granger's pillow, telling her where to find the fights in which she intervened."

The boy did not react to this at all. Finally he spoke. "Because you dislike bullying."

"Not that alone." There was a note of pain in the Potions Master's voice that sounded alien to it; it was hard to imagine it being the same acid voice that instructed children not to stir one more time or they'd blow off their wrists. "I should have realized it... very much earlier, I suppose, and yet I did not see it at all, being entirely absorbed in myself. For me to be placed as Head of Slytherin... it means that Albus Dumbledore has entirely lost hope that Slytherin House can be helped. I am certain that Dumbledore must have tried, I cannot imagine that he did not try, when he first took trust of Hogwarts. It must have been a severe blow to him, when after that so much of Slytherin answered to the Dark Lord's call... he would not have placed me in authority over that House, acting as I did, unless he had lost all hope." The Potions Master's shoulders fell, beneath his spotted and stained cloak. "But you and Miss Granger were trying to do something, and the two of you had even managed to bring over Mr. Malfoy and Miss Greengrass, and perhaps those two could have set a different example... I suppose it was foolish for me to believe. The Headmaster does not know of what I have done, and I ask you not to tell him."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Matters have become far too serious not to tell someone." Severus Snape's lips twisted. "I have seen enough disastrous plotting, in my tenure as Head of Slytherin, to know how that sometimes goes. If, in the future, all should come to light—then at least I have told you, and you may say as much."

"Lovely," the boy said. "Thank you for clearing that up. Is that all?"

"Do you intend to declare that your life is now a ruin and that there is nothing left for you but vengeance?"

"No. I still have—" The boy cut himself off.

"Then there is very little advice that I can give you," said Severus Snape.

The boy nodded distantly. "On Hermione's behalf, thank you for helping her with the bullies. She would tell you that it was the right thing to do. And now I would be much obliged if you could tell them to *leave me alone*."

The Potions Master turned to the door, and when his face was unseen, his voice came in a whisper. "I truly am sorry for your loss."

Severus Snape departed.

The boy stared after him, trying to remember, as best as he could at this distance, words which had been spoken some time earlier.

Your books betrayed you, Potter. They did not tell you the one thing you needed to know. You cannot learn from books what it is like to lose the one you love. That is something you could never know without experiencing it for yourself.

It had gone something like that, the boy thought, if he was remembering correctly.

Hours had passed now, in the infirmary section with its closed door and a body lying in state behind it.

Harry went on staring at his wand, as it lay in his lap. At the tiny scratches and smudges on the eleven inches of holly, flaws he'd never looked closely enough to notice before. A quick mental calculation said there was no reason to worry since if this was six or seven months' accumulation of damage, then a standard lifetime wouldn't wear away the wand entirely. At the time, he probably would've worried about his own Time-Turner being taken away if he'd just openly yelled out 'Does anyone have a Time-Turner?' into the Great Hall, but it would have been easy enough to precommit to, after lunch, finding someone to send Professor Flitwick a message two hours earlier and then Professor Flitwick could've just gone straight to Hermione, or sent her his raven Patronus, long before the troll was anywhere near her. Or might that alternate Harry have already learned it was too late—heard about Hermione's death after lunch and before he could buy any messages sent backwards in time? Maybe a basic guideline of working with time-travel was to make sure you never risked learning you were too late, if you hadn't yet gone backwards. There was a tiny chemical burn now on the end

of his wand, presumably from contacting the acid he'd partially Transfigured the troll's brain into, but the wand seemed robust against losses of small amounts of wood. Really the concept of a 'magic wand' being required just got stranger the more you thought about it. Though if spells were always being invented in some mysterious way, new rituals being carved as new levers upon the unknown machine, it might just be that people just kept inventing rituals that involved wands, just like they invented phrases like 'Wingardium Leviosa'. It really seemed like magic ought to be, in some sense, almost arbitrarily powerful, and it certainly would be convenient if Harry could just bypass whatever conceptual limitation prevented people from inventing spells like 'Just Fix Everything Forever', but somehow nothing was ever that easy where magic was concerned. Harry looked at his mechanical watch again, but it still wasn't time.

He'd attempted to cast the Patronus Charm, meaning to tell his Patronus to go to Hermione Granger. Just in case it was all a lie, a False Memory Charm or one of the who-knew-how-many-ways that wizards could be made to close their eyes and dream. Just in case the real Hermione was alive and being held somewhere, despite his feeling her life as it left her. Just in case there was an afterlife and the True Patronus could reach it.

The spell hadn't worked though, so that particular test had failed to provide any evidence, leaving him with the previous, unfavorable prior.

Time passed, and yet more time. From the outside you would've just seen a boy, sitting, staring at his wand with an abstracted gaze, looking at his watch every two minutes or so.

The door to the infirmary section opened once *again*.

The boy sitting there looked up with a deadly, chilling glare.

Then the boy's face cracked in dismay, and he scrambled to his feet.

"Harry," said the man in the button-down formal shirt and a black vest thrown over it. His voice was hoarse. "Harry, what's happening? The Headmaster of your school—he showed up in those ridiculous robes at my office and told me that Hermione Granger was dead!"

A moment later a woman followed the man into the room; she seemed less confused than the man, less bewildered and more frightened.

"Dad," the boy said thinly. "Mum. Yes, she's dead. They didn't tell you anything else?"

"No! Harry, what's happening?"

There was a pause.

The boy slumped back against the wall. "I c-can't, I can't, I can't do this."

"What?"

"I can't pretend to be a little boy, I j-just don't have the energy right now."

"Harry," the woman said falteringly. "Harry—"

"Dad, you know those fantasy books where the hero has to hide everything from his parents because they, they wouldn't understand, they'd react stupidly and get in the hero's way? It's a plot device, right, so that the hero has to solve everything himself instead of telling his parents. P-please don't be that plot device, Dad, or you either, Mum. Just... just don't play that role. Don't be the parents who won't understand. D-don't yell at me and give me parental demands I can't follow. Because I've wandered into a bloody stupid fantasy novel and now Hermione's— I j-just don't have the energy to deal with it."

Slowly, as though his limbs were only half-animated, the man in the black vest kneeled down to where Harry was standing, so that his eyes were level with his son's. "Harry," the man said. "I need you to tell me everything that has happened, right now."

The boy took a deep breath, swallowed. "They t-tell me the Dark Lord I defeated may still be alive. Like that's not the p-plot of a hundred sodding books, right? So, it could also be that the Headmaster of my school, who's the most powerful wizard in the world, has gone insane. And, and Hermione was framed for an attempted murder just before this, not that anyone would've told her parents about it or anything. The student she was framed for attempted-murdering was the son of Lucius Malfoy, who's the most powerful politician in magical Britain, and used to be the Dark Lord's number two. The Defense Professor position at this school has a curse on it, nobody ever lasts more than a year, they have a saying that the Defense Professor is always a suspect. This year the Defense Professor is secretly a mysterious wizard who opposed the

Dark Lord during the last war and may or may not be evil himself. Also the Potions Master has been pining after Lily Potter for years and might be behind this whole thing for some twisted psychological reason." The boy's lips pressed together bitterly. "I think that's most of the bloody stupid plot."

The man, who had listened to all this quietly, stood up. He put a gentle hand on the boy's shoulder. "That's enough, Harry," he said. "I've heard enough. We're leaving this school right now and taking you with us."

The woman was looking at the boy, her face asking a question.

The boy gazed back at her and nodded.

The woman's voice was thin when she spoke. "*They* won't let us, Michael."

"They have no legal right to stop us—"

"*Right?* You're *Muggles,*" said the boy. He smiled twistedly. "You have as much standing in the magical British legal system as mice. No wizard is going to care about any arguments you make about *rights,* about *fairness*, they won't even take the time to listen. You don't have any *power,* see, so they don't have to bother. No, Mum, I'm not smiling like this because I agree with their Muggle policies, I'm smiling because I disagree with your children policies."

"Then," Professor Michael Verres-Evans said firmly, "we shall see what the *real* government has to say about that. I know an MP or three—"

"They'll say, you're crazy, have a nice stay in this asylum. That's assuming the Ministry Obliviators don't get to you first and erase your memories. They do that to Muggles a lot, I hear. I figure the real higher-ups in our government have formed some cozy accomodations of their own. Maybe they get a few healing Charms now and then, if someone important manages to get cancer." The boy gave that twisted smile again. "And that's the situation, Dad, as Mum already knows. They'd never have brought you here or told you anything, if there was a single thing you could do about it."

The man's mouth opened but no words came out, as though he had been reading from a script which described what a concerned parent

ought to do in this sort of situation, and this script had suddenly arrived at a blank spot.

"Harry," the woman said falteringly.

The boy looked at her.

"Harry, did something happen to you? You seem... different..."

"Petunia!" the man said, his tongue apparently working once more. "Don't say such things! He's under stress, that's all."

"Well, Mum, you see—" The boy's voice cracked. "Are you sure you want this all at once, Mum?"

The woman nodded, though she didn't speak.

"I've got... you know how that school psychiatrist thought I had anger management problems? Well—" The boy stopped, and swallowed. "I don't know how to explain this to you, Mum. It's something magical instead. Probably something to do with whatever happened on the night my parents died. I have... well, I was calling it a mysterious dark side and I know it sounds like a joke and I *did* check with... with an ancient telepathic magical hat to make sure my scar wasn't *actually* inhabited by the Dark Lord's spirit and it said that there was only one person under its brim and I don't think wizards have actual souls anyway since they can still suffer from brain damage, only—"

"Harry, slow down!" said the man.

"—only, only whatever it is, it's still *real,* there's something inside me, it gave me willpower when things were bad, I could face down anything so long as I was angry, Snape, Dumbledore, the entire Wizengamot, my dark side wasn't afraid of anything but Dementors. And I wasn't stupid, I knew that there might be a price for using my dark side and I kept on looking to see what the price might be. It didn't change my magic, it didn't seem to cause permanent alignment shift, it didn't try to take me away from my friends or anything like that, so I kept on using it whenever I had to and I only figured out too late what the price really was—" The boy's voice had become almost a whisper. "I only figured out today... every time I call on it... it uses up my childhood. I killed the thing that got Hermione. And it wasn't my dark side that did it, it was me. Oh, Mum, Dad, I'm sorry."

There was a long silence filled with the sound of broken masks.

"Harry," the man said, kneeling down again, "I need you to start over from the beginning and explain that much more slowly."

The boy spoke.

The parents listened.

Some time later, the father stood up.

The boy looked up at him, grimacing in bitter anticipation.

"Harry," the man said, "Petunia and I are going to get you out of here as quickly as possible—"

"Don't," the boy said warningly. "I mean it, Dad. The Ministry of Magic isn't something you can stand up to. Pretend they're the tax office or the dean or something else that won't brook any challenge to their dominance. In magical Britain you're only allowed to remember what the government thinks you should remember, and remembering the existence of magic or that you have a son named Harry is a privilege, not a right. And if they did that I'd crack and turn the Ministry into a giant flaming crater. Mum, you know the score, you absolutely have to stop Dad from trying anything stupid."

"And son—" The man rubbed at his temples. "Maybe I shouldn't say this now... but are you sure that what you're talking about is really a magical dark side, and not something normal for a boy your age?"

"Normal," the boy said with elaborate patience. "Normal how, exactly? I could check again, but I'm reasonably sure there wasn't anything about this in *Childcraft: A Guide For Parents.* My dark side isn't just an emotional state, it *makes me smarter.* In some ways, anyhow. You can't just *pretend* yourself smarter."

The man rubbed at his head again. "Well... there's a certain well-known phenomenon wherein children undergo a biological process which can sometimes make them angry and dark and grim, and this process also significantly increases their intelligence and their height—"

The boy slumped back against the wall. "No, Dad, it's not that I'm turning into a teenager. I checked with my brain and it still thinks that girls are icky. But if that's what you want to pretend, then fine. Maybe I'm better off with you not believing me. I just—" The boy's voice choked. "I just couldn't stand lying about it."

"Adolescence doesn't necessarily work like that, Harry. It may still take a while for you to notice girls. If, in fact, you haven't noticed one alrea-" and the man abruptly stopped.

"I didn't like Hermione in that way," the boy whispered. "Why does everyone keep thinking it has to be about that? It's disrespectful to her, to think someone could only like her in that way."

The man swallowed visibly. "Anyway, son, you keep yourself safe while we work on getting you out of here, is that understood? Don't you go actually thinking that you've turned to the dark side. I know you've had, ah, what I used to call your Ender Wiggin moments—"

"I think we are now *well* past Ender and on to Ender after the buggers kill Valentine."

"Language!" said the woman, and then her hand flew to cover her mouth.

The boy spoke wearily. "Not that kind of bugger, Mum. They're insectoid aliens—never mind."

"Harry, that's exactly what I'm saying you shouldn't think," Professor Verres-Evans said firmly. "You're not to go believing that you're turning evil. You are not to hurt anyone, place yourself in harm's way, or mess around with any sort of black magic whatsoever, while your Mum and I work on extracting you from this situation. Is that clear, son?"

The boy closed his eyes. "That'd be wonderful advice, Dad, if only I were in a comic book."

"*Harry*—" the man began.

"Police can't do that. Soldiers can't do that. The most powerful wizard in the world couldn't do that, and he tried. It's not fair to the innocent bystanders to play at being Batman if you can't actually protect everyone under that code. And I've just proven that I can't."

Beads of sweat were glistening on Professor Michael Verres-Evans's forehead. "Now you listen to me. No matter what you've read in books, you aren't *supposed* to be protecting anyone! Or involving yourself in anything dangerous! Absolutely anything dangerous whatsoever! Just stay out of the way of *everything*, every bit of craziness going on in this

madhouse, while we get you out of here the first instant we possibly can!"

The boy looked searchingly at his father, then his mother. Then he looked at his wristwatch again.

"Excellent point," said the boy.

The boy marched over to the door leading outward, and flung it open.

The door flew open with a crack that caused Minerva to startle where she stood, and before she had time to think, Harry Potter marched out of the room, glaring directly at her.

"You brought my parents *here*," the Boy-Who-Lived said. "To *Hogwarts.* Where You-Know-Who or *someone* is lurking around, targeting my friends. What exactly were you thinking?"

She did not reply that she had been thinking about Harry sitting in front of the door to the storeroom containing Hermione's body, refusing to move.

"Who else knows about this?" Harry Potter demanded. "Did anyone see them with you?"

"The Headmaster brought them here—"

"I want them out of here *immediately* before anyone else notices, especially You-Know-Who, but also including Professor Quirrell or Professor Snape. Please send your Patronus to the Headmaster and tell him that he needs to bring it back at once. Do not mention my parents by name, or as people, in case somebody else is listening."

"Indeed," said Professor Verres-Evans, nodding sternly along with this from where he stood directly behind the boy, Petunia a step behind him. His hand rested firmly on Harry's shoulder. "We'll finish talking to our son at home."

"A moment, please," Minerva said in reflexive politeness. Her first try at casting the Patronus failed, a disadvantage of that Charm under certain circumstances. It wasn't the first time she'd done it so, but she seemed to have lost some of the knack—

Minerva shut the thought down and concentrated.

When the message was sent, she turned back to Professor Verres-Evans. "Sir," she said, "I'm afraid that Mr. Potter must not leave the Hogwarts School—"

By the time Albus finally arrived, there was shouting, the Muggle man having given up on dignity. At least there was shouting on one side of the argument. Minerva's heart wasn't in it. The truth was that she couldn't believe the words coming out of her mouth.

When the Professor turned to argue with the Headmaster, Harry Potter, who had remained silent through this, spoke up. "Not here," said Harry. "You can argue with him anywhere but Hogwarts, Dad. Mum, please, please make sure that Dad doesn't try anything that will get him in trouble with the Ministry."

Michael Verres-Evans's face screwed up. He turned, looked at Harry Potter. When his voice came out it was hoarse, accompanied by water in his eyes. "Son—what are you doing?"

"You know perfectly well what I'm doing," Harry Potter said. "You read those comic books long before you gave them to me. I've been through a bunch of crap, matured a bit, and now I'm protecting my relatives. Actually, it's simpler than that, you know what I'm doing because you tried to do the same thing. I'm having my loved ones taken out of Hogwarts immediately, that's what I'm doing. Headmaster, please get them out of here before You-Know-Who discovers their presence and marks them for death."

Michael Verres-Evans began a frantic dash toward Harry, and then all motion stopped with the Muggle man leaning forward in his flight.

"I am sorry," the Headmaster said quietly. "We shall speak more soon. Minerva, I was with the others when you called, they are waiting in your office."

The Headmaster passed forwards like he was gliding, until he stood in the midst of where the man and woman stood frozen; and there was another flash of flame.

Motion resumed.

Minerva looked at Harry.

Words did not come to her.

"Clever move, bringing them here," Harry Potter said. "Probably damaged our relationship permanently. All I wanted was to be bloody left alone until bloody dinnertime. Which," the boy looked at his wristwatch, "it now is *anyway*. I'm going to go say goodbye to Hermione by myself, which I promise will take less than two minutes, and then after that I'll come out and go eat something like I would have done regardless. Do *not* disturb me for those two bloody minutes or I will snap and try to kill someone, I mean it, Professor."

The boy turned and strode into the small room, opened the rear door to where Hermione Granger's body was being kept, and strode inside before she could think to speak. Through the doorway she saw a flash of a sight she knew no child ought to see—

The door slammed shut.

She started forwards, unthinking.

Halfway to the door, she stopped herself.

Her mind was still slow, and hurting, and the part of her that Harry Potter would have called *the picture of a stern disciplinarian* was lifelessly mouthing words about inappropriate behavior from children. The rest of her didn't think it was a good idea to leave any child, even Harry Potter, alone in a room with the bloody corpse of his best friend. But the act of opening the door, or asserting any sort of authority, did not seem to her wise. There was no right thing to do, and no right thing to say; or if there was any right path, she did not know it.

Very slowly, a minute and a half passed.

When the door opened again, Harry seemed to have changed, as though that minute and a half had passed over the course of lifetimes.

"Seal up the room," Harry said quietly, "and let's go, Professor McGonagall."

She walked over to the storeroom door. She wasn't quite able to stop herself from looking in, and saw the dried blood, the sheet covering the

lower half, the upper body waxy and doll-like, and a glimpse of Hermione Granger's closed eyes. Something inside her began its weeping all over again.

She closed the door.

Her fingers moved upon her wand, her mouth spoke words without thought, Charms and wards to seal the room against entry.

"Professor McGonagall," Harry said in a strange voice, as if by rote, "do you have the rock? The rock that the Headmaster gave me? I should Transfigure it into a jewel again, since it did prove useful."

Automatically her eyes went to the ring on Harry's left pinky finger, noting the emptiness of the setting where the jewel should have been. "I shall mention it to the Headmaster," her tongue replied.

"Is that a usual tactic, by the way?" Harry said, voice still odd. "Carrying something large Transfigured into something small to use as a weapon? Or is that a usual exercise for Transfiguration practice?"

Distantly, she shook her head.

"Well, let's go, then."

"I have—" her voice stopped. "I'm afraid I have something else which I must do, now. Will you be all right on your own, and will you promise to go to the Great Hall directly and eat something, Mr. Potter?"

The boy promised (barring exceptional and unforeseen circumstances, a clause with which she did not argue) and then walked out of the room.

What lay ahead of her... would be no easier, certainly, and might well be harder.

Minerva walked to her office at a swift pace; not slowly, for that would have been a discourtesy.

Professor McGonagall opened the door to her office.

"Madam Granger," her voice said, "Mr. Granger, I am so terribly sorry for—"

CHAPTER NINETY-TWO

ROLES, PART III

There was nothing left to do.

There was nothing left to plan.

There was nothing left to think.

Into that emptiness rose the new worst memory—

The Boy-Who-Lived-Unlike-His-Best-Friend trudged the long, echoing corridors toward the Great Hall. With all his energies of thought exhausted, his mind was starting to throw out thoughts like an image of Hermione walking beside him and wordless concepts like *That will never happen again* until another part yelled *No* and shouted it down with determination to bring her back, only that part's voice was getting tired and the other part seemed tireless. Another part of his mind insisted on reviewing what he'd said to Professor McGonagall and Dad and Mum, even though he'd only been trying to get them out of there as quickly as possible and had been running on limited mental energy. As though somehow he could have done better, by an act of his defective will. What would be left of his relationship with his parents now, Harry couldn't guess.

He came finally to a junction where there waited a older boy in green-fringed black robes, silently reading a textbook, on the path that anyone would pick if they wanted to intercept someone going from the healer's chambers to the Great Hall.

Harry was wearing the Cloak of Invisibility, of course, he'd put it on after leaving the office, rendering himself immune to almost all forms of magical detection. There was no point in making it easy for anyone trying to find him and kill him. And Harry was almost set to continue past

without bothering to find out what was going on, when he recognized the Slytherin boy's face.

Realization dawned on Harry then. Of course, one of the students who had stayed in school over the Easter holiday would naturally have been—

"You were waiting for me," Harry said out loud, without removing the Cloak.

The Slytherin boy jerked back, hitting his head against the wall, his fifth-year Charms textbook dropping from his hands, before he looked up with wide eyes.

"You're—"

"Invisible. Yes. Say what you mean to say."

Lesath Lestrange scrambled to his feet, a position of attention, then blurted out, "My lord, did I do the right thing—I thought you would not wish me to step forward before all those others, that they might suspect our connection—I thought, surely if you wished my help you would call on me—"

It was amazing how many different ways there were to kill your best friend by being stupid.

"I—" Lesath hesitated, then said in a small voice, "I was wrong, wasn't I?"

"You acted exactly as you should have, under the circumstances. It is I who was a fool."

"I'm sorry, my lord," whispered Lesath.

"If you *had* come with me, would you have been able to kill the troll?" It wasn't even the correct question, the correct question was whether Harry himself would have considered Lesath as sufficient and flown out sixty seconds earlier, but still...

"I... I'm not sure, my lord... I am not much welcome to duelling practices in Slytherin, I have not learned the gestures to the Killing Curse—should I study those arts to better serve you, my lord?"

"I continue to insist that I am not your lord," Harry said.

"Yes, my lord."

"Although," Harry said, "and this is not any kind of order, just a remark, anyone ought to know how to defend themselves, especially

you. I'm sure the Defense Professor would help you with that on general principles, if you asked."

Lesath Lestrange bowed and said, "Yes, my lord, I will follow your orders if I can, my lord."

Harry would have complained about being misunderstood, if he hadn't been understood perfectly.

Lesath left.

Harry stared at the wall.

He'd honestly thought that he'd already figured out all the different ways that he'd been stupid, after spending half a day thinking about it.

Apparently this had just been more overconfidence on his part.

Do we understand what we did wrong? his Slytherin side said coldly.

Yes, Harry thought.

Your ethical qualms don't even make sense. You're not tricking Lesath. You did exactly what Lesath thinks you did. You wouldn't have to make excuses for why Lesath was helping you, you could just say you were calling in the debt from rescuing him from bullies, there were six witnesses to that. Hermione died because you forgot about an extremely valuable resource, and you forgot about Lesath because... why?

Because having Lesath Lestrange for a minion seemed sort of Dark-Lordish? Hufflepuff said in a small mental voice. *I mean... that decision was probably mostly me...*

Harry's Slytherin side didn't answer that in words, just radiated contempt and flashed an image of Hermione's corpse.

Stop it! Harry screamed internally.

Next time, Slytherin said icily, *I suggest that we spend more time worrying about what is efficient and effective, and less time worrying about what seems sort of Dark-Lordish.*

Point made, Harry thought, *I will.*

No, you won't, said Slytherin. *You'll come up with more rationalisations for your petty qualms. You'll start listening to me after your* next *friend dies.*

Harry was starting to worry that he was going insane. The conversations he had with the voices in his head weren't usually like this.

The Boy-Who-Lived

pain
Harry Verres trudged on alone
hurts
Harry walked on through the silent corridors.

"How is Mr. Potter doing?" demanded Professor Quirrell. There was a tension about the man, you could not quite call it *concern,* more like an ambusher measuring the time to strike. The Grangers had hardly left with Madam Pomfrey before the Defense Professor had knocked upon the door to her office and then entered without waiting for her answer, and spoken before she could say a word. Part of Minerva wondered distantly whether Harry Potter had picked up that habit from his Defense Professor, being unaware of others' pain when there was something else on his mind, or if it was only a childish flaw which this man had somehow failed to grow out of.

"Mr. Potter has ceased guarding Miss Granger's body," she said, putting some of the chill she felt into her voice. She felt certain that the Defense Professor was not experiencing as much grief as she was, the man had spoken not a single word of Hermione Granger. For *him* to put demands on her—"I believe he has gone down to dinner."

"I am not asking after the boy's *physical* state! Have you—has he—" Professor Quirrell made a sharp gesture, as though to indicate a concept for which he had no words.

"Not particularly," she said. She was around thirty seconds away from ordering the Defense Professor out of her office.

Professor Quirrell began to pace within the small confines of her office. "Miss Granger was the only one whose worries he truly heeded—with her gone—all checks on the boy's recklessness are removed. I see it now. Who else is there? Mr. Longbottom? Mr. Potter does not pretend that they are peers. Flitwick? His goblin blood would only cry for vengeance. Mr. Malfoy, if he were returned? To what end? Snape? A

walking disaster. Dumbledore? Pfah. Events are already set for catastrophe, they must be steered along some course they would not naturally go. Who might Mr. Potter heed, who would not ordinarily speak to him? Cedric Diggory has taught him, but what would Mr. Diggory say in advice? An unknown. Mr. Potter spent long in speech with Remus Lupin. To him I have paid little heed. Would Lupin know the words to speak, the act which must be done, the sacrifice which must be made to change the boy's course?" Professor Quirrell whirled on her. "Did Remus Lupin comfort those in grief or stay those moved to rash deeds, during his time with the Order of the Phoenix?"

"It is not a poor thought," she said slowly. "I believe that Mr. Lupin was often a voice of restraint to James Potter in his Hogwarts days."

"James Potter," said Professor Quirrell, his eyes narrowing. "The boy is not much like James Potter. Are you confident in the success of this plan? No, that is the wrong question, we are not limited to a single plan. Are you certain that this plan will be *enough,* that we need essay no others? Asked in such fashion, the question answers itself. The path leading to disaster must be averted along every possible point of intervention." The Defense Professor had resumed pacing the confines of her office, reaching one wall, turning on his heel, pacing to the other.

"My apologies, Professor," she did not bother keeping the sharpness from her voice, "but I have quite reached my limits for the day. You may go."

"*You*." Professor Quirrell spun, and she found herself gazing directly into eyes of icy blue. "*You* would be the first one I would think of after Miss Granger, to stay the boy from a folly. Have you already done your utmost? Of course you have not."

How *dare* he suggest that. "If you have nothing more to say, Professor, then you *will* go."

"Has your confederacy deduced who I really am?" The words were spoken with deceptive mildness.

"Yes, in fact. Now—"

Pure magic, pure power crashed into the room like a flash of lightning, like a thunderclap echoing about her ears that deafened her other

senses, the papers on her desk blown aside not by any conjured wind but by the sheer raw force of arcane might.

Then the power subsided, leaving only Hermione Granger's death certificates drifting down through the air to the floor.

"I am David Monroe, who fought Voldemort," the man said, still in mild tones. "Heed my words. The boy cannot be allowed to continue in this state of mind. He will become *dangerous*. It is possible that you have already done everything you can. Yet I find this a very rare event indeed, and more often said than done. I suspect rather that you have only done what you customarily do. I cannot truly comprehend what drives others to break their bounds, since I never had them. People remain surprisingly passive when faced with the prospect of death. Fear of public ridicule or losing one's livelihood is more likely to drive men to extremes and the breaking of their customary habits. On the other side of the war, the Dark Lord had excellent results from the Cruciatus Curse, judiciously used on Marked servants who cannot escape punishment except by success, with no reasonable efforts accepted. Imagine their state of mind within yourself, and ask yourself whether you have truly done *all that you can* to wrench Harry Potter from his course."

"I am a Gryffindor and not much given to being moved by fear," she snapped back. "*You* will exercise courtesy within my office!"

"I find fear an excellent motivation, and indeed it is fear that moves me now. You-Know-Who, for all his horror, still abided by certain boundaries. It is my professional judgment, speaking as a learned wizard almost on par with Dumbledore or He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, that the boy could join the ranks of those whose rituals are inscribed upon the tombstones of countries. This is not an idle worry, McGonagall, I have already heard words to produce the gravest apprehensions."

"Are you mad? You think that Mr. Potter could—this is ridiculous. Mr. Potter cannot possibly—"

A wordless image crossed her mind of a patch of glass on a steel ball.

"—Mr. Potter *would* not do such a thing!"

"His deliberate choice is not required. Wizards rarely set out to invoke their own dooms. Mr. Potter may not strike you as malicious.

Does he strike you as reckless once he is resolved upon a goal? I say again that I have specific reason for the gravest *possible* concerns!"

"Have you spoken to the Headmaster of this?" she said slowly.

"That would be worse than pointless. Dumbledore cannot reach the boy. At best he is wise enough to know this and make things no worse. I lack the requisite frame of mind. *You* are the one who—but I see that you still look for others to save you." The Defense Professor turned from her, and strode to the door. "I think I shall consult with Severus Snape. The man may be a walking disaster, but he knows the fact, and he may possess a greater understanding of that boy's mood. As for you, madam, imagine yourself at the end of your life, knowing that Britain—but no, Britain is not your true country, is it? Imagine yourself at the end of your life as the darkness eats through the fading walls of Hogwarts, knowing that your students will die with you, remembering this day and realizing there was something else you could have done."

CHAPTER NINETY-THREE

ROLES, PART IV

Harry had walked into the Great Hall, looked around only once, grabbed enough calories to sustain himself, walked out, put on his Cloak again and found a small random corner in which to eat. Seeing the students at their tables—

Feeling revulsion when you look at other humans is not a good sign, Hufflepuff said. *It's not reasonable to blame them for having not had your opportunities to learn what you've learned. Inaction in emergencies has nothing to do with people being selfish. Normalcy bias, like that plane crash in Tener- something where a few people ran out and escaped but most people just sat in their seats not moving while their plane was literally on fire. Look at how long* you *took to really start moving.*

It serves no useful purpose to hate, said Gryffindor. *It's just going to damage your altruism.*

Try to figure out a training method you could use to prevent this from happening next time, said Ravenclaw.

I'll go ahead and register the experimental prediction, said Slytherin, *that we'll always observe exactly what would be predicted on the hypothesis that people cannot be saved, cannot be taught, and will never help us with anything important. Also, we need some way of keeping track of all the times I'm right.*

Harry ignored the voices in his head and just ate slices of toast as fast as he could. It wasn't proper nutrition as a general policy, but one-time exceptions wouldn't hurt so long as he made them up the next day.

In mid-bite, the blazing silver silhouette of a phoenix flew in from nowhere and said, in the voice of a tired old man, "Please remove your Cloak, Harry, I have a letter to deliver to you."

Harry coughed for a bit, swallowed some toast which had gone down the wrong way, stood up, took off the Cloak of Invisibility, said aloud "Tell Dumbledore I said fine," and then sat down and continued to eat his toast.

The toast had all gone by the time Albus Dumbledore walked up to Harry's nook, carrying folded sheets of paper in his hand; real paper, with lines, not wizard's parchment.

"Is that—" Harry said.

"From your father, and from your mother," said the old wizard. Wordlessly, Dumbledore handed over the folded sheets, and wordlessly Harry accepted them. The old wizard hesitated, then said quietly, "The Defense Professor has told me to restrain my counsel, and I thought the same thing myself when given time to think. I have always taken too long to learn the virtues of silence. But if I am mistaken, you need only say the word—"

"You're not mistaken," Harry said. He looked down at the folded, lined papers, feeling the sickness in his gut that was how his body indicated a strong pessimistic prediction. His parents wouldn't actually disown him, and there wasn't much they could *do* to him (some part of himself was still afraid in a very visceral way of television privileges being taken away, no matter how little sense that made now). But he had stepped outside the role that parents would expect of children who, in their internal beliefs, were lower on the pecking order. It would be stupid to expect anything except complete indignant fury, all-out righteous rage, when you acted like that to someone who thought they were dominant over you.

"After you read it," the Headmaster said, "I believe that you should come to the Great Hall at once, Harry. There is an announcement which you will wish to hear."

"I'm not interested in funerals—"

"No. Not that. Please, Harry, come as soon as you are done reading, and do so without your Cloak. Will you?"

"Yes."

The old wizard left.

Harry had to force himself to open up the letter. The important thing was keeping your vulnerable friends and relations out of harm's way, it might be a cliche but so far as Harry could tell the logic was valid. Damaged relationships could be repaired later.

The first letter said, in script handwriting that required a careful focus for Harry to read,

Son,

No matter what you've read in books, keeping us out of harm's way is not as important as having adults who can help when you're in trouble. You decided without giving us a word in edgewise that we'd abandon you because of your 'dark side'. The ghost of Shakespeare knows that I've seen things in this last year that were not dreamt of in my philosophy—sometimes I wonder if your Mum isn't just humoring me and the authorities took you away when I started thinking you were a magic-user—so I can't deny that it's possible you've managed to develop some... I'm not quite sure what to call it, but 'dark side' seems premature if we don't know what's happening. Are you sure it's not a burgeoning telepathic talent and you're just picking up on the minds of other wizards around you? Their thoughts might seem evil to a child who grew up in a saner civilization. These are ungrounded speculations, I admit, but you shouldn't jump to conclusions either.

The two most important things I have to tell you are this. First, son, I have every confidence in your ability to stay on the Light Side of the Force so long as you choose to, and I have every confidence that you will choose to. If there's some evil spirit whispering horrible suggestions in your ears, just ignore the suggestions. I do feel the need to emphasize that you should exercise special caution to ignore this evil spirit even if it is suggesting what seem like wonderful creative ideas and I hope I do not need to remind you about the Incident with the Science Project which would, I admit, make a deal more sense if you were struggling with demonic possession.

The second thing I have to say is that you do not need to fear that Mum or I are going to abandon you because of your 'dark side'. We may not have expected you to gain magical powers or develop an affinity for black magic, but we did expect you to become a teenager. Which, if you think about it from your poor father's perspective, is already a sufficiently worrying prospect regarding a child who, by the age of nine, had been party to the summoning

of a total of five fire engines. Children grow up. I won't lie to you and say that you will feel as close to us at 20 as you do now. But your Mum and I will feel just as close to you when we are old and grey and bothering the nursing-home robots. Children always grow up and away from their parents, and the parents always follow them from behind, offering helpful advice. Children grow up, and their personalities change, and they do things that their parents wish they would not do, and they act disrespectfully toward their parents and have them hauled out of their magical schools, and the parents go on loving them anyway. It is Nature's way. Though in the event that you have not yet hit puberty and your teenage years are proportionately worse than this, we reserve the right to reconsider this sentiment.

No matter what is happening, remember that we love you and will always love you no matter what. I don't know if our love has any magical power under your rules, but if it does, don't hesitate to call on it.

With all of this said... Harry, what you did there is not acceptable. I think you know that. And I also know that it is not the time to lecture you on it. But you must write and tell us what is happening. I can understand very well why you'd want us taken out of your school at once, and I know we can't force you to do anything, but please, Harry, be reasonable and realize how terrified we must be.

I would like to tell you that you are absolutely forbidden to mess around with any magic that the adults around you consider the least bit unsafe, but for all I know, the teachers at your school are giving everyone lessons in advanced necromancy every Monday. Please, please exercise as much caution as your situation permits, whatever your situation may be. Despite your very hurried summary we don't have the slightest idea what is happening and I hope that you will write us as much as you can. It is clear that you are, at least in some ways, growing up, and I will try not to act like the children's-book parent who only makes things worse—though I hope you appreciate how hard this is—and your Mum has said a number of frightening things to me about how wizardry stays secret and how I might get you into trouble by making waves. I cannot tell you to avoid anything unsafe, because your school is unsafe and your Headmaster will not let you leave. I can't tell you that you shouldn't take responsibility for anything happening around you, because for all I know there are other children in trouble. But remember that it is not

your moral responsibility to protect any adults, their place is to protect you, and every good adult would agree with that. Please write and tell us more as soon as you can.

Both of us are desperate to help. If there is anything at all that we can do, please let us know at once. There is nothing which can happen to us which would be worse than learning that something had happened to you.

*Love,
Dad.
*

The last page said only,

You promised me that you wouldn't let magic take you away from me. I didn't raise you to be a boy who would break a promise to his Mum. You must come back safely, because you promised.

*Love,
Mum.
*

Slowly, Harry lowered the letters and began to walk towards the Great Hall. His hands were shaking, his whole body was shaking, and it seemed to be taking a very great deal of effort not to cry; which he knew wordlessly that he must not do. He hadn't cried through all of the day. And he wouldn't cry. Crying was the same as admitting defeat. And this wasn't over. So he wouldn't cry.

The food served in the Great Hall that evening was plain that night, toast and butter and jam, water and orange juice, oatmeal and other simple fare, without dessert. Some students had worn simple black robes without their House colors. Others had still worn theirs. It should have been cause for argument, but there was instead a quietness, the sound of people eating without talking. It took two sides to make a debate, and one of the sides, this night, was not much interested in debating.

Deputy Headmistress Minerva McGonagall sat at the Head Table and did not eat. She should have. Perhaps she would in a short while. But she could not force herself to do it now.

For a Gryffindor there was only one path. It had taken Minerva only a short time to remember that, when after the Defense Professor's urgings her mind had stayed empty of clever plots to try. That was not

a Gryffindor's way; or perhaps she ought to say only that it was not *her* way, Albus did seem to try his hand at plotting... and yet when she thought back on their history, there were no plots at the moment of crisis, no cleverness and games in the last resort. For Albus Dumbledore, as for her, the rule *in extremis* was to decide what was the right thing to do, and do it no matter the cost to yourself. Even if it meant breaking your bounds, or changing your role, or letting go of your picture of yourself. That was the last resort of Gryffindor.

Through a side entrance of the Great Hall she saw Harry Potter quietly slip in.

It was time.

Professor Minerva McGonagall rose from her chair, straightened the worn point on her hat, walked slowly to the lectern before the Head Table.

The sounds in the Great Hall, already muted, fell away entirely as all students turned to look at her.

"By now you have all heard," she said, her voice not quite steady. *That Hermione Granger is dead.* She didn't say those words aloud, since they had all heard. "Somehow, a troll was infiltrated into the castle Hogwarts without alarm from our ancient wards. Somehow this troll succeeded in injuring a student, without alarm from the wards until the point of her death. Investigations are underway to determine how this has occurred. The Board of Governors is meeting to determine how Hogwarts will respond. In due time justice shall be served. Meanwhile there is another matter of justice, which must be handled at once. George Weasley, Fred Weasley, please come forward to stand before us all."

The Weasley twins exchanged glances where they sat at the Gryffindor table, and then stood up and walked toward her, slowly, reluctantly; and Minerva realized then that the Weasley twins thought that they were to be expelled.

They honestly thought that she would expel them.

That was what the picture of Professor McGonagall who lived in her head had wrought.

The Weasley twins walked over to the lectern, looking up at her with faces that were frightened, but resolute; and she felt something in her heart break a little further.

"I am not going to expel you," she said, and was saddened further by the surprised look on their faces. "Fred Weasley, George Weasley, turn and face your classmates, let them see you."

Still looking surprised, the Weasley twins did so.

She drew up all the steel in her heart, and said what was right.

"I am ashamed," said Minerva McGonagall, "of the events of this day. I am ashamed that there were only two of you. Ashamed of what I have done to Gryffindor. Of all the Houses, it should have been Gryffindor to help when Hermione Granger was in need, when Harry Potter called for the brave to aid him. It was true, a seventh-year could have held back a mountain troll while searching for Miss Granger. And you should have believed that the Head of House Gryffindor," her voice broke, "would have believed in you. If you disobeyed her to do what was right, in events she had not foreseen. And the reason you did not believe this, is that I have never shown it to you. I did not believe in you. I did not believe in the virtues of Gryffindor itself. I tried to stamp out your defiance, instead of training your courage to wisdom. Whatever the Sorting Hat saw in me that led it to place me in Gryffindor, I have betrayed it. I have offered my resignation to the Headmaster as Deputy Headmistress and as the Head of House Gryffindor."

⁂

There were cries of shock and dismay, and not only from the Gryffindor Table, as Harry's heart froze within his chest. Harry needed to run forward, say something, he hadn't meant for *this* to—

⁂

Minerva took another breath, and continued. "However, the Headmaster has declined to accept my resignation," she said. "So I will continue to serve, and try to undo what I have wrought. Somehow I must find a way to teach my students how to do what is right. Not what is safe, not what is easy, not what we are told to do. If all I can teach you is to turn in your essays on time, there might as well not be a House Gryffindor. This road will be more difficult for me, and maybe for all of us. But I know now that before I was only taking the easy path."

She stepped down from the lectern, moved down to where the Weasley twins stood.

"Fred Weasley, George Weasley," she said. "The two of you have not always done what is right. The path of wisdom does not lie in flagrant and needless defiance of authority. And yet today you proved to be the last of our House to survive my mistakes. Because it was the right thing to do, you defied a threat of expulsion and risked your lives to face a mountain troll. For your astounding courage that honors your House to have you, I award each of you two hundred points for Gryffindor."

Again the look of shock on their faces, again the pain like a knife through her heart.

She turned to face the other students.

"I will not award any points to Ravenclaw," she said. "I suspect that Mr. Potter would not want them. If I am wrong, he may correct me and take as many House points as he pleases. But for whatever it is worth, Mr. Potter, I am," her voice faltered, "I am sorry—"

*

"Stop!" Harry screamed, and then, again, "Stop." The word sticking in his throat. "You don't have to, Professor." Something inside him was twisting, threatening to split him open, like a giant's hands wrenching at him to tear him in half. "And, and you shouldn't forget Susan Bones, and Ron Weasley—they also helped, they should get House points too—"

"Miss Bones and the young Weasley?" said Professor McGonagall. "Rubeus said nothing of that—what did they do?"

"Miss Bones tried to stun Mr. Hagrid when he tried to stop me, and Mr. Weasley shot Neville when Neville tried to stop me. They should both get points, and, and so should Neville," Harry hadn't thought to imagine it before, the way Neville must be feeling now, but the instant he'd thought, he knew, "because Neville tried to do something, even if it wasn't the right thing, doing what's right is the *second* lesson, you can start practicing that after you learn to do anything at all—"

"Ten points to Hufflepuff, Miss Bones," Professor McGonagall said, her voice breaking in the middle. "Ten points to Gryffindor, Ron Weasley, your family has done itself exceeding proud, this day. And ten points to Hufflepuff for Neville Longbottom, for standing up to Mr. Potter and doing what he thought was right—"

"You shouldn't!" screamed a young voice from the Hufflepuff table, followed by a single choking sound.

Harry looked there, and then quickly looked back at Professor McGonagall and said, as steadily as he could, "Neville's right, actually, you can't award literally zero points for the part where you get the action correct, that sends the wrong message too, but he was halfway there so it could be five points instead."

Professor McGonagall looked, for a moment, like she couldn't think of what to say; but then her eyes went to Neville's place at the table, and she said, "As you wish, Mr. Potter. What is it, Miss Bones?"

Harry looked and saw that Susan Bones had stepped forward, wiping at her own eyes, and the Hufflepuff girl said, "Actually—Professor McGonagall—General Potter didn't see it—but Captain Weasley and I weren't the only ones who tried to get in Mr. Hagrid's way, after he ran out. Before some of the older students stopped us. But we managed to slow Mr. Hagrid down a minute, so General Potter could get away."

"You've got to give them points too," said Ron Weasley from the Gryffindor table. "Or I won't take any."

"Who else?" said Professor McGonagall, her voice a bit unsteady.

Seven other children stood up.

What was that our Slytherin side was saying about predicting nothing would ever work? said Hufflepuff.

Something in Harry cracked, so that he had to exert all his force to hold himself together.

⁂

When all had been said, and all had been done, Minerva went to where Harry Potter stood. Though it was not her greatest skill she cast a ward about them to blur vision, and muffled sounds with another thought.

"You, you didn't have to—" said Harry Potter. "You shouldn't have said—" He sounded like he was choking. "P-Professor, everything I said to you was hurtful, and hateful, and wrong—"

"I already knew that, Harry," she said. "Even so, I wished to do better." There was a feeling of lightness in her chest, much as one might experience after stepping off a cliff, when your legs no longer had to hold your body upright. She wasn't sure she could do this, she did not know the way; and yet for the first time it seemed possible that Hogwarts wouldn't become a sad ghost of its former self, when she became its Headmistress.

Harry stared at her, then made a odd noise that sounded like it had been forced from his throat, and covered his face in his hands.

So she knelt down, and hugged him. It might go wrong, but it might also go right, and she would not let that uncertainty stop her; it was time she began to learn a Gryffindor's courage, so that she could teach it in turn.

"I had a sister once," she whispered. Just that, and nothing more.

⁂

Just to make sure, said some part of Harry, while the rest of him sobbed into Professor McGonagall's arms, *this doesn't mean we've accepted Hermione's death, right?*

NO said all the rest of him, every part of his mind in unanimous agreement, warmth and cold and a hidden place of steel. *Never, ever, forever.*

And an ancient wizard to whom that ward meant nothing gazed upon them both, the witch and the weeping young wizard. Albus Dumbledore was smiling with a strange sad look in his eyes, like someone who has taken one more step toward a foreseen destination.

The Defense Professor watched them both, the woman and the crying boy. His eyes were very cold, and very calculating.

He did not think that this would be enough.

It wasn't until the next morning that it was discovered that Hermione Granger's body was missing.

CHAPTER NINETY-FOUR

ROLES, PART V

THE FIRST MEETING:

At 6:07AM on April 17th, 1992 the Sun was just rising above the horizon as seen from the castle Hogwarts, filtering in through drawn curtains in the Ravenclaw first-year boys' dorm to provide a gentle light, red-orange for dawn and little-changed by the white fabric covering the windows, not yet waking boys more accustomed to winter's schedule.

In one bed among many, Harry Potter slept the sleep of the just exhausted.

Quietly the door opened.

Quietly a figure walked across the floor.

That figure came to Harry Potter's bed.

The figure laid a hand on the shoulder of the sleeping boy, who started and shrieked.

No others heard.

"Mr. Potter," the small man squeaked, "the Headmaster has requested your presence immediately."

Slowly the boy sat up in bed, his hands momentarily fiddling beneath the covers. He'd expected to feel much worse, waking up this morning. It felt... wrong, that his brain functioned now, that his thoughts still moved, that he wasn't incapacitated with weeping for at least a week. The boy knew that it wouldn't have been an adaptive response, for brains to evolve to do that. His dark side, certainly, would not do that. Even so, it still felt wrong to be alive and lucid, this morning.

But his resolution to revive Hermione Granger felt—sufficient, like he was already doing the right thing, bent on the right path, and she

would be brought back, and that was all there was to it; grief would have been giving up. There was nothing left to decide, no ambiguity, no conflict to tear at him, and no need to remember what he'd *seen*—

"I'll get dressed," Harry said.

Professor Flitwick looked rather reluctant, but said in his high voice, "The Headmaster specified you were to be brought to his office directly and without pause, Mr. Potter. I'm sorry."

Less than a minute later—Professor Flitwick had sent him straight to the Headmaster's office through the Hogwarts internal Floo—Harry found himself, still in his pajamas, facing Albus Dumbledore. The Deputy Headmistress was also sitting in another chair, and the Potions Master lurked nearby amid the weird devices, caught in a gaping yawn just as Harry had entered through the fireplace.

"Harry," the Headmaster said without preamble, "before I say what I must say next, I tell you that Hermione Granger did truly die. The wards recorded it and informed me. The very stones spoke that a witch had died. I tested her body where it lay and those were Hermione Granger's true mortal remains, not any doll or likeness. There is no way known to wizardry by which death may be undone. All this being said, Hermione Granger's remains are now missing from the storeroom where they were placed, and where you guarded them. Did you take them, Harry Potter?"

"No," Harry said, narrowing his eyes. A glance showed him that Severus was watching him intently.

Dumbledore's gaze was also keen, though not unfriendly. "Is Hermione Granger's body in your possession?"

"No."

"Do you know where it is?"

"No."

"Do you know who took it?"

"No," Harry said, then hesitated. "Besides the obvious probabilistic speculations which are not based upon any specific knowledge of mine."

The old wizard nodded. "Do you know why it was taken?"

"No. Besides the obvious speculations etcetera."

"What would those be?" Sharp the ancient eyes.

"If the enemy can notice you running off to consult the Weasley twins during class after Hermione was arrested, and find out about that magic map you said was stolen, then the enemy can wonder why I was guarding Hermione Granger's body. My turn. Did you arrange for Hermione's death in hopes of getting the money back from Lucius?"

"*What?*" said Professor McGonagall.

"No," said the old wizard.

"Did you know or suspect that Hermione Granger would die?"

"I did not know. As for suspicions, I placed her in the most strongly defended position I could, against Voldemort. I did not will her death, nor allow it, nor plan to benefit from it, Harry Potter. Now show me your pouch."

"It's in my trunk—" Harry began.

"Severus," said the old wizard, and the Potions Master moved forward. "Check his trunk as well, every compartment."

"My trunk has wards."

Severus Snape grinned mirthlessly and strode into the green flame.

Dumbledore took out his long dark-grey wand and began to wave it close around Harry's hair, looking like a Muggle using a metal-detector. Before he had reached as far as Harry's neck, Dumbledore stopped.

"The gem upon your ring," Dumbledore said. "It is no longer a clear diamond. It is brown, the color of Hermione Granger's eyes, and the color of her hair."

A sudden tension filled the room.

"That's my father's rock," Harry said. "Transfigured the same as before. I just did it to remember Hermione—"

"I must be sure. Take off that ring, Harry, and place it upon my desk."

Slowly, Harry did so, removing the gem and setting the ring off to the other side of the desk.

Dumbledore pointed his wand at the gem and—

A large, undistinguished grey rock jumped into the air from the force of its sudden expansion, hit some invisible barrier in the air above, and then fell with a loud crack upon the Headmaster's desk,

"There's another half-hour of work for me, Transfiguring it again," Harry said evenly.

Dumbledore resumed his examination. Harry had to remove his left shoe, and take off the toe-ring that was his emergency portkey if someone kidnapped him and took him outside the wards of Hogwarts (and didn't put up anti-Apparition, anti-portkey, anti-phoenix, and anti-time-looping wards, which Severus had warned Harry that any inner-circle Death Eater would certainly do). It was verified that the magic radiating from the toe-ring was indeed the magic of a portkey, and not the magic of a Transfiguration. The rest of Harry was deemed clear.

Not long after, the Potions Master returned, bearing Harry's pouch, and several other magical things which had been in Harry's trunk, which the Headmaster also examined, one by one, even to all the items remaining within the healer's kit.

"Can I go now?" Harry said when it was all done, putting as much cold as he could into his voice. He took up his pouch, and began the process of feeding the grey rock into it. The empty ring went back on his finger.

The old wizard breathed out, slipping his wand back into his sleeve. "I *am* sorry," he said. "I had to know. Harry... the Dark Lord has taken Hermione Granger's remains, it seems. I cannot think of anything he would gain thereby, except to send her corpse against you as an Inferius. Severus shall give you certain potions to keep about your person. Be warned now, and be prepared for when you must do what must be done."

"Will the Inferius have Hermione's mind?"

"No—"

"Then it's not her. Can I go? At least to change out of my pyjamas."

"There is other news, but I shall be brief. The wards of Hogwarts record that no foreign creature has entered, and that it was the Defense Professor who killed Hermione Granger."

"Um," Harry said.

Thought 1: But I saw the troll kill Hermione.

Thought 2: Professor Quirrell Memory-Charmed me and set up the scene that Dumbledore saw when he arrived.

Thought 3: Professor Quirrell can't do that, his magic can't touch mine. I saw that in Azkaban—

Thought 4: Can I trust those memories?

Thought 5: There was clearly some sort of debacle at Azkaban, we wouldn't have needed a rocket if Professor Quirrell hadn't fallen unconscious, and why'd he be unconscious if not—

Thought 6: Did I ever actually go to Azkaban at all?

Thought 7: I clearly practiced controlling Dementors at some point before I scared that Dementor in the Wizengamot. And that *was in the newspapers.*

Thought 8: Am I accurately remembering the newspapers?

"Um," Harry said again. "That spell seriously ought to be Unforgiveable. You think Professor Quirrell could have Memory-Charmed—"

"No. I went back through time and placed certain instruments to record Hermione's last battle, which I could not quite bear to watch in my own person." The old wizard looked very grim indeed. "Your guess was right, Harry Potter. Voldemort sabotaged everything we gave Hermione to protect her. Her broomstick lay dead in her hands. Her invisibility cloak did not conceal her. The troll walked in the sunlight unharmed; it was no stray creature, but a weapon pure and aimed. And it was indeed the troll who killed her, with strength alone, so that my wards and webs to detect hostile magics went for naught. The Defense Professor never crossed her path."

Harry swallowed, shut his eyes, and thought. "So this was an attempted frame on Professor Quirrell. Somehow. It does seem to be the enemy's *modus operandi.* Troll eats Hermione Granger, check the wards, oh look actually the Defense Professor did it, same as last year... no. No, that can't be right."

"Why not, Mr. Potter?" said the Potions Master. "It seems obvious enough to me—"

"That's the problem."

The enemy is smart.

Slowly the fog of sleep was drifting out of Harry's mind, and after a full night's sleep his brain could see the things which hadn't been obvious the day before.

Under standard literary convention... the enemy wasn't supposed to look over what you'd done, sabotage the magic items you'd handed out, and then send out a troll rendered undetectable by some means the heroes couldn't figure out even after the fact, so that you might as well have not defended yourself at all. In a book, the point-of-view usually stayed on the main characters. Having the enemy just bypass all the protagonists' work, as a result of planning and actions taken out of literary sight, would be a *diabolus ex machina,* and dramatically unsatisfying.

But in real life the enemy would think that they were the main character, and they would also be clever, and think things through in advance, even if you didn't see them do it. That was why everything about this felt so disjointed, with parts unexplained and seemingly inexplicable. How had Lucius felt, when Harry had threatened Dumbledore with breaking Azkaban? How had the Aurors above Azkaban felt, seeing the broomstick rise up on a torch of fire?

The enemy is smart.

"The enemy knew perfectly well that you'd turn back time to check what really happened to Hermione, especially since the troll getting into Hogwarts at all tells us that somebody can fool the wards." Harry shut his eyes, thinking harder, trying to put himself into the enemy's shoes. Why would he, or his dark side, have done something like—"We're meant to conclude that the enemy has control of what the wards tell us. But that's actually something the enemy can only do with difficulty, or under special conditions; they're trying to create a false appearance of omnipotence." *Like I would.* "Later, hypothetically, the wards show Professor Sinistra killing someone. We think the wards are just being fooled again, but really, Professor Sinistra was Legilimized and she *did* do it."

"Unless that is precisely what the Dark Lord expects us to think," said Severus Snape, his brow furrowed in concentration. "In which case he does have control of the wards, and Professor Sinistra will be innocent."

"Does the Dark Lord *really* use plots with that many levels of meta—"

"Yes," said Dumbledore and Severus.

Harry nodded distantly. "Then this could be a setup to either make us think the wards are telling the truth when they're lying, or a setup

to make us think the wards are lying when they're telling the truth, depending on what level the enemy expects us to reason at. But if the enemy is planning to make us trust the wards—we would have trusted the wards anyway, if we'd been given no reason to distrust them. So there's no need to go to all the work of framing Professor Quirrell in a way that we would realize we were intended to discover, just to trick us into going meta—"

"Not so," said Dumbledore. "If Voldemort has not fully mastered the wards, then the wards had to believe that some Professor's hand was at work. Else they would have cried out at Miss Granger's injury, and not only upon her death."

Harry reached up a hand and rubbed at his brow, just beneath his hair.

Okay, serious question. If the enemy is that smart, why the heck am I still alive? Is it seriously that hard to poison someone, are there Charms and Potions and bezoars which can cure me of literally anything that could be slipped into my breakfast? Would the wards record it, trace the magic of the murderer?

Could my scar *contain the fragment of soul that's keeping the Dark Lord anchored to the world, so he doesn't want to kill me? Instead he's trying to drive off all my friends to weaken my spirit so he can take over my body? It'd explain the Parselmouth thing. The Sorting Hat might not be able to detect a lich-phylactery-thingy. Obvious problem 1, the Dark Lord is supposed to have made his lich-phylactery-thingy in 1943 by killing whatshername and framing Mr. Hagrid. Obvious problem 2, there's no such thing as souls.*

Though Dumbledore also thought that my blood was a key ingredient in a ritual to restore the Dark Lord's full strength, which would require keeping me alive until then... now there's a cheery thought.

"Well..." Harry said. "I'm sure of one thing."

"And that is?"

"Neville needs to be taken out of Hogwarts *now*. He's the obvious next target and no first-year student can survive this level of offense. We're lucky Neville wasn't assassinated yesterday evening, the enemy doesn't have to wait until we're finished mourning to make their next move." *Why didn't the enemy strike while we were distracted?*

Dumbledore exchanged glances with Severus, and then with the suddenly tight expression of Professor McGonagall. "Harry," said the old wizard, "if you send all your friends away yourself, that is just the same as if Voldemort—"

"I will be *fine* I can do without Neville for a couple of extra months it's not like you were planning to make my friends stay here over the summer and that is just plain *not sufficient justification* to let him get killed! Professor McGonagall—"

"I quite agree," said the Scottish witch. She frowned. "I extremely agree. I agree to the point where... I'm having some trouble figuring out how to express this, Albus..."

"To the point where you're going to haul him out of there yourself, regardless of what anyone else says, because it's no excuse to say you were only following orders if Neville gets killed?" Harry said.

Professor McGonagall closed her eyes briefly. "Yes, but surely there ought to be some way to be responsible without threats of unilateral action."

The Headmaster sighed. "No need. Go, Minerva."

"Wait," the Potions Master said, just as Professor McGonagall, moving rather swiftly, was taking a pinch of green dust from the Floo-vase. "We should not call attention to the boy, as the Headmaster called attention to the Weasley twins. It would be wiser, I think, if Mr. Longbottom's grandmother took him from Hogwarts. Let him stay in his Common Room for now; the Dark Lord does not seem able to act so openly."

There was another long exchange of glances among the four, and finally Harry nodded, followed by Professor McGonagall.

"In that case," said Harry, "I'm sure of one other thing."

"And that is?" said Dumbledore.

"I very much need to visit the washroom, and I would also like to change out of these pyjamas."

"By the way," Harry said as he and the Headmaster emerged from Floo into the empty office of the Ravenclaw Head of House. "One last quick question I wanted to ask just you. That sword the Weasley twins pulled out of the Sorting Hat. That was the Sword of Gryffindor, wasn't it?"

The old wizard turned, face neutral. "What makes you think that, Harry?"

"The Sorting Hat yelled *Gryffindor!* just before handing it out, the sword had a ruby pommel and gold letters on the blade, and the Latin script said *Nothing better*. Just a hunch."

"*Nihil supernum,*" said the old wizard. "That is not *quite* what it means."

Harry nodded. "Mmhm. What'd you do with it?"

"I retrieved it from where it fell, and placed it in a secure place," the old wizard said. He gave Harry a stern look. "I hope you are not greedy for it yourself, young Ravenclaw."

"Not at all, just want to make sure you're not keeping it permanently from its rightful wielders. So the Weasley twins are the Heir of Gryffindor, then?"

"The Heir of Gryffindor?" Dumbledore said, looking surprised. Then the old wizard smiled, blue eyes twinkling brightly. "Ah, Harry, Salazar Slytherin may have built a Chamber of Secrets into Hogwarts, but Godric Gryffindor was not much given to such extravagances. We have seen only that Godric left his Sword to the defense of Hogwarts, if a worthy student ever faced a foe they could not defeat alone."

"That's not the same as saying no. Don't think I didn't notice that you didn't actually say no."

"I did not live in those years, Harry, and I do not know all that Godric Gryffindor may or may not have done—"

"Do you in fact assign greater than fifty percent subjective probability that there is something like a Heir of Gryffindor and one or both Weasley twins are it. Yes or no, evasion means yes. You're not going to succeed in distracting me, no matter how much I have to go to the bathroom."

The old wizard sighed. "Yes, Fred and George Weasley are the Heir of Gryffindor. I beg you not to speak of it to them, not yet."

Harry nodded, and turned to go. "I'm surprised," Harry said. "I read a little about Godric Gryffindor's historical life. The Weasley twins are... well, they're awesome in various ways, but they don't seem much like the Godric in the history books."

"Only a man exceedingly proud and vain," Dumbledore said quietly, as he turned back to the Floo roaring up again with green flames, "would believe that his heir should be like himself, rather than like who he wished that he could be."

The Headmaster stepped into green fire, and was gone.

THE SECOND MEETING:

(in a small cubby off the Hufflepuff Common Room)

Neville Longbottom's face was drawn up in anguish, as he spoke with no one to hear, to the empty air.

"Seriously," the empty air said back to him. "I'm wearing an invisibility cloak with extra anti-detection charms just to walk through the hallways because *I* don't want to be killed. My parents would have me out of Hogwarts in an instant if the Headmaster allowed it. Neville, your getting the heck out of Hogwarts is common sense, it has *nothing to do* with—"

"I betrayed you, General," Neville said, his voice around as hollow as any normal eleven-year-old boy could reasonably manage. "I didn't even do it the Chaotic way. I conformed to authority and tried to make you conform to authority too. What's that you always say, about how in the Chaos Legion, a soldier who can only obey orders is useless?"

"Neville," the empty air said firmly. The pressure of two hands, beneath thin cloth, came firmly to bear on Neville's shoulders; and the voice moved closer to him. "You weren't blindly obeying authority,

you were trying to protect me. It's true that in this chaotic world, soldiers who can only follow rules and regulations are worthless. However, soldiers who follow rules for the sake of protecting their friends are—"

"Slightly better than worthless?" Neville said bitterly.

"*Significantly* better than worthless. Neville, you made an error of judgment. It cost me around six seconds. Now it could be that Hermione's injuries were just barely fatal, but even then, I don't think six seconds was actually enough time for the troll to take an extra bite of Hermione. In the counterfactual world where you didn't step in front of me, Hermione still died. Now, I could stand here listing out the first dozen ways that Hermione would be alive if I hadn't been stupid—"

"You? *You* ran right out after her. *I'm* the one who tried to stop you. It's my fault if it's anyone's," Neville said bitterly.

The empty air went silent at this for a while.

"Wow," the empty air finally said. "Wow. That puts a pretty different perspective on things, I have to say. I'm going to remember this the next time I feel an impulse to blame myself for something. Neville, the term in the literature for this is 'egocentric bias', it means that you experience everything about your own life but you don't get to experience everything else that happens in the world. There was way, way more going on than you running in front of me. You're going to spend weeks remembering that thing you did there for six seconds, I can tell, but nobody else is going to bother thinking about it. Other people spend a lot less time thinking about your past mistakes than you do, just because you're not the center of their worlds. I *guarantee* to you that nobody except you has even *considered* blaming Neville Longbottom for what happened to Hermione. Not for a fraction of a second. You are being, if you will pardon the phrase, a silly-dilly. Now shut up and say goodbye."

"I don't want to say goodbye," Neville said. His voice was trembling, but he managed not to cry. "I want to stay here and fight with you against—against whatever's happening."

The empty air moved closer to him, and embraced him in a hug, and Harry Potter's voice whispered, "Tough luck."

CHAPTER NINETY-FIVE

ROLES, PART VI

The third meeting

(10:31am, April 17th 1992) Spring had begun, the late-morning air still crisp with the leavings of winter. Daffodils had bloomed amid the sprouting grass of the forest, the gentle yellow petals with their golden hearts dangling limply from their dead, grayed stems, wounded or killed by one of the sudden frosts that you often saw in April. In the Forbidden Forest there would be stranger lifeforms, centaurs and unicorns at the least, and Harry had heard allegations of werewolves. Though from what Harry had read of real-life werewolves, that did not make the slightest bit of sense.

Harry didn't venture anywhere near the border of the Forbidden Forest, since there was no reason to take the risk. He walked invisibly among the more ordinary life-forms of the permitted woods, wand in hand, a broomstick strapped to his back for easier access, just in case. He was not actually afraid; Harry thought it odd that he didn't feel afraid. The state of constant vigilance, readiness for fight or flight, failed to feel burdensome or even abnormal.

On the edges of the permitted woods Harry walked, his feet never straying near the beaten path where he might be more easily found, never leaving sight of Hogwarts's windows. Harry had set the alarm upon his mechanical watch to tell him when it was lunchtime, since he couldn't actually look at his wrist, being invisible and all that. It raised the question of how his eyeglasses worked while he was wearing the Cloak. For that matter the Law of the Excluded Middle seemed to imply that either the rhodopsin complexes in his retina were absorbing photons and

transducing them to neural spikes, or alternatively, those photons were going straight through his body and out the other side, but not both. It really did seem increasingly likely that invisibility cloaks let you see outward while being invisible yourself because, on some fundamental level, that was how the caster had—not *wanted*—but *implicitly believed*—that invisibility should work.

Whereupon you had to wonder whether anyone had tried Confunding or Legilimizing someone into implicitly and matter-of-factly believing that *Fixus Everythingus* ought to be an easy first-year Charm, and then trying to invent it.

Or maybe find a worthy Muggleborn in a country that didn't identify Muggleborn children, and tell them some extensive lies, fake up a surrounding story and corresponding evidence, so that, from the very beginning, they'd have a different idea of what magic could do. Though apparently they'd still have to learn a number of previous Charms before they became capable of inventing their own...

It might not work. Surely there'd been some organically insane wizards who'd truly believed in their own possibility of godhood, and yet had failed to become god. But even the insane had probably believed the ascension spell ought to be some grandiose dramatic ritual and not something you did with a carefully composed twitch of your wand and the incantation *Becomus Goddus.*

Harry was already pretty sure it wouldn't be that easy. But then the question was, *why not?* What pattern had his brain learned? Could the reason be predicted in advance?

A slight fringe of apprehension crept through Harry then, a tinge of worry, as he contemplated this question. The nameless concern sharpened, grew greater—

Professor Quirrell?

"Mr. Potter," a soft voice called from behind him.

Harry spun, his hand going to the Time-Turner beneath his cloak; again the principle of being ready to flee upon an instant's notice felt only ordinary.

Slowly, palms empty and turned outward, Professor Quirrell was walking towards him within the forests' outskirts, coming from the gen-

eral direction of the Hogwarts castle.

"Mr. Potter," Professor Quirrell said again. "I know that you're here. You know that I know that you're here. I must speak to you."

Still Harry said nothing. Professor Quirrell hadn't actually said what this was about, and Harry's sunlit afternoon walk about the forest edge had produced a mood of silence within him.

Professor Quirrell took a small step to the left, a step forward, another to the right. He tilted his head with a look of calculation, and then he walked almost directly towards where Harry stood, halted a few paces off with the sense of doom enflamed to the height of bearability.

"Are you still resolved upon your course?" Professor Quirrell said. "The same course you spoke of yesterday?"

Again Harry did not reply.

Professor Quirrell sighed. "There is much I have done for you," the man said. "Whatever else you may wonder of me, you cannot deny that. I am calling in some of the debt. Talk to me, Mr. Potter."

I don't feel like doing this right now, Harry thought; then: *Oh, right.*

⁂

Two hours later, after Harry had spun the Time-Turner once, noted down the exact time and memorized his exact location, spent another hour walking, went inside and told Professor McGonagall that he was currently talking to the Defense Professor in the woods outside Hogwarts (just in case anything happened to him), walked for a further hour, then returned to his original location exactly one hour after he'd left and spun the Time-Turner again—

⁂

"What was that?" Professor Quirrell said, blinking. "Did you just—"

"Nothing important," Harry said without pulling back the hood of his invisibility cloak, or taking his hand from his Time-Turner. "Yes, I'm still resolved. To be honest, I'm thinking I shouldn't have said anything."

Professor Quirrell inclined his head. "A sentiment which shall serve you well in life. Is there anything which is liable to change your mind?"

"Professor, if I already *knew* about the existence of an argument which would change my decision—"

"True, for the likes of us. But you would be surprised how often someone knows what they are waiting to hear, yet must wait to hear it said." Professor Quirrell shook his head. "To put this in your terms... there is a true fact, known to me but not to you, of which I would like to convince you, Mr. Potter."

Harry's eyebrows rose, though he realized in the next moment that Professor Quirrell couldn't see it. "That's in my terms, all right. Go ahead."

"The intention you have formed is far more dangerous than you realize."

Replying to this surprising statement did not take much thought on Harry's part. "Define dangerous, and tell me what you think you know and how you think you know it."

"Sometimes," said Professor Quirrell, "telling someone about a danger can cause them to walk directly into it. I have no intention of having that happen this time. Do you expect me to tell you exactly what you must not do? Exactly why I am afraid?" The man shook his head. "If you were wizardborn, Mr. Potter, you would know to take it seriously, when a powerful magus tells you only to beware."

It would have been a lie to say that Harry was not annoyed, but he also wasn't an idiot; so Harry said merely, "Is there anything you *can* tell me?"

Carefully, Professor Quirrell seated himself upon the grass, and took out his wand, his hand assuming a position that Harry recognized. Harry's breath caught.

"This is the last time that I shall be able to do this for you," Professor Quirrell said quietly. Then the man began to speak words that were strange, of no language Harry could recognize, intonation that seemed not quite human, words which seemed to slip from Harry's memory even as he tried to grasp them, exiting from his mind as quickly as they entered.

The spell took effect more slowly, this time. The trees seemed to darken, branches and leaves staining, as though seen through perfect sunglasses that faded and attenuated light without distorting it. The blue bowl of the sky receded, the horizon which Harry's brain falsely assigned a finite distance pulling back as it turned gray, and darker gray. The clouds became translucent, transparent, wisping away to let the darkness shine through.

The forest shaded, faded, abated into blackness.

The great sky river became visible once again, as Harry's eyes adjusted, became able to see the largest object which human eyes could ever behold as more than a point, the surrounding Milky Way.

And the stars, piercingly bright and yet remote, out of a great depth.

Professor Quirrell breathed deeply. Then he raised his wand again (just barely visible, in the starlight without sun or moon) and tapped himself on the head with a sound like an egg cracking.

The Defense Professor also faded away, became likewise invisible.

A tiny disk of grass, illuminated by not much light at all, drifted unoccupied within empty space.

Neither of them spoke for a time. Harry was content to look at the stars, undistracted even by his own body. Whatever Professor Quirrell had called him here to say, it would be said in due time.

In due time, a voice spoke.

"There is no war here," said a soft voice emanating from within the emptiness. "No conflict and battle, no politics and betrayal, no death and no life. That is all for the folly of men. The stars are above such foolishness, untouched by it. Here there is peace, and silence eternal. So I once thought."

Harry turned to look at where the voice originated, and saw only stars.

"So you once thought?" Harry said, when no other words seemed to be forthcoming.

"There is nothing above the folly of men," whispered the voice from the emptiness. "There is nothing beyond the destructive powers of sufficiently intelligent idiocy, not even the stars themselves. I went to a great

deal of trouble to make a certain golden plaque last forever. I would not like to see it destroyed by human folly."

Again Harry's eyes reflexively darted toward where the voice should have been, again saw only emptiness. "I think I can reassure you on that score, Professor. Nuclear weapons don't have a fireball extending out for... how far away is Pioneer 11? Somewhere around a billion kilometers, maybe? Muggles talk about nuclear weapons destroying the world, but what they actually mean is lightly warming up some of Earth's surface. The *Sun* is a giant fusion reaction and *it* doesn't vaporize distant space probes. The worst-case scenario for nuclear war wouldn't even come close to destroying the Solar System, not that this is much of a consolation."

"True while we speak of Muggles," said the soft voice amid starlight. "But what do Muggles know of true power? It is not them who frightens me now. It is you."

"Professor," Harry said carefully, "while I have to admit I've rolled a few critical failures in my life, there's a bit of distance between that and missing a saving throw so hard that the Pioneer 11 probe gets caught in the damage radius. There's no realistic way to do that without blowing up the Sun. And our Sun is a main-sequence G-type star, it *can't* explode. Any energy input would just increase the volume of the hydrogen plasma, the Sun doesn't have a degenerate core that could be detonated. The Sun doesn't have enough mass to go supernova, even at the end of its lifespan."

"Such amazing things the Muggles have learned," the other voice murmured. "How stars live, how they are preserved from death, how they die. And they never wonder if such knowledge might be dangerous."

"In all frankness, Professor, that particular thought has never occurred to me either."

"You are Muggleborn. I speak not of blood, I speak of how you spent your childhood years. There is a freedom of thought in that, true. But there is also wisdom in the caution of wizardkind. It has been three hundred and twenty-three years since the country of magical Italy was ruined by one man's folly. Such incidents were more common in the

years when Hogwarts was raised. Commoner still, in the aftertime of Merlin. Of the time before Merlin, little remains to study."

"There's around thirty orders of magnitude of difference between that and blowing up the Sun," Harry observed, then caught himself. "But that's a pointless quibble, sorry, blowing up a country would also be bad, I agree. In any case, Professor, I don't plan on doing anything like that."

"Your choice is not required, Mr. Potter. If you had read more wizardborn novels and fewer Muggle stories, you would know. In serious literature the wizard whose foolishness threatens to unleash the Shambling Bone-Men will not be deliberately bent on such a goal, that is for children's books. This truly dangerous wizard shall perhaps be bent on some project of which he anticipates great renown, and the certain prospect of losing that renown and living out his life in obscurity will seem to him more vivid, more aversive, than the unknown prospect of destroying his country. Or he shall have promised success to one he cannot dare to disappoint. Perhaps he has children in debt. There is much literary wisdom in those stories. It is born of harsh experience and cities of ash. The most likely prospect for disaster is a powerful wizard who, for whatever reason, cannot bring himself to halt as warning signs appear. Though he may speak much and loudly of his caution, he will not be able to bring himself actually to halt. I wonder, Mr. Potter, have you thought of trying anything which Hermione Granger herself would have told you not to do?"

"All *right,* point taken," said Harry. "Professor, I am well aware that if I save Hermione at the price of two other people's lives, I've lost on total points from a utilitarian standpoint. I am *extremely* aware that Hermione would not want me to risk destroying a whole country just to save her. That's just common sense."

"Child who destroys Dementors," said that soft voice, "if it were only one country I feared you might ruin, I would be less concerned. I did not at first credit that your knowledge of Muggle science and Muggle practices would be a source of great power. I now credit it more. I am, in complete sincerity, concerned for the safety of that golden plaque."

"Well, if science fiction has taught me anything," said Harry, "it's

taught me that destroying the Solar System is not morally acceptable, especially if you do it before humanity has colonized any other star systems."

"Then will you give up this—"

"No," Harry said without even thinking before he opened his mouth. After a moment, he added, "But I do understand what you're trying to tell me."

Silence. The stars had not shifted, not even as they would have in an Earthly night sky, over time.

A very slight rustle, as of someone shifting their body. Harry realized that he had been standing for a while in the same position, and dropped down to the almost unseeable circle of grass that still stayed beneath him, careful not to touch the edges of the spell.

"Tell me this, at least," said the soft voice. "Why does that girl matter to you so much?"

"Because she is my friend."

"In the English language as it is customarily used, Mr. Potter, the word 'friend' is not associated with a desperate effort to raise the dead. Are you under the impression that she is your true love, or some such?"

"Oh, not you too," Harry said wearily. "Not you of all people, Professor. Fine, we're best friends, but that's *all,* okay? That's enough. Friends don't let friends stay dead."

"Ordinary folk do not do as much, for those they call friends." The voice sounded more distant now, abstracted. "Not even for those they say they love. Their companions die, and they do not go in search of power to resurrect them."

Harry couldn't help himself. He looked over again, despite knowing it would be futile, and saw only more stars. "Let me guess, from this you deduce that... people don't actually care as much about their friends as they pretend."

A brief laugh. "They would scarcely pretend to care *less*."

"They care, Professor, and not just for their true loves. Soldiers throw themselves on grenades to save their friends, mothers run into burning houses to save their children. But if you're a Muggle you don't think there's any such thing as magic to bring someone back to life. And

normal wizards don't... *think outside the box* like that. I mean, most wizards aren't searching for power to make *themselves* immortal. Does that prove they don't care about their own lives?"

"As you say, Mr. Potter. Certainly I myself would consider their lives pointless and without a shred of value. Perhaps, somewhere in their hidden hearts, they also believe that my opinion of them is the correct one."

Harry shook his head, and then, in annoyance, cast back the hood of his Cloak, and shook his head again. "That seems like a rather *contrived* view of the world, Professor," said the dim-lit head of a boy, floating unsupported on a circle of dark grass amid stars. "Trying to invent a resurrection spell just isn't something normal people would think of, so you can't deduce anything from their not taking the option."

A moment later, the dim-lit outline of a man sitting on the circle of grass was visible as well.

"If they *truly* cared about their supposed loved ones," the Defense Professor said softly, "they would think of it, would they not?"

"Brains don't work that way. They don't suddenly supercharge when the stakes go up—or when they do, it's within hard limits. I couldn't calculate the thousandth digit of pi if someone's life depended on it."

The dim-lit head inclined. "But there is another possible explanation, Mr. Potter. It is that people play the *role* of friendship. They do just as much as that role requires of them, and no more. The thought occurs to me that perhaps the difference between you and them is not that you care more than they do. Why would you have been born with such unusually strong emotions of friendship, that you alone among wizardkind are driven to resurrect Hermione Granger after her death? No, the most likely difference is not that you care more. It is that, being a more logical creature than they, you alone have thought that playing the role of Friend would require this of you."

Harry stared out at the stars. He would have been lying if he'd claimed not to be shaken. "That... can't be true, Professor. I could name a dozen examples in Muggle novels of people driven to resurrect their dead friends. The authors of those stories clearly understood exactly how I feel about Hermione. Though you wouldn't have read them,

I guess... maybe Orpheus and Eurydice? I didn't actually read that one but I know what's in it."

"Such tales are also told among wizardkind. There is the story of the Elric brothers. The tale of Dora Kent, who was protected by her son Saul. There is Ronald Mallett and his doomed challenge to Time. In Italy before its fall, the drama of Precia Testarossa. In Nippon they tell of Akemi Homura and her lost love. What these stories have in common, Mr. Potter, is that they are all *fiction.* Real-life wizards do not attempt the same, even though the notion is clearly *not* beyond their imagination."

"Because they don't think they *can!*" Harry's voice rose.

"Shall we go and tell the good Professor McGonagall about your intention to find a way to resurrect Miss Granger, and see what she thinks of it? Perhaps it has simply never occurred to her to consider that option... Ah, but you hesitate. You already know her answer, Mr. Potter. Do you know why you know it?" You could hear the cold smile in the voice. "A lovely technique, that. Thank you for teaching it to me."

Harry was aware of the tension that had developed in his face, his words came out as though bitten off. "Professor McGonagall has not grown up with the Muggle concept of the increasing power of science, and nobody's ever told her that when a friend's life is at stake is a time when you need to *think very rationally*—"

The Defense Professor's voice was also rising. "The Transfiguration Professor is *reading from a script,* Mr. Potter! That script calls for her to mourn and grieve, that all may know how much she cared. Ordinary people react poorly if you suggest that they go off-script. As you already knew!"

"That's funny, I could have sworn I saw Professor McGonagall going off-script at dinner yesterday. If I saw her go off-script another ten times I might actually try to talk to her about resurrecting Hermione, but right now she's new to that and needs practice. In the end, Professor, what you're trying to explain away by calling love and friendship and everything else a lie is just *human beings not knowing any better.*"

The Defense Professor's voice rose in pitch. "If it were you who had been killed by that troll, it would not even *occur* to Hermione Granger to do as you are doing for her! It would not occur to Draco Malfoy,

nor to Neville Longbottom, nor to McGonagall or any of your precious friends! There is not one person in this world who would return to you the care that you are showing her! So *why?* Why do it, Mr. Potter?" There was a strange, wild desperation in that voice. "Why be the only one in the world who goes to such lengths to keep up the pretense, when none of them will ever do the same for you?"

"I believe you are factually mistaken, Professor," Harry returned evenly. "About a number of things, in fact. At the very least, your model of my emotions is flawed. Because you don't understand me the tiniest bit, if you think that it would stop me if everything you said was *true.* Everything in the world has to start somewhere, every event has to happen for a first time. Life on Earth had to start with some little self-replicating molecule in a pool of mud. And if I were the first person in the world, no—"

Harry's hand swept out, to indicate the terribly distant points of light.

"—if I were the first person in the *universe* who ever really cared about someone else, which I'm *not* by the way, then I'd be honored to be that person, and I'd try to do it justice."

There was a long silence.

"You truly do care about that girl," the man's dim outline said softly. "You care about her in the way that none of *them* are capable of caring for their own lives, let alone each other." The Defense Professor's voice had become strange, filled with some indecipherable emotion. "I do not understand it, but I know the lengths you will go to because of it. You will challenge death itself, for her. Nothing will sway you from that."

"I care enough to make an actual effort," Harry said quietly. "Yes, that is correct."

The starlight slowly began to fracture, the world shining through the cracks; slashes through the night showing treetrunks and leaves glowing in the sunlight. Harry raised a hand, blinking hard, as the returning brightness smashed into his dark-adjusted eyes; and his eyes automatically went to the Defense Professor, just in case an attack occurred while he was blinded.

When all the stars had gone and only daylight remained, Professor Quirrell was still sitting on the grass. "Well, Mr. Potter," he said in his normal voice, "if that is so, then I shall give you what help I can, while I can."

"You'll *what?*" Harry said involuntarily.

"My offer as I made it yesterday still stands. Ask and I will answer. Show me the same science books you deemed suitable for Mr. Malfoy, and I shall look them over and tell you what comes to mind. Don't look so surprised, Mr. Potter, I would hardly leave you to your own devices."

Harry stared, tear ducts still watering from the sudden light.

Professor Quirrell looked back at him. Something strange glinted in the pale eyes. "I have done what I can, and now I fear I must take my leave of you. Good—" and the Defense Professor hesitated. "Good day, Mr. Potter."

"Good—" Harry began.

The man sitting on the grass fell over, his head impacting the ground with a light thud. At the same time the sense of doom diminished so sharply that Harry leapt to his feet, his heart suddenly in his throat.

But the figure on the ground slowly pushed back up to a crawling position. Turned to look at Harry, eyes empty, mouth slack. Tried to stand, fell back to the ground.

Harry took a step forward, sheer instinct telling him to offer a hand, although that was incorrect.

But the fallen figure flinched away from Harry, and then slowly began to crawl away from him, in the general direction of the distant castle.

The boy standing amid the forest gazed after.

This book was edited by a fan of the story. The text was set in 12-point URW Garamond No. 8. Chapter headings were set in Lumos, inspired by the display font used in the US editions of the Harry Potter books, drawn by Sarah McFalls. The book was typeset using LaTeX. The artwork for the cover was created with the GIMP.