

HARRY POTTER AND THE METHODS OF RATIONALITY

BY ELIEZER YUDKOWSKY



BOOK 5: HARRY JAMES POTTER-EVANS-VERRES AND THE LAST ENEMY

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CHAPTER ONE

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 INHABITANTS 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

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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 cunning 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 patted 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 *super-saturated* 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 Thiefs 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."

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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?"

"I, for one, think it perfectly clear that Granger is Potter's moirail, and that Potter was auspisticing between Malfoy and Granger." The witch

who'd spoken nodded with the self-satisfaction of someone who has just precisely nailed down a complicated issue.

"Those aren't even words," objected a young wizard. "You're just making them up as you go."

"Sometimes you can't describe a thing using *real* words."

"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—”

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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.

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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,

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CHAPTER 1

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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—

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“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...”

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—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—

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“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—”

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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—"

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"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—"

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HYPOTHESIS: GILDEROY LOCKHART: END

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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. Wand-work 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 Muggle-

borns. 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

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CHAPTER 1

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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."

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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 gadgets. 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 Invisibil-

ity 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 Wizen-gamot 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 clichéd enough to take down the villain—

Yes, replied the central Harry over the distant vrooming 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 Rehfluss, 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 crack-ing."

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 forgivable, 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?

*
*

MULTIPLE HYPOTHESIS TESTING

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*

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.

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*

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?

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*

"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.

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*

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 shut 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 TWO

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, then, 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 running 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 was 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 read-

ing, 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 THREE

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—"

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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 splattered 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 Pinini’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.

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...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 occurred 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.

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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.

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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 three 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 FOUR

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 [REDACTED]

The Weasley twins screamed.

Harry's Patronus shattered.

The troll snorted and spun around to face them, dropping [REDACTED] 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 bel-low 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 go-

ing 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 crunching 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.

*
*

“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 unyielding 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—

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TIME PRESSURE II

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“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 FIVE

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 discontinuously 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."

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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 SIX

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.

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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. 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. 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 knelt 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 accommodations 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 mad-house, 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 be-

fore 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.

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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."

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ROLES II

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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.

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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 SEVEN

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.

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"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

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ROLES III

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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 EIGHT

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 cliché 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.

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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—

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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—"

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"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."

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CHAPTER 8

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"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.

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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.

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ROLE'S IV

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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.*

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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.

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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.

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It wasn't until the next morning that it was discovered that Hermione Granger's body was missing.

CHAPTER NINE

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 Unforgivable. 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.”

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“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. "Mhmm. 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.

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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 TEN

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 general 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 morning 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.*

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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—

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"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 they who frighten 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 blast radius. There’s no realistic way to do that without blowing up the Sun. And before you ask, 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 magical territories of Sicily were 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 than the unknown prospect of destroying his country. Or he shall have promised success to one he cannot bear 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 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," 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 Sicily 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 that happens 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 tree trunks 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; the apprehension that rose up in him, however faint, spoke of continued danger.

But the fallen figure flinched away from Harry, and then slowly began crawl to away from him, in the general direction of the distant castle.

The boy standing amid the forest gazed after.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

ROLES, PART VII

THE FOURTH MEETING:

(4:38PM, APRIL 17TH, 1992)

The man wearing the worn, warm coat, with three faint scars etched forever into his cheek, observed Harry Potter as closely as he could while the boy looked around politely at the rows of cottages. For someone whose best friend had died yesterday, Harry Potter seemed strangely composed, though not in any way reminiscent of unfeelingness, or normality. *I don't wish to talk about that*, the boy had said, *with you or anyone*. Saying 'wish' and not 'want', as though to emphasize that he was able to use grownup words and make grownup decisions. There had been only one thing Remus Lupin had thought of that might help, after he'd received the owls from Professor McGonagall and that strange man Quirinus Quirrell.

"There's a lot of empty houses," the boy said, glancing around again.

Godric's Hollow had changed, in the decade since Remus Lupin had been a frequent visitor. Many of the old, peaked cottages looked deserted, with green leafy vines growing across their windows and their doors. Britain had contracted noticeably, in the aftermath of the Wizarding War, having lost not only the dead but the fled. Godric's Hollow had been hard-hit. And afterward still more families had moved elsewhere, to Hogsmeade or magical London, the deserted houses too uncomfortable a reminder.

Others had remained. Godric's Hollow was older than Hogwarts, older than Godric Gryffindor whose name it had taken, and there were families which would reside here until the end of the world and its magic.

The Potters had been one such family, and would be again, if the last Potter so chose.

Remus Lupin tried to explain all that, simplifying it as best he could for the young boy. The Ravenclaw nodded thoughtfully and said nothing, as though he had understood it all without need of questions. Perhaps that was so; the child of James Potter and Lily Evans, the Head Boy and Head Girl of Hogwarts, would hardly be stupid. The child had certainly seemed highly intelligent, for the little time that they had spoken in January, though at that time Remus had done most of the talking.

(There was also that business with the Wizengamot which Remus had heard rumors about, but Remus didn't believe a single word of that, any more than he'd believed it about James betrothing his son to Molly's youngest.)

"There's the monument," Remus said, pointing ahead of them.

*
*

Harry walked beside Mr. Lupin toward the black marble obelisk, thinking silently. It seemed to Harry that this adventure was essentially misguided; he had no use for grief counseling, that was not Harry's chosen path. So far as Harry was concerned, the five stages of grief were Rage, Remorse, Resolve, Research, and Resurrection. (Not that the usual 'five stages of grief' had any experimental evidence whatsoever that Harry had ever heard about.) But Mr. Lupin had seemed too sincere to refuse; and visiting James and Lily's home was something Harry felt he ought not to turn down. So Harry walked, feeling oddly detached; walking silently through a play whose script he was not interested in reading.

Harry had been told that he wasn't to wear the Cloak of Invisibility for this journey, so that Mr. Lupin could keep track of him.

Harry was morally certain that Dumbledore, or both Dumbledore and Mad-Eye Moody, were following them invisibly to see if anyone tried for the bait. There was no way Harry would have been let out of Hogwarts

with only Remus Lupin for a guard. Harry didn't expect anything to happen, though. He'd seen nothing to contradict the hypothesis that all the danger centered on Hogwarts and only Hogwarts.

As the two of them walked closer toward the center of town, the marble obelisk transformed into—

Harry drew in a breath. He'd been expecting a heroic pose of James Potter with wand leveled against Lord Voldemort, and Lily Potter with arms outstretched in front of the crib.

Instead there was a man with untidy hair and glasses, and a woman with her hair let down and a baby in her arms, and that was all.

"It looks very... normal," Harry said, feeling an odd catch in his throat.

"Madam Longbottom and Professor Dumbledore put their foot down hard," said Mr. Lupin, who was looking more at Harry than at the monument. "They said that the Potters should be remembered as they had lived, not as they had died."

Harry looked at the statue, thinking. Very strange, to see himself as a baby of stone, with no scar upon his forehead. It was a glimpse at an alternate universe, one where Harry James Potter (no Evans-Verres to his name) became an intelligent but ordinary wizarding scholar, maybe Sorted into Gryffindor like his parents. A Harry Potter who grew up a proper young wizard, knowing little of science for all that his mother was Muggleborn. Ultimately changing... not much. James and Lily wouldn't have raised their son with what Professor Quirrell would have called *ambition* and what Professor Verres-Evans would have called *the common endeavor*. His birth parents would have loved him very much, and that would not have been much help to anyone in the world except Harry. If someone had undone their death—

"You were their friend," Harry said, turning to look at Lupin. "For a long time, since you were children."

Mr. Lupin nodded silently.

Professor Quirrell's voice resounded in Harry's approximate memory: *The most likely difference is not that you care more. Rather it is that, being a more logical creature than they, only you are aware that the role of Friend ought to require this of you...*

"When Lily and James died," Harry said, "did you think at all of whether there might be some magical way to get them back? Like Orpheus and Eurydice? Or the, what was it, Elrin brothers?"

"There is no magic which can undo death," Mr. Lupin said quietly. "There are some mysteries which wizardry cannot touch."

"Did you do a mental check of what you thought you knew, how you thought you knew it, and how high the probability was of that conclusion?"

"What?" said Mr. Lupin. "Could you repeat that, Harry?"

"I'm saying, did you think about it anyway?"

Mr. Lupin shook his head.

"Why not?"

"Because it was already done, and over," Remus Lupin said gently. "Because wherever James and Lily are now, they would wish me to act for the sake of the living, not the dead."

Harry nodded silently. He'd been pretty sure of the answer to that question before he'd asked. He'd already read that script. But he'd asked anyway, just in case Mr. Lupin had spent a week obsessing about it, because Harry could have been wrong.

The soft voice of the Defense Professor seemed to speak in Harry's mind. *Surely, if Lupin truly cared, he would not need special instruction for something as simple as thinking for five minutes before giving up...*

Yes, he would, Harry answered the mental voice. *Human beings wouldn't suddenly obtain a skill like that just because they cared. I learned about it because I'd read library books, produced by a huge scientific edifice—*

And that other part of Harry said, in that soft voice, *But there is also another hypothesis, Mr. Potter, and it fits the data in a much less complicated way.*

No it doesn't! How would people even know what to pretend, if nobody had ever cared?

They don't know. That is what you observe.

The two of them walked onward toward a certain house, past a long row of occupied wizard cottages and other cottages overgrown with vines.

Coming finally to the house with half its top blown off, and green leaves growing over into the inside; behind a shoulder-high wild-growing hedge lining the sidewalk, and a narrow metal gate (Mr. Hagrid had probably stepped right over it, being unable to fit through). The gap in the roof was like a giant mouth had taken a circular bite from the house, leaving spines of wood, what had maybe been support beams, sticking out. To the right side a single chimney still stood upright, uneaten by the giant bite, but leaning dangerously without its former support. Windows were shattered. Where there should have been a front door were only splinters of wood.

To this place Lord Voldemort had come, *silently, making less noise than the dead leaves slithering along the pavement...*

Remus Lupin put a hand upon Harry's shoulder. "Touch the gate," Mr. Lupin urged.

Harry reached out a hand and did so.

Like a fast-growing flower a sign burst from the tangled weeds in the ground behind the gate, a wooden sign with golden letters, and it said:

On this spot, on the night of 31 October 1981,
Lily and James Potter lost their lives.
They were survived by their son, Harry Potter,
the only wizard ever to withstand the Killing Curse,
the Boy-Who-Lived, who broke You-Know-Who's power.
This house has been left in its ruined state,
as a monument to the Potters,
as a reminder of their sacrifice.

In a blank space below the golden letters were written other messages, dozens of them, magical ink that rose to the surface and gleamed brightly enough to be read before fading and giving way to other messages.

So my Gideon is avenged.
Thank you, Harry Potter. Fare well wherever you are.
We will always be in the Potters' debt.
Oh James, oh Lily, I am sorry.

I hope you're alive, Harry Potter.
There is always a price.
I wish our last words had been kinder, James. I'm sorry.
There is always a dawn after the night.
Rest well, Lily.
Bless you, Boy-Who-Lived. You were our miracle.

"I guess—" Harry said. "I guess that's what people do—instead of trying to make it better—" Harry stopped. The thought seemed unworthy of this place. He looked up, and saw Remus Lupin gazing at him with a look so gentle that Harry wrenched his eyes away to the blasted and broken roof.

You were our miracle. Harry had always heard the word 'miracle' in the context of how, in the natural universe, there was no such thing. And yet looking at the ruined house, he suddenly knew exactly what the word meant, the note of grace all unexplained, the blessing inexplicable. The Dark Lord had almost won, and then in one night all the darkness and terror had ended, salvation without justification, a sudden dawn from out of the darkness and even now nobody knew *why*—

If Lily Potter had lived beyond her confrontation with Lord Voldemort, she would have felt that way when she saw her baby alive, afterward.

"Let's go," whispered the baby boy, ten years later.

They went.

The graveyard's entrance was guarded by a lockless gate of the sort that kept out animals, with a place to stand while you moved the door from one side of the standing-place to the other. Remus took out his wand (Harry was already holding his) and there was a brief blur as they stepped through.

Some of the stones rising up from the ground looked as old as the wall in Oxford that his father had said was around a thousand years old.

Hallie Fleming, said the first stone that Harry saw, in a carving almost invisibly faded with the erosion of time. *Vienna Wood*, said another.

It had been a long time since Harry had visited a graveyard. His mind had still been childlike the last time he'd come to one, long before he'd

seen within Death's shadow. Coming here now was... strange, and sad, and puzzling, and *this has been happening for so long, why haven't wizards tried to stop it, why aren't they putting all their strength into that like Muggles do with medical research, only more so, wizards have more reason to hope...*

"The Dumbledores lived in Godric's Hollow too?" Harry said, as they walked past a pair of relatively new stones saying *Kendra Dumbledore* and *Ariana Dumbledore*.

"For a long, long time," Mr. Lupin said.

They walked further into the graveyard, far toward the end, past many deaths that had been mourned.

Then Mr. Lupin pointed at a linked double headstone, of marble still white and unaged.

"Are there going to be messages there?" Harry said. He didn't want to deal any more with the way that other people dealt with death.

Mr. Lupin shook his head.

They walked toward the linked white stones.

And stood before—

"What is this?" Harry whispered. "Who... *who wrote this?*"

JAMES POTTER
BORN 27 MARCH 1960
DIED 31 OCTOBER 1981

"Wrote what?" said Mr. Lupin, puzzled.

LILY POTTER
BORN 30 JANUARY 1960
DIED 31 OCTOBER 1981

"*This!*" Harry cried. "*The inscription!*" There were tears welling up in Harry's eyes, at the brightness out of place and unexplained, the touch of grace where no grace should have been, the mysterious blessing, tears welling up at

THE LAST ENEMY THAT SHALL BE DESTROYED IS DEATH

"That?" Mr. Lupin said. "That's the... motto, I suppose you could call it, of the Potters. Though I don't think it was ever something as formal as that. Just a saying handed down from long, long ago..."

"This—that—" Harry scrambled down to kneel beside the grave, touched the inscription with a trembling hand. "How? Things like that can't just be, be *genetic*—"

Then Harry saw what tears had blurred, the faint carving of a line, within a circle, within a triangle.

The symbol of the Deathly Hallows.

And Harry understood.

"They tried," Harry whispered.

The three Peverell brothers.

Had they lost someone precious to them, was that where it had begun?

"With all their lives, they tried, and they made progress—"

The Cloak of Invisibility, that could defeat the Dementors' sight.

"—but their research wasn't finished—"

Hiding from Death's shadow is not defeating Death itself. The Resurrection Stone couldn't really bring anyone back. The Elder Wand couldn't protect you from old age.

"—so they passed on the mission to their children, and their children's children."

Generation after generation.

Until it came to me.

Could Time echo like that, rhyming, between this far into the future, and that far in the past? It *couldn't* be coincidence, could it? Not this message, not in this place.

My family.

You really were, my mother and my father.

"It doesn't mean resurrecting the dead, Harry," Mr. Lupin said. "It means accepting death, and so being beyond death, mastering it."

"Did James tell you that?" Harry said, his voice strange.

"No," said Mr. Lupin, "but—"

"Good."

Harry rose up slowly from where he had been kneeling, feeling as though he were pushing up a sun upon his shoulders, raising the dawn above the horizon.

Of course other wizards have tried. I am not unique. I was never alone. These feelings in my heart, they're not so special, not in the wizard world or the Muggle one.

"Harry, your wand!" There was a sudden excitement in Mr. Lupin's voice, and when Harry raised his wand to look at it closely, he saw that it was gleaming ever so faintly with a silver light, welling out of the wood.

"Cast the Patronus Charm!" urged Mr. Lupin. "Try casting it again, Harry!"

Oh, right. So far as Mr. Lupin knows, I can't—

Harry smiled, and even laughed a little. "I'd better not," Harry said. "If I tried to cast the spell in this state of mind, it'd probably kill me."

"What?" said Mr. Lupin. "The Patronus Charm doesn't do that!"

Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres raised his left hand, still laughing, and wiped away some more tears.

"You know, Mr. Lupin," Harry said, "it really takes a *baroque* interpretation to think that somebody would be walking around, pondering how death is just something we all have to accept, and communicate their state of mind by saying, 'The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death.' Maybe someone else thought it sounded poetic and picked up the phrase and tried to interpret it differently, but whoever said it first didn't like death much." Sometimes it puzzled Harry how most people didn't seem to even *notice* when they were twisting something around to the 180-degree opposite of its first obvious reading. It couldn't be a raw brainpower thing, people could see the obvious reading of most other English sentences. "Also 'shall be destroyed' refers to a change of future state, so it can't be about the way things are now."

Remus Lupin was staring at him with wide eyes. "You certainly are James and Lily's child," the man said, sounding rather shocked.

"Yes, I am," Harry said. But that wasn't enough, he had to do something more, so Harry raised his wand in the air and said, his voice as steady as he could make it, "I am Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres, the

son of Lily and James, of the house of Potter, and I accept my family's quest. Death is my enemy, and I will defeat it."

Thrayen beyn Peverlas soona ahnd thrih heera toal thissoom Dath beyewoo-
nen.

"What?" Harry said aloud. The words had popped up into his stream of consciousness as though from his own thoughts, unexplained.

"What was that?" said Remus Lupin at the same time.

Harry turned, scanning the graveyard, but he didn't see anything. Beside him, Mr. Lupin was doing the same.

Neither of them noticed the tall stone worn as though from a thousand years of age, upon it a line within a circle within a triangle glowing ever so faintly silver, like the light which had shone from Harry's wand, invisible at that distance beneath the still-bright Sun.

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SOME TIME LATER:

"Thank you again, Mr. Lupin," Harry said, the tall, faintly scarred man was about to depart once more. "Though I really wish you hadn't—"

"Professor Dumbledore said that I was to portkey us back to Hogwarts if anything unusual happened, whether or not it seemed like an attack," Mr. Lupin said firmly. "Which is eminently sensible."

Harry nodded. And then, having carefully saved this question for last, "Do you have any idea of what the words meant?"

"If I did, I wouldn't tell you," Mr. Lupin said, looking rather severe. "Certainly not without Professor Dumbledore's permission. I can understand your eagerness, but you should not go trying to uncover any ancestral secrets of the Potters until you are an adult. That means after you've passed your NEWTs, Harry, or at least your OWLs. And I still think you've picked up entirely the wrong idea of what your family motto is meant to say!"

Harry nodded, sighing internally, and bid Mr. Lupin farewell.

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ROLE'S VII

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Harry went back through Hogwarts, to the Ravenclaw Tower, feeling strange, and strengthened. He would not have expected any of that, but it had been all to the good.

He was passing through the Ravenclaw common room, on the way to his dorm.

That was when the shining creature came to him, gleaming soft white beneath the candlefires of the Ravenclaw common room, as it slithered out from nowhere, the silver snake.

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Bregen béon Pefearles suna and þrie hira tól þissum Déað béo gewunnen.
Three shall be Peverell's sons and three their devices by which Death
shall be defeated.

—Spoken in the presence of the three Peverell brothers,
in a small tavern on the outskirts of what would later be called Godric's
Hollow.

CHAPTER TWELVE

ROLES, PART VIII

For the second time that day, Harry's eyes filled with tears. Heedless of the puzzled eyes of the Ravenclaws in the common room, he reached out to the silver creature which Draco Malfoy had sent, cradling it in his arms like a live thing; and stumbled off in the direction of his dorm room, heading half-blindly for the bottom of his trunk, as the silver snake waited silently in his arms.

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THE FIFTH MEETING: 10:12AM, SUNDAY, APRIL 19TH.

The debtor's meeting which Lord Malfoy had demanded from Harry Potter, who owed Lucius Malfoy a debt of some 58,203 Galleons, was held within the Gringotts Central Bank, in accordance with the laws of Britain.

There had been some pushback from Chief Warlock Dumbledore, trying to prevent Harry Potter from leaving the security of Hogwarts (a phrase that caused Harry Potter to raise his fingers and silently make quote marks in the air). For his own part, the Boy-Who-Lived had seemingly pondered quietly, and then assented to the meeting, strangely compliant in the face of his enemy's demand.

The Headmaster of Hogwarts, who acted as Harry Potter's legal guardian in the eyes of magical Britain, had overruled his ward's assent.

The Debts Committee of the Wizengamot had overruled the Headmaster of Hogwarts.

The Chief Warlock had overruled the Debts Committee.

The Wizengamot had overruled the Chief Warlock.

And so the Boy-Who-Lived had departed under the heavy guard of Mad-Eye Moody and an Auror trio for the Gringotts Central Bank; with Moody's bright-blue eye rotating wildly in every direction, as though to signal to any possible attacker that he was On Guard and Constantly Vigilant and would cheerfully incinerate the kidneys of anyone who sneezed in the general direction of the Boy-Who-Lived.

Harry Potter watched more keenly than before, as they marched through the wide-open front doors of Gringotts, beneath the motto *Fortius Quo Fidelius*. On Harry's last three visits to Gringotts he had merely admired the marble pillars, the gold-burning torchlights, the architecture not quite like the human parts of magical Britain. Since then had come the Incident at Azkaban and other things; and now, on his fourth visit, Harry was thinking about the Goblin Rebellions and goblins' ongoing resentment at not being allowed to own wands and certain facts which hadn't been in the first-year History textbook, which Harry had guessed at by pattern-matching and which Professor Flitwick had confirmed in a very quiet voice. Lord Voldemort had killed goblins as well as wizards—an incredibly stupid move on Lord Voldemort's part, unless

Harry was really missing something—but what goblins thought of the Boy-Who-Lived, Harry had no idea. Goblins had a reputation for paying what they owed and taking what they thought owed them, along with a reputation for interpreting those accounts in a somewhat prejudiced fashion.

Today, the guards standing upright in armor at regular intervals around the bank were staring at the Boy-Who-Lived with blank faces, and glaring at Moody and the Aurors with flashes of bitter contempt. At the stands and counters of the bank's foyer, goblin tellers stared with equal contempt at the wizards whose hands they were filling with Galleons; one teller smiled a sharp-toothed grin at a witch who was looking angry and desperate.

If I understand human nature correctly—and if I'm right that all the humanoid magical species are genetically human plus a heritable magical effect—then you're not likely to become friends with a wizard just because I'm polite to you, or say that I'm sympathetic. But I wonder if you would back the Boy-Who-Lived in a bid to overthrow the Ministry, if I promised to revoke the Wand Law afterward... or if I quietly gave you wands, and spellbooks, in exchange for your support... is that why the secret of wand-making is restricted to people like Ollivander? Though if you really are human, just plain human, then the goblin nation probably has its own internal horrors, its own Azkabans, for that is also human nature; in which case sooner or later I must overthrow or reform your own government as well. Hm.

An aged goblin appeared before them, and Harry inclined his head with careful courtesy, a gesture that the aged goblin returned with an abrupt half-nod. There was no wild train ride; instead the aged goblin ushered them into a short hallway that terminated in a small waiting room, with three goblin-sized benches and one wizard-sized chair, within which nobody sat.

"Do not sign anything that Lucius Malfoy gives you," Mad-Eye Moody said. "Nothing, do you understand me, lad? If Malfoy hands you a copy of *The Wonderful Adventures of the Boy-Who-Lived* and asks you for an autograph, tell him that you've sprained a finger. Don't pick up a quill for a single second while you're in Gringotts. If someone hands you a quill, break the quill and then break your own fingers. Do I need to explain

further, son?"

"Not particularly," Harry said. "We also have lawyers in Muggle Britain, and they'd think your lawyers are cute."

A short time later Harry Potter handed his wand over to an armored goblin guard who frisked him with all manner of interesting-looking probes, and gave his pouch to Moody to keep.

And then Harry stepped through another door, and a brief waterfall of Thief's Downfall, which evaporated from his skin as soon as he stepped out.

On the other side of the door was a larger room, richly paneled and appointed, with a great golden table stretching across it; two huge leather chairs on one side of the table, and a small wooden stool on the other, the debtor's perch. Two goblins in full armor, wearing ornate earpieces and glasses, stood watch around the room. Neither side would have wands or any other device of magic, and the goblin guards would attack immediately if anyone dared to use wandless magic within this peaceable meeting supervised by Gringotts Bank. The ornate earpieces would prevent the goblin guards from hearing the conversation unless directly addressed, the eyepieces would leave the wizards' faces as blurs. It was, in short, something along the lines of *actual* security, at least if you were an Occlumens.

Harry climbed up onto his uncomfortable wooden stool, thinking *Subtle* in a tone of some mental sarcasm, and awaited his creditors.

It was only a brief interval later, much shorter than the time a debtor could legally be made to wait, when Lucius Malfoy entered into the room, taking up his leather chair with motions worn smooth by practice. His snake-headed cane was missing from his hands, his long white mane drifted behind him the same as ever, his face could not be read.

Quietly following behind him was a young boy with white-blond hair, now wearing black robes far finer than any Hogwarts uniform, who followed in his father's footsteps with a controlled face. A boy who was also Harry's creditor to the tune of forty Galleons, and also of House Malfoy, and therefore, technically, covered by the Wizengamot resolution enabling this meeting.

Draco. Harry didn't say it aloud, didn't let his own expression change. He could not think of what to say. Not even *I'm sorry* seemed appropriate. Harry hadn't dared say any of that to Draco's Patronus either, when they had set up this meeting in a few brief exchanges; and not only because Lucius might be listening. It had been enough to know that Draco's happy thought was still happy, and that he had still been able to want Harry to know it.

Lucius Malfoy spoke first, his voice level, his face set. "I do not understand what is happening at Hogwarts, Harry Potter. Would you care to explain it to me?"

"I don't know," Harry said. "If I understood these events I would not have let them happen, Lord Malfoy."

"Then answer me this question. *Who* are you?"

Harry gazed evenly at the face of his creditor. "I'm not You-Know-Who, like you thought I was," Harry said. Not being a *complete* idiot, he'd eventually worked out who Lucius Malfoy had thought he was talking to in front of the Wizengamot. "Obviously I'm not a normal boy. Equally obviously, that probably has *something* to do with the Boy-Who-Lived business. But I don't know what, or why, any more than you do. I asked the Sorting Hat and it didn't know either."

Lucius Malfoy nodded distantly. "I could not think of any reason why you would pay a hundred thousand Galleons to save a mudblood's life. No reason save one, which would account for her power and bloodthirst alike; but then she died at the hands of a troll, and yet you lived. And also my *son* has told me *much* of you, Harry Potter, which *did not make the tiniest bit of sense*, I have heard the ravings of the mad in St. Mungo's and they were more sensible by far than the events which my *son* told me under *Veritaserum* that you enacted, and that portion of this *raving lunacy*, which you *personally carried out*, I would have you explain to me, and now."

Harry turned to look at Draco, who looked back at him with a face that was screwing up, being controlled, and then tensing up again.

"I'd also," Draco Malfoy said in a high and wavering voice, "like, to know, why, Potter."

Harry closed his eyes, and spoke without looking. "A boy raised by Muggles who thought he was clever. You saw me, Draco, and you thought

of how very useful it would be if the Boy-Who-Lived, out of all the other children in your year, could be shown the truth of things, if we could be friends. And I thought the same thing about you. Only, you and I believed different things were true. Not that I'm saying that there are different truths, I mean, there's different beliefs but there's only one reality, only one universe that can make those beliefs true or false—"

"You lied to me."

Harry opened his eyes and looked at Draco. "I would prefer to say," Harry said, not quite with a steady voice, "that the things I told you were true from a certain point of view."

"*A certain point of view?*" Draco Malfoy looked every bit as angry as Luke Skywalker'd had the right to be, and not in a mood to accept Kenobi's excuses, either. "There's a word for things that are true from a certain point of view. They're called *lies!*"

"Or tricks," Harry said evenly. "Statements which are technically true but which deceive the listener into forming further beliefs which are false. I think it's worth making that distinction. What I told you was a self-fulfilling prophecy; you believed that you couldn't deceive yourself, so you didn't try. The skills you've learned are real, and it would have been very bad for you to start fighting against them internally. People can't make themselves believe that blue is green by an act of will, but they *think* they can, and that can be almost as bad."

"You *used* me," said Draco Malfoy.

"I only used you in ways that made you stronger. That's what it means to be used by a friend."

"*Even I know that's not what friendship is!*"

Now Lucius Malfoy spoke again. "For what purpose? To what end?" Even the elder Malfoy's voice was not quite steady. "*Why?*"

Harry regarded him for a moment, and then turned to Draco. "Your father's probably not going to believe this," Harry said. "But you, Draco, should be able to see that everything which has happened is compatible with this hypothesis. And that any more cynical hypothesis wouldn't explain why I didn't press you harder when you thought I had leverage, or why I taught you so much. I thought that the heir of House Malfoy, who'd been publicly seen to grab a Muggleborn girl to stop her falling off the

roof of Hogwarts, would be a good compromise candidate to lead magical Britain after the reformation."

"So you would have me believe," Lucius Malfoy said in a thin voice, "that you are claiming to be mad. Well, let us leave all that aside. Tell me who set that troll on Hogwarts."

"I don't know," Harry said.

"Tell me who you *suspect*, Harry Potter."

"I have four suspects. One of them is Professor Snape—"

"*Snape?*" Draco burst out.

"The second, of course, is the Defense Professor of Hogwarts, just because he's the Defense Professor." Harry would have left him out, not wanting to bring Professor Quirrell to the Malfoys' attention if he was innocent, but Draco might have called him on that. "The third, you wouldn't believe me about. The fourth is a catchall category called Everything Else." *And the fifth, Lord Voldemort, I do not think I should name to you.*

Lucius Malfoy's face contorted in a snarl. "Do you think I cannot recognize bait upon your hook? Tell me about this third possibility, Potter, the one you wish me to believe is the *true* answer, and leave aside games."

Harry regarded Lord Malfoy steadily. "I once read a book I wasn't supposed to read, and it told me this: Communication is an event that takes place between equals. Employees lie to their bosses, who, in turn, expect to be lied to. I'm not playing coy, I'm observing that it's simply not possible, in our present situation, for me to tell you about the third suspect, and have you believe that my story was anything but a lure."

Draco spoke then. "It's Father, isn't it?"

Harry gave Draco a startled look.

Draco spoke evenly. "You suspect that Father sent the troll into Hogwarts to get at Granger, don't you? That's what you're thinking, isn't it!"

Harry opened his mouth to say, *Actually, no*, and then managed to think ahead and stop himself for once in his life.

"I see..." Harry said slowly. "*That's* what this is about. Lucius Malfoy publicly says that Hermione won't get away with what she's done, and lo and behold, a troll kills her." Harry smiled then, in a way that bared his teeth. "And if I deny that here, then Draco, who isn't an Occlumens, can then testify under Veritaserum that the Boy-Who-Lived does *not* suspect

Lucius Malfoy of having sent a troll into Hogwarts to kill Hermione Granger, sworn to the Noble House of Potter, whose blood debt was recently purchased for a hundred thousand Galleons et cetera.” Harry leaned back slightly, though his wooden stool had no back with which to do it properly. “But now that it’s been pointed out, I see that it’s very reasonable. Obviously *you* killed Hermione Granger, just like you threatened to do in front of the whole Wizengamot.”

“I did not,” Lucius Malfoy said, expressionless once more.

Harry bared his teeth again in that non-smile. “Well then, in *that* case, there must be someone *else* out there who killed Hermione and messed with the Hogwarts wards, the same person who *earlier* tried to *frame Hermione for Draco Malfoy’s murder*. Either you killed Hermione Granger after being paid for her life, or you blamed your son’s attempted murder on an innocent girl and took all my family’s money under false pretenses, one of those two things must be true.”

“Perhaps *you* killed her in hopes of your money being returned.” Lucius Malfoy had leaned forward, and was staring hard at Harry.

“Then *I* would not have given away my money for her in the first place. As you already know. Don’t insult my intelligence, Lord Malfoy—no, wait, sorry, you just had to *say* that in case Draco had to testify to it, never mind.”

Lucius Malfoy sat back in his chair and stared.

“I tried to tell you, Father,” Draco said under his breath, “but nobody can imagine Harry Potter until they’ve actually *met* him...”

Harry tapped a finger on his cheek. “So people are starting to figure out the blatantly obvious? I’m surprised, actually. I wouldn’t have predicted that would happen.” Harry had by now caught the general rhythm of Professor Quirrell’s cynicism and was able to generate it independently. “I wouldn’t think a newspaper would be able to report on a concept like ‘Either X or Y must be true, but we don’t know which.’ I would only expect journalists to report stories consisting of series of atomic propositions, like ‘X is true’, ‘Y is false’, or ‘X is true and Y is false’. Not more complex logical connectors like ‘If X is true then Y is true, but we don’t know whether X is true’. And all your supporters ought to be rapidly switching between ‘You can’t prove that Lord Malfoy killed

Granger, it could've been someone else' and 'You can't prove there was someone else to frame Granger', so long as it's uncertain they should be trying to have it both ways at once... wait, don't you *own* the Daily Prophet?"

"The Daily Prophet," Lucius Malfoy said thinly, "which I certainly do not own, is far too respectable to publish any such scurrilous nonsense. Unfortunately, not all wizards of influence are so reasonable."

"Ah. Got it." Harry nodded.

Lucius glanced at Draco. "The rest of what he said—was any of it important?"

"No, Father, it was not."

"Thank you, son." Lucius returned his gaze to Harry. His voice, when he spoke, was something closer to his usual drawl, cool and confident. "It is possible that I could be persuaded to show you some favor, if you admitted before the Wizengamot what you clearly know, that I was not responsible for this deed. I would be willing to reduce your remaining debt to House Malfoy quite significantly, or even adjust the terms to allow later repayment."

Harry regarded Lucius Malfoy steadily. "Lucius Malfoy. You are now perfectly aware that Hermione Granger was, in fact, framed using your son as bait, that she was False-Memory-Charmed or worse, and that House Potter held nothing against you before that. My counterproposal is that you return my family's money, I announce before the Wizengamot that House Potter holds House Malfoy no animus, and we present a united front against whoever's doing this. We decide to screw the roles we're supposed to play, and ally with each other instead of fighting. It could be the one thing the enemy doesn't expect us to do."

There was a brief silence in the room, except for the two goblin guards who went on breathing regardless.

"You *are* mad," Lucius Malfoy said coldly.

"It's called justice, Lord Malfoy. You cannot possibly expect me to cooperate with you while you are holding the wealth of House Potter under what you now know to be false pretenses. I understand how it looked to you at the time, but you know better now."

"You have nothing to offer me worth a hundred thousand Galleons."

“Don’t I?” Harry said distantly. “I wonder. I think it quite probable that you care more about the long-term welfare of House Malfoy than about whichever political issue the last generation’s failed Dark Lord made his personal hobbyhorse.” Harry glanced significantly at Draco. “The next generation is drawing its own battle lines and forming new alliances. Your son can be frozen out of that, or he can go straight to the top. Is that worth more to you than forty thousand Galleons you weren’t particularly expecting and don’t particularly need?” Harry smiled thinly. “Forty thousand Galleons. Two million Muggle pounds sterling. Your son knows some things about the size of the Muggle economy that might surprise you. They’d find it amusing, that the fate of a country was revolving around two million pounds sterling. They’d think it was cute. And I think much the same, Lord Malfoy. This isn’t about me being desperate. This is about you getting a fair chance to be fair.”

“Oh?” said Lord Malfoy. “And if I refuse your fair chance, what then?”

Harry shrugged. “Depends what sort of coalition government gets put together without the Malfoys. If the government can be reformed peacefully and it would disturb the peace to do otherwise, I’ll pay you the money out of petty cash. Or maybe the Death Eaters will be retried for past crimes and executed as a matter of justice, as a result of due legal process, of course.”

“You truly are mad,” Lucius Malfoy said quietly. “You have no power, no wealth, and yet you say such things to me.”

“Yes, it’s silly to think I could scare you. After all, you’re not a Demen-tor.”

And Harry went on smiling. He’d looked it up, and apparently a bezoar *would* heal almost any poison if you shoved it into someone’s mouth fast enough. Maybe that wouldn’t repair radiation damage from Transfigured polonium, but then again, maybe it would. So Harry had looked up the freezing points of various acids, and it turned out that sulfuric acid would freeze at just ten degrees Celsius, which meant Harry could buy a liter of acid on the Muggle market, freeze it solid, and Transfigure it down to a tiny little unnoticable water-ice chip to be flipped into someone’s mouth and ingested. No bezoar would compensate for that, once the Transfiguration wore off. Harry had no intention of saying it out loud,

of course, but now that he'd failed decisively to prevent any deaths during his quest, he had no further intention of being restrained by the law or even the code of Batman.

Last chance to live, Lucius. Ethically speaking, your life was bought and paid for the day you committed your first atrocity for the Death Eaters. You're still human and your life still has intrinsic value, but you no longer have the deontological protection of an innocent. Any good person is licensed to kill you now, if they think it'll save net lives in the long run; and I will conclude as much of you, if you begin to get in my way. Whoever sent the troll after Granger must have targeted you too and hit you with some curse that makes former Death Eaters melt into a pile of goo. Very sad.

"Father," Draco said in a small voice. "I think you should consider it, father."

Lucius Malfoy looked at his son. "You jest."

"It's true. I don't think Potter just made up his books, nobody could have written all that and there were things in them that I could check for myself. And if even half of all that is true, he's right, a hundred thousand Galleons won't mean much. If we give it to him he really will be friends with House Malfoy again—the way *he* thinks of being friends, anyway. And if we don't, he'll be your enemy, whether it's in his own interests or not, he'll just go after you. Harry Potter really does think like that. It's not about money to him, it's about what he thinks is honor."

Harry Potter inclined his head, still smiling.

"But let's get one part of it straight," Draco said, now staring directly at him. There was a fierce light in his eyes. "*You wronged me. And you owe me.*"

"Acknowledged," Harry said quietly. "Conditional on the rest of it, of course."

Lucius Malfoy opened his mouth to say who-knew-what and then closed it again. "Mad," he said again.

There was a long father-and-son argument during which Harry managed to keep his mouth shut.

When it seemed that even Draco wouldn't be able to persuade his father, Harry spoke up again, and proposed his intended next steps, if the Houses of Potter and Malfoy could cooperate.

Then came more argument between Lucius and Draco, during which Harry again stayed silent.

Finally Lucius Malfoy's eyes turned to gaze at Harry. "And you believe," Lucius Malfoy said, "that you can persuade Longbottom and Bones to go along with this notion, even if Dumbledore opposes it."

Harry nodded. "They'll be suspicious of your involvement, of course. But I'll tell them that it was my plan to start with, and that should help."

"I suppose," Lucius Malfoy said after a pause, "that I could have a contract drawn up, absolving you of *almost* all the remaining debt, if by some chance I do go along with this mad idea. It shall need more guarantees, of course—"

Harry promptly reached into his robes and drew out a parchment, unfolding it and spreading it across the golden table. "I've taken the liberty myself, actually," Harry said. He'd spent some careful hours in the Hogwarts library with the law books available. Thankfully, so far as Harry could tell, the laws of magical Britain were charmingly simple by Muggle standards. Writing that the original blood debt and payment was cancelled, the Potters' wealth and all other vault items would be returned, and the remaining debt annulled, all with no fault to the Malfoys, was only a few more lines than it took to say out loud. "I had to promise my keepers not to sign anything you gave me. So I made sure to compose this myself, and sign it before I left."

Draco emitted a choked laugh.

Lucius read through the contract, smiling humorlessly. "How charmingly straightforward."

"I also promised not to touch a quill while I was in Gringotts," Harry said. He reached into his robes again and drew out a Muggle pen, along with a sheet of normal paper. "Will this wording be all right?" Harry rapidly scribbled down a legal-sounding statement to the effect that House Potter didn't hold House Malfoy responsible in any way for Hermione Granger's murder and didn't believe they had anything to do with it, then held up the paper in the air for Lord Malfoy's inspection.

Lord Malfoy looked at the paper, rolled his eyes slightly, and said, "Good enough, I suppose. Though to have the proper meaning, you should use the legal term *indemnify* rather than *exonerate*—"

"Nice try, but no. I know exactly what that word means, Lord Malfoy." Harry took his parchment and began copying down his original wording more carefully.

When Harry was done, Lord Malfoy reached across the golden table and took the pen, looking at it thoughtfully. "One of your Muggle artefacts, I suppose? What does this do, son?"

"It writes without needing an inkwell," Draco answered.

"I can see that. I suppose some might find it an amusing trinket." Lucius smoothed the parchment contract over the table, then set his hand by the line for signatures, tapping the pen thoughtfully on the starting spot.

Harry wrenched his eyes away, up to Lucius Malfoy's face, forcing himself to breathe regularly, not quite able to stop his muscles from tensing.

"Our good friend, Severus Snape," said Lucius Malfoy, still tapping the pen on the line awaiting his signature. "The Defense Professor, calling himself Quirrell. Now I ask again, who is your third suspect, Harry Potter?"

"I would strongly advise that you sign first, Lord Malfoy, if you're going to do so anyway. You will benefit from this information more if you do not think I am trying to persuade you of something."

Another humorless smile. "I shall take my chances. Speak, if you wish this to continue."

Harry hesitated, then said evenly, "My third suspect is Albus Dumbledore."

The tapping pen stilled on the parchment. "A strange allegation," Lucius drawled. "Dumbledore lost much face when a Hogwarts student died within his tenure. Do you suppose that I will believe anything of him, only because he is my enemy?"

"He is one suspect among several, Lord Malfoy, and not necessarily the most plausible. But the reason I was able to kill a full-grown mountain troll was that I had a weapon which Dumbledore gave to me, at the start of the school year. It's not strong evidence, but it's suspicious. And if you're thinking that murdering one of his students is not Dumbledore's style, well, the same thought had occurred to me."

"It's *not* his style?" Draco Malfoy said.

Lucius Malfoy shook his head in a measured, careful movement. "Not quite, my son. Dumbledore is particular in his evils." Lord Malfoy leaned back into his chair, and then sat quite still. "Tell me of this weapon."

"I am not yet certain I should go into details about that in your presence, Lord Malfoy." Harry took a breath. "Let *me* be clear on this. I am not trying to sell you on the idea that Dumbledore is behind this, just raising the possibility—"

Then Draco Malfoy spoke. "The device Dumbledore gave you—was it something to kill trolls? I mean, *just* trolls? Can you tell us that?"

Lucius turned his head to look at his son with some surprise.

"No..." Harry said slowly. "It wasn't specifically a sword of anti-troll slaying, or anything like that."

Draco's eyes were intent. "Would the device have worked against an assassin?"

Not if they had shields raised. "No."

"A fight in school?"

An expanding rock in the throat is inherently lethal. "No. I don't think it was meant for use against humans."

Draco nodded. "So just magical creatures. Would it have been a good weapon against an angry Hippogriff, or something like that?"

"Does the Stunning Hex work on Hippogriffs?" Harry said slowly.

"I don't know," said Draco.

"Yes," said Lucius Malfoy.

Compared to trying to target a Wingardium Leviosa and Finite Incantatem— "Then a Stunning Hex would be a better way of dealing with a Hippogriff." Put that way, it did seem increasingly like a Transfigured rock was an optimal weapon *only* against a flesh-and-blood magical creature with spell-resistant skin. "But... I mean, it might not have *been* intended as a weapon at all, I used it in a strange way, it could have just been a crazy whim—"

"No," Lucius Malfoy said lowly. "Not a whim. Not coincidence. Not Dumbledore."

"Then it's him," Draco said. Slowly Draco's eyes narrowed, and he gave a vicious nod. "It's been him *since the beginning*. The court Legilimens *said* that someone had used Legilimency on Granger. Dumbledore

admitted that it was him. And I bet the wards *did* go off when Granger cursed me and Dumbledore just *ignored* them.”

“But—” Harry said. He looked at Lucius, wondering if it was really to his advantage to question this idea. “What would be his *motive*? Are we going to say he’s evil and leave it at that?”

Draco Malfoy jumped out of his chair and began pacing around the room, black robes swishing behind the young boy, the goblin guards staring at him in some surprise through their enchanted goggles. “To figure out a strange plot, look at what happens, then ask who benefits. Except that Dumbledore didn’t plan on you trying to save Granger at her trial, he tried to stop you from doing that. What would’ve happened if Granger *had* gone to Azkaban? House Malfoy and House Potter would’ve hated each other forever. Of all the suspects, the only one who wants *that* is Dumbledore. So it fits. It *all* fits. The one who really committed the murder is—Albus Dumbledore!”

“Um,” Harry said. “But why give *me* an anti-troll weapon? I said it was suspicious, I didn’t say that it made any sense.”

Draco nodded thoughtfully. “Maybe Dumbledore thought you’d stop the troll before it got Granger and then he could blame Father for sending it. A lot of people would be very angry if they thought Father had even *tried* to do something like that, in Hogwarts. Like Father said, Dumbledore must’ve lost face when people found out that a student had actually died in Hogwarts, being safe is what Hogwarts is famous for. So that part probably wasn’t supposed to happen.”

Harry’s mind involuntarily flashed back to the horror in Dumbledore’s eyes when he’d seen Hermione Granger’s body.

Would I have gotten there in time, if the Weasley twins hadn’t had their magic map stolen? Could that have been the plan? And then, though Dumbledore didn’t know it, somebody stole their map, and I was too late... but no, that doesn’t make much sense, I found out too late, how could Dumbledore have guessed that I’d use a broomstick... well, he did know I had one...

There was no way a plan like that could work.

And it hadn’t.

But someone going a little bit senile might *expect* it to work, and a phoenix might not know the difference.

"Or," Draco Malfoy continued, still pacing energetically, "maybe Dumbledore had an enchanted troll around, and he expected you to defeat it some other time, for some other plot, and then he used the troll on Granger instead. I can't imagine Dumbledore had this *all* planned since the first week of lessons—"

"I can imagine," Lucius Malfoy said in low tones. "I have seen such, from Dumbledore."

Draco nodded decisively. "Then I was never *supposed* to die in the first plot. Dumbledore knew Professor Quirrell was checking on me, or Dumbledore planned to have someone else find me in time—I couldn't have testified against Granger if I was dead, and he'd have lost face if I'd died. But my leaving Hogwarts and not being around to lead Slytherin would be just right for him. And then the next time Harry was supposed to stop the troll before it got Granger and everyone was supposed to blame you, Father, only that time it didn't go the way Dumbledore planned."

Lucius Malfoy lifted his grey eyes, from where he'd been gazing with open surprise at his son. "If this is true—but I wonder if Harry Potter is only playing at being reluctant to believe it."

"Maybe," Draco said. "But I'm pretty sure he isn't."

"Then, if it is true..." Lucius Malfoy's voice trailed off. A slow fury was lighting in his eyes.

"What *would* we do, exactly?" Harry said.

"That, too, is clear to me," Draco said. He whirled on them and raised a finger high in the air. "We shall find the proof to convict Dumbledore of this crime, and bring him to justice!"

Harry Potter and Lucius Malfoy looked at each other.

Neither of them quite knew what to say.

"My son," Lucius Malfoy said after a time, "truly, you have done very well this day."

"Thank you, Father!"

"However, this is not a play, we are not Aurors, and we do not put our trust in trials."

Some of the light went out of Draco's eyes. "Oh."

"I, ah, do have a sentimental fondness for trials," Harry interjected. *I cannot believe I am having this conversation.* He needed to go home and

take a sheet of paper and a pencil and try to figure out whether Draco's reasoning *actually* made sense. "And evidence."

Lucius Malfoy turned his gaze to Harry Potter then, and his eyes simmered in pure grey fury.

"If you have deceived me," Lucius Malfoy said in tones of low anger, "if all this is a lie, then I will not forgive. But if this is not deception... Bring me the proof to convict Dumbledore of this murder before the Wizen-gamot, or evidence enough to have him cast down, and there is nothing that House Malfoy will not do for you, Harry Potter. Nothing."

Harry took a deep breath. He needed to sort all this out and figure out the actual probabilities, but he didn't have *time*. "If it is Dumbledore, then removing him from the gameboard leaves a huge hole in Britain's power structure."

"So it does," Lucius Malfoy said with a grim smile. "Did you have ambitions of filling it yourself, Harry Potter?"

"Some of your opposition might not like that. They could fight."

"They will lose," Lucius Malfoy said, now with a face hard like iron.

"So this is what I'd want House Malfoy to do for me, Lord Malfoy, if Dumbledore gets removed because of me. When the opposition is most frightened—that's when they'll be offered a last-minute arrangement to avoid a civil war. Some of your allies might not prefer it, but there'll be a lot of neutrals who'll be glad to see stability. The bargain will be that instead of you taking over right away, Draco Malfoy will take power when he comes of age."

"What?" Draco said.

"Draco has testified under Veritaserum that he tried to help Hermione Granger. I bet there'd be a lot of people in the opposition who'd take a chance on him rather than fight. I'm not sure how exactly you'd enforce it—Unbreakable Vows or Gringotts contracts or what—but there'll be some sort of enforceable compact about power going to Draco after he graduates Hogwarts. I'll throw any support the Boy-Who-Lived has behind that bargain. Try to persuade Longbottom and Bones and so on. Our first plan paves the way for that later, if you're careful to act honorable when you deal with Longbottom and Bones this time around."

"Father, I swear I didn't—"

Lucius's face twisted into a grim smile. "I know you didn't, son. Well." The white-haired man stared across the mighty golden table at Harry Potter. "Those terms are acceptable to me. But fail in any part of our agreement, whether our first bargain, or the second, and there shall be consequences for you, Harry Potter. Clever words will not halt that."

And Lucius Malfoy signed the parchment.

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Mad-Eye Moody had been staring at the bronze door of the Gringotts meeting room for what seemed like hours, insofar as a man could stare at any one thing when his gaze always saw in all directions.

The trouble with trying to be suspicious of a man like Lucius Malfoy, Moody thought, was that you could spend an entire day thinking of everything he might be up to, and still not have finished.

The door cracked open and Harry Potter trudged out, small beads of sweat still on his forehead.

"Did you sign anything?" Mad-Eye demanded upon the instant.

Harry Potter looked at him silently, then reached into his robes and drew out a folded parchment. "The goblins are already executing this," said Harry Potter. "They made three copies before I left."

"MERLIN DAMN IT SON—" Moody paused as his Eye caught sight of the second half of the document as Harry Potter slowly, as though reluctantly, began to unfold the top upward. A glance sufficed to take in the paragraphs drawn in careful handwriting, Lucius Malfoy's elegant signature below Harry Potter's. And then Moody exploded, even as the top half of the document also began to enter his Sight. "You *exonerate House Malfoy of any involvement in Hermione Granger's death?* Do you have any idea what you've done, you little fool? Why in Merlin's name would you do something like WHAT—"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ROLES, FINAL

SUNDAY, APRIL 19TH, 6:34PM.

Daphne Greengrass walked quietly toward the Greengrass room below the Slytherin dungeons, the privilege of an Ancient House; on her way to drop off her trunk from the Hogwarts Express, before she joined the other students for dinner. The whole private area had been hers alone ever since Malfoy had gone. Her hand, held behind her, made repeated come-along gestures at her huge emerald-studded trunk, which seemed hesitant to follow. Maybe the enchantments on the sturdy old family device needed to be reapplied; or maybe her trunk was reluctant to follow her into Hogwarts, which was no longer safe.

There'd been a long talk between Mother and Father, after they'd been told about Hermione; with Daphne hiding around a doorway to listen, choking back her tears and trying not to make sounds.

Mother had said that the sad fact was that if only one student died every year, well, that still made Hogwarts safer than Beauxbatons, let alone Durmstrang. There were more ways for a young witch to die than being murdered. Beauxbatons's Transfiguration Master just wasn't on the same level as McGonagall, Mother had said.

Father had soberly remarked how important it was for the Greengrass heir to stay at Hogwarts where all the other Noble families sent their children to school (it was the reason for the old tradition of the Noble families synchronizing the birth of their heirs, to put them in the same year of Hogwarts, if they could). And Father had said that being heiress to a Most Ancient House meant you couldn't always stay away from trouble.

She could have done without hearing that last part.

Daphne gulped hard, as she turned the doorknob, and opened the door.

"Miss Greengrass—" whispered a shadowy, silvery-robed figure.

Daphne screamed and slammed the door and drew her wand and turned to run.

"Wait!" cried the voice, now higher and louder.

Daphne paused. That couldn't *possibly* be who it had sounded like.

Slowly, Daphne turned, and opened the door again.

"*You!*" Daphne said in astonishment, as she saw the face beneath the hood. "I thought you were—"

"I come back to you now," the silvery-robed figure said in a strong voice, "at the turn of the—"

"*What are you doing in my bedroom?*" shrieked Daphne.

"I heard you can cast the mist form of the Patronus Charm. Can I see?"

Daphne stared, and then her blood began to burn. "Why?" she said, keeping her wand level. "So you can *kill* everyone in Slytherin who casts un-Slytherin spells? We all *know* who it was had Hermione killed!"

The figure's voice rose. "I testified under Veritaserum that I tried to help Miss Granger! I really was trying to help her, when I grabbed her hand on the roof, when I helped her off the floor—"

Daphne kept her wand level. "Like your father couldn't tamper with the Aurors' record, if he wanted to! I wasn't born yesterday, Mister *Malfoy!*"

Slowly, as if not to cause alarm, the silver-robed figure drew a wand from his robes. Daphne's hand tightened on her own wand, but then she recognized the position of the fingers on the wand, the stance the figure was assuming, and she drew a shocked breath—

"*Expecto Patronum!*"

Silver light leapt from the end of the other's wand—and condensed, forming a shining serpent that seemed to coil in the air as though nesting there.

She just gaped.

"I *did* try to help Hermione Granger," Draco Malfoy said with a level voice. "Because I know the sickness at the heart of Slytherin's House, the reason why so many of us can't cast the Patronus Charm any more, is

hate. Hate of Muggleborns, or just anyone really. People think that's all Slytherin is about now, not cunning or ambition or honorable nobility. And I even know, because it's obvious if you just look, that Hermione Granger wasn't weak at magic."

Daphne's mind had gone completely blank. Her eyes darted around nervously, just to check that there wasn't blood coming from under the doors, like the last time Something had Broken.

"And I've also figured out," Draco Malfoy said quietly, as the silver snake went on shining with unmistakeable light and warmth, "that Hermione Granger never really tried to kill me. Maybe she was False-Memory-Charmed, maybe she was Legilimized, but now that she's been murdered, it's obvious that Miss Granger was the target in the first place, when somebody tried to set her up for murdering me—"

"D-do-do you know what you're *saying*?" Daphne's voice broke. If Lucius Malfoy heard his heir saying that—he'd *skin* Draco and turn him into *trousers*!

Draco Malfoy smiled, metallic robes gleaming in the light of his full corporeal Patronus; it was a smile both arrogant and dangerous, like being turned into a pair of leather pants was beneath his concerns. "Yes," said Draco, "but it doesn't matter now. House Malfoy is returning House Potter's money and cancelling the debt."

Daphne walked over to her bed and then fell on it, hoping she could wake up from the dream once she was in bed.

"I'd like you to join a conspiracy," said the figure in the shining robes. "Everyone in Slytherin who can cast the Patronus Charm, and everyone who can learn. That's how we'll know to trust each other, when the Silvery Slytherins meet." With a dramatic gesture, Draco Malfoy cast back his hood. "But it won't work without *you*, Daphne Greengrass. You and your family. Your mother will negotiate it with Father, but I'd like the Greengrasses to hear the proposal from you, first." Draco Malfoy's voice lowered grimly. "There is much we must speak of, before we eat dinner."

Harry Potter had, apparently, taken to being invisible; they'd glimpsed his hand only briefly, when he was handing them the list, written on strange not-parchment. Harry had explained that, all things considered, he didn't really think it was smart for him to be *findable* except on special occasions, so he was just going to deal with people as a disembodied floating voice from now on, or as a brilliant silver light that hid behind corners where nobody could see it, and which could always find his friends no matter where they tried to hide. It was, in all honesty, one of the creepiest things which Fred and George had ever heard, over a lifetime which had included filling the shoes of every student in second-year Slytherin with Transfigured live millipedes. Fred and George didn't think this could possibly be good for anyone's sanity, but they didn't know what to say. It couldn't be denied, they'd seen with their own four eyes, that Hogwarts...

...wasn't safe...

"I don't know who you went to for the False Memory Charm on Rita Skeeter," said the sourceless voice of Harry Potter. "Whoever it is... probably *won't* be able to fill this order directly, but they may know someone who can get things from the Muggle world. And—I know it may cost extra, but as few people as possible should know that Harry Potter is related to this." Another flash of a small boy's hand, and a bag hit the ground with the clinking noise. "Some of these items are expensive even in the Muggle world, and your contact may have to go outside Britain; but one hundred Galleons will be enough to pay for it all, I hope. I'd tell you where the Galleons came from, but I don't want to spoil tomorrow's surprise."

"What is this stuff?" said Fred or George, as they looked over the list. "Our father is a Muggle expert—"

"—and we don't recognize *half* this stuff—"

"—why, we don't recognize any of it—"

"—just what are you planning to *do*?"

"Things have become serious," Harry's voice said softly. "I don't know what I'll have to do. I may need the power of the Muggles, not just the wizards, before this is done—and I might need it right away, with no time to prepare. I'm not *planning* to use any of this. I just want it around in case of... contingencies." Harry's voice paused. "Obviously I owe you more

than I can ever repay and you won't *let* me give you *any* of what you deserve, I don't even know how to say thank you properly, and all I can do is hope that someday when you grow up you'll be more sensible about this whole thing and would you *please* take a ten percent commission—"

"Shut up, you," said George or Fred.

"For God's sake, you went after a troll for me and Fred had his ribs broken!"

They both just shook their heads. Harry had stayed behind when they'd told him to run, and stepped forward to distract the troll from eating George. Harry was the kind of person, they knew, who'd think that something like that didn't cancel out what he owed the Weasley twins, that his own deed wasn't properly commensurate. But what the Weasleys knew, and Harry wouldn't understand until he was older, was that it meant that nothing was owed, or ever could be owed between them. It was a strange kind of selfishness, they thought, that Harry could understand kindness within himself—never dreaming of asking of money from anyone he'd helped more than they'd helped him, or calling that a debt—while being apparently unable to conceive that others might want to act the same way toward *him*.

"Remind me to buy you a copy of the Muggle novel *Atlas Shrugged*," the sourceless voice said. "I'm starting to understand what sort of person can benefit from reading it."

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MONDAY, APRIL 20TH, 7:00PM.

It happened without any intervention or sign from the Head Table, as the students had finished their subdued dinner; it happened with no permission or forgiveness asked from the Professors or the Headmaster.

Shortly after the dessert dishes had appeared, a student stood up from the Slytherin Table and calmly made his way, not to the front of the Head Table, but toward the opposite side of the Four Tables of Hogwarts. A few whispers broke out at the sight of the white-blond short-cropped hair, as Draco Malfoy stood there, silently regarding all of Hogwarts. Draco

Malfoy had said almost nothing since his surprise return. The Slytherin had condescended neither to confirm nor deny that he had returned because, with Hermione Granger dead at his family's hand, he no longer had anything to fear.

Then Draco Malfoy took up a spoon in one hand, and a glass of water in the other, and began tapping, producing a clear ringing sound.

Ting.

Ting.

Ting.

It produced more excited babble at first. At the Head Table, the various Professors looked in puzzlement toward the Headmaster in his great chair, but the Headmaster gave no sign, and so the faculty did nothing.

Draco Malfoy continued tapping the spoon upon his glass, until the room fell silent, waiting.

Then another student arose from the Ravenclaw table, and made his way to where Draco Malfoy was standing, turning to face Hogwarts at his side. Breaths were drawn in surprise; those two should have been the bitterest of enemies—

"I, and my Father, the Lord of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Malfoy," Draco Malfoy said in a clear voice, "have come to realize that there are ill forces at work in Hogwarts. That these ill forces, did wish Hermione Granger harm. That Hermione Granger was perhaps compelled, against her will, to raise her hand against our House; or perhaps she and I were both Memory-Charmed. We now say that whoever dared use the heir of Malfoy so, is the enemy of House Malfoy, upon whom we shall have our vengeance. And that honor be served, we have returned all moneys taken from House Potter, and canceled all debt."

Then Harry Potter spoke. "House Potter acknowledges that it was an honest mistake, and holds House Malfoy no ill will. We believe and publicly say that House Malfoy was not at fault in Hermione Granger's death. Whoever harmed Hermione Granger is the enemy of House Potter, upon whom we shall have our vengeance. Both of us."

Then Harry Potter began to walk back to the Ravenclaw table, and the babble of sheer, utter, reality-crashing bewilderment began to explode—

Draco Malfoy resumed tapping his spoon against his waterglass, creating a clear ringing chime.

Ting.

Ting.

Ting.

And other students arose, from other tables, making their way to where Draco Malfoy stood, arranging themselves at his side, or behind him, or before him.

There was a dread silence in the Great Hall, a sense of the world shifting, of realigning Powers, almost tangible in the air.

“My father, Owen Greengrass, with the consent and full backing of my mother, the Lady of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Greengrass,” Daphne Greengrass spoke.

“And my forefather, Charles, of the House of Nott,” said the former Lieutenant Nott, once Theodore of Chaos, now standing behind Draco Malfoy.

“And my grand-aunt, Amelia, of the House of Bones, also Director of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement,” said Susan Bones, who stood anext Daphne Greengrass, beside whom she had fought.

“And my grandmother, Augusta, of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Longbottom,” said Neville Longbottom, who had returned for this one night.

“And my father, Lucius, the Lord Malfoy, of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Malfoy!”

“Together with Alanna Howe constituting a majority of the Hogwarts Board of Governors!” Daphne Greengrass said clearly. “Have, to ensure the safety of all students, including their own children, passed the following Educational Decrees upon the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry!”

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“First!” Daphne said. Daphne was trying to keep her trembling under control, as she faced the Four Houses at the forefront of the five. There was only so far her parents’ lessons in speech-making could take her.

Daphne's eyes darted down quickly to her hand, upon which, written with a quill in faint red ink, cues to her lines had been written. "Students are not to go anywhere alone, not even to the toilets! You will travel in groups of at least three, and every group must have a sixth-year or seventh-year student!"

"Second!" Susan Bones said from behind her, voice almost firm. "To further ensure the students' safety, nine Aurors have been dispatched to Hogwarts to form an Auxiliary Protective Force!" Susan took a small, round glass object from within her robes, one of the communicators that the DMLE used, which they'd all been given. Susan raised it to her mouth and said, her voice now higher, "Auror Brodski, this is Susan Bones. *Enter!*"

The doors to the Hall slammed open, and in marched nine Aurors in the reinforced leather gear they used when on duty. At once they spread out, two Aurors taking up station by each of the four tables, and the last took up watch at the Head Table. There were more gasps.

"Third!" said Draco Malfoy, his voice commanding. Malfoy had apparently memorized his own lines, since there was nothing written on his hand that Daphne could see. "In the face of a common enemy who does not balk at killing students from any House, the four Houses of Hogwarts must come together and act as one! To emphasize this, the House Points system is temporarily suspended! *All* Professors will encourage solidarity between Houses, by decree of the Hogwarts Board of Governors!"

"Fourth!" recited Neville Longbottom. "All students not already in the Defense Professor's after-school classes, will receive special training in self-defense by Auror instructors!"

"Fifth!" Theodore Nott yelled in a menacing tone. "All fighting in the corridors or anywhere outside of Defense lessons will be dealt with severely! Fight together or don't fight at all!"

"Sixth!" said Daphne Greengrass, and took a deep breath. When she'd found out what was planned, she'd made her own little extra request to Mother through the Floo. Even with Lucius Malfoy going along with Amelia Bones—a thought her mind was still having trouble grasping—the Greengrass swing vote had still been vital, since Jugson and his own faction had refused to back Malfoy. Not to mention that Bones didn't

trust Malfoy, and Malfoy didn't trust Bones. So Mother had demanded, and the Greengrasses had received—"Since Memory Charms have been used on students without setting off wards, it is possible that someone on the Hogwarts faculty may be implicated. Therefore! The Auxiliary Protective force reports directly to my father, Lord Greengrass!" And this part was only symbolic, she knew, there'd be no reason anyone wouldn't just contact the Aurors directly; but it might turn into more, someday, which was why she'd asked Mother to demand it—"And if anyone wants to report something to the Auxiliary Protectors, they can talk to the Aurors, or go through *me*—" Daphne's arm swept behind her to indicate the gathered students. "The duly appointed President of the Auxiliary Protective Special Committee!"

And Daphne paused dramatically. They'd all rehearsed this part.

"We don't know who the enemy is," said Neville, whose voice did not squeak.

"We don't know what the enemy wants," said Theodore, still looking menacing.

"But we know who the enemy is attacking," said Susan, as fierce as when she'd taken on three seventh-year students.

"The enemy is attacking Hogwarts students," said Draco Malfoy, clear and commanding, like all this was his natural element.

"And Hogwarts," spoke Daphne of Greengrass, feeling her blood burn like it never had before in her life, "is going to *fight back*."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

ROLES, AFTERMATH

Ten days later, the first dead unicorn was found in the Forbidden Forest.

This book was formatted by fans of the story. The text was set in Huerta Tipografica's Ale-greya type family. 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 type-set using L^AT_EX. The artwork for the cover was created with the GIMP. The source code for this PDF can be found at <https://github.com/rj120/hpmor/>.