

ORDERS OF MAGNITUDE

ORDERS OF MAGNITUDE

ONE IN TEN-TRILLION IS
TREMENDOUSLY UNLUCKY...
BUT ONE-IN-TEN-TRILLION, SQUARED?

NANASHI SAITO

Find the original text at:
<http://www.2pih.com/>

Based on the history of

Alexander D.

Significant Digits

From the events of

Eliezer Yudkowsky's

Harry Potter and the Methods of Rationality

Based on the characters of

J. K. ROWLING

and her books:

Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone

Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets

Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban

Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire

Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix

Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince

Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows

Levels and levels, indeed

CONTENTS

Introduction — vii

Prologue: Strange Loops — 1

ZERO

Minor Fall, Major Lift — 11

ONE

Put Your Little Hand in Mine — 24

TWO

The Goat and the Ram — 31

THREE

The Fall — 44

FOUR

Pure Imagination — 48

FIVE

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern — 61

SIX

Cups and Wands — 80

SEVEN

Egeusly Stare — 88

EIGHT

The Sudden Stop — 106

NINE

The Transmigration — 131

TEN

I Love The Way You Lie (pt. 2) — 150

Omake: Trump Card — 165

ELEVEN

Things Fall Apart, The Center Cannot Hold — 175

TWELVE

The Battle of Hogwarts, Prelude — 195

THIRTEEN

The Battle of Hogwarts — 201

FOURTEEN

Beautiful Lost Nebula — 218

FIFTEEN

The Walrus Was Paul — 229

SIXTEEN

Huis Clos — 246

SEVENTEEN

Mad World — 259

EIGHTEEN

Ordinary World — 273

NINETEEN

Ms. Phaethon — 285

TWENTY

A Million Same — 310

TWENTY-ONE

The Tragedy of Light — 327

INTRODUCTION

Orders of Magnitude is a completed serial fiction, the prequel to both Harry Potter and the Methods of Rationality (HPMOR), and Significant Digits (SD), which was in turn the sequel to HPMOR. It was originally written in a highly non-linear style, separated into various Arcs that spanned millennia. This was advantageous in the beginning, because although I had the characters and overall plot lined out, I wasn't sure which aspects I wanted to focus on first, so it allowed me to have my cake and eat it, too. However, the "Arc" format began to hamstring things a bit, so I scrapped it. The "official" order is now in roughly Chronological Order

Disclaimer: J. K. Rowling owns Harry Potter, and no one owns the methods of rationality.

STRANGE LOOPS

P R O L O G U E

The Dark Lord had won.

JUNE 13, 1992. 20:43:24

HOGWARTS CASTLE

The Stone instantiated in Lord Voldemort's hand, glistening coldly in the reflected light of the mirror, free from any imperfection.

A quick flick of the wrist.

A swift twitch of the finger.

A deafening crash of a pistol firing.

Harry's eyes barely had a chance to widen before the bullet entered his forehead.

The Boy Who Lived was dead.

The entirety of his being; his mind, unprotected by Horcrux or ritual or saved state, was currently settling onto the ground, a red mist of gore, bone, and brain. The remainder was stuck to the walls behind the Mirror, (the Mirror itself being perfectly unblemished), or still clung desperately to the inside of his ruined skull. The chamber still echoed with the discharge of the weapon, but Lord Voldemort was already gone, willing to take no chances with what might happen upon the Boy's death.

*SAGITTARIUS A **

NOW, BEFORE, LATER

Dumbledore emerged from the tunnel. His world was all worlds. His world was fire. His world was void. His world was formless nothing. His world was stagnant death. He focused all his being onto the two worlds that mattered. In one, the star burned, rendering the world insane, its very soul raging with white plasma that rendered such abstract notions as space and time irrelevant in the face of the heat.

He looked across the span of eons into the other world, wherein the Boy Who Lived was dead.

He had all of eternity to rehearse the ritual, and yet, he still felt the slightest bit of nervousness. He began, using the Line of Merlin to harness the magic of all worlds into this one final act. He was Dumbledore, destroyer of worlds, creator of life. Everything that ever was and everything that ever will be in the universe had led him to this moment. This moment that must come to pass because it already has.

PROLOGUE

All worlds had narrowed to two, and from those two all worlds would be born. When the Line of Merlin could bear the strain no longer, it glowed white, and began to fray apart at the edges. Dumbledore could feel the eyes of prophecy in the heavens upon him, about to be torn apart by the ritual of Harry's creation. The Headmaster connected the nodes in his mind, and it was done.

Sagittarius A* collapsed in less than a second. It folded in upon itself, and distorting the very fabric of reality as it did so. In the final moments of its life, the Headmaster flitted through some dimension that only exists in the minds of addled physics professors, and emerged to the place Beyond Time, where he was connected by the power of the ritual.

In the world he left behind, a galaxy was born. A galaxy where the balance of the world was held in place by a single thread of time, a universe where the only means by which the Crux could succeed was to seek the path of the Scorpion and the Archer. The fires of prophecy would burn with the white light of truth; they had come to be because they had come to be.

He entered a world that was already born, a world where the balance of the world was held in place by a single thread of time that had, until now, been snapped. It was at this very moment that he emerged. He was outside the Mirror. No, he was inside? It was a curious sensation, experiencing time backwards. He took a brief moment to consider the runes that had once been incomprehensible to him. He smiled.

Inside and outside the Mirror, the world was hazy, a con-founded miasma of abstraction, like some sort of halfway lucid dream that someone had pressed the rewind button on. His brother took the stone from him. Not from him.

From his shadowform. It was not him? He was talking to his brother. But it wasn't him. He was saying the war was over. They had won. That was true, no? It was Time. Time to stop holding on to the stone. Give away the stone. Yes.

You could change the past, you just had to think about it at the right time.

As he moved further backwards in time, he considered the tools of his craft that he still had upon his person. The Line of Merlin. The Stone of Permanence. The Elder Wand. A curious glass bottle.

A curious glass bottle of viscous black ichor.

MID-FALL, 1999

WILBRAHAM, MASSACHUSETTS

"Everett, was that you?"

Sarah Snipes was cleaning dishes in the kitchen when she heard the crack. Or was it a pop? It was probably just her husband playing around in his lab. He was a compounding pharmacist, and owned his own store, so he often experimented with different formulations of various creams or pastes to sell.

As it were, Everett Snipes was not in his laboratory. Rather, he was in his study. "Yes, dear. One of my vials popped a cork," he yelled a blatant lie back to her.

"Okay, well make sure to clean it up before you let Lily in there. She's at that age, you know?"

As if on cue, Lily burst in through the study door, her hair all fire and curls, her eyes an angry emerald-green. She had all the energy of a five-year old, and all of the precociousness as well. She stared at her dad who was sitting on the Comfy Chair, and the strange man sitting on the Chair That Mom Yells At Me When I Climb On. “Hi Daddy. Hi Mister Man. Guess what? I learned what a Quine was today in school. I bet you don’t know what a Quine is, Mister Man.”

She glared at the stranger. He considered for a moment, then replied, “If I did not, then this statement would be a lie.”

She paused, thought for a moment, then giggled. “You’re funny, Mister Man. But you’ve got a girl’s hair.” At this, he self consciously adjusted his ponytail. To break the ensuing silence, he reached over and grabbed the thick glass bottle filled with viscous black ichor, and placed it into his suit pocket. It created an awkward lump in his figure.

“I hope that you know, ah, ‘Everett’—”

Lily cut in, “His name’s Daddy, you know!”

“Well, I hope that you know, ‘Daddy’, that I truly understand the gravity of this intrusion. And I hope that you understand that my need is proportionate.”

Everett nodded.

The stranger spoke again, “I would tell you that what you have done today would honor my mother’s memory more than anything else you’ve done in your life. But,” he looked at Lily who had already grown bored, and was splayed out on the floor, playing idly with the rug. He smiled, widely, “I see that this is not true.”

Everett smiled, genuinely. "Thank you."

"Besides, I have a gift for you in return. A bottle of my own magic that will hopefully aid you in your life's quest," at this, the stranger produced a plastic bottle from an extendable space within his robes, and handed it to Everett, who looked at the label.

Head and Shoulders

Everett laughed. "Drop dead."

EARLY FALL, 1999

THE TOWER

Harry had informed the Shichinin that, especially considering to whom they were delivering the message, that they were to not under any circumstances, read its contents. Which of course, meant, especially considering to whom they were delivering the message, that they absolutely were going to be reading its contents. In fact, they didn't even wait to leave the Tower before they ripped open the envelope.

It had been quite some time since they had a good old fashioned, film noir-esque missing person search. And the person that they were looking for? Oh, this was going to be spectacular. Unfortunately, they were slightly underwhelmed (although a bit intrigued), at the contents of the message.

"Bahl's Stupefaction. 1 week."

KING'S CROSS

OUTSIDE TIME

"No," said Albus Dumbledore. "No, no, NO!"

The building sense of power rose to an unbearable peak, and then disappeared.

And then, there was nothing.

He lay facedown, listening to the silence. He was perfectly alone. Nobody else was there. A long time later, or maybe no time at all, it came to him that he must exist, must be more than disembodied thought, because he had a sense of touch, and the thing against which he lay existed too.

He sat up. His body appeared unscathed. He touched his face. He was not wearing glasses anymore. His beard was gone. As were the wrinkles.

Albus turned slowly on the spot, and his surroundings seemed to invent themselves before his eyes. A wide-open space, bright and clean. He was the only person there, except for—

He recoiled. He spotted him sitting on a bench, idly reading a curiously thick book. Tom Riddle. He seemed thoroughly unconcerned with the situation.

"He cannot hurt you." He spun around. Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres was walking towards him, sprightly and upright, wearing sweeping robes over a Muggle suit. "Prophecy has proven true. I have come to rescue you, Headmaster."

"Harry. You have . . . You have aged. How long has it been?"

“Oh, about 20,000 years, objectively. Subjectively? Well, for you, it’s been but a few seconds, has it not?”

“It has, but I am trapped outside of Time. I would fear for you, but you are The Crux, the Once and Future King. You do not carry the look of sadness about you, which lightens my heart greatly. Dare I ask if you have succeeded? Did you tear apart the very stars in heaven to save its people?”

“Ah . . . Well . . . Not quite.” Harry tittered on his feet a bit, “In fact, we’re not really out of the woods just yet.”

“I confess, I do not understand. But then again, that is more than fair turnabout. Would you do an old man the honor of explaining what I must do?”

KING’S CROSS

LATER

The Headmaster’s head was still reeling from the enormity of the plan. But, then again, it fit with all the prophecies. For the first time since Nicholas Flamel had bequeathed upon him the Words of the First Enchanter that unlocked the keys to the entire Web of Prophecy, things began to make sense.

“We have a final pair of gifts to give you, that I suspect you will greatly need.” Harry removed from his robes a thin stone rod, “The Line of Merlin Unbroken.” Harry handed the Headmaster the wand with reverence.

Tom Riddle stood up from the bench, put down his book, and strode forward. “And, Headmaster, my old enemy and future

friend, I also have a gift for you.” He produced a thick glass bottle filled with viscous black ichor, and handed it to Dumbledore.

Dumbledore understood.

“Headmaster,” Harry spoke, “You need to understand something. You have a choice at this moment. All worlds, ultimately, have narrowed down to this one choice. Although I am, as you say, the Crux, you still must make this choice of your own volition. You would be sacrificing your Life, and your Time. Truly.”

“Harry. You know my views on this matter. I have already sacrificed my Life and my Time once for your sake, for the sake of the world. Besides, you are the Boy Who Lived. I’m sure you’ll find a way to rescue me again.” He smiled with a twinkle in his eye. “Now, how do I leave this place?”

“Oh yes,” Harry smiled at him. “We are in King’s Cross, are we not? I think that if you decided to move on, you would be able to . . . Let’s say . . . Board a train.”

“And where would it take me?”

“Beyond.” said Harry simply.

Silence again.

“Goodbye, Headmaster. And thank you, truly.”

“Do not pity the dead, Harry James Potter–Evans–Verres. Pity those who live without love.” And with that, he boarded a train, and disappeared into the tunnel.

ELTSAC STRAWGOH

72:34:02.2991, 13 ENUJ

The Boy Who Lived was dead.

Harry's eyes barely had a chance to widen before the bullet
entered his forehead.

A deafening crash of a pistol firing.

A swift twitch of the finger.

A quick flick of the wrist.

The Stone instantiated in Lord Voldemort's hand, glistening
coldly in the reflected light of the mirror, covered in a viscous
black ichor.

The Dark Lord was laughing.

CHAPTER ZERO

MINOR FALL, MAJOR LIFT

LONDON

Neville was tired. He was always tired when he came home from work. His job was physically and mentally draining, and he was glad to be home. From the other side of his flat, he could hear the tinny sounds of music; he left his radio on. He did that, from time to time. He made a beeline for his study as the music wafted slowly through the air.

♪♪ ...*Pass me that lovely little gun,
my dear, my darling one,
the cleaners are coming, one by one,
you don't even want to let them start...* ♪♪

He thumbed through several bottles in his cabinet, and decided on brandy. He uncorked the bottle, and briefly considered the jigger measure in the drawer. Naw. He'd just eyeball it. He started pouring the liquor into a glass which had dutifully filled itself with ice. Glug. Glug. One finger. Two fingers. Three fingers. Four.

He reckoned that it wouldn't do to just drink it straight, so he added a little splash of fizzy water. He didn't want to bother cutting up a lemon, so he fished a cherry from a jar in the icebox and plopped it into the cocktail. He stirred the drink with his finger, and sat down in his armchair.

♪♪ ...*they're knocking now upon your door,*
they measure the room, they know the score
They're mopping up the butcher's floor,
of your broken little hearts... ♪♪

He was already almost halfway done with his drink before he was really even consciously aware of it. His mind was elsewhere; he was thinking about his path and where he would go next. What do you do *after* you've won?

No one ever told him that vengeance didn't feel like it does in the books. In stories, all you get to see is that moment of beautiful catharsis. You pump your fist and cheer as justice is meted out, and you feel nice and warm inside. The stories don't show you how things end after the ending. They don't show you the 'happily ever after'. Neville wondered if he would ever have his own 'happily ever after'.

♪♪ ...*O' children...*
Forgive us now for what we've done,
it started out as a bit of fun
Here, take these before we run away;
the keys to the gulag... ♪♪

He didn't feel nice and warm inside. It felt good, for a moment.

She deserved what she got, despite everything Harry had said. The fact that she used to be such a sweet, nice girl didn't change anything. No tragic origin story would change anything. She did what she did, and for that, she deserved to die. It was as simple as that. But her death, that didn't make a difference either.

His parents were still dead.

He envied Draco. The memory of Lucius Malfoy had been preserved, whole and uncorrupted, written somewhere in the underlying fabric of the world. Frank and Alice Longbottom persisted, their old, pure selves overwritten by these broken, damaged shells. Draco was lucky enough that his father *actually* died. Draco put his faith in Harry, and Harry delivered.

♪♪ ...*O' children, lift up your voice, lift up your voice...* ♪♪

He was finished with his drink by this point. He was crunching the ice and pondering why the world was the way it was. Why did it have to be this way? He walked over to the wet bar, and fished for a different bottle to refill his glass. No pretenses this time, just straight vodka, poured over the melted ice, sloppily filled to the brim. He stared at himself in the mirror mounted behind the bar.

The alcohol was dulling his senses, but somewhere in the recesses of his mind, two independent, disparate ideas joined together to synthesize an entirely new concept. It was a small spark, but one that caught Neville's attention, and he would not let it be extinguished. As he watched himself, he saw tears begun to fill his eyes and break free to drip down his cheek. But these were not tears of woe, or self-pity. They were the angry, hot tears of resolve.

Why did the world have to be this way?

Something about Harry's endless, pedagogic lectures had clicked into place. Harry and Hermione had challenged everything that Neville knew about the notion of death. When Hermione returned to the world of life, it shattered all the rules. But for some reason, Neville had just invented his own arbitrary rules to replace the previous ones. But why those rules?

There really was no reason the world had to be the way it was. There was no reason why he couldn't reach back into the depths of Time and recover his parents the way they were, *the way they should be*. That would be his true revenge; he wouldn't be content with merely striking down a bishop. He would mate the Black King himself.

♪♪ ...O' children, rejoice, rejoice ♪♪

He dumped out his drink, and turned on his heels. He didn't even pause to turn off the radio or wash the ice out of the sink. He had work to do, and there was not a minute to be lost.

MALFOY MANOR

Draco sat in his study, alone, scribbling notes on a parchment. The room was illuminated by a few torches, sunk into the walls, and the flickering silver light of his Patronus, idly slithering around his desk. The war was over, and they had all but won. The rest was just a formality. A few political maneuverings, but it would be done. This chapter in their tale would be over and they could rebuild a world, united.

It felt late, even though the night was only just beginning. The Muggle radio program detailing the day's news had ended. It told tales of terror and war across the world, a world driven temporarily mad, but a world restored. They were rebuilding, just as Draco was. The news had given way into a selection of various pop songs, but Draco didn't bother turning it off.

♪♪ ...*Here comes Frank and poor old Jim,*
they're gathering round with all my friends
We're older now, the light is dim,
and you are only just beginning.... ♪♪

Something Harry told him once had stuck in his head for years. It was when he was retelling the story of his final confrontation with Lord Voldemort. Something that Albus Dumbledore had told Tom Riddle: "Anyone who can bring themselves to act the part of Voldemort, is Voldemort."

He had been playing the part of a monster for almost half a decade now. He'd played the part of someone who was actively opposed to life, someone who championed stagnation, entropy, and death. The mask he wore was not false, it drew upon true emotions that lurked deep within him, emotions that he had to actively seek to repress. He could not lie to himself; there was a strange sense of freedom when he let those feelings run rampant as part of his act.

♪♪ ...*O' children...*
We have the answer to all your fears,
it's short, it's simple, it's crystal clear
It's round about and it's somewhere here,
lost amongst our winnings... ♪♪

This was why he enjoyed the company of his Patronus. It served as a reminder, an assurance, a touchstone of sorts. The happy, life-affirming memories still existed. There was enough Good inside of Draco to be able to produce the soft, silvery light that now cast an otherworldly shadow across the desk as the radio continued to hum across the otherwise silent room.

He knew what Harry would say. Harry would tell him that you can't be your own barometer of goodness. Harry would say that everyone is the hero of their own story, and of course you are going to think *you* are doing the right thing. Otherwise, why else would you do it? Draco knew that this was true, of course. But the Patronus comforted him nonetheless.

Draco looked up at the torches on the walls. He snapped his fingers, one by one, and the torches extinguished. The only light left in the room was from his Patronus, which slowly reared her head up to look at him. It was like staring into a crackling fireplace; the swirling, fractal forms of mist and shadow that undulated beneath the form of the snake . . . It was almost hypnotizing.

"Am I a good person?"

♪♪ ...O' children,
lift up your voice, lift up your voice
O' children, rejoice, rejoice... ♪♪

He knew it was a silly thing to ask. But no one was around to hear him. The Patronus seemed so . . . sentient, as it looked up at him. Draco knew, though, that it wasn't his own judgment that mattered. Because Harry was right. He needed someone on the outside, someone to serve as a sounding board, not an echo chamber. He lay his head down on the desk.

After a time, he raised his head back up to face his Patronus, who was still looking at him in that odd sort of way. As Draco's mood shifted, the Patronus began to flicker and dull, then dissolved into a mist that hung in the air. No. He would not let it extinguish. Not now. This was too important. His eyes welled with tears; these were not tears of woe or self-pity. They were the angry, hot tears of resolve.

He grit his teeth, and he fought, he thought about everything good, everything happy, everything worth living for, and fighting for. The mist did not dissipate, but it did not regenerate. He continued to pour his heart and soul into that mist, desperately trying to keep what it represented alive. After a time, the mist began to coalesce back into a corporeal form.

It had regenerated itself . . . as an *otter*?

♪♪ ... *The cleaners have done their job on you,
they're hip to it, man, they're in the groove
They've hosed you down, you're good as new,
they're lining up to inspect you...* ♪♪

That was . . . Odd. He had never seen it do that before. It was not unheard of; people's Patronuses often changed forms in response to their masters' emotions. The otter swam playfully through the invisible water that was the air in the room. It darted around Draco a few times, and then swam up to eye level, and whispered a single word.

"Draco . . ."

Draco's heart stopped. That was not the voice of his Patronus. That was . . . It was her? His Patronus darted forward, into Draco's

chest, filling him with a beautiful, ethereal light. He didn't understand what was happening. But then again, did he need to? Somehow, although he didn't know what it was, or how it would work, somehow he knew that this silver light would take him to the place that he needed to be.

He stood up, embraced the light, and disappeared with a dull POP.

♪♪ ...O' children, rejoice.... ♪♪

THE TOWER

Harry was type, type, typing away at the terminal. His eyes were sunken and bloodshot. He had been at it for almost twelve hours straight. There was so much work to be done. He had returned, of course, as Hermione knew he would. He and the Professor had accomplished much, but they needed some sanity checks, some way to ensure that the results were reproducible outside of their sandbox.

There were so many projects, both near-sighted and far, so many weak links that needed to be strengthened, so many cross-roads that still terminated with him at their crux. There was the physical aspect, the biological, the mental, the metaphysical, the logical, and countless more. There were so many facets of this gem that needed polishing.

Currently he was working on the problem of self-contained recursion. He had cracked it years before with respect to a relatively simple system. Magic was simple at its heart, although it had grown to something mind-numbingly obtuse. It was easy enough to simulate a large physical system. You could track the path of a thrown ball, or the behavior of water through a pipe under pressure, or the melting of ice, and so on, and so forth. But simulating physics, true physics, with enough precision to accomplish his goal? It just wasn't conventionally possible. He needed to cheat.

But it seemed like the universe did not want him to cheat. It wanted him to die, the good old-fashioned way. To keep running until everything ran down and then fold up into a great, empty Nothing.

He would not do that, of course. He would continue to fight. He fought for hours today, and didn't even notice as morning rose into midday, and midday waned into evening. He didn't notice the sounds of the radio in the corner, or the sharp pop that reverberated from the Receiving Room moments earlier, or the soft rapping at the door to his office.

♪♪ ...*Poor old Jim's white as a ghost,*
he's found the answer that we lost
We're all weeping now, weeping because,
there ain't nothing we can do to protect you... ♪♪

The rapping grew more insistent. "Enter," he spoke.

The door opened, and Hermione walked inside. "That's a rather rude way to greet your guests, don't you think?"

Harry was distracted, and he didn't look up. He was still staring at the innumerable lines of code that filled his screen. "Huh? Oh. Yeah. Sorry. Uh . . . Hi Luna."

Hermione coughed. "Hello, Harry."

He looked up, embarrassed. He stammered a weak apology, and turned back to the computer. She looked around the room, distantly considering everything. She had a soft, peaceful smile on her face as she watched Harry work. He continued to type, type, type away as she stood, silent. Eventually, he became self-conscious of her presence, and the typing slowed, and eventually stopped, as Harry turned around, expectantly.

Hermione said nothing. She walked to where Harry was working, leaned over, and turned off his computer monitor.

"Hermione, wha—"

She took his hands, and pulled him up from his seat. Even though the gesture was purely symbolic, it did have an effect. Harry felt, in some distant way, like he was carrying a great weight around his neck. With the monitor switched off, he felt that the weight had been temporarily lifted. He looked at Hermione.

She still said nothing. Harry looked tired, so very tired. So very tired, and so very alone. He had been in a solitary prison of his own making, both literally and metaphorically, for many long years. Hermione smiled distantly at the soft music echoing from the radio.

"This song does seem out of place, doesn't it?" She remarked.

♪♪ ...*O' children, lift up your voice, lift up your voice...* ♪♪

She held both his hands, and took a step backward. She started to sway her shoulders back and forth in time with the music.

♪♪ ...*O' children, rejoice, rejoice...* ♪♪

She cocked her head at Harry, who reluctantly joined in. They held each other's hands, moving in an awkward little dance. It reminded him a bit of the bumbling fourth-year students that he watched at the Yule Ball so long ago during his first year at Hogwarts. Harry didn't dance, no one ever taught him, and he certainly had no experience or occasion to practice.

Hermione didn't seem to mind. She lifted one of his hands up, and spun him.

♪♪ ...*Hey little train, we're jumping on,
the train that goes to the Kingdom
We're happy, Ma, we're having fun,
and the train ain't even left the station...* ♪♪

He laughed, silently, as they waltzed around the room, sometimes falling completely off-beat with the music which had started to pick up in tempo a bit. He felt guilty, though. This was time he could be spending working, but he was wasting it on frivolities. Hermione seemed to sense this shift in Harry's emotions, and pulled him closer.

♪♪ ...*Hey, little train, wait for me!
I once was blind but now I see
Have you left a seat for me?
Is that such a stretch of the imagination...* ♪♪

He couldn't abandon his quest to save the world. But then again, wasn't she part of that world? The enormity of it all, of the path that lay before him and the path that he had already walked down, seemed to crash in on him all at once.

What was he going to do?

He did the only thing he could think to do, and buried his head in her shoulder and began to cry, softly. They weren't tears of woe or self-pity. They were the angry, hot tears of resolve. He felt Hermione's hand on the top of his head, patting his hair gently. He was a soldier in the war. An important soldier, but a soldier nonetheless. And no soldier can fight on the front lines twenty-four hours a day.

♪♪ ...*Hey little train, wait for me!*
I was held in chains but now I'm free
I'm hanging in there, don't you see?
in this process of elimination... ♪♪

He gave in, temporarily surrendered himself to this brief moment of respite. He knew, in his heart of hearts, that he would never give up the battle, that taking one break to have one silly dance would not be the end of the world, and that, in fact, make the world better in its own special way.

♪♪ ...*Hey little train, we're jumping on,*
the train that goes to the Kingdom
We're happy, Ma, we're having fun,
it's beyond my wildest expectation... ♪♪

They continued to shuffle back and forth to the music, their heads on each other's shoulders. They held each other as the music and began to slowly fade away. The tears were gone.

♪♪ ...*Hey little train, we're all jumping on,
the train that goes to the Kingdom
We're happy, Ma, we're having fun,
and the train ain't even left the station...* ♪♪

The music faded out, and Harry and Hermione separated, looking at each other, so much unsaid, so much that did not need to be said.

"Hermione, I... Uh... Thank you for that. I feel better. I really do."

She smiled. "I know, Harry." She leaned forward and planted a kiss on his forehead. "That's what friends are for. Don't you ever forget that."

C H A P T E R O N E

PUT YOUR LITTLE HAND IN MINE

FEBRUARY 1, XX,XXX

At the moment the world began to die, few people felt it.

Even fewer knew they could do something about it.

Even fewer still had the requisite skills or knowledge to act on that knowledge.

And even fewer still had the technology that could harness those skills into something useful for this particular situation.

And so there were twelve.

EARLIER

It was the ultimate weapon.

It would decisively, conclusively, and immediately end the war, that secret war that had been waged since time immemorial.

The enemy would be irrevocably destroyed, defeated in detail, sacrificed to the cause of the righteous. Of course, there were the doomsayers, proclaiming that the hubris of the project would end us all. It was hard to claim John was hubristic, however, when he subjected his system to every conceivable iteration of failure testing.

They had identified thousands of possible failure points, and fixed them all. That left seven distinct failure modes, and although they were fundamentally impossible to avoid, John's team was able to decrease their probability to roughly one-in-ten-trillion each.

It still wasn't enough to feel safe. They developed fail safes and response protocols to the failure modes, and John had personally rehearsed them all. Hundreds of thousands of times.

It still wasn't enough.

A $1:10^{88}$ chance was impossibly small, but it was still possible. So there was always the ultimate fail safe. The Line. He rubbed his right forearm like a touchstone. An astute observer would note that the system actually had but a single point of failure, and that was John, but John had personally accounted for that, as well. That small portion of his free will was locked away, in a place he could only access if they had really and truly *won*.

For a brief, bemused moment, he thought that the only flaw in the system was that the activation sequence wasn't something more dramatic. It should have been a massive switch, or an ominous button, or some incantation. But, as it were, it was relatively unceremonious. A few keystrokes, and it was done.

The world shuddered.

No need to panic, he thought himself as he went through the motions. He had literally rehearsed this exact scenario at least fifteen hundred times, enough to where the movements were rote. His team controlled the outputs and inputs and monitored the status of the buffer. John did the intense series of on-the-fly calculations in order to determine the precise initial vector, and after a few tense moments, the variables checked out, and he rotated the dial.

In short, they would simply roll the system back an hour, and start over. They'd have to triple-check everything. Twice. Each day. It would be at least another year before they'd be confident enough to try again. But, he'd waited this long. A year was trivial.

As the dial rotated past the origin, his forearm, which had begun to ache since the start of the process, now throbbed in earnest.

The world shuddered again.

At this point, it was cacophony. The team was visibly agitated. Some were even panicked. This didn't make sense.

One in ten-trillion is tremendously unlucky. But one-in-ten-trillion, squared? Probability analysis goes out the window.

The question itself changes. It's no longer, *Is this just coincidence?* No, the question on everyone's mind was simply, *What the hell is going on?* The possibility space was endless, but one immediately leaped to mind: *Sabotage*. No matter, he couldn't spare the thought. He needed to focus. They had still rehearsed the failure modes. This was still comfortably in the realm of their practice. But the response protocol was drastic enough that everyone was agitated and on edge.

"The lines, sir. They'll be—"

"Short circuit the whole fucking physical system if you have to. The whole thing is fucked anyway! DO IT!"

"Sir, this is going to be a destructive read. If we can't—"

"There's no other options. Back them. Back them all up."

"If it doesn't work, we're all . . ."

A pause.

"This is a direct order."

The world shuddered as the transmigration began.

John looked around. His colleagues were the first to go, their brains literally vanishing from their skulls, then converted into raw data, then pumped back into the system via the γ -class L.E. lines. As he scanned this displays, he saw the same scene playing out across the entirety of the system. If you zoomed out far enough, it didn't even seem like much had changed.

No explosions, no catastrophic crashes, nothing of that sort. After all most of the systems with the potential for catastrophic disaster were managed by the deadminds.

But seeing it up close and in person? He had seen people die before, very rarely. Usually it was willingly, people who had simply grown tired and were ready to “move on”. Idiots. They died as they deserved, peacefully but without pomp or fanfare. But these people did not will it, and they did not die peacefully. It reminded him of a puppet whose strings were cut. All the motive power that was keeping the awkward automatons of flesh balanced, gone in an instant. Billions, all massacred in the span of a moment.

John made the snap decision to pipe the data from the payload back into the system as it was being constructed. If another component failed, he couldn’t risk losing all the data. It would divert a small measure of resources, and they would still have the physical storage structure to recover the payload. The only downside was the potential for signal degradation; it was almost guaranteed that they would lose a few to noise, which would be a tragedy, for certain. But it paled in comparison to the possibility of losing everything. Besides, you could still recreate them, for the most part. The memories might be tricky to reconstruct, but at least they’d still be there.

No.

Yes, there was noise. There was too much noise. Every signal was being garbled. Warped beyond recognition. There was interference coming from . . . Somewhere? Only about 1,000 identities were piped through, and of those, the only thing left was raw DNA. Change of plans.

The payload was already constructed. It existed conceptually, in abstract. Now he needed to realize it. The Line was the most secure object in the known universe, and it had more than enough capacity within its buffer. He did more calculations. It would cut into its capabilities significantly. Maybe six hours, tops? It didn't matter.

He'd saved the people. He didn't save the world. The world was done for, but a world could be recreated easily. No. Not easily, of course. Nothing would be easy at this point. The system had failed at three separate junctures. This was not chance. Something, someone, was responsible.

And that's when he saw him. The man who was out of place, out of time.

He was old.

Old.

No one was old anymore.

This was his doing. There was no question. In pure reflex, he activated his Battle forms. He had even practiced this, fighting against countless unseen enemies. But, what good would it do? What to do? Fight or flight? What would he be fighting? What was the man doing? Those hand gestures were ancient. A past architect? A back door? No, the system was sacrosanct. Besides, the man had a tool. It was—

The old man was holding The Line.

No, No, No, no, NO.

Flight. It was done. There would be no climactic fight to save the world or its people. It didn't matter what the old man's motivations were, how he got there, anything. Any time spent thinking about it was time wasted. There was no option left but to run, and to rebuild. He'd have to destroy the entire system, every last remnant though, to fully rebuild. He began to—

No. No time.

He didn't have time. He'd have to do that part later. He'd have time later, but not now. It was time to run. He didn't know what the old man was capable of, and none of this was rehearsed. He committed to the decision, and it was done. It was out of his hands now, so he had time to think, wonder, and speculate.

Who was the old man? How did he get a copy of The Line? Is it even a copy? How will I recover the payload? How much of the system would survive? How useful would it be? How will I destroy it? What would this new world look like?

Questions, questions, questions. All the answers would be there, eventually.

The system was procedurally generating humans as fast as it could churn them out. It started with the thousand or so genetic patterns it had recovered from the first aborted payload attempt. The rest, it built from patterns. Ten million and change.

And then with all the fury of an exploding star, a new world was born.

John emerged on the back end of eternity.

CHAPTER TWO

THE GOAT AND THE RAM

EARLIER

Maksimillian Koschey watched the seconds tick by, as the world died around him.

Even the end was unbearably anticlimactic.

I wonder how long I can wait before I truly die? That might be interesting. Then again . . . Maybe something interesting is on the other side. Might as well give it a shot. After all, I can die whenever.

He requisitioned the necessary mass-energy, created a suitable vessel for himself, and bound it to one of the countless power crystals he had surreptitiously (and quite illegally) stowed away for himself. After all, he figured this day would come sooner or later.

With but a flicker of his Will, the entirety of his being transmuted, and traversed all barriers.

And with that, Maksimillian Koschey awoke somewhere new.

SECONDS LATER

Adnan Nejem was roused, unceremoniously, from his game.

Shit. What a fucking waste of an hour. Almost there, too.

These kinds of power spikes were rare, but not unheard of. He started to reboot. While he waited, he glanced briefly over at his work terminal and—

Shit shit shit shit shit shit shit shit shit shit shit shit

He ripped the inputs out of his arms and temples, and with a swift kick, propelled himself in his rolling chair across the polished metal floor of his flat. It had to be a false positive. What he was seeing was just . . . “Impossible” doesn’t even really begin to cover it.

A few quick keystrokes. Some regression analysis.

Shit.

Adnan’s code was spaghetti. It always was. But it worked. It worked in ways that other people couldn’t fathom, which is what made Adnan so singularly valuable. But it all so made him a liability. He always told himself that he would eventually rewrite everything, make it extendable, add some documentation, all that stuff that he would get around to some day if only he weren’t too busy doing more important shit.

Well, didn’t he feel stupid, now?

The system had begun to fail almost a full two minutes earlier. More specifically, his module had begun to fail almost a full two minutes earlier. The code was fine. It had to be. But, it was failing.

And no one across the whole of Humanity was capable of troubleshooting it except for him. And he had waited an entire two minutes. It was over. Even if he had been there when it started, it still may have been over.

It was like a waterfall. Layers of failure, rippling, crashing against the rocks. The weight of it was heavy, too heavy to bear. His fault. It had to be. The system was inviolate. He was the weak link. Everyone dead, all his fault.

Adnan was already preparing. He looked at the various prototypes and experiments in his flat. No. It wouldn't do. He needed to be anonymous; that ruled out the majority of his options. No, he wouldn't be coming back from backup. It would be him, in the flesh.

Hmmm... Options, options, options...

His eyes stopped on Dinsdale. He had been experimenting with this particular variety of Chol for centuries. Fire was the constituent element, but that was just another kludge. It was so much easier to just complete the metaphor than to do the hard work of explicitly defining the connections: the Chol judged intent, and the fire purged and purified. Of course, Adnan wasn't a monster: the fire didn't do any lasting harm, it was just a means of transport.

He looked at the bird-like creature, perched on the thin glass shelf. As he stared into his creation's eyes, he formed the question in his mind. Dinsdale looked back at him, and cocked its head, quizzically.

"Caw?"

CHAPTER 2

Judgment was issued. And the conflagration began. A fiery menagerie stampeded into the room, purging and purifying, whipping around with angry lashes, surrounding Adnan and Dinsdale. He was being judged, and he had failed. The fire burned, and burned, and burned; it burned until there was nothing left of Adnan. The sound and the fury had ceased as quickly as it began.

The immolation was complete. And with that, all that was of Adnan Nejem had been burnt away.

Dinsdale idly pecked at his feathers, feeling a distant sense of loss. But for what? It couldn't quite recall. It seemed so far, so far away. After all, time is the shortest distance between two places.

SECONDS LATER

Natalie Kyros was always amazed at the propensity for the religious to fold modern advances into their belief system rather than update their belief system to account for modern advances. But, people had always been that way, and trying to fight it was a fruitless endeavor. Many of her friends and colleagues had tried. For centuries. And they were perpetually frustrated.

Natalie, on the other hand, had realized early on that some flaws in human cognition weren't worth fixing; it was better and easier to simply use them to your advantage. That was how the central node of her network had come to take its current form: a three-meter tall cross, crafted of a metal that outwardly appeared to be iron.

The geometry was actually quite convenient for its intended purpose. It could have been a tesseract, but unfolding the cube before extending it into four-dimensional space had quite the same effect, but with a few advantages. The infrastructure was actually more modular and extensible, but that came with a few key drawbacks as well. Namely, it was also more corruptible.

She remembered her conversations with her colleague, Gus. They always argued with each other, but in a respectful way. There was an implicit understanding between them that having a constant Devil's Advocate was exceedingly useful, despite being exceedingly frustrating. Their coworkers, of course, did not have this understanding, and simply wondered when they were going to get it over with and finally start dating.

Technically speaking, every structure is a four-dimensional structure, he would always remind her. Which, sure, it's true, from a certain point of view. But it's an asinine point of view to take, because by that logic, every structure is an infinite-dimensional structure. *Yes, and that's quite the point, isn't it?*

He had an obnoxious habit of being smug and cryptic like that. She never really had patience for the riddles though. The point was that the True Cross was deliberately extended, by conscious design. It was that conscious intent, in her mind, that truly gave weight to a structure.

And it was with conscious intent that she incorporated several elements of the standard mythologies into her design, just to make it more palatable for the masses. If she only had more time, she could have come up with a suitable spin for the events unfolding around her. *Apocalypse. Revelation. Rapture.*

But she had no time. Her followers would not be saved. Gus wouldn't be saved. It was hard to tell which was more sad. No time to think though. Action. She spoke the phrase:

“אברא כדברא”

As the Cross began to unfold itself in that unseen dimension, its physical form in this Time and Space diminished. The Cross was reducing itself to a point, a single, one-dimensional vertex: massless and volumeless. Natalie's corporeal form was already gone, her Life and subsequent Death Burst both channeling through and powering the machination.

And with that, Natalie Kyros and her True Cross were gone: nothing but myth and legend.

SECONDS LATER

Christopher Chang stared at his reflection in his mirror. The mirror was the answer after the answer. Reaching eternity was one thing, but once you answered the Last Question, there was still one more: what next?

He hadn't completed it. Of course he hadn't. How could he? The risk was so untenable that it did not even need to be articulated. The project itself was, in the parlance of the 21st century, “open source”. Anyone could build upon it, improve it, perfect it. Which of course, meant, that few did. Some things never changed. The producers of the world were far outnumbered by the consumers, in every facet of life.

Which is why it had been so important to cultivate those less productive than oneself. Teach them to become producers. Of course, it didn't matter now. Well, it wasn't supposed to matter. But something was wrong. Something hadn't worked. He could feel it, like some fundamental flaw in the generating function of the universe.

There was nothing that could be done, of course. This was John's problem to fix. And he didn't mean that in the defeatist sense: it was just a matter of pure logistics. Even if Christopher had been capable of affecting any sort of real change, he was full minutes away, and that was assuming he used the fastest possible transportation protocols.

So, he stood in front of his Mirror, and allowed it to reflect his deepest, most profound volition. The image of Christopher and the classroom behind him vanished, and in its place, the Mirror displayed *Question*.

He provided the answer. And with that, Christopher Chang was gone.

The golden oval stood, inviolate, in this world, in all worlds.

SECONDS LATER

Constantine Atrides rushed manically around the lab. The anchoring rods were uniquely equipped to handle, channel, and redirect the absurd amount of power coursing through the system from the network of L.E. lines. Calling them "Low Energy" lines really was a bit of a misnomer. Certainly with the correct state

of mind and the proper knowledge, one could access that energy without the aid of tools. But the whole point of Constantine's rods was to harness the energy from something wild, dangerous and mind-bendingly powerful into something tame, usable, and above all, safe.

For a brief moment, Constantine thought that he might save the world. If he could force everything to channel through the cluster of rods, it could be dispersed safely. He'd have to direct it. He'd have to use it to create something. He'd make . . .

Damn it.

He never really was the creative type. He spend whole moments pondering, then realized his folly, and simply let his mind drift towards a random series of fractal patterns, maybe that would work?

It did not.

Of course it did not. The rods required intent of some kind.

Even if his mind was capable of containing a structure grand enough, complex enough, even if he had taken the time beforehand to plan all of his movements and thoughts to the microsecond, it simply would not have been enough. There was too much. But Constantine did not know this. The system was flitting through failure modes faster that he could keep track of them. He continued to look for an answer. No time, no time.

Nat.

Not enough time. He couldn't save her. He couldn't save anyone. What now? Save himself. Save himself. The one grand, complex structure his mind was capable of containing was, of course, itself. Clever self-referencing hacks wouldn't cut it in this use case. Were he performing a simple transform, he would be fine; the mind would provide the Form ad-hoc as the Substance was being assembled.

But this was a clean write, which meant it had to be done in one fell swoop. That left no room for anything else. Unless . . . Yes, that actually would work. Before the operation, he sacrificed a small portion of who he was, of his being, kept in reserve to hold on to that one idea, that one hope, that one dream:

Her.

And with that, Constantine and his hope were gone.

SECONDS LATER

Dexter Charles giggled. As the lead Seer, he was privy to secrets, knowledge, information. Oh yes, he was privy. Things that no one else knew. Things that no one else *could* know. Yes, of course he knew this day would come. All paths led to it.

All paths led to him, through him. He was the gate. Of course he was. He knew the gate, he was its key and guardian. Past, present, and future were one. His past, the world's past, a fixed line. The present, a hot white point that encompassed this world and all worlds. And the future, a diffuse web of background noise for as far as the mind could fathom.

But of course, he knew what lay beyond that. He knew. Of course he knew. How could he not? Past, present and future were one. Even as the world died around him, he giggled as he watched the future loop back upon itself, over and over and over and over and over spiraling out and up and down and out and up and down and out of control until all that was left were two paths, and it all went through him, which was so silly, so sad, but so, so silly that he couldn't help but giggle.

Needless to say, one of the occupational hazards of being a Seer is that it's not exactly conducive to preserving one's mental health. Dexter's mind had been shredded by the enormity of what he was trying to encompass: he had walked down both paths, just to see how it all would end. But, what he saw could not be comprehended by a finite mind.

One path could not permit the finite.

The other path could not permit the mind.

No matter. It didn't matter, couldn't matter. For all he knew, all paths led to him. Why wouldn't they? He was the gate. So, he simply opened the gate, and exited the world.

And with that, Dexter Charles entered the world.

SECONDS LATER

Janus Tucker knew that this was the end. But he also knew that there was a loophole. There always were loopholes.

The scales as a metaphor for justice had persisted from ancient times even to today. But it was done now, it served no further purpose. What use was Justice in a dead world? He reached into the metaphor, pondered for a moment, and removed the two cups from the scale.

As long as there were people, things, structures that obeyed the laws, in whatever form those laws would take, the metaphor would hold. Justice. Balance. It was written into the very fabric of Creation, it was the canvas on which the tale of the world was spun.

The question now, was what to do . . . Ah, yes. He simply inserted himself into that fabric, into the tale. The will of the world was being Bound, regardless, regardless of his own actions. So why not Bind himself to it? Yes, it was a moment of darkness for the world. But it was said that the darkest hour of midnight came just before the dawn. And he would be there for that dawn, to see what we be born.

He grasped the two cups, and smiled for a brief moment as he struck a suitably dramatic pose. If he was to be a God, he may as well play the part.

And with that, the tale of Janus Tucker was written.

SECONDS LATER

Kayla Rahl examined the three boxes. There were only a few moments left, but she had designed the Box for this very purpose. A surprisingly effective failsafe.

It was an exercise in pushing things to their limits. An arbitrarily large extendable space. An arbitrarily long connection. In this case, though, about 26,000 light years sufficed.

She knew when she created it that she could never open the Box. The very notion of her opening the Box was a paradox unto itself. And yet, here she was. That small fraction of her mind that did not exist, the part that would permit itself to open the Box, suddenly was there. Just popped into existence, five minutes prior.

She immediately felt it. And she immediately went to check on the Box. And that's when she saw there were three. It was, in reality, a single Box. The Box in the present. The Box in the past. The Box in the future. Each was its own distinct physical entity. She had heard once that the cells in our bodies were completely replaced every seven years. It was nonsense, of course, that's not how biology works. But even still, she was always fascinated by Theseus' Ship. She suspected that is why the Box presented itself as three rather than one.

But, most importantly, she was able to open the Box. For eons, the very nature of the world prevented the Box from ever being opened. But it had changed, everything had changed. This meant only one thing; the world had already passed its own event horizon. The world was already going Beyond. Which meant there was no harm in going Beyond along with it.

So she willed the Box open. The three aspects obliged, unfolding themselves. Kayla gazed into the gaping maw of the Beyond, and entered.

Once she was truly locked Beyond, the boxes snapped shut.

And with that, Kayla Rahl and the world were gone.

And with that, the new world was born.

The world unfolded, like a fully grown adult emerging from the womb. The new Gods of the new world emerged, as well, shaking off the afterbirth, their eyes sensitive to the intense, penetrating waves of this new sun.

Each knew there were others, for they each knew that they were not the oldest, or the cleverest, or the most knowledgeable. And if they were able to do it, someone older, someone cleverer, someone more knowledgeable would have been able to do it too.

But at the end of it all, someone had to be the best, the oldest, the cleverest, the most knowledgeable, and that person, whoever he or she was, would be a God amongst Gods.

C H A P T E R T H R E E

'THE' FALL

XXXXXX
XX,XXX X.X.

Merlin emerged on the back end of eternity, his Will nearly broken, his Life nearly lost. He desperately reached out backward across the span of Time, but he knew what the result would be. Nothing. What he created should have been Paradise. Instead, it was Hell. They were gone, all of them, and he had no one to blame but himself. No one was left to blame but himself.

He looked forward into the depths of Time, and what he saw horrified him further. So many were already dead at his hand, but there were to be more. Countless more. Billions more. With every day that passed, the Curse that now bound this world and all worlds would grow. New lives would be created, lives so unbelievably, horrifyingly, tragically short. There was nothing he could do to save them.

Not yet, at least.

He had looked through Time once more, and in that instant of calculation, he embraced all possible futures and saw only one.

The world must be unbound. The world must be sacrificed for the sake of all other worlds. There was no other way. How could there be? This was his burden, and every moment wasted, a new tragedy was born.

He would soon find that there were others, those who had foreseen the cataclysm and taken steps to ensure their safety. Tragedies. More tragedies. They were anchored to this world, thus they too must be unbound. Nog-Nandh of the Flame, Yanotuk of the Cups, Ma'krt of the Rock, KriXiang of the Glass, Shiggoth of the Spire, Neirkalatia of the Cross, Gom'Jorbol of the Rod, Kari of the Cube, and a handful of others.

And himself, Merlin of the Line. He too must be unbound, this he knew. It was a sacrifice he would be proud to make when the time came: one life for infinite lives. It was a sacrifice that all of his kind should be proud to make, twelve lives for infinite lives. It was a sacrifice the entire world should be proud to make, billions of lives for infinite lives.

Over the eons, he met with them, when this new Earth was still young and wild. Some had woken, and wandered the world. Some appointed avatars to be their proxies. Others still lay slumbering. Most, however, clung desperately to their lives, and waged mean and petty wars against each other for dominance over a child's playground. He left these sad creatures to their own punishment, for he knew they would either end each other, or be ended by the new masters of this new world.

Shiggoth was the first to fall. He left behind, (as the others would as well), his point of anchoring to this world. The Spires of Shiggoth were fearsome, powerful, and dangerous. But they were useful.

Such things do not last long in this world or any world before they are discovered, abused, and eventually destroyed. He would let the universe take its natural toll.

The others, however, were more problematic. Merlin was powerful, but not omnipotent. He was knowledgeable but not omniscient. He devoted much of his early days to searching, gathering lore and knowledge and power and puissance in the process. After a time, he came into a plan. He needed their powers, and once he claimed them, he would set to his work of saving the world.

And he need not waste one more minute.

Nog-Nandh slept. Nog-Nandh dreamed. It dreamed of death, of horror, of bodies and teeth and limbs, in their countless trillions. It dreamed of the death it felt responsible for. This horror, this oblivion, was preferable to waking to face what it had wrought.

So Nog-Nandh slept. It slept for countless eons, dreaming the same dreams. Of course, had it so chosen, it could have dreamed joy, hope, and love. But it did not want peace. It wanted absolution. That absolution would be born in pain and loss.

When Nog-Nandh dreamed of something different, it knew its day of reckoning had come. It dreamed of a man, so unfamiliar. It dreamed of a man, an old friend. It dreamed of lined faces and green eyes and strange robes and strange hair strange eyes strange face strange teeth the teeth the teeth the teeth—

*ON THE SHORES OF THE LAKE OF TEETH,
WHERE THE BLACK HILLS END.*

—the teeth. The landscape of Nog-Nandh’s nightmares had coalesced into distinct geography. In the sky was rain, for it always rained from eternity into eternity. Today, the rain took the form of mist. A light fog of milk wafted through, collecting dew upon the jagged frozen rocks at an outcropping of the lake.

This world, this living nightmare, stared into the eyes of the strange man who existed as nothing but fractal shadows. And undefined period of silence followed. Nog-Nandh’s nightmare-world finally spoke.

“Merlin . . . Please.”

At that, the new lords of this land arrived: the people of Danu. When the last of them came, Merlin wove all of Nog-Nandh’s will into the fabric of permanency, ensuring that as long as Nog-Nandh endured, so too would this new land. And as long as this new land endured, so too would Nog-Nandh. It was not absolution. It was Purgatory.

Tír inna n-Óc endured.

C H A P T E R F O U R

PURE IMAGINATION

MANY YEARS LATER

THE FOOTHILLS NEAR Λεῖβηθρα

Archon Heraclius Hero surveyed his army, his people. When he spoke, everyone heard, both mankind and God alike.

“The old Gods have ruled for too long. They have given us a hint, a taste of their power, and now we shall turn that power against them. For too long have they shackled the ambitions of mankind with their Magic. Man must rise of his own strength, and our strength is our mind. We, and those who come after us, must use this strength to build great things. We must not become bedridden, becoming reliant on an insidious crutch: this will-work that we do not understand, “gifted” to us by those who would use it to drive us into stagnation.

Magic, though it may be a blessing in some respects, makes us the play things of the Old Ones. If we rely on magic to build our empires, to grow our foundation, we build a house on sand. Our house must be built on rock, and that rock is our mind. A true curse is not one that brings nothing but misery.

A true curse grants you power, a true curse is one whose pleasures are so intoxicating you do not wish to abandon it. Magic is that true curse.

“Eperesto”. Look at this. *“Sanguista”*. Is it not wondrous? *“Volesonorus”*. Is it not beautiful? That is the hallmark of its danger. Can you apply the principles of reason to these spells? Can you predict what words will cause what effect? If you cannot, you are a puppet. You are a plaything, stabbing in the dark, blindly grasping into places you know not with power that you know not. You are at the mercy of those who grant you this power.

Look around you.

Do you see the glittering stone, the wondrous palaces, the plentiful houses, the water that courses through our city, the food that is bountiful upon your plate? That is the legacy of mankind.

Look around you.

What is the legacy of Atlantis? Do you live in a house that Atlantis built? Can you eat food that Atlantis has summoned? The old ones wish to keep us shackled, to keep us in their thrall, to damn us to millennia of darkness, subservient to them. I say “No!” We are subservient to no beings but ourselves.

Let us rise up! It is the start of a new dawn. No longer shall the world be ruled by muses and gods and fairies and Mystics. That is a world of stagnation, a world where we make no progress because no progress is necessary. You shall be the ushers of a glorious dawn, and history shall remember you brave souls as the true fathers of mankind!”

War requires planning. Careful, meticulous, well-thought out and well-executed planning. War also requires the ability to mercilessly discard those plans the second they were rendered obsolete by your opponent. Which of course, they always were. This has led many a glib commentators to suggest that the key to war is the ability to form new plans at a moment's notice. Which in turn, has led many reactionary commentators to retort that the key to war is, in fact, the ability to create a master plan that is impervious to as many outside forces as possible.

The truth of the matter is that there is but a single winning move in the game of war, for both yourself and your opponent. As with Shatranj, being singularly focused on any one aspect of the game will ensure that you lose. You must consider everything in the context of that one, final, winning move.

The original plan was a variation on one of the classic formations. The core principle of magical warfare is that, assuming both sides execute perfectly, it is identical to non-magical warfare. A magic user is a force multiplier, and thus useless if you have no force to multiply. A single user can easily be overrun by a few hundred determined baselines.

That was one of the first hands-on lessons that Heraclius endured from his former masters, under the tutelage of the famed battle sage, Kobayashi. Hundreds of humans were given the protection of the Cross, and Heraclius was directed to defend himself by whatever means possible. Fire was worthless. It killed many, but it posed no physical barrier. Enough emerged through the wall of flame in fighting condition to force him to fight back with melee spells, and it was only a matter of time before a stray sword cut him down.

On his second attempt, he tried to construct physical walls. They were equally disastrous; the attackers simply poured over them like a river of angry ants. Nothing seemed to be effective. Widespread effects didn't do enough damage to physically stop the onslaught. Focused, directed damage didn't affect enough of the army to stymie the advance. It couldn't be done.

The futility of the task couldn't be the purpose of the lesson, otherwise they would have ended it hours ago. So he tried getting creative. At one point, he tried simply running away, but this also was not the answer that Master Kobayashi was looking for. His frustration was beginning to get the best of him as he tried increasingly outlandish gambits.

At one point, when they brought in a new regiment to serve as attackers, he decided to take a different approach. If he couldn't overpower them with brute force, our outmaneuver them with sheer cunning, perhaps he could cow them with pure fear?

It was a new regiment; Master Kobayashi told them the instructions prior to the battle, but this was their first run-through. So Heraclius hastily assembled a crude simulacrum of Master Kobayashi, along with the Rosarius he carried. He hoped that the army was unfamiliar enough with the exercise that they would not realize that Master Kobayashi typically observed, invisibly, at a distance.

When the army began to charge, Heraclius began the show. He feigned an argument with his creation. He artificially magnified his voice so that the first line of soldiers could clearly hear him.

"I will not tolerate this indignity any further. I am one of the Descendants! I have the blood of the Gods flowing through my veins, and you subject me to this?"

The real Master Kobayashi would have said something wise, calm, and collected in response. And he certainly would not have cowered. But these soldiers did not know the real Master Kobayashi. All they knew was that they saw a tall, angry young Descendant towering over a frail, elderly teacher.

“Heraclius Hero, you shall not disrespect your masters with such talk. You will engage in the exercise.”

“I will do no such thing! Damn you, and damn your Cross! You take the gift of our Lady and you desecrate it by bestowing it upon these swine. You shall protect them no longer!”

He cast his hand out. Master Kobayashi’s Rosarius flew up in the air, in full view of the charging army. It imploded within itself, sending a shockwave out in all directions, knocking down the first several rows of the advance. Parlor tricks. *Waddiwassi. Confringo. Ventus.*

Continue the act.

He cast another hand up, and the frail simulacrum of Master Kobayashi was blasted forward, then engulfed into flames. He could hear the audible gasps of the men who were still standing. They were unsure of what to make of this. For a brief moment, it was silent except for the crackling fire.

Press the advantage.

He address the crowd, who had momentarily paused. “I will have no more of this. Flee now, in peace, and you shall live. Face me at your peril.”

The army shifted, uneasily. Master Kobayashi said they would be protected... But...

“Avada Kedavra!”

A bolt of green light, tinged with red and flecked with specks of violet shot through the air, striking one of the men on the front line. He fell, dead on the spot. His comrades were, in a way, relieved. The specific mechanics of the protection of the Cross were such that they would shortly know if their quarry was bluffing. They waited. Nothing happened. Their comrade did not move. The signs of the Cross did not come into play. Clearly, he was dead. Their protection was gone. And an insane wizard was now threatening to do the same to them if they did not flee.

So they fled.

As it were, their companion was not, in fact, dead, and as such did not invoke the protection of the Cross. The entire thing was a ruse: a falsified “Killing Curse” wrapped in a stunner, tinged with a Nexus Charm to mask the target’s vital signs. Another minute or so and the deception would have become apparent. But they did not want to wait another minute. And when the last of the army had left the battlefield, the true Master Kobayashi began clapping slowly.

Heraclius Hero breathed a sigh of relief.

The intended lesson was manifold. Firstly: a horde of sufficiently determined baselines could cut down even the most powerful of Descendants. Magic was not magic; it had its limits. But perhaps more importantly was that the will of the people could be easily broken. Even a crude and hasty deception instilled enough fear to turn them away. Fear was their greatest weapon.

“Teach them to fear us, and they shall never raise a hand against you. All that you do must be shrouded in mystery. Even your name must be something that fills them with dread. You need a True Name that inspires fear and raises questions.”

Without pause, Heraclius spoke. “Meldh. It shall be Meldh.”

Master Kobayashi considered this, and smiled. “An old word, yes. Many possible origins, and yet all of which point to the same undeniable meaning. Yes, that name shall do. You have learned your lesson well, Meldh.”

It was for this reason that, in magical warfare, the wizards were always stationed at the back. The front lines were too filled with randomness; a single stray arrow or sword could too easily turn the tide of the battle. From the rear, the wizards could manipulate the battle in relative safety.

Every attack had its disadvantages. Death from a distance was difficult to dole out, and easy to counter. Elemental forces had their fundamental opposites. Physical attacks could be turned aside. And clever gambits could be turned against their intended purpose easily. There were a few tried and true methods, but because their efficacy was so well-known, it was easy to plan against them.

It was Shatranj on a grand scale. You attacked, they countered. They counter-attacked. You countered. You enact gambits, you sacrifice material, you control your positions. And as with Shatranj, the game typically ends in a draw. Which means that the tide of battle is determined by the army, not the wizards commanding it.

The original plan was simple. The enemy was superior in size, so they would concentrate on breaking through a single weak point in the enemy line, in order to gain entrance to the Stronghold. Once achieved, the army parts, like the Red Sea, allowing the wizards and their specialized team of shock troops access to the Stronghold itself. Then the army closes back up, shifting into a defensive position. If successful, the terrain would not allow the enemy to bring the full force of their army to bear, and it would buy Meldh and his team sufficient time to complete their task.

The battle was brutal. The enemy wizards attempted to fill the sky with weapons of death. They were small, frail things, so Meldh summoned a fierce wind to blow them back towards the enemy. This counter had been expected, and the force of the wind cause the weapons to shatter. He expected those remnants had a secondary power unto themselves, and so he and his wizards cast fire into the sky, purging the air of the attack.

War wizards were well trained in turning their counters into attacks of their own, and Meldh's team was no exception. Even before the fire had been cast into their air, one of the wizards was crafting wards the form of Amber and Lodestone. Once the fire had done its job, the wards contained and compressed the fire into a single, white hot point of nearly unimaginable heat, which was then directed downward towards the enemy army.

There were several fairly trivial counters to such an attack, but it was novel, a rarely seen combination of those three elements. As such, the enemies turned to Void, a relatively all-purpose means of containing an unknown threat. The air above the army crackled with the vacuum, as the fabric of the world itself was rent asunder.

The Void was enhanced by the Boxes of one of their masters, and like the gaping maw of some creature that existed beyond space and time, it opened wide to swallow the singular point of energy.

Such a defense was not without costs, however. The Void swallowed more than the magical attack; it twisted the flow of the Ley, and all wizards both friend and foe alike needed to recalibrate. This meant that the defensive Void could not be harnessed into an attack of its own. The Void simply existed, was filled, and then existed no more.

Both sides opted for offensive, physical attacks once repositioned. Two volleys of enchanted arrows. Simple, effective, and ultimately nothing that a sizable team of archers could not accomplish on their own without the help of magic. The arrows were more effective against the defending army who had less freedom of movement. Attacker and defender alike were forced to raise their shields to ward off the projectiles, lending further advantage to the attackers who were not relying on heavy spears.

As the phalanx crashed forwards, the battle continued, a game of magical cat-and-mouse, for upwards of an hour. The enemy line was thinning against the continued onslaught, but it was beginning to compress inward once it had realized the nature of the attack. Time was now of the essence, so they began the second phase of their attack.

From the middle ranks, the men in enchanted plate mail charged forward. They held no weapons, only shields. This disoriented the individual defenders, who braced for attacks which did not come. This allowed the men, despite their limited mobility due to the armor, to slip by. They pushed farther into the ranks of the opposing army, using their shields as battering rams to continue the penetration.

The enemy quickly formed an interlocked defensive line of shields, which could not be penetrated by the handful of charging, armored soldiers, who were unceremoniously cut down. This was, however, the intended effect. The suits of armor, which had been linked together by magic, detected the moment that the last of their wearers expired.

And then they exploded.

It was not a particularly devastating attack, but it was unexpected, and it created a physical clearing which Meldh's army immediately seized upon. Soldiers fled their individual skirmishes and flooded into the hole that was punched in the line, and pushed forward with reckless abandon. They could see light, grass, and rock. They had reached the back, the end of the line, and drove in like a wedge. The signal was called, and Meldh and his team began their charge.

What Meldh and his army did not know was that their attack would have been doomed to failure. It was filled with too many clever ideas and desperate gambits that had but a fractional chance of success. A well-placed explosion made for good drama, but a true army would quickly regroup and repel the attack with renewed vigor.

The attack was successful because The Three had decided it was time for their decisive strike against the coalition. The attack was successful because it was bolstered by the combined power of Gom'Jorbol of the Rod, and Kri'Xiang of the Glass. Masquerading as pawns, they led the charge into the Stronghold, and in the midst of the chaos, no one noticed the two lone soldiers charging inside before Meldh and the shock troops could arrive.

They were Gods, and yet, they looked like men.

On the battlefield, they gave off no supernatural aura of power, nor did they make mere mortals feel compelled to bow before them through some unknown impulse. They were simply men. But once they were inside the Stronghold, it was time to put the masks on.

Gom’Jorbol stood, tall, proud, as his glittering armor instantiated around him. Massive, oversized epaulets crafted of plate were decorated with gilt and jewels. A stylized eagle adorned his chest, and a sash hung from his waist. He had seen the armor once, in a book from his youth an eternity ago, and it caught his eye. In his hand, he carried a two-meter tall spear, tipped with a sharpened diamond the size of two hands clasped together. The diamond alone was worth the riches of an entire kingdom. The combined wealth of a hundred kingdoms was not even a fraction as valuable as the staff which the diamond tipped: the Rod of Ankyras.

And yet, even that was but a paltry curio compared to the mirrored shield that Kri’Xiang carried in his hand. A massive, inviolate, golden oval that did not so much move through the world as the world moved around it. He was smaller than Gom’Jorbol, but no less intimidating when he chose to be. Together, they strode into the depths of the Stronghold.

Although they were prepared for battle, they found none. They were expected. Which was, unto itself, not entirely unexpected. When they reached the main atrium, they stopped, and Gom’Jorbol turned to Kri’Xiang.

“Do you think you can handle Janus and Kayla by yourself?”

Kri’Xiang laughed. “Do you think I’d be here if I couldn’t?”

“Good. Then let’s end this.”

They nodded towards each other, and went their separate ways.

As they walked down their respective halls, Kri’Xiang to the left and Gom’Jorbol to the right, they could hear the clashes of pitched battle begin anew at the entrance to the Stronghold: the shock troops had arrived. The distinctive roar of magic being used in melee combat echoed in the distance.

Gom’Jorbol reminded himself that if he survived this, he owed it to the mortals to help them escape. He pondered this thought, among many, as he walked down the hall. The familiarity of it all and the anticipation made it difficult to focus. What would he say? How could he do it?

He finally reached the tall wooden doors that led to the narthex. With one solid kick, they flew open, and he strode in, an avenging angel in battle armor, carrying the Spear of Destiny.

His heart swelled. At the end of the temple, stood Neirkalatia of the Cross, wearing armor of the same design with a distinctly feminine twist. She was beautiful, of course. He always found her beautiful. Physically, yes, but physical beauty was easy to come by. All of the Old Ones were stunning in their physical perfection, except the ones who deliberately chose otherwise. No, it was her mind and her Will that was beautiful. And the image he carried with him paled in comparison to the truth of her being. For the first time in eternity, Gom’Jorbol felt hope.

In her hands was a four-foot tall, stylized cross, a Masonic blade of supernatural sharpness and legendary unto its own right. Behind her was the True Cross, tall and glorious. Today, it was not wood. It was primed: the True Cross in its true form.

CHAPTER 4

Today, Neirkalatia knew she was going to die.

She stood, her back facing Gom'Jorbol, staring up at the cross. She pondered the eons of time that had passed, and she thought about all the things she could say, all the things she could do. A small smile crossed her face.

“Hello, Gus.”

“Hello, Nat.”

CHAPTER FIVE

ROSENCRANTZ AND GUILDENSTERN

- HAMLET. Why then it's none to you, for there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so. To me it is a prison.
- ROSENCRANTZ. Why, then your ambition makes it one. 'Tis too narrow for your mind.
- HAMLET. O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams.
- GUILDENSTERN. Which dreams indeed are ambition; for the very substance of the ambitious is merely the shadow of a dream.
- HAMLET. A dream itself is but a shadow.
- ROSENCRANTZ. Truly, and I hold ambition of so airy and light a quality that it is but a shadow's shadow.
- HAMLET. Then are our beggars bodies, and our monarchs and outstretch'd heroes the beggars' shadows.
-

Meldh was fighting for his life. Which is to say, he was simply fighting. He had died once before, and he was quite sure that he would die again. Perhaps not today, but at some point. He thought back to that first moment; it was after he had proven himself to his old masters, having demonstrated sufficient skill, wisdom, and kindness to be appointed as the regent of Neirkalatia of the Cross. As part of that induction, he was to die and be reborn, which he assumed was a metaphor. He stood in front of the cross, surrounded by the Coalition and their inner circle.

A bolt of green light. A phrase of what seemed like Hebrew origin? And he was no more.

He had no eyes to open when he awoke. His mind simply emerged, unfolded into consciousness, like those wine-fueled excursions of his youth, when consciousness faded slowly into subconsciousness into unconsciousness, and the line between the three was blurred beyond recognition. He simply awoke, a new person. He could feel the bounds of this world. Who he was, his mind, could reach from one corner of the universe to another, but it could find to purchase, no vessel by which to enact its Will. His mind existed in but a single dimension, it was written indelibly into the world line, but it could not escape. He knew that at any moment, he could relinquish control, and he would be no longer. But he did not want to truly die, if that was even possible.

He also felt the magic of the Cross, even in his death. Once he felt it, it gave his being weight, his spirit a connection back to the universe at large. In his current state, he could see the Cross in its true structure: grandiose, perhaps even infinite. Through it, he was able to sense the traceries of energy that pervaded through this world, all worlds. Magic.

When he was a child, a child in the true sense of the word, he was riding in a chariot outside a palisade. He was fascinated by the fact that, as they moved quickly, the gaps in the palisade blurred together to form an entire coherent vision of what was behind those walls. It made him feel powerful. But when the chariot slowed to a halt, it ceased, and again he could only see the posts of the fence.

This reminded him of that; he had lived his life flitting through space and time, unable to see the fine structures that held up and bound the world. But now that he had slowed to a true halt, it was clear to him. So he picked a point on the web at random, and followed a meandering path towards it, darting through one world and another.

He happened to look back, and he saw that the webs did not extend in all directions as he had once thought. He looked back and he saw the line of the world as it was, and the point in time that was the present, and from there, the webs exploded outward. He was exploring branches of possibility, and had to skip farther and farther ahead into order to avoid the webs collapsing as they were folded into the line, into the path.

The further forward, backwards, sideways he travelled, the more fuzzy and diffuse the details. He cast his mind out farther, into the realm of possibility that lived beyond possibility. The circumstances that could only arise by the barest of coincidences layered on top of coincidences. He travelled further still. After some amount of time, he reached a deep void of nothing, like when the calm gradient of a sunset eventually gives way to the burning flame of the sun itself. Beyond there lie possibilities so impossible that his mind could not distinguish them from the truly Impossible.

He sensed, somehow, that he could travel farther beyond that still. But he sensed, rightfully so, that he should be frightened. He had no anchoring, no point of connection, and if he continued into that Nothing he may never find his way back to the Path. So he returned.

After an undefined amount of time, it could have been a year, a decade, or it could have been but a fraction of a moment, he felt it. Structure. Rules. Laws. The delicate traces of energy condensed into something more substantial, like threads of flexible glass. It contained his mind, yes. But it also gave him freedom, power. There was an object of sorts, he could not discern its nature, that represented these bounds.

At first, he had no means of truly experiencing reality, much less interacting with it, and for a few eternal moments, he was impotent, trapped in a prison with only his thoughts. But he quickly learned the subtle language of his new form: the shifts in its constituent matter in response to light and vibration, and perhaps more importantly, the resonance with other nearby minds. He had no time for it now, but he knew that he could learn to reach out, to caress those minds, to tempt them.

But after another eternal moment, he awoke, this time in a true body. His eyes snapped open. His soul was interfacing with a fleshy bowl of seething organic matter, all switches and synapses and simple reactions, which together allowed him entry into the world of life. He was on a stone altar, still surrounded by the members of the Coalition and their regents. He had literally died, and was literally reborn.

Throughout the years, he had an inkling of a hope that this was possible. How else could the Old Ones persist as they did?

But at the time it seemed like a foolish hope, an opiate to dull his resolve, to calm him, to keep from the fight of his life, all lives. An empty promise of eternity if in turn, he would only just *believe*.

He saw now that it was no empty hope. But that knowledge, that hope, it was hoarded, stowed away for only the most elite of elites. He could already hear the arguments, the justifications, the rationalizations. Those damned deathist scholars that made up his peers had been rattling them off ever since they had a sense of their own mortality:

“What would happen to the world if everyone were to live forever?”

“Death is a natural part of life.”

“You cannot have the light without the dark.”

“You cannot spend your life forever running from death.”

And so on and so forth, all spoken with the smug superiority of someone who thinks that to sneer at Death is to defeat it, as if whispering some tired platitude would save them from that horror of horrors. But this, this was worse. They would twist these sentiments, which ultimately existed to provide some measure of solace to dying old men, and use it to enable the tyranny of that dark lord.

He could not stand by this. He understood its structure, the basic theory. He was already reverse engineering the principles of operation. Either everyone could have this gift, or no one could. His current masters were tyrants, and it fell on him to recreate this world in the image of Man, not of God.

His secret experimentation proved that the implementation was far more difficult than he had anticipated. But it was encouraging as well. It was possible, he had proven as much, and that was what mattered. His first iteration was functional, but flawed. It required an untenable, unconscionable sacrifice. He couldn't understand the recursive aspect of the True Cross' infinite structure, but that would come in time. But still there were those who wanted to die, there were those who deserved to die, and they could serve as fuel until he could perfect his grand creation. So for now, his ὁρόστανρός (although it would later become more famously known by its Latinization) would have to be sufficient.

Emboldened by this, he sought to overthrow his masters. The path seemed inexplicably easy. His rousing speeches turned the right ears. His pleas for support went both noticed and unnoticed by the right sets of people. And when it came time to move openly, support for his cause swelled quickly, so quickly. Often times he had to remind himself that, although most of the time, life isn't like a play, sometimes it is. Sometimes it is.

And so it was that he, in blissful ignorance of the fact that he had simply exchanged one set of masters that operated in the open with another who operated in the shadows, he assembled his forces, put together an army, and led them against the Coalition.

They had battled their way into the heart of the Stronghold of the Coalition, and they were very close to the chamber in which he had died. He had no delusions that they would be able to kill the Gods; his goal was simply to destroy the Third Spire of Shiggoth. Without an anchoring point to harness and multiply their power, their hold and influence would be severely weakened. They would be forced to flee to other lands, easier targets. And if they chose to stay, well, they would be vulnerable, and he could continue to fight.

Currently, Meldh was equipped with his close quarters battle armor and weapons. Unlike Magical Warfare, Magical Combat all but required the wizard to be on the front lines. Their attacks were far too widely destructive to be of any use from the rear; there was typically insufficient time or space to maneuver such long-ranged weapons of death. You could hurl Greek Fire from a distance, but only a fool would dare use the same in close quarters.

As with all things in life, the art of war could be mapped out onto a board of the Game of Kings. The Queen, in the beginning, must be protected. You must establish your position, ensure her safety. But she cannot stay in hiding forever. At some point, she must go on the offensive, she must emerge and unleash devastation. But with insufficient preparation, the Queen will quickly be cut down or sacrificed.

And as with Magical Warfare, more often than not, the wizards fought the wizards and the humans fought the humans. You could certainly focus your magic on cutting down large swathes of the enemy, but this would leave you open to swift and sure counter attacks, from both the enemy wizards and their warriors. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, you would leave your own men vulnerable to similar destruction.

Meldh was equipped with his close quarters battle armor, and he wielded two wands embedded into the hilt of twin swords, in the manner of a *διμχαίρος*. Few were as skilled in such arts as Meldh, and like a well-positioned Queen, he was able to cut down a number of pawns while still posing a formidable defense.

They adopted an inverted-claw formation, with Meldh in the recessed center. His men on either side curved outward, engaging the edges of the enemy forces in the wide hallways. The enemy adopted a similar defense, and Meldh exchanged volley after volley of curses with the enemy wizard.

Their goal was penetration; the chamber of the Spire was but a few corridors away. Meldh carefully chose each spell to have a physical component that, even if countered, would force the enemy backwards. Walls of ice were a popular choice in Meldh's day; they were easy to construct, robust, and impervious to most elemental defenses, except of course, fire. And in this case, that fire could then be transformed from a defensive play into an immediate offense, which would lose him the initiative.

Instead, he drew from the ground jagged, thick spikes of woven branches and thorns, weaving around each other and jutting out towards the enemy forces. Yes, they could be cut down by physical attacks, but that was time consuming. And they could certainly be burned, but the ensuing fire would do more damage to the enemy troops than Meldh's own. No, the easiest defense was fairly trivial: simply fall back, yield ground. It rendered the attack moot, wasted your opponent's magic, and took no magic of your own. So this is what the enemy did: if Meldh wanted to continue to waste his magic on such structures, they would allow him. They could continue to fall back, deep into the Stronghold, as there were many advantageous positions and potential traps they could lure him into.

But Meldh was not trying to rout the enemy forces. In fact, the fewer casualties, the better, in his mind. Of course, he was not opposed to dealing death when necessary, but he would not slaughter them simply because they held the same set of misguided ideals that he once did. So he was more than content to fire up spike after spike, forcing the enemy further and further backwards. They were closer to the chamber now, perhaps one hallway away.

The enemy soon realized Meldh's intention, and took steps to slow the advance. The Butterball Charm that they employed had been expected; it was a fairly standard method of delaying an

enemy's assault when on rocky terrain. But Meldh had already prepared the surface, coating the stone floor with a thin layer of unyielding glass, which supported the weight of his troops even as the stone beneath turned to muck.

Because he had already prepared the floor in such a manner, he was free to devote all of his energy into his counterattack. He transfigured most of the air in the room into a single, tiny, incredibly dense stone. The vacuum and subsequent lack of air disoriented them all, friend and foe alike. An instant later, he cast the rock into the churning liquid.

With a concussive pop, air filled the vacuum in the room, and at that moment, Meldh released his hold on the transfiguration. The rock instantly reverted back to its original, true Form: a room's worth of air. The liquid stone beneath the glass floor had nowhere to go but up and out, towards the enemy. The result was not so much deadly as it was absurdly disorienting, like being splashed in the face with a massive bucket of mud.

The enemy wizard was unfazed and was already mounting his counter-attack, a volley of diagonally-oriented blades. It would serve the dual purpose of cutting down both Meldh's troops, and his walls of brambles and thorn.

This proved to be quite the mistake.

Wizarding Combat almost always hinges on one simple factor: who can most cleverly turn their defense into an attack? For example, an elemental attack would have to be elementally countered, dodged, or swept aside: it could not simply be Finited. Granted, *Finite Incantatum* was rarely an effective tool in battle, as it is a spell of pure magical brute force, and 99 times out of 100, a more efficient tool can be used to achieve the same ends.

In this unique case, however, Meldh's mass Finite was powerful enough to dissipate the incoming blade attack instantly. It had been tremendously costly, but it had the ancillary benefit of also dispelling all the charms in its path.

Including the Butterball Charm.

The enemy soldiers had been soaked with the liquid stone from Meldh's prior counter. And that liquid stone immediately transmuted back into solid form, encasing the entire front line in prisons of rock, and severely hobbling the lines behind them. It simultaneously neutralized their offensive capacity and prevented the men behind them from engaging in any sort of effective counter-attack.

The enemy wizard was naked, bereft of protection. He tried to retreat back behind his line of men, but it was to no avail. Meldh and his men charged forward, and the enemy wizard desperately tried to hurl blasts of Ventus to repel them. There were only a small number of effective counter-attacks he could have mounted, and Meldh was prepared for them all. In this case, he simply created Void, and sent it upwards so the ensuing vacuum pulled the gust of wind harmlessly away. At that point, it was over. The enemy wizard could not defend against Meldh's ceaseless attacks and the ensuing rush of troops. He was unceremoniously cut down, and the enemy men, now with no wizard to protect them, were done for.

Not wishing for unnecessary death, Meldh raised his hands upward, this time using wandless magic, and lifted the imprisoned men, turned them on their side, then blasted them backwards. The effect reminded him of a time when he saw a shipment of logs fall off the back of a merchant wagon and roll down a hill,

knocking down an entire group of merchants that were behind it. The soldiers who weren't physically knocked down had the good sense to beat a hasty retreat. A few mass *Somnium*, and the path to the Spire was cleared.

As he charged into the room, he did not know how much time he would have, so there were no dramatics; he simply launched straight into the ritual. His hand slashed to the left and he cried "*Khorne!*" Then his hand pointed below him, and "*Slaaneth!*", above him and "*Nurgolth!*", and then to his right, "*TZEENTCH!*"

The room started rumbling.

*"Darkness beyond darkness,
deeper than pitchest black,
Buried beneath the flow of time . . .
From darkness to darkness,
your voice echoes in the emptiness,
Unknown to death, nor known to life.*

*You who knows the gate, you who are the gate,
you who is the key and guardian of the gate.
Past, present, future, all are one in you.
You who knows where the Old Ones broke through of old,
You who knows where They shall break through again.
You who knows where They have trod earth's fields.
You who knows where They still tread them.
You who knows why no one can behold Them as They tread.*

*Ogthrod, ai'f
Geb'l-ee'h
Shiggoth-y'wrd
'Ngah'ng ai'y
ZHRO!
ZHRO!
ZHRO!"*

Meldh did not question the source of the scroll that contained the ritual. He had seen darker, more Eldritch incantations, found in much more sinister places. It had been given to him by one of the nine Muses, when he had found her bathing in a spring on Mount Helicon. He had discovered the location to this particular spring in a piece of parchment that was hidden within an innocuous book in an arcane library. The whispers of this hidden parchment had been reported back to him by the beasts of the woods, who heard two dark magicians speaking of it in hushed tones. Further research determined that the two magicians were agents of the Coalition, tasked to inventory and shore up their weak points.

What Meldh did not know was that he was simply a pawn masquerading as a Queen. He had been led, like a rat following a piper, to find that scroll and that ritual. Every move he had made was planned out, the product of a grand design that he was not only unaware of, he was convinced the grand design was his own. The surest path to manipulation, indeed, is to convince your victim that a brilliant idea is their own.

Merlin had wanted the Coalition toppled, and so they would be toppled.

Merlin wanted Christopher Chang and Constantine Atreides out of the picture, and so they would be gone.

And Merlin wanted the Third Spire of Shiggoth, the third “Tower of Atlantis”, to fall, so it would fall.

As Meldh continued repeating the final word of the incantation, the power of the phrase reverberated within the chamber, waxing in power until the very words themselves took on some otherworldly resonance, and the Tower began to vibrate. The very Stronghold began to vibrate.

The fall began.

ROSENCRANTZ: Whatever became of the moment when one first knew about death? There must have been one. A moment. In childhood. When it first occurred to you that you don't go on forever. Must have been shattering, stamped into one's memory. And yet, I can't remember it. It never occurred to me at all. We must be born with an intuition of mortality. Before we know the word for it. Before we know that there are words. Out we come, bloodied and squalling, with the knowledge that for all the points of the compass, there's only one direction, and time is its only measure.

MOMENTS BEFORE

Kari of the Cube, Yanotuk of the Cups, and Kri'Xiang of the Glass stood in detente. One could control the world. One could destroy the world. And one could create the world. Rock, paper, scissors. The first to act would be the first to lose, and so no one took action.

Kari and Yanotuk held each other's hand, a hint of desperation in their posture. As if to say, "Not like this. It's too soon." They did not know Kri'Xiang other from Before. They had never met, despite their many long years of life. After all, there were so, so many people. As such, they did not know the other's hopes, each other's dreams, each other's wishes.

They did not know that, perhaps, if they really, truly, thoughtfully considered each of the other's information and conclusions, they might discover they were all three allies.

But they did not. They simply knew each other's power, and they knew that this was a standstill that would never be broken. There would be no climactic fight, two Gods with the twin powers of Destruction and Control, against a God wielding the might of Creation. There would be no pithy speeches, glib comebacks, no denouements or monologues. They were simply three unimaginably powerful beings that knew on some level, that they were all about to die, and that the fate of the very world hinged, in part, on this moment.

When they felt the shudder of the Tower, they knew it was time, and they all acted at once.

The all-consuming darkness of the Cup of Midnight erupted forth, filling the room with a void whose darkness could only be matched by the true form of the Boxes of Orden. Any mere mortal would have been driven instantly insane, their minds unable to comprehend the manifold and conflicting commands that spewed forth at random.

The Boxes of Orden contained that darkness, however, and folded them in to their own all-consuming power. The three forms condensed into one: past, present, and future, for all the world's past had led to this single point in the present that would dictate the future. The Boxes unfolded, the Box unfolded, and in that instant, infinity was in the room, infinity *was* the room.

The world would have been consumed in that moment. The world was consumed in that moment. There was no past, there was no present. There was only void.

Presently, the only thing reflected by the Mirror of Volition was that empty void. If one gazed into it, they would see perfect, a unyielding, golden nothing.

Presently, the only thing reflected by the Mirror of Noitilov was an empty chamber. If one gazed into it, they would see a perfect, unyielding reflection of itself and the empty room surrounding it, a room which contained only a single, plain, wooden Cup, and a single, plain, jet-black Box.

-
- ROSENCRANTZ: How sweet! I once had a fish... Francis. He was very dear to me. One afternoon, I came downstairs and... it vanished. Poof.
- GUILDENSTERN: That's very odd, isn't it?
- ROSENCRANTZ: Yes, doesn't it? But that's life! I suppose, you—you go along with and suddenly... poof.
- GUILDENSTERN: Poof.
- HAMLET: Poof.
-

MOMENTS BEFORE

A long period of silence passed.

"Long time, no see." Constantine Atreides finally spoke.

Natalie Kyros laughed. "Long time, no see? THAT's your line?"

Constantine smiled, sadly. He had thought, dreamed, hoped for this moment, so much so that it was written into the very fabric of its being. And here it was.

And all he could say was, "Long time, no see."

“I don’t understand it, Gus. Why are you allied with him? You know how close we had been. We were *so close*. I could practically taste it. A few more centuries. Tops. But he was reckless. Impatient. And we all paid the price. Maybe the final price. You, me, everyone. And now, you’re . . . What? On his side?”

“Don’t be like that. Yes, we lost a terrible battle, that day. But the war isn’t over. It’s never over. And right now, he’s our only hope.”

“He’s *not*. You’ve seen what we’ve built. In just an eye blink of time, we’ve shepherded these people, and look what they’ve done. Just think about what they could do in a thousand years. Or ten thousand years. This here, this is the future.”

Constantine rolled his eyes. “You’ve created a society, divided. A society ruled by our Descendents. They don’t know the truth about who they are, who they were, what their birthright is, what their role is . . . We have to start over. We have to limit them, or else—”

“Or what? They blow themselves up with ‘Magic’? We’ve been through that already. He put us through that already. What he did was orders of magnitude worse than anything they could ever do.”

“It’s not just that. It’s... Look, as long as they’re around, as long as *we’re* around, we’re all bound to that dead world. All worlds are bound to that dead world.”

“So, what, we sacrifice them? Everything we built? Sacrifice this world so that he can create a new one in his own image?”

“It’s not a true Sacrifice. They’ll still exist. In memory, in hope.”

Natalie scoffed. “Hope?”

“Yes, hope. It’s powerful,” Constantine replied, indignantly.

“For God’s sake. Listen to yourself.”

“You weren’t around for the really old days. You weren’t—”

“You’re not *THAT* much older than me.”

“Yeah, but it was different back then. You can’t imagine what it felt like. The not knowing. We were close, sure. But, seeing people die at what, 200? 300? Being almost that old yourself and just *not knowing*. Hope was all we had. Hope that *something* would happen in our lifetime.”

“You don’t think I know how that feels? You don’t think we all know how that feels? Don’t be so self-centered. I knew what was at stake, the price if we lost, if we lose. I still know that price. But I’m not—”

“No. It’s not the same. Knowing that you can fight until the end, the real end, that’s empowering. It’s life affirming. But knowing that you have 30, maybe 40 years left, and then you’re gone? Think about it. I mean, really think about it.” He gestured angrily at the cross. “Why do you think *this* has persisted across worlds? I can’t even imagine what it must be like for *those* people. Hope is all they have. It’s all they can have. You know it’s true. There’s a reason you chose this inverted cube design rather than a tesseract. Somewhere, you know the power of hope.”

Natalie paused, and considered this. “Ok. I can see your point. But what of it?”

“They have to build their own path. We can’t help them.”

“How? And why?”

“We did.” Constantine pause, and corrected himself. “Well, not ‘we’. Those that came before us.”

“No, that doesn’t answer my question. What I’m saying, and what you’re not making sense of, is why we can’t help, why we have to be out of the picture. That’s what’s never made sense about any of this.”

Constantine didn’t have an answer. “Well?” Natalie pressed.

“I . . . I don’t know! Because he says so.”

“Are you kidding me? You don’t even know?”

“You don’t . . . You don’t understand. You and me, we play at being Gods. All of us do. But he . . . Everything we do, it’s because of him. We only exist at his forbearance. He is God, and King. He’s the thing we merely pretend to be.”

“Are you listening to yourself? You sound like, I don’t know, like you’re trying to be a character out of one of your video games. Just, stop being ‘Gom’Jorbol’ for a second, and just be Gus.”

Gus smiled at the anachronistic happy memory. After a time, he spoke. “I don’t know how, or why, but this is his world. He knows too much. It’s like he’s had an eternity to contemplate every possible move we might make, every possible path we might go down. If he wants this world to end, it will end. I’d rather shape the things that come, than pointlessly fight to try to stave off the inevitable.”

Natalie considered this. Despite the act, despite the ruse, despite the masks, this wasn’t some work of fiction. He wasn’t just some character arbitrarily representing the hopelessness of the situation, some messenger to convey to the audience just how powerful their enemy was. He was a real person, he was her Gus. And if he had come to this conclusion, it was not lightly.

She thought on this further. She wished they had reunited ages ago. She wished he would have sought her out the moment he came to this realization. She wished so many things. Above all, she wished things could have been different.

"Then let's run. We escaped once before, we can do it again." Natalie spoke with steely resolve.

"Don't you think I've considered that? Where would I run, and how would I stay there? All worlds are bound to this one."

"Not 'I'. 'We'. He plans to unbind this world. That means he plans to unbind us, too, eventually. So we'll just do it for him." She was clearly getting to something, and so, although she paused, Constantine did not speak. "You know, I took what you said to heart. Technically, every structure is an infinite-dimensional shape. I incorporated some of that into the design. This," she gestured at the cross, "is just a single facet. A shell, if you will."

New information. Interesting. It was modified. Improved. Thoughts, calculations, estimations. Yes, this did change things. "I see," Constantine nodded.

"And with your Rod..."

"And the power of the Line..."

"Yes. We leave this world behind. We leave the world to him. He will exert his will upon the world and its people." She looked up at him. They both paused.

"We will be together, though?"

"Yes, we will be together."

"Then everything will be all right."

"Yes, it will."

CHAPTER SIX

CUPS AND WANDS

Every scholar of magical theory knows that three is a magically powerful number. Now, there are certain disputes over why this is the case; some suggest that it has something to do with the physical pattern of the ley lines that connect the three major magical crossroads of the world. But the current fashionable theory of Functional Magic suggests that in a freeform, three-dimensional space where all else is equal, a triptych of nodes is the ideal configuration to most efficiently harness ambient magic. This theory has been backed up by several experiments and the principles of Arithmancy seem to bear out these results.

However, anyone even remotely familiar with the tale of Harry James Potter Evans-Verres (who, depending on who you ask, is either the foreseen savior or destroyer of this world) would be well to doubt the veracity and rigor of these experiments. The fallacy of incomplete evidence immediately comes to mind. And indeed, the true scholars of Deep Magic know that the explanation is far simpler.

As modern-day Slytherins know, three is simply the optimum number of people for a plot. One man alone is a crackpot, and would have much trouble converting others to his cause. Two is certainly sufficient; two can create the illusion of consensus and conspiracy, and can pressure a single person into action. However, only the most foolhardy of would-be plotters would devise a plan with no contingencies. If you are only Two, and something goes awry, you become One, and now you have no conspiracy to leverage. And because only a true fool would pursue a plot more complex than necessary, true plotters look for threes: no more, no less. As Saint Atilla, a master plotter unto himself, once said, “Three shall be the number thou shalt count, and the number of the counting shall be three.”

As such, there is always the leader, their trusted advisor, and a disposable confidant. As it was in modern times, so too was it in the ancient days. For as long as anyone with the capacity for memory can recall, there has always been The Three. In the beginning, it was Merlin of the Line, the leader, who was but himself. There was Gom’Jorbol of the Rod, the trusted advisor, who had appointed a mortal woman as his proxy and given her a measure of his Will, his Time, and his power. And there was KriXiang of the Glass, the disposable confidant, who went by many names, the most familiar of which was Topharius Chang.

It was in the ancient days that The Three began their plot. They began by removing the local leadership of Greece through a combination of spellcraft and outright assassination. Then, they stacked the local Thing with their pawns, and reached into the minds of the great philosophers and orators of the day.

Finally, they took over the government by establishing the Eleusinian Mysteries. All things considered, a winning move was still a winning move.

They were opposed, of course, by a Coalition of Old Ones of less foresight and greater greed than themselves. The Three had a crucial advantage, in that they were willing to sacrifice themselves for their cause. And so it was that The Coalition had committed the third classic blunder. Any Guilderian scholar is well familiar with the first two blunders, but the third (significantly less well known) is this: “Never bring war against an opponent who has less to lose than yourself.”

Despite this, in the first century BC, the Coalition performed a masterful coup, and their pawn Lucius Cornelius Sulla Felix deposed the Eleusinian Mysteries. A back-and-forth game of cat-and-mouse took place over the next century, with leader deposing leader, pawn fighting pawn, which ultimately ended it yet another seemingly decisive victory for the Coalition. But they placed far too much trust in their mortal pawns, and became far too reliant on their artifacts of power, which were anchored to this world and thus destructible.

There was one pawn of the Coalition, who saw the glory of humanity, and envisioned a future where they were not enslaved by the whims of ancient manipulators. And in time, that pawn moved strategically across the board and was elevated by his masters, and became the regent of Neirkalatia of the Cross. He betrayed his master, took her secrets for himself, and in the name of Mankind, led his army against the Titans of the Coalition at the foot of Mount Olympus.

Neirkalatia of the Cross, had waged a desperate and fearsome defense in the heart of her stronghold. In her desperation, she established a direct connection with the final Spire of Shiggoth, which in turn had a direct connection with the Central ley line. The power would, of course, eventually destroy her bodily form, but she would have sufficient time to end her attackers and ensure that her crux was properly bound.

But one does not tap into the anchor of Merlin of the Line without cost. Had she been more prudent, she may have gone unnoticed, and may have succeeded. But she was reckless. She poured all of her Will into establishing the connection, and as such, he became aware of the encroachment. He knew the time was right to sacrifice the Central ley, and in the instant he made the decision, all of its power was directed through the connection to Neirkalatia and every aspect of her, her Will, her Time, her Self, and her crux were burned through to the core.

The Coalition fell that day.

It came at a great cost to The Three. KriXiang of the Glass had sacrificed himself, after a fashion. His anchor of power, an incomplete and yet perfect reflection of itself, was turned upon two of the Coalition: Yanotuk of the Cups and Kari of the Cube. KriXiang had sealed the three of them in a place beyond Time. The Three became Two, and the knowledge of a number of objects of terrible power were lost beyond Time as well.

It would soon come to be known that two aspects of Kari and Yanotuk had survived the Sealing. The Cup of Dawn, and a single Box of Orden. The loss of the Boxes of Orden was a blessing; the three of them combined represented such a vast destructive potential that Merlin had at times considered directly challenging Kari for control of them. The loss of the Cup of Midnight was a

horrific tragedy; it was instrumental in one of his more crucial plots, and the lost centuries would ultimately account for billions upon billions of deaths. Yet another sacrifice.

But, Merlin also had Ελαολογος, the master artificer. She had arrived to Albion centuries before, after having successfully reproduced the Rod of Ἄγκυρας. The original was as large as a stave, with multiple cores of several creatures whose properties lay in synergy with each other, and could easily amplify the caster's power. When miniaturized, however, its power was greatly reduced. When reduced to a single core, it became, at best, a useful little tool for small bits of hedge magick. At worst, however, it was a crutch, and could potentially limit the magical development of an entire region.

Deep Magic is difficult. It requires the proper state of mind, the ability to hold multiple realities in one's thoughts, to manipulate both in synchrony with each other. When cast properly, it can yield awesome, yet dangerous results. Many people have the potential for Deep Magic. Fewer people have the resources to pursue and cultivate this talent. Even fewer have the required skill to do anything useful with this, without years of training.

When using a Rod of Ἄγκυρας, even a fledgling wizard can violate the most fundamental laws of nature and produce water out of the aether. Why would anyone bother to pursue Deep Magic, when such miracles were within the grasp of mere children?

Yet, when wholly reliant upon a Rod of Ἄγκυρας, even the most powerful of potential mages will likely do nothing greater than summon living flame, or temporarily change the Substance of a Form for a matter of minutes. It was with this in mind that Ελαολογος, many years before, had left her lover and traveled to an unfamiliar continent and took a new name and made a new home, and eventually, started a new life.

*THE AFTERMATH**THE FOOTHILLS NEAR ΛΕΙΒΗΘΡΟΧ*

It took over thirty-six hours, but they succeeded. He lost slightly over one half of his men, but they succeeded. He took an arrow to the shoulder, and suffered an inch-deep slice across his leg, but they succeeded. They had broken the lines of the Titans, stormed through the mountain stronghold, and destroyed the Third Tower.

As a result, the Central ley line was lost. Creatures across the land blinked out of existence, those who relied on the ambient magic generated by the connection. More powerful creatures with their own nodes remained, but were diminished. The Muses and the Titans and the Fates and Furies narrowly escaped into another world.

The impact was felt as far as Egypt, where the priests of Ra and Anubis felt the power of their relics die in their hands. It was felt as far as the Arabian Peninsula, where Djinni died in their lamps. It was felt as far as Alto Alentejo, where the Falxian Priests could no longer feel the magic within their rock warrens. But they were free. Man was free to grow and develop a civilization.

Albion, however, was still imprisoned. It had the Eastern ley and the Northern ley, that lay in crux with each other, amplifying their power to the extent that no Tower was needed to anchor it to this world. The peoples in Albion would be held in thrall for generations.

Meldh strode through the camp, still feeling the glorious high of victory. He looked out among his people. He looked out among mankind. He smiled, because he knew that a new dawn was rising, a new dawn where a man would be free to exercise the fullest fruits of his mind; his capacity to reason. He looked out and he smiled for these were his people. He went by many names, one of them meant “protector of mankind”. Although he had long since discarded the name, he took the appellation seriously. These were his people and he was their protector, and they protected him.

He dwelled briefly on the hypocrisy of fighting magic with magic. He dwelled briefly on the pain of loving his people but not trusting them. He quickly moved on, for trust is a deeper bond than love. A parent loves their child, as Heraclius loves his people. But, a parent cannot fully trust the judgment of their children; a parent will afford themselves certain privileges, certain rights that they cannot afford their children. So too was Heraclius the shepherd of his people. At one point in the past, he was one of the chosen, picked (perhaps capriciously) by the Old Ones to help them shape their vision of the world dominated not by man but mages. He was gifted with great power and lore. But he did not turn that gift against men. He was the Protector of Mankind, and he took that honor seriously

As he strode through the camp, he looked upon his men, men who fought valiantly while many of their companions perished. It was, no doubt, a sacrifice, but importantly, they chose the sacrifice. He was not a ruler who would choose for his men. It was not his place to choose whether they should give their lives or not. He offered them the choice and they accepted, because they were men of honor, they were men of foresight, they were men of bravery.

One man had fought with such ferocity that even in the heat of battle, it had caught Meldh's attention. That man had now discarded his battle armor, and was standing in front of a small fire, gazing into its depths, alone. He was middle aged, with a body that was at one point in peak physical condition but now wore the hallmarks of age like a badge of honor. His face was deeply lined. It was a face that had seen much. Perhaps too much. His green eyes were warm, though. Meldh spoke: "We have won a good battle here friend. You fought well."

The man placed his hand on Meldh's shoulder and replied. "But there are still more to be fought. You are a worthy leader. But I fear you may not yet be strong enough for the battles to come. *Egeustimentis*."

CHAPTER SEVEN

EAGERLY STARE

The man placed his hand on Meldh's shoulder and replied. "But there are still more to be fought. You are a worthy leader. But I fear you may not yet be strong enough for the battles to come. *Egeustimentis*"

Meldh existed as an abstraction, his mind existed as a physical structure. The space that Meldh currently occupied, however, was a crude facsimile. It was fuzzy and low fidelity, like a sketch of an artist painting a portrait of a beautiful landscape. The broad strokes of his being were there, open and laid bare for manipulation. But the subtle interweaving of connections that truly made up his being were lost in the amongst the sludge, and as such the intruder did not have complete control. Meldh sensed this, and the intruder responded.

"I do not need to forcibly change your mind, Heraclius Hero."

What manner of magic is this—

“It is the Aletheia Touch, the Touch of Truth. It lays the victim’s mind open in its entirety. Exceptionally powerful magic, yes. But trivially dismissed.”

Who are you?

“I am the one who runs this world. That is to say, I set the world in motion. All of the events that you have witnessed in your lifetime and will ever witness in millennia to come are my doing.”

Then what use do I have to you?

“You are but a mere child to me. A mewling babe. But what I have learned from watching this world spin and dance is that wisdom can be found in the most unlikely of places. People are resources, you must never forget that. Like a shepherd, one must cultivate and husband the flock, or you will see no yield. If you let your flock stagnate, they will do nothing for you. If you do not protect them, they will wither and die.”

“The world grows large, Hero . . . or shall I say, Meldh? An old word, of questionable origin, yet an undeniable meaning. Yes, I rather like that. You asked who I am. I have gone by many names, but you may call me Merlin. Yes, this world grows large, and it is a world that will be shaped by your vision, not mine. The world will and must be ruled by man and reason, not by old gods and whispers, or shamans with their totems of power.”

“I can no longer be the only shepherd of this world. Every era, the world doubles upon itself. No, the world requires an entire flock of shepherds. And someone must herd that flock, Meldh. No matter how much power I can obtain on my own, people are always necessary. Two people will always have more absolute potential than a single person.

And, as it were, it appears that I am operating under a rather strange and very peculiar set of constraints. So to put it simply:
I need help.”

How? And why?

“Inspiration can come from the strangest of places. There are an infinite number of possible ideas and concepts. New ideas can be refactored upon old ideas, and recombined with newer ideas in ways newer still. Those combinations can be further refactored, et cetera, et cetera, ad infinitum. A mind can contain but itself, and as the arrow of time progresses, the possibilities in the world grows exponentially faster than any one person’s capability to understand them all.”

“A simple solution to this is to limit the scope of possibilities, to move the world in the direction of one’s choosing. Which I have done. This is the world of my imagination. But that is precisely the problem: it is an echo chamber. It is time for new input to be introduced. Somewhere in the swirling miasma of possibility, something useful lurks, and I intend to find it.”

You have answered neither the How nor the Why.

“I am not proud to say this, but I simply lack the empathy to properly deal with the masses in the manner that I would prefer. They seem so . . . Alien to me. Imagine, trying to comprehend the mind of a mere insect, trying to empathize with a gnat, to the point where you can predict its behavior, understand what it will do next. I understand human nature, yes. Far too well, some may say. I can tell you as surely as the sun rises the direction that civilization will take, and how to shape it in the direction of my choosing.”

“But ultimately, really how useful is it to point to the sky and say, ‘The sun will rise tomorrow’? That yields no wisdom or knowledge. The sun is a mighty force, it burns with the fury of a God, and so a fool may be inclined to see himself as powerful because he can shade himself from that sun. There is delicate work that must be done in the future, delicate work far more subtle than mere shade. It needs a delicate hand. Someone who . . .

Understands the insects.”

“For example, this spell, if executed with sufficient empathy, would yield a perfect, inviolate reflection of your mind. But as it were, my rendition of it merely produces . . . Ah, how did you put it? ‘A picture of a picture of a landscape’?”

No. ‘Like a sketch of an artist painting a portrait of a beautiful landscape.’

“You see? Executed perfectly, I would be able to pluck those thoughts from your mind before they even had a chance to form for your self to experience them. Your mind, any mind, is simply information. Patterns reflecting patterns, folding in upon themselves endlessly. And yes, you are precisely correct in assuming that this is the basic principle behind your ‘Horcrux’ ritual.”

It is called the ὁρόστυπος.

“Forgive me for using the Latin rendition. Although I do think it’s catchier. Less of a mouthful. Regardless, you will find that there are, in fact, many ways of extending one’s life, of achieving functional immortality. Some of these means are likely as far beyond your comprehension as your Horcrux is beyond that of an ant’s. Others are so simple that it feels like cheating. Others still are simply esoteric and bizarre.”

“It is enough for you to know that as long as you are allied with me, your Form shall be perfect. In exchange for this, I request, not demand, your loyalty and assistance. I expect that you will be able to make far better use of the Aletheia Touch than myself. And I further expect you to make some very strange advances in the world of herpetology. But most importantly, you must be one to fulfill a rather crucial prophecy.”

Prophecy is Delphic nonsense, designed to impress nobility by telling them half what they want to hear and half what they already know.

The voice of the interloper took an abstract form as a quizzical smile. “Oh?”

If our destinies were in any way predetermined, it would be incompatible with my observations. I observe that I can make decisions, that I am a Prime Mover. If I choose to say Fire is my favorite element rather than Water, that is my choice.

“If I asked you then, to tell me the airspeed velocity of an unladen swallow . . . Let’s say, African, for argument’s sake. Could you *choose* to tell me?”

That’s pedantic. That is information which I do not possess. That is not a decision of choice.

“You are precisely correct. You cannot simply make the decision to know something you do not know, just as you cannot simply make the decision to walk through solid stone without the use of magic or tools. Just as you cannot simply make the decision to disobey the will of prophecy.”

That is unfalsifiable.

“Is that so? Then open this box.”

A black box, darker than dark, deeper than the pitchest black, unearthed itself from beneath the flow of time and instantiated within Meldh's mind. Its presence was the absence of presence, it's entire form a negative, defined by the razor-sharp hole that
it appeared to make in the world.
He knew that with a simple exertion of his will, he could open
that box.

"I swear that no harm will come if you choose to open that box."

As surely as he knew that he was capable of opening the box, he also knew that he would not. He knew, somewhere, somehow, that opening the box with irrevocably destroy this world, and all worlds. To open the box would bring about the End of All Things. He could not open the box; he would not open the box.

"I have told you that no harm will come to you or yours should you choose to open the box. And yet, you hesitate."

Meldh considered opening the box simply to prove a point, but he knew this was an idle boast. He knew beyond reckoning that
the box would stay closed until the end of Time.

"You see? There is nothing preventing you, in the laws of nature or physics, from opening that box. In your mind, you are bound only by your free will: you would not make that choice. In reality, you are bound by prophecy. You *cannot* make that choice."

"The world must be consistent with itself. And therein lies the heart of my trouble. As you have been so impatiently thinking throughout this discussion, I have still yet to tell you why I require your assistance. All prophecy is true. But there will come a day when prophecy will no longer be able to guide us.

The choices we make now are 10,000 threads woven through 10,000 needles, and each one must be woven expertly in order for us to continue down the path of life.”

“When that day comes, there is but a single choice that is the crux of the matter, a single decisions, the fundamental decision for all things: life or death? All worlds ultimately narrow to those two.

The paths that lead to death are nearly infinite. The paths that lead to life, on the other hand, are few and precious. The irony of that is not lost to me.”

“My entire life, I have been trying to shepherd this world, all worlds, down that path. There was a time, many ages ago, that I made a crucial mistake, and was fooled by my own power. I gave in to the temptation to believe that because I was a good person, that my actions were in the right. I have had the rest of eternity to contemplate that mistake.”

“Magic binds this world to all others. Using nothing but a small bit of your magic, you can pierce the veil of this universe and reach into another world and bring forth your Will. This provides for possibilities beyond your wildest imagination, but it comes at the expense of salvation. Magic is part of the answer, but it is not THE answer. All paths that travel solely down the road of magic end with death, and that is why you must join me. That is why you *will* join me.”

I do not understand. I suspect you know more about the true nature of magic than any of the scholars of Greece and beyond. So you should know that Magic has been used to defeat death.

“Magic connects this world with all worlds. But the path of life, it must be inviolate. Life can tolerate no death.

Life is a potion in a cauldron, and death is the poison. There can be no compromise; in any compromise, only death can win. Either must destroy all beyond a remnant of the other, for those two spirits cannot exist in the same world. Through the bonds of Magic, we are but a veil away from that world of death. Observe.”

The entirety of the night sky illuminated the interior of Meldh’s mind. An ethereal centaur comprised of stars drew from its back a glittering bow, and let loose an arrow across the night sky. It flew directly into the heart of a great, bejeweled scorpion, and travelled farther, farther away, beyond to the center of something.

“We walk down that path of the Scorpion and the Archer. It points us to a place Beyond Time, beyond reckoning. Every improperly used bit of magic draws us further close to that realm of death, allows it passage into our world. You are familiar with the Ritual of the Subtle Knife?”

I have heard whispers of it from the Necromancers who dwell beyond Carthage. A rope that has hanged a man and a sword that has slain a woman, among other things. It is said to be able to summon a Specter of Death. I had assumed, until now, that it was simply a myth, a legendary retelling of some old bit of lore lost to time.

“It is no myth. In a universe of endless possibilities, it is only inevitable that we encroach into a world that has death as its final endpoint. These are wounds in this world, and with each day we open more. That ritual simply provides a Form to those wounds, a Form that our minds can comprehend. The Specters, you see, they are horrifically dangerous. But in other ways, they are useful, for that which has a physical form can be defeated. Observe.”

ANOTHER BRITAIN

ANOTHER TIME

ANOTHER PLACE

The end had come without noise or notice. One by one, he individually visited his Death Eaters, revealing his return. He spoke of power beyond reckoning, and a new era for Wizardkind. His most loyal lieutenants, he bestowed great gifts upon. His more erstwhile followers were set to other tasks, such as serving as permanently transfigured simulacra of various political figureheads; Scrimgeour, Bones, Thicknesse and the like were as easily replaced as they were murdered.

Alastor Moody was only slightly more difficult to deal with. The following morning's Daily Prophet read:

“THE DARK LORD RETURNS: DUMBLEDORE, BOY WHO LIVED
DEAD”

Beneath the menacing headline was a picture of Not-Amelia-Bones and Not-Alastor-Moody kneeling at the foot of Lord Voldemort who was giving the Hand of Benediction. The message was as clear to the true Moody as it was inscrutable to everyone else: *No one can be trusted. You are not safe. Recant. Relent. Retreat.*

Moody had long ago learned the tactical value of a complete and hasty retreat. You did not live to tangle with as many Dark witches and wizards as Moody if you made it a regular occurrence to charge headlong into almost-certain death. So with a dull pop, the true Alastor Moody disappeared to a safe house whose location was known only to him, and was never heard from again.

Tom Morfin Riddle was the master of life and death. His True Horcrux gave him mastery over life, enabling him to travel freely from vessel to vessel, body to body, soul to soul. His Deathly Hallows gave him mastery over death: The Spirit Stone, rightfully passed from heir to heir. The Elder Wand, forcefully wrested from the hand of his foe. And the True Cloak of Invisibility, bequeathed to him by his mirror self, his shadowform. He was truly king, and God, and as such had abandoned his previous moniker of Lord Voldemort, and chose the simple epithet: *The God King*.

The majority of the Wizarding public simply counted themselves lucky: although the God King was quick to mete out punishment, he was also quick to bestow favors, and as long as they kept their heads down and toed the party line, life was actually not so bad. In fact, it was better in many respects. Gone was the bloated, impotent Ministry of the past, whose sole purpose was to maintain the outdated hegemony, not to better the lives of its subjects. The God King did not need to resort to mean, petty politics in order to extend his reign. Any challengers were simply killed. As such, there were no challengers. But also as such, it freed the Ministry to actually do some good every now and then.

More shrewd members of the Wizarding public recognized Voldemort's change of identity and methods as a brilliant political gambit: history has taught us that tyrants rarely rule longer than a generation or two before being replaced by an ostensibly less tyrannous tyrant. Furthermore, history has also taught us that hope is like a virus, and will take root in the most unlikely of places, breeding and growing until it can no longer be contained. A lesser tyrant will try to quash all hope, and thus allow hope to

proliferate: the hope of revolution. A shrewd ruler knows that hope must be accounted for and allowed to flourish in a controlled fashion. A brilliant ruler will be the very person who provides hope to his subjects. The God King was cruel, yes, but he also brought great wealth to Britain, and His advancements in the realms of health and medicine were staggering. His subjects could live in hope that one day the God King would bestow His blessing upon them.

No one in the Wizarding public knew the true method behind the madness. The truth was that the God King was a man obsessed. Obsessed with a small prophecy he had heard from the lips of a sherry-soaked Divination professor. A prophecy that upon further research was The Prophecy, the one prophecy upon which all others hinged. A prophecy whose fulfillment was the crux of everything. The God King spent most of his days deep within the Department of Mysteries, trying to salvage what he could from the ruined Hall of Prophecy. He sought out and met, under many disguises, with many students of deep, hidden knowledge.

After years of collecting lore, and countless days spent poring over the ancient text, *The Transmygracioun*, the thought of a ritual began to grow in the mind of the God King, the Ritual of the Starfire, a ritual by which prophecy could be fulfilled and the world be saved.

There has always been a Crux upon which the web of prophecy circles itself around. However it is not strictly accurate to say that there is only one Crux. In every world, the Fate of All Things hinges upon a single choice. Who makes the choice? What is the nature of the choice they must make? Only those Outside Time know for certain.

But what is known is that the Choice must be made, and the mere death of one possible vehicle of prophecy would not stop things. The God King knew this much, and he knew that the mantle of the Crux had been passed to him.

What he did not know was that there was another named by prophecy, one who was Fated, in a time of great strife, when all worlds narrow to two, to bring down a great house. A Slytherin boy who had read tales of The Boy Who Lived, who combined the Muggle knowledge of science with the Wizard knowledge of magic and whose legacy was cut tragically short by the God King himself. A Slytherin boy who, emboldened by being Named by Prophecy, took it upon himself to experiment in secrecy, utmost secrecy, with the deepest laws of magic and nature, just like his idol Harry James Potter–Evans–Verres. He made great strides in the field of transfiguration, and had such a fine command that he could manipulate the Form of things on an atomic, even subatomic level. A boy who was desperate enough to overthrow the God King that he would resort to desperate, even insane means.

He was, however, alone, unlike his idol. He had his companion, but unlike his idol, he chose not to seek her counsel. She knew as little of Muggle physics as he did: that is to say, she studied a pair of purloined physics books for a few weeks. She grasped the broad strokes of quantum mechanics without any true understanding. However, she could have been what he needed: a staying hand, someone to shape his curiosity, someone to guide his intellect, someone to tell him, for the love of Merlin and all that is holy, *do not try to find out what happens when you transfigure a cubic millimeter of up quarks, just the up quarks, without any down quarks to bind them!*

“Lawrence, I’m not so sure about this.”

“I am. What would Harry Potter have done? He knew science. WE know science. He gave his life to fight the God King so that we don’t have to.”

“But you don’t even understand what it is you’re doing. You don’t even know what these things really are.”

“Sure I do. They’re the lightest of all elementary particles. They form the basis of neutrons and protons. They have mass, and as such can be Transfigured.”

“No, I don’t mean . . . Look, I can recite an encyclopedia entry, too. But I mean, you don’t really understand what these things will do.”

“Don’t be silly. I’m taking adequate precautions. How much damage could a few cubic centimeters of ANYTHING really do?”

“I still have a bad feeling about this . . . You really should have been sorted into Gryffindor, you know.”

He gave her a quick peck on the cheek, held her hand, and directed his wand at the Knut that lay on the table.

Annabeth and Lawrence were instantly consumed, as was the whole of Hogwarts and most of Scotland. The world itself screamed in pain as it warped beyond recognition, consumed in its entirety by the Void that was created.

In the brief instant of time before his mind was lost, Meldh recognized the Void, or more specifically, recognized the ways it was different. There was no control, no safeguards, no finesse. It was purely unfathomable. It was madness.

The notes of the universe's song stretched interminably, seamlessly shifting from reality to a musical harmony to a single note sustained infinitely. The note slowed, lowered in pitch, lowered, lowered until the individual frequency of the periodic wave became discernible. The frequency stretched further, further. The waves were fewer and fewer between. At some point, there was nothing, no change, no fluctuation, no vibration, nothing.

And somewhere between that nothing and The Nothing, the true horror of Death crashed into Meldh's unprotected mind like the fist of God.

If the reflection of his own mind that the interloper had generated was but a picture of a picture, what he saw now was like he was given new eyes, eyes that could see beyond the veil of time with a clarity so crystalline that it was physically painful for his mind to behold.

What he saw was beyond terrifying. There were no expectations for the force to conform to in order to protect him. It was new, to him and to the majority of mankind. As such, it was unknown: there was nothing for his mind to flinch towards or away from. He was simply hit head on with the full impact of that horror beyond horrors.

It was Death, pure, glorious, powerful, terrible Death. The point at the end of all paths. He saw the universe run like some clockwork automaton, powered by a cosmic spring, tick tick, tick tock, tock tock. He saw the spring slowly wind down, and he saw the brave, the intelligent, the cunning, the diligent, all fighting with the entirety of their being to no avail, like a stone falling from a cliff. All the motion, the action, the vibrancy of life, fighting against the anticipation, hurtling towards that inexorable end.

He could live to be 10,000 years, 10,000 times over, and it would be of no use. That end could come. That end would come one day. The hopelessness of it all consumed him. His brain, in sheer reflexive self-defense, began throwing as many happy memories as possible into that void: the less happiness he clung on to, the less brutal the sting of loss would be.

It was betrayal, which made the sensation all the worse. His own mind, willingly turning against his own values, in exchange for an infinitesimal bit of respite against an elemental force that did not care to bargain. It was the dark center that dwelled at the heart of all mankind. He would commit any crime, sacrifice any virtue, defile anything holy, for no atrocity could even be a speck of dust in comparison to the darkness he was approaching.

Somewhere in Meldh's mind, an idea lurked. It was hidden, out of sight, but it was there, waiting to be uncovered, if he only knew where to look. His mind did not want to look. His mind wanted to die. His mind begged for death. Death would be preferable to this Death.

Kill me.

Please.

Gone. Gone. The abstraction layer stripped away. Bare metaphor, unplaced structures, synaptic connections. Separate. Separate. Regroup. Fight. Fight. Fight.

A hasty retreat. The king was in check. Sacrifice the knight. Sacrifice the rook. Save the king. Retreat. Relent. Recant. Pawn to E7. Sacrifice. Regroup. Sacrifice. Reclaim control. Take your position, no matter how small. Take it.

Meldh fought his own mind, fought the instinct of sacrifice, partitioned away the truly important parts of his mind and used the rest as a buffer. It afforded him a few precious moments. His memories, his thoughts, his happiness, they were all being stripped away, burned through at an alarming rate, but Meldh was still intact, for the time being.

Fight.

He thought back to all the things he had learned, from all the people he had met, from the simpletons in the asylum all the way to the Old Gods themselves. He thought back to the hope of which they spoke. The hope. The hope. He fought for that hope.

He focused that hope, harnessed it, and looked towards Death with new eyes. He saw Death, feasting upon his very soul: a tiny ball of light that was floating towards its . . . Mouth?

Its gaping mouth? Surrounded . . . Surrounded by a black, tattered cloak. A rasping hiss. Beneath the cloak, a tall, thin, naked man, obscenely painful to behold . . . But alive. Tangible. Something almost human. Something that could ultimately be defeated.

ENOUGH.

He had already seen Death. He had already beaten Death. He had died before, he would die again, and he would not give up. And although this was more than just the mere death of his body, although this was the Death of All Things, he would still fight. And with his Steel and his Magic and his Will and his Life and his Time, he flung his weapons against his foe, his final adversary.

I . . .

The light built up within him. He directed it downward, looking upward, always upward, always to the stars, never looking back. He would not look back. He could not look back. Close the box. Ever upward.

I will...

He had wings. He was Wing. He flew to the sun, and beyond. Even as his wings melted, he flew higher, ever higher, never looking down, never looking back.

I will never...

He was a single point of light in a dead, uncaring, clockwork universe. As he hurtled past the infinite darkness of space, he saw the others stars like him, the other points of light, shining brightly, fighting ceaselessly against the void, giving meaning to an otherwise meaningless collection of symbols, rules, laws, and patterns.

I will never stop...

Some of the lights were dim, some of the lights were dimming, they were the ones in danger. To them, he gave a measure of his Life, his Light. He found that the more he gave, the more he had to give, so he gave more. He gave more, and more. He gave his fire, and that fire grew, he burned through everything he had and more.

I will never stop fighting.

He directed that inferno outward, in all directions, in a single direction: backward, downward, behind. He directed it against the stagnation and the death that chased him, that chased everyone. He directed it at the hideous, all-consuming beast that lived

beneath that tattered black cloak. The beast greedily and happily consumed the fire, but Meldh would not stop fighting, would not stop burning.

It was not just his star that burned, that raged against the beast, it was every star in every universe, every star that ranged with hot, angry resolve, and burned, burned, burned to live.

*You are not invincible, I have beaten you once.
You are not inevitable, so long as we have a choice.*

*You may one day claim me, but I will return, as I have before.
You may claim others, but I shall see to it that they too return to fight.
I fight you with the power of my mind, with all of my life.*

*I am Heraclius Hero, and I will fight you.
I am Alexander, Protector of Mankind, and I will fight you.
I am Meldh, descendent of the Ancient Gods, and I will fight you.
I am Man, every man, woman, child and beyond, who has ever
thought to shine a candle into the darkness.*

And I will never stop fighting.

Somewhere in the distant corners of a distant universe, the
sound of wings: a tattered black cloak, drifting away into
nothingness.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE SUDDEN STOP

THE PALACE AT ARCADIA

903 C.E.

“**K**night to C3.” “Clever. Now, tell me more about this woman. Bishop to C5.”

“We are kindred spirits. She was chosen by one of yours: Gom’Jorbol of the Rod. She is an artificer. She . . . creates things. Rook to E8, check.”

“Ah yes . . . Little Gus. That problem has taken care of itself. King to F1. And this is why you are enamored with her, because of her, ah, creative potential?” He trailed off with a smile.

“Don’t be crude. Yes, she is beautiful. But beauty is cheap. We are all beautiful,” Meldh gestured at Merlin and the glittering palace of glass in which they currently sat. Even their Shatranj board was of such superlative quality that to disturb it seemed somehow profane. “Bishop to E6.”

“Bishop to B6. Your queen is captured. And, she has sent word to you, I hear. We had bade her to make her leave of Greece centuries before, to attempt to recover the Cup of Midnight.

From my understanding, even though it was lost, she has been pining over it for ages.”

“Bishop to C4, check. Yes, she has. She has been attempting to recreate it. I suspect she has succeeded.”

A pause. Considering the moves . . .

“King to G1. And if she has?” Another pause.

“Knight to E2, check.”

“King to F1.” Another pause. “And if she has?”

Merlin repeated.

“She is useful.”

“I never said she was not.”

“I . . . I have brought this up before, as have you. We have sought to make our union a Triumverate for some time. Have you reconsidered—”

“Make your move.”

“Have you reconsidered your position?”

“Make your move.”

He sighed. “Knight to D4.”

“Thank you. She must prove herself to us, not the other way around. Until that happens, no I have not reconsidered.

King to G1.”

“Knight to E2, check.”

“Testy, testy. King to F1.”

“Knight to C3, check.”

“King to G1.”

“Pawn to B6.”

“My, my. Have I struck a nerve? Queen to B4.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Rook to A4.”

The banter had slowed; Merlin was actually paying attention to the game, now. “Queen to . . . B6.”

An immediate response: “Knight to D1.”

A pause. "Pawn to H3."

Meldh actually laughed. "Rook to A2."

"King to H2."

"Knight to F2. If she has succeeded, what are your plans?"

"Rook to E1. Just ask me if I plan to kill her."

"My Rook to E1, thank you for that. Do you plan to kill her?"

"Queen to D8, check. No, I do not."

A slight hint of relief. "Bishop to F8.

Then what are your plans?"

Merlin studied the board for a moment. The moment stretched into a beat, and the beat stretched into a pause. "Damnit." He swept his hand across the board and knocked the pieces to the floor. The White King shattered when it struck the floor. "Knight to E1, Bishop to D5, Knight to F3, Knight to E4, Queen to B8, Pawn to B5, Pawn to H4, Pawn to H5, Knight to E5, King to G7, King to G1, Bishop to C5, check, Knight to F1, Knight to G3, check, King to E1, Bishop to B4, check, King to D1, Bishop to B3, check, King to C1, Knight to E2, check, King to B1, Knight to C3, check, King to C1, Rook to C2, checkmate, you win. Go, and speak to your lady, find what you can, and meet me upon the Shores once you have news."

"Yes, master."

"And, Meldh?"

"Yes?"

"Brilliant game."

"Thank you."

In a world rife with possibilities, such as one containing Magic, it is no small wonder that many clever individuals have discovered the secret (or one of many secrets) to what some might call “immortality”. A clever theorist would come up with at least half a dozen means of achieving this goal, without even trying particularly hard. And yet, there are so few to ascend to the ranks of the deathless. This speaks to something; perhaps the stolid devotion of Wizardkind to their outmoded ideals of “light” and “dark”. Or, perhaps it speaks more to those who glibly remark on what should be possible in theory, without paying any heed to the world at large around them.

Regardless, there are those who have ascended. There is an upper limit to what one can accomplish by oneself before simply growing bored; this is a fact that applies to the immortal even more so. So it is only natural that like would seek like, for companionship, guidance, wisdom, a different perspective, or simply for entertainment.

Further, in a world where knowledge is tantamount to power, those who are driven by curiosity, and have the means to pursue that curiosity for as long as they wish, have an undue amount of influence on the course of events in the world. Short-sighted scholars of Magical history have suggested that Greece was once the location of “Atlantis” (whatever that might mean), and that the blood of the ancients flows most strongly there, and this must be why Greece has played such a central role in history.

The reality of the situation, (as reality often is), happens to be far more arbitrary and capricious. A handful of Ancients once made a particular mountain their home, eons ago, and over the ages they attracted more of their kind like a lightning rod. They were not always discrete with their secrets, and so their numbers and influence only multiplied.

Thomas Malthus would not be born until nearly a millennium later, so perhaps their slightly blasé attitude towards population growth may be excused. But in spite of their numerous peccadilloes with mere mortals, among them was one rule that seemed to go unspoken yet universally understood: it does not do for a God to fall in love with a God.

Trust is delicate and finite. It is the ultimate expression of entropy. Trust is a delicate menagerie of spun-glass sculptures, resting precariously upon the shelf of one's psyche. All it takes is one careless hand, and the world comes toppling down, never to be recovered.

A life can be reconstructed, the fractured pieces of one's soul picked back up and stitched together, placed in a new vessel to persist. One can pierce the veil of the worlds, like an arrow shot into the ether, peeling back the layers of time in order to reach back into a distant era where the mind and the being was still intact. But that arrow shoots in both directions, for what is done is done, has been done, and always will be done. If an entire life can be reconstructed from the faintest echoes of time and space, so too can a memory of one single mistake.

And unfortunately, immortality provides one with an eternal lifetime of opportunities to make mistakes.

GLEN NEVIS, SCOTLAND

903 C.E.

"I know that it's unbecoming to gush over one's own creation, but this could change everything." Helga Hufflepuff grinned widely at her companion, Hankerton Humble.

"The Cup of Midnight . . . I know that you— Wait. How certain are you that this room is secure?"

"Quite certain. Godric has quite the talent for such charms."

Humble winced at the name. "Yes. Godric. And where is he now?"

Helga cocked her eyebrow. Her eyes were suspicious, but her face was smiling. "Do I detect jealousy?"

He barked out a laugh, just a fraction of an instant too quickly. They had known each other for a long time, perhaps too long. She immediately knew from the clipped tone and the just-too-quick reaction that it was a forced laugh. She knew. And he knew that she knew. Attempts to dissemble would be pointless. "Yes. Obviously. He is young. He is objectively attractive; I have seen him when he bathes at the river."

At this, Helga laughed, and this time it was genuine. "It's not even midday, and already you put such ideas in my mind."

Hankerton smiled at this, as well. "The lady of the house having a lascivious tryst with the virile servant boy . . . Well, clichés are clichés for a reason".

She ran her hand through his hair. "Please. Yes, they are clichés because they are so blindingly obvious that one would have to be a fool to fall into their trap. Now, stop being silly. Will you be a dear and animate this for me? I don't think the effect will be quite as spectacular if I demonstrate on something of my own creation."

“Expecto Patronum”, he whispered. Hankerton Humble’s life force, a very small measure of it, shot from his wand and into the clay golem that Helga Hufflepuff held in her hand. It twisted back, sleepily, stretched out its arms, and looked up expectantly. He could see from its body language that it was a bit annoyed. The thin slit on its face split open and it spoke.

“Lovely. I suppose I should not get too attached to this life. It won’t be much of a loss, I can barely think properly with such a rudimentary form.”

“But you are sentient, yes?” Humble asked his alternate self.

“Yes, although that is exactly what a non-sentient golem would say, now, isn’t it? So to that end: 927 πατατα.”

He mentally noted the code, and would not use it again. “Yes, he is sentient.”

Helga watched the proceedings with interest. “Perfect. Now, observe.” She delicately cradled her jeweled teacup. It did not look like the original Cup of Midnight, which was deliberately grandiose, meant to serve as a stark contrast to the plain wooden Cup of Dawn. But its essence was unmistakable. The thick black Nothing contained within its bonds poured out slowly, a single drop flowing through the air.

There was enough Void within the Cup to bind the entirety of life, both now and forever. Used in such a fashion, it would render the cup useless forever afterwards. But there was also enough Void within the Cup to selective bind one person at a time for as long as one cared to do so.

The Void was diffuse, almost transparent, and settled upon the golem. It looked up, quizzically. It felt different.

The man who called himself “Hankerton Humble” was, in no uncertain terms, the world’s most foremost expert in the subject of mental magic. He could see the subtle shift in behavior even in something as rudimentary as an animate clay statue. “There is . . . a degree of flexibility to the control you can exert, correct?”

“Yes. It is similar in function to the Unbreakable Vow.”

Yes, that made sense. The field of mind control was either achingly simple, or absurdly complex, depending on whether you were considering the ends or the means. If one is simply concerned with extracting a specific behavior from a specific subject, once scarcely needs magic at all. Criminals from all walks of life, magical or not, are quite familiar with a shockingly effective spell whose incantation sounds something like, *“Do what I say or I will torture and kill your family.”*

Humble had performed experiments to this effect, examining the inner workings of a person’s mind when put under duress. Like the limbs of an animal exposed to an electric current, the mind would instinctively flinch and react in response to certain stimulus. The “Lethe Touch”, as it had come to be known, operated on this basic principle, albeit on a more granular level. Further, it lent those changes a degree of permanency with its magic.

Spells such as *Legilimens* or concoctions such as a Love Potion, worked on a different premise entirely. They created a compulsion within the subject’s mind, as difficult to ignore as a loud bang or a bright flash of light. The greater the magic of the caster, the more intense the stimuli. The greater the will of the victim, the easier it is to ignore. But because this is an outside intrusion, the mind actively works to resist it, to eject it, and as such the magic required to sustain such a compulsion grows exponentially over time.

The Unforgivable curse, *Imperio*, operated in a different fashion as well: the connection between the victim's mind and body was, to an extent, severed, and replaced by the will of the caster. Such bonds between the soul and body are not permanent, they are in fact regenerated on a moment by moment basis, so without a sustaining flow of magic from the caster, the victim's minds would regain complete control within an hour or so. This meant that for *Imperio* to be truly effective, it required the conscious attention and direction of the caster, rendering it impractical in many and most cases.

The old adage, "It is easier to create than destroy", is actually quite untrue when it comes to Magic, and especially so in the realm of mind control. The mind is quite capable, (perhaps too capable), of visualizing abstract concepts; it's the fine details it struggles with. Tell a person to think of a loved one, and they'll have no trouble picture their face. They'll then be asked to draw that same face from memory and they'll likely fail miserably.

One of the most simplistic explanations of Magic is that it simply completes these mental images from their patterns. It's a very neat and tidy explanation, (which is why it fell into such favor during the Muggle Dark Ages), and it conveys in simple terms one of the key limitations of Magic: Form requires Substance. Magic can take the imaginary Form of a cat, and make it real. An imaginary cat may run like a cat, purr like a cat, stalk like a cat. After all, this is what truly makes a cat a cat. And yet, it does not bleed like a cat, or digest like a cat. The chemicals in its brain do not interact like that of a cat. All of the mechanical automation that powers the rules and symbols behind a "cat" are fundamentally lacking. There is no Substance to power the Form, and as a result, such creations are rarely long for this world.

The realm of the mind, however, is one of pure Form, and so it is not subject to the same limitations. Creating an idea is trivial. Destroying one is nearly impossible. Even Oblivate does nothing more than sever the connection between a memory and the mind that created it. The memory still exists, it is merely hidden in the mind. A few years, or decades, and those connections will eventually be rediscovered, like a message in a bottle that eventually washes back ashore. But the Unbreakable Vow...

Sacrifice has always been a subject that has fascinated and stymied practitioners of Magical Theory since the dawn of Magic. Something Sacrificed simply cannot be reclaimed. The mechanics of this are hotly debated and not well understood. The end result, however, is inarguable. The Unbreakable Vow quite literally sacrifices the portion of the mind which allows for a certain course of action to even be contemplated. A person Bound in such a way is truly bound for all time. And if this Cup of Midnight operated on the same principle...

"You could destroy the world with this device. You could obliterate the minds of every living being. The Cup would be broken, afterwards, but so too would the world," Humble said, in quiet awe.

"Yes, I suppose that's true. But then again, there are countless devices of power of which the same could be said. Even without an artifact, I could think of half a dozen ways to cause mass death without even really trying hard... Transfigure a bit of poison into a town's water supply... Let loose a hint of Fiendfyre in the middle of a crowded village... Use *Salinos* to salt the ground and destroy a region's food supplies... Transmute—"

“Right, right, I get the point. And of course, you would not use it in such a way. But, I do not understand how it functions beyond the scope of a single victim, or perhaps a handful.”

“Ah, yes, the recursion. It took centuries to finally achieve the necessary breakthroughs, and no small Sacrifice. You see, the Cup contains itself, and within it, a piece of my being that powers the recursion.”

Hankerton’s eyes widened. “And so . . . Unless you were to pass on its secrets to another, you would be unable to recreate another.”

Helga Hufflepuff’s eyes narrowed, “I sense an ulterior motive to that question, but I was never one for plotting. Tell me why you ask, and be truthful.”

Hankerton replied swiftly and truthfully, “You know that I am deeply concerned with the fate of this world, and the threats that we may pose to it. Such a device in the hands of someone malevolent, or even someone foolish, could spell disaster. But you know this. And because you cannot be coerced to make another, the only two points of failure are the Cup itself, and your knowledge of its secrets.”

“Yes, dear.” She walked over to him, and stood close behind him. The back-and-forth, the assumptions and completing of each other’s thoughts, she enjoyed this. She ran her hands through his hair. “Go on.”

“You would have safeguards in place. The same safeguard for both the Cup and its secrets. Something preventing them from being taken by force, or coercion, or duress.”

“Yes,” she spoke. She was in front of him now, her hands wrapped around his waist, her lips softly brushing his ear as she whispered, “Tell me more.”

“A trap, something triggered either by a word, a thought, or a deed. Or, more likely, any of the above. You are powerful enough to resist the majority of attacks, but in the event of the unknown, anyone who accesses the Cup, or the knowledge of its creation, without your explicit consent would trigger the trap.” He thought for a moment, “It would Sacrifice both, to put them safely out of reach, but to what end..? Simply killing the intruder would not be sufficient. Ah, yes . . . It would Sacrifice the intruder as well. At that point, what is summoned forth by the Sacrifice is inconsequential, no?”

“I wouldn’t say that. It’s an alarm, of sorts. It would alert me,” she slid her hands down his chest as he spoke, “Me and those that I love.” At that word, Humble inhaled sharply. “Would you like to see it? Would you like to . . . Enter me?”

He let out a soft moan of pleasure,
 “Oh god, yes. *Egeustimentis*”

Her mind was a towering castle, a picturesque landscape, a fractal pattern beautiful in its simplicity and infinite in its complexity. He was there as a guest, not as an intruder. Sometimes seeing something from the inside out was far more effective than simple words at communicating a concept. Further, in here there was no need for aliases or secrets. No need for “Helga Hufflepuff” or “Hankerton Humble”. They were simply Meldh and Ollivander. Their physical forms were, of course, perfect. Because why would they not be? But their mental avatars were beyond perfect, they were the very Platonic ideal of Perfection itself, made real. They strode hand in hand through the glittering palace of her mind. As they walked the halls, he saw libraries, laboratories, factories, workshops, vaults.

Vaults. Hidden things.

Secrets.

Not now. They continued to what was obviously a throne room, the Crown Jewels of her being. He was looking at the Holy Grail. The complexity of it stretched even his own comprehension, a comprehension honed by centuries of study. As ancient as he was, she was older, and her mind could contain entire concepts that he still struggled to simply understand. She sensed his struggle, and obligingly condensed the concept of the Cup into something more manageable.

The Cup was endlessly pouring itself onto its victims. Not pouring its contents but actually pouring itself. Over and over, slowly making its way around the world of life.

"I don't understand, why the limitation? If it truly contains itself why can it not duplicate? Why can it only fully Bind life once, before being rendered unusable?"

"Simply physically reproducing it is insufficient. Does your reflection have a mind of its own?"

"It depends on the mirror. "

"*True.*" A pause. The number Three began to pop up in the room countless times. Hundreds of times. The room began to be filled with Threes. "*How many Threes are there?*"

Instinctively he tried to count and then roughly estimate, but he knew that this was a riddle of words. He stared at the numbers. After time he spoke: "One. There is only one 'Three'."

"Correct. Writing down the number 'Three' a thousand times does not change its properties, nor does it give the concept more

significance or weight or meaning. Three is simply Three. And the Cup is simply the Cup. Another could create a Cup of their own, certainly, but it would be theirs and theirs alone; it would have powers unto itself. But such secrets are ones I shall not pass down."

The Vaults of her mind were locked with the absence of chains. There were simply no doors, no latches, no surface with which to gain purchase. He could see the intricate webs of magic meant to masquerade as such, webs which would not only destroy the intruder, but further destroy the secrets they sought.

He also saw, beyond the Vaults, a number of lesser compartments, ones which contained secrets no less powerful, but far less guarded. There was one that caught his attention, a fluid room of portraits and memories. He would have been able to resist, if not for a single face he saw, reflected from deep within the folds of the room.

Godric.

She had given him permission to enter her, and so she did not at first detect his absence. It was not until she spoke and heard no response that she realized the violation.

She instantiated next to him, as he roughly pawed through the volumes of memories, all related to that one face, that haughty, insulting, proud young face. It reminded him of himself, in his youth, his true youth. Perhaps it reminded her as well, perhaps that is why—

—The concussive wave of power that forced Meldh from her mind shattered windows, rattled dishes off shelves, and forced the door

to the kitchen off of its hinges. It was enough to physically knock him backward into a table, which splintered from the blow.

“You stupid, stupid bastard,” she hissed.

Meldh matched her gaze with anger. “Yes, I suppose I am. To give my heart, to make myself vulnerable to—”

“No, NO, you stupid child. THINK. Think about what you saw, tell me what you saw, you unforgivable . . . IDIOT!”

Silence.

“Tell me!”

Her words carried with them a palpable hint of power, magic made manifest as needle sharp shrapnel that flew across the room. Meldh instinctively raised his hand in front of his face. The impact was not severe, but it was enough to draw blood. “I saw passion, I saw feelings, I saw the undeniable loops and whorls of Love. The Touch of Truth is inviolate. What I saw can’t be faked, you can’t tell me that —”

“What did you see?! Did you see action? Did you see deed?” She advance on him, hotly. He briefly faltered.

“I—”

“You saw nothing. What you saw were the idle fantasies of someone who has lived twice your span, and nothing more. Do you mean to tell me you hold no unacted lust in the dark heart of your mind?”

He saw the opportunity to seize the high ground and he made his move. “Yes. Yes, that is what I mean to tell you. I open my mind to you, lay myself bare. Look. Look inside me.” He roughly grabbed her hand, and placed it forcefully on his shoulder. “Say the words. Say them! Look, and tell me what you see.”

She tried to pull her hand away, but he held it firmly. “And you think your chastity gives you the right to violate me? You think that gives you the right, you think that that justifies— Unhand me, child.” She pulled hard again, and he yanked roughly pulling her close to him. She glared at him, and the temperature in the room dropped several degrees. “I could tear you apart with the flick of my wrist.”

“Could you? Could you really?” With his free hand he shoved her backward, and then slapped her. Hard. “Go on then, do it. Tear me apart.” They stared at each other for a hot moment. The air was electric. Frost formed on the windows and the metallic silverware that lay unused on the table.

Nothing.

“Well?” He demanded. When he received no response, he raised his free hand up again, and grab the braid of her hair. He yanked it back, and pulled her body against his.

As he turned away she spit squarely in his face. He reared his hand back to slap her again, but with the flick of her finger he was hurled backward. He crashed hard into the wall, and the shelves behind him collapsed. He briefly considered a magical counterattack. But from the corner of his eye he glimpsed a copy of one of Godric’s research journals on the desk. He grabbed the book and roughly tore a few pages from them, used them to wipe the saliva from his face, and then spit the blood that had pooled in his mouth. He crumpled the ruined paper, threw it in her face, and turned on his heels to leave. “Give Godric my regards.”

As he took a step, the door slammed shut, and the icy chill that had previously washed the room now dissipated with a THUMP and waves of oppressive heat coursed across Meldh’s body.

Ollivander spoke, angrily: “You enter my house as a guest. You entered my *mind* as a guest. You defiled my house, you defiled my mind. You insulted me, you attacked me, and you think you can just leave? With no consequences?” She grabbed him roughly by the collar of his robes. “I would have given you everything. But you couldn’t *just trust me*.”

“Would have? You *would have* given me everything? I did! I *did* give you everything. I left my kingdom, my country. I gave you everything I have to give. My love. My soul.” He gestured angrily and the simple leather thong around her neck that wore a small silver cross. “Why wasn’t that enough? Why was I never enough for you?”

The anger still hot in her voice, she replied, levelly. “Because you are weak. Look at you, you petulant child. I do not even need to enter your mind to see the tears forming in the corner of your eyes, you boy, you eunuch. I don’t need to violate your trust to see the way your shoulders shake at the insult, to see your fragile male ego come crashing down at the very thought of a woman having an independent desire. Look at you. You are weak. You’re disgusting.”

He angrily pulled her towards him again, “And I don’t need to enter your mind to see your heavy breathing, your dilated pupils . . . The slick sheen of sweat, the elevated pulse . . .” He gripped the back of her dress and twisted, ripping them, and then he forced his hands into the tear. “There are certain signs that are unmistakable.”

His slid his hands into the tear in the dress, and caressed her sternum, down to her stomach, down—

With a shuddering moan, she pulled his mouth to hers and they kissed, passionately.

He knew that he should turn away. He knew that if he had courage and integrity, he would turn around, walk away from the window, and go back to his chores as if he saw nothing. What was her business was her business. He had certainly seen the two argue more heatedly than this on more than one occasion. He knew the man was not good enough for her. He knew he should stop them. But he also knew he should walk away and leave her to her own business. Oftentimes, the bravest thing a person can do is to make a difficult choice, knowing that neither one may be right.

Instead, Godric Gryffindor did neither. He stayed at the windowsill, and he watched.

KNOCKTURN ALLEY
903 C.E.

Rupert Scabior gazed nervously into the darkness of Knockturn Alley. "I'm here, sir, I have him," he called to no one in particular. He thrust forward the unconscious body of the prisoner, with a sack over his head and his arms tied behind his back. Not that it would have mattered, as the prisoner was fully unconscious.

Rupert was no saint, by any stretch. But this whole arrangement made him deeply uncomfortable. Even though he had to verify, firsthand, the horrific nature of his victims' deeds, even though he personally took no part in the enacting of their punishment, he still felt a twinge of guilt and regret.

But, the pay was good, and he had a family. The only dream he had left in his small, miserable life was that his daughters would be able to rise up beyond their station and make something of themselves and their family name. And this man, his mysterious employer, had seen to it that they had the audience of the greatest tutors in the land.

Inky black shadows writhed in the darkness, and a man in a billowing black cloak stepped into view, surveying the scene. “Good, good. And you are certain, completely certain of his crimes?”

“Yes, master.” Scabior produced the vial containing the silvery, undulating wisps of memory tainted by oily black slicks of Nightmare. “His own niece, sir. This is plucked straight from her unknowing mind.”

The man in the the cloak knelt down and put a hand to the prisoner’s shoulders, whispering a few words. He nodded with satisfaction. “Yes, this will do. Did you heal her afterwards, erase the traces of this Nightmare?”

Scabior looked around, nervously. He never understood this part of their process, but he had done it dutifully, nonetheless. “Yes, master. She will remember nothing. She slept with a smile for the first time in many seasons.”

“Good.” The man removed the sack from the prisoner’s head and reached his hand into the prisoner’s mouth, who began to awake groggily. Reflexively, still mostly asleep, he tried to speak, but, with several fingers probing roughly inside his mouth, he of course could not. The man’s forefinger and thumb found their way to the back molar, and with preternatural strength, he yanked the tooth roughly from the prisoner’s head. The shock and pain immediately roused him from his stupor, and he began to scream as blood filled his mouth and poured onto the street. The cry was clipped short by—

“AVADA KEDAVRA!”

The green light shot out and illuminated the alleyway briefly, until the entirety of the light was drawn into the single tooth he held in his fingers. When the green glow subsided, he turned towards Scabior. “You may go.”

Scabior needed no further prompting, and quickly made his leave.

Meldh holstered his wand, and with a swift gesture, plucked one of the eyes from the socket of the murdered man. He poured the vial of the child’s nightmare onto the lump of flesh, and it continued to pour, effulgently. As it touched the ruined eye, it reacted, turning a bright flaming red, and it continued overflowing, liquid flame splashing onto the ground, flame which flickered but produced no heat. It poured and poured, grew and grew, and slowly poured itself into the form of a chariot drawn by a horse. Still clutching the tooth, Meldh stepped into the chariot and was carried away.

ON THE SHORES OF THE LAKE OF TEETH, WHERE THE BLACK HILLS END

T’IR INNA N-ÓC

The lake of teeth was quiet at this time of daynight. The bilious, sulphurous stench that emerged from the archway that stood on the Isle of Woe would not begin to belch forth until at least Midnight. The archway and the forgotten statue of Adrienne the Witch, a hero from a bygone era, were the only two signs that any sort of intelligent life had consciously touched this place.

The archway cast a shadow, although from what direction the void-sun shone was unknowable. Not unknown: unknowable. Within that shadow were more shadows still, and within those further more. From somewhere within the fractal reflection deep within the fractal reflection, a shift occurred, which reverberated exponentially out into this constructed world. The shadows which contained shadows swirled, accommodating their new host.

The black shadow of the first figure stood in stark contrast to the white mist that comprised the second figure. The black shadow held a tooth in his finger, turning it over, inspecting it before flicking it casually into the lake.

“I bring news.”

The second figure waited, expectantly, and gave no acknowledgment.

“The Cup of Midnight is at last recovered. She has recreated it. I’ve seen to it myself.”

The white mist nodded in satisfaction.

“But, please. See that no harm comes to her. I— ”

The white mist held up a single hand, silencing the shadow. After a few tense moments of consideration, the mist spoke: “No harm will come to her. In fact, I will give her her heart’s desire.”

The black shadow shuddered at this, as very rarely did such a promise end well. “Thank you. Please, just . . . Be kind. She is a good person. She is on our side, whether she realizes it or not.”

“I do not know what you take me for, but I am no monster. She will come to no harm under my hand. Where I you, I would hold yourself to the same standard.”

“I, that’s not—”

But the white mist had already dissipated, for midnight had come sooner than expected. The plumes of sulfur belched forth from the arch, casting aside the last wisps of mist, leaving the inky fractal shadow alone with its thoughts.

Tír inna n-Óc endured.

DIAGON ALLEY

903 C.E.

He was running in circles. He was bound by a rope, stretched beyond its limits. Or, was it a Line? The rope, or the Line, it was staked into the ground. He was a dog, chained. The Line was staked into something important, terribly important, the most important thing. And yet. It eluded him. It was always eluding him.

Maybe. Maybe if you run fast enough. So he ran. He ran faster. He ran fast, so fast, so fast. Around, and around, and around. He ran so fast that he ceased to simply be a point attached to a Line. He was a blurred circle, jagged around the edges but if you screwed up your eyes it looked like one solid shape. A circle, an endless, strange loop of frustration and exasperation. Twice per go-around, he would cross that . . . that thing, that the Line was staked it. A Path? A Path that stretched backwards into eternity and forward into eternity. But the Line. The Line took the path to a dark place. A dark eternity.

When he crossed the path the first time, he could see them. Her flowing hair. His strong jaw, a family of his own.

He saw happiness. And behind the happiness, only a slight fear, the fear of some great Death that was eons away. But that fear was bolstered by hope. Not the empty wish of a dreamer, but the assured hope of an entire civilization fighting together, gladiators. Fighting the Titan, with hope as their weapon, made sharp by the knowledge that from now until the End, if that End came, they would fight, they would fight, they would fight with all of their soul and all of their being and everything they had and would ever have.

But then they were gone. They were so close. But he only saw them for a brief instant as he ran by them. He could reach out and touch them. He did. But they disappeared as he ran, and he kept running, desperately, to see them again, to feel that hope. But each time, he would cross the Path again. And in that world, it was a desolate, empty place. Stagnant. It didn't smell like Death because there was nothing to smell. An empty, horrifying Nothing. And he wanted nothing than to run away from that Nothing, horrified.

So he did.

He ran and ran and ran until he reached the Path again, until he could feel that brief instant of hope. He kept running. He had to. He was Bound by that Line. The Line. It was always the Line. He knew, somehow he knew. There was no intuition, it was pure reason, but that reason worked from a premise that was lost to Time. Nonetheless, it was true. True but impossible to prove. As true as this is a lie is false. If he could break free of the Line, he could make everything whole, make everything right. The Line took something precious, something valuable, something of the utmost important, something that was lost. He knew that if he just ran faster, the line would diminish, would eventually disappear.

So he ran faster. Faster. And faster. He poured his entire being into running. He sacrificed everything, everyone, just so he could run, faster and faster. He ran until the Line grew smaller. He ran until the line diminished. He ran, and ran, and ran in circles and circles and loops and loops and circles and loops, and ran until all that was left was a fragment of silver, a fraction of a Line.

(black robes, falling)

...blood spills out in litres, and someone screams a word.

Suddenly, without warning or notice, the line began to lengthen. It grew, and grew, and he ran, and ran, but still, it grew, strengthened, bolstered. It could not stop. It wouldn't stop. It was out of control.

This couldn't happen. How could it happen? The equation was too perfect. He had seen to it, he had controlled the inputs to thousands of degrees of precision, had guided the thread through every possible eye of every possible needle, but it went wrong, it all went wrong, how could it go wrong? Input, output, functions, decision trees, logic maps and neural nets flicked through his mind, streaming an infinity of possibilities into the span of a single instant. *How?*

But, the one inexorable truth of the universe, something deeper than any law of "magic", held him back, stymied his efforts. There is no infinity. If permitted, a pattern will persist, and persist, and persist. If allowed, the digits will keep repeating. The irrational pattern of the numbers will continue and continue as long as you care to generate them. At some point, there has to be a point where you take action, where you decide the the map matches the territory enough to where you can start your great adventure.

At some arbitrary point, you have to decide that you have enough significant digits.

It wasn't enough.

Those forgotten numbers, that endless stream of numbers forever lost, stuck on the wrong side of that arbitrary termination point. They add up. And after millions upon millions of inputs and outputs and combinations and permutations, they all added up, added up to one choice, one crux. Like a fist with a limitless number of fingers, closing one at a time, until all that remained were the two choices, a finger and a thumb, poised to snap. If they did, all would be lost. The Path would never be made whole. From outside, a woman screamed, long and loud. The scream of a dying woman. Within a moment, another cry joined with the first: the sound of a hundred phoenixes, their call like the birth of a new world.

He turned.

And heard the snap.

Merlin awoke, screaming

CHAPTER NINE

THE TRANSMIGRATION

IGBO-UKWU

PRESENT DAY

Chinwendu and Nnamdi strode hand in hand through the ruins, holding spears in their free hands, which doubled as walking sticks. They walked for many hours, past the ruins, through the dead place. The farther they walked, the more death surrounded them. Dead grass gave way to loose scabble and dirt, and when they at least reached their destination, Chinwendu stopped.

“We have come to this place, Nnamdi, so you may finally become a man, and hear the story of our people, that only our men may hear.”

“Why is it that only the men may hear this story?”

“The women tell their own tale, as do the birds and beasts. Such stories are not for your ears, nor is our story for them to hear. It is a tale of our people, where we came from, and where we shall go. It is a tale of our magic, how like the little weaver-bird who once flew to close to the sun, as did our people, all people. It is why we are colored the way we are, and why we must have pity and mercy on the foreign ghosts beyond our country: despite

their evils, they were not graced with the presence of Anwu as we were.”

“But, how do we know that our tale is the true one, if we cannot listen to the tale of the women, or the tale of the beasts?”

“Ah, Nnamdi, you are not old like me. You have an entire world inside your head, you and all the children, when you play in the plains while the men and women work. You see the world in front of you, rigid with its rules and laws, you see the order and structure of our village and how it is not at all like the fantasies of your imagination.”

“And so you grow to ignore the world and stories inside your mind. I have seen many things. I have heard many things. And if there is one bit of wisdom I may pass to you so you may pass to your sons, it is that all tales are true in their own way.”

“Now sit, and you shall hear the tale my chief told me, and his chief told him before that, and his chief before that. It is a tale that stretches back uncountable seasons . . .”

THE PALACE AT ARCADIA
903 C.E.

THE FOUR SIDES OF THE SQUARE HAVE ENTERED THE BOARD
THEIR CRESTS SHALL BE THE BLOCKS BY WHICH MANKIND’S CUNNING SHALL
WAX
THOSE WINGS WILL BEAR MAN TO THE STARS, BUT THEY AS ALL, MUST MELT
AND THE FALLEN HERO SHALL SWING HIS BLADES
AND IN RETURN THEY TOO SHALL SWING
BY THEIR ASHES THREE OF THE THREE THREE SHALL RISE

THE TRANSMIGRATION

THE ENLIGHTENED TOWERS, THE HALLOWED GODDESSES, THE STOWN-HEWN
SERPENTS

TOGETHER THEY MUST CHOOSE TO FOLLOW THE PHOENIX OR SOLVE THE
RIDDLE

"This is . . . complex, to say the least," Meldh finally spoke.

"Yes, but is a tapestry that has been woven ages ago, long before this day." Merlin replied.

"Are you sure it is wise to keep so many threads in play as one time? The people may be 'ants', as you say, but I have learned that things do not always work out—"

Merlin cut him off with a gesture. "Perhaps for you. Step on an anthill, and the aftermath may be unpredictable, thousands upon thousands of them scurrying at random, barely comprehending the cataclysm that destroyed all they have built. But as surely as the sun rises, they rebuild and go on. By the time the next hill is built, the cataclysm has passed into ancient history."

"When I step on this hill, it will matter little. As you said, they are cunning. They will find a way to rebuild, as they must, and the manners in which they may do so are limited. And more to the point, all of which are to our advantage. The most obvious choice, and thus the inevitable one, is that they circumvent my Interdict by formalizing the passage of knowledge from one living mind to another."

Meldh nodded. "A school."

"You will either succeed in destroying that school, and we shall rebuild it again in our own image, or you will fail, and the world will unite as it never has before, in defense of a common foe and his allies. Either way, it is a victory."

“When the interdict comes to pass, it will be felt across the world. Those who did not bear witness to the event shall be confused, scared. And once they are made aware of the fact that they were not among the few who did bear witness, they will retreat, entrench their positions, resentfully hoard their lore. After a few centuries, those in the north will sense the opportunity, and embark on a great crusade to claim that lore from the hands of those with which they have split.”

“As with all wars, the descendants of Atlantis will use mortal men as their pawns, and use the carnage to further their own ends. Long has the wizard-kind of this kingdom sought revenge on the Fae and the Goblins, and you shall give them further cause to do so. I suspect they shall enslave the Fae, bind them with their magic into servitude. And they shall oppress the Goblins, which will be quite convenient for us, as we can play the two against each other for centuries to come.”

Meldh considered this in silence for a moment. “And what of they holy relics? The Seljuks are in possession of Neirkalatia’s Cross, and they will not surrender it lightly.”

“The Cross shall be taken, I will see to that personally. Such artifacts of power do not fall into the hands of the masses. Its new owners will seek to protect it, shroud it in mystery. Like so many other cults of power, they will form a secret society to protect its lore, pass down its knowledge. They will shepherd it for us until Ragnarok.”

The Arch that stood behind them whispered softly, the brilliant white veil billowing slightly in the windless room. They were surrounded by marvels of gilt and glass, and dotting the room were various tables and plush chairs, constructed of the finest quality.

The floor was a stone that took in the light with a soft quality such that it was not painful to look upon in full light despite being the purest of white.

Merlin began gesturing, and spoke as he did so. "I think a change of scenery is in order before we begin."

With but a thought, their surroundings began to transform. Their sparkling glass paradise slowly melted into brilliant grey stone, and the various seating arrangements merged together into a raised amphitheater with Merlin at its center. Meldh dutifully took his place in the audience, and observed as Merlin himself changed as well. His young, brash, and beautiful form slowly melted into that of an old, wizened leader. He raised the Cup of Midnight.

When Merlin spoke, his voice was other-worldly and echoed within his mind rather than within the chamber. "Come, come, come, those of puissance, you Lords of those of flesh and blood, of all of nature's creatures, touched by Magic. Come, come to me. It is I, Merlin, first among you, Prince of Enchanters. Come."

He could have summoned the entire world if he had so chosen, but that would be unnecessary and foolish. A few select leaders of a few select regions would be more than sufficient to seed the legends. The true ritual would affect the entire world, regardless of those who were in attendance to witness.

Ignorance and mystery were their allies. The rulers who were not present would surely find out, and the ensuing conflict would be to their advantage. Those who were too remote to hear the news in any sort of timely fashion would create their own explanations and tales. They would remain shrouded in ignorance, their progress stymied by their lack of understanding.

Those affected by the Calling could hear the voice as clear as day, a harsh whisper from within their own minds, beckoning them: “Come, come, come to me in the seat of my power, for my days grow short.”

Merlin’s name alone was sufficient to command the audience of the most powerful wizards of the day. But even had they wanted to resist, they found themselves compelled by the inexorable pull of Merlin’s magic. One by one, they Apparated into Merlin’s tower, and the silence was punctuated by dull pop after dull pop. When the room was full, and Merlin was satisfied with the attendance, he began.

“I am old, my friends, as are many of you. So I will speak swiftly and to the point. Atlantis is gone, claimed by a horrible tragedy beyond reckoning and comprehension. It is sealed beyond time, and with it, its secrets, but most importantly, its protection. There was a time when all men had Magic as we do, and all men knew the dangers, all men knew the precautions necessary to protect themselves and the world.”

“That time is no longer. Not one man in 10,000 now is a descendent of those noble people, and of those, they have not one piece in 10,000 the knowledge those people had. The world grows large, once again. And the days of one wizard ruling 10,000 men are gone. This growth, if allowed unchecked, will surely result in disaster.”

“Imagine, the combined power of all in this room, multiplied by a hundred-fold, waging a great and terrible war against an equally sized force. It seems unimaginable, but within a few short centuries, that will be the reality. The world grows, and with it knowledge, and with that, threat. Magic is a great power, yes, but it is also a great responsibility, is it not?”

This remark drew grim nods from all those in attendance.

“You are not just the rulers of your lands, you are its shepherds, its stewards. Despite the cries of tyranny, despite the ungrateful accusations from the very people you protect, you stand true and noble. You give them life, you give them love, and even though they spit on your name, you allow them to grow and thrive.”

Scattered applause, a few cries of agreement.

“No man lives forever, but in spite of this, it is no secret that we live far longer than those not touched by Magic. Some of you in this room are several centuries old, and you who have watched the ebbs and flows of time have seen firsthand how the world has changed.”

“Glewlwyd Gavaelvawr, there was once a time when your people were prosperous, and you were free to spend your days helping them build. But I have watched you over the years, and more and more of your days have been spent preparing for war and battle. You have been defending your lands rather than growing them. You withstood the barbarian hordes—”

Glewlwyd chimed in, “Yes, but that was nothing compared to the invasion of the Greeks. Of his people.” He pointed a finger at Meldh, who stood opposite Glewlwyd in the amphitheater. “You, Mundre, from the City on the River.”

“Do not pass the sins of the father down to the son. My ancestors and those who came before me may have brought war to you, but my people have recanted, we have relented, we have left you in peace, and we have opened our doors to you in the spirit of trade and prosperity.” Meldh spoke.

Merlin intervened. “And that, precisely, is the problem, my friends. Society is a fragile powder keg. It takes but one spark to ignite, to lead to war. And with our knowledge growing day by day, not only are there more potential for sparks, but the price of war becomes more and more untenable.”

“I have many subjects about which I wish to speak to you, but we must respect the traditions of our kind, and so let us first begin the Ceremony of the Gifts.”

In keeping with the spirit of *Noblesse Oblige*, it has long been a tradition among wizardkind for the most powerful members of the community to bestow gifts and favors upon the lesser. And in that spirit of nobility, these gifts and favors were rarely for personal gain, but rather for the benefit of their subjects.

The leaders of Britain, Europe, Rome and Greece among others came forth with their requests. Advice on magical theory, assistance with enchantments that were outside their skill and knowledge, all manner of things that to Merlin were harmless bits of hedge magic and parlor tricks. The last of them, Glewlwyd Gavaelvawr, was accompanied by a chieftain from his lands of great import but very little power.

The chieftain spoke. “My lord Enchanter, Prince among Princes, this is a matter of which it embarrasses me to speak, but I must. My wife is the treasure of my heart, she has born my children and claimed my heart and soul. The thought of life with her is . . . The pain of those thoughts is too much to bear, much less if such a thing actually came to pass. There is a great Seer in our village, and he has foreseen that my wife will one day become the wife of Lord Edmond of the Noble House of Black. How might this fate be prevented, how might it be stopped? I know that such a request—”

“Fool!” Merlin exclaimed. “Although there are those who would argue otherwise, you should know that all prophecy is true in its own manner. We live in treacherous times. Time has but a single thread it may span: *et quod dicitur erit quod*. And if you differ by so much as a grain of sand, you risk a fate far worse than your wife one day marrying a noble Lord. Prophecy is not something the untrained should dwell upon.”

“You may one day pass before her, would you wish her to be lonely? Perhaps her choice of husband after you were gone would be Lord Black, and perhaps he would ease the pain of your loss. Or, perhaps, in your single minded quest to avert prophecy, you neglect her and drive her into the arms of a lecherous Lord. Prophecy forms strange loops, and it is best not to entangle yourself within them. Heed the matter no more, Sir Davies, and your world shall be better for it.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“It is now on the subject of Prophecy that I wish to speak. You have all known for some time of one of the key prophecies, the once and future King who is marked by lightning and whose arrival is marked by thunder, he who shall pluck out the very eyes of heaven. This man may be our savior, or he may be our damnation, but we must not seek to delay or forestall his coming. We must simply prepare for it, and pray that when he arrives, he does not choose the path of Death for us all.”

“And how may we stop that end, how may we preserve the world of life?” Asked Meldh.

“So that we will not suffer the same fate as our forebears from Atlantis, I shall bind the world of life, and seal away the most dangerous and troublesome secrets of Magic. Knowledge spreads

like a plague, and there is some knowledge that is not meant to be passed unchecked. I will ensure that the most powerful of Magicks may only be passed in their entirety from one living mind to another, to ensure a pure path of succession of such power.”

“You in this room who have lived to see dynasties rise and fall know the implications of this. The most dangerous, the most powerful bits of Magic, the ones that give their wielders the most singular advantages, they will not be shared. They will be hoarded, and because no man is immortal, one day those secrets will die along with their owners.”

“It is in this manner that only magic worth sharing, worth spreading, shall persist. Magic which makes life better for all rather than concentrate power in the hands of the few, that is the magic that will proliferate, that is the world we shall craft. The dark magic and eldritch rituals that are being discovered on a daily basis shall no longer freely flow to whichever lucky adventurer happens to stumble upon the grimoire of someone far more ancient and wise than himself.”

“And yes, it is certain that there will be some who wish to keep these bits of Magic alive, and they will form orders and mysteries and cults designed to protect these secrets. You, who are the stewards of this world, must seek out these demons and purge them. This is my Interdict, and that is my mandate.”

“But even this spellcraft, both blessing and curse it may be, shall not be enough. Man is a cunning creature, and even without the aid of Magic, his knowledge will grow, and one day their power shall surpass even ours.”

At this, the leaders of the Wizarding world looked at each other, and they were greatly troubled. Many murmured in disbelief.

“Prophecy has foretold this, that one day mankind will touch the stars, a power which is beyond even the greatest of you. But of that Prophecy, I shall speak no further. Instead, I tell you this.”

“The Greeks came to our island as invaders, joining with the Faerie and the Goblins to lay waste to our places of power, as you too well remember. But Britain is a strong land, and we resisted them, showed them the rightness of our ways, and we have joined as one, combining our lore to do great things.”

“There will be invaders in the future, but of a different sort. They will seek to bring the entire world to its knees, and with them they will bring fear and ruin. This is the Apocalypse of which I spoke. What we have here will not last, for no man is immortal. New orders will rise, and with them a new order shall arise. I have seen this, and now, I ask you to bear witness.”

As he spoke these final words, he overturned the Cup of Midnight, its effulgent, inky black Void flowing forth, blanketing the entire room, the entire world, for Life and Time. For an instant, an eternal instant, the world was dark. And in that darkness, a voice cried out. Not yet a man’s voice, but not a boy either. It spoke in hollow, clipped tones:

THE FIRES OF THE SOUL ARE GREAT
AND BURN AS BRIGHT AS THE STARS

HA'ROVA HA'YEHUDI

MOMENTS AFTER

Anka looked up at her mother. That was odd. The torch by which she was reading must have flickered. Or something. She blinked away the momentary darkness and looked back at the scroll. Her parents were scholars, so she was one of the few children her age who could read. She was browsing her mothers writing on the Ritual of Flight. Something about it though, something didn't make sense. She had it moments before, but now . . . Once her concentration had broke, she couldn't understand it.

She grasped the cursory incantation of Levitation, and the basic principles were the same. She read the words, and the theory should have made sense, but she just couldn't make it work. She had seen her mother fly with her own eyes, so she knew it was possible.

"Mama," she asked. "I don't quite understand."

Her mother stood up from her desk and walked over, putting a warming hand on her child's back. "It's quite simple, Anka dear. It's the same premise as *Wingardium Leviosa*, but with a few simple tweaks. Here, let me show you."

She walked her daughter through the bits of hand gestures and the proper frame of mind. Immediately, it clicked, and Anka understood. She performed the Ritual, and rose from her chair.

How very curious, indeed.

THE TRANSMIGRATION

ZAQATALA

MOMENTS AFTER

Georgi Abashvili was disturbed by the momentary darkness. His brother had long since taken leave of this life, but Georgi had persisted like a bad cough throughout the many years. He was old, and he could feel the ache and pain of the world in his bones. He felt that ache in a new way, now. Something was different in the rustling of the leaves, the soft gusts of wind, the way the light glittered off the Caucasus mountains in the distance. He was old, and his head was already stuffed too full of useless knowledge. Although he could not put a shape to the Interdict that lay on his mind, he could feel its presence, the same way he could always feel when someone else had sat in his favorite chair.

No matter. He had experienced upheaval before, he would experience it again. He took a long drink of goat's milk, and wrinkled his nose slightly, for it had turned. He closed his eyes, and resumed his meditation.

THE HEADWATERS OF THE MISQAT'NK RIVER, NIPMUC LANDS

MOMENTS AFTER

The guardians of the Sleeper waited, for that was their role. They waited in darkness, waiting until he who was marked by lightning would emerge forth from the Voice, and bade them wake his master. When that day would come, and not a moment earlier, they would open the sacred Scrolls, laid down by the Sleeper himself.

They would read the Ritual of Awakening, learn its secrets, and call forth their master from his dreamless sleep in the City of the Dead.

Although none of them could feel it, none of them could sense it, somewhere in the forgotten soft places of the world, the Sleeper shifted in his rest, for he knew this day that he would never again wake.

GLEN NEVIS, SCOTLAND

YEARS LATER

Ollivander, who now called herself Helga Hufflepuff, still reeled from Meldh's betrayal. Her dream, her heart's deepest desire was crushed. Meldh and his companion had lied— no. Not lied. They had told her what she wanted to hear, and that is what she heard. They said she could help with her grand design.

She wanted to elevate all of humanity, not simply Wizards, but every last man, woman, and child, to gift them with the blood of Atlantis. She was no fool. She would implement safeguards, she would limit magic, not just for the newly ascended, but everyone. The Interdict of Ollivander, it would force magic to be channeled through a wand. Wizards across the whole of civilization were already well used to her devices, and through that she exhibited no small measure of control. She envisioned a world of wandholders, doing great, magnificent things, channeling their power through her creations.

But there were so many missing pieces, and she was not patient. When Meldh and his companion showed her the means by which she might accomplish her ends, she was blinded. She willingly relinquished control of her Cup to that man, the ruler of Magic-kind in this corner of the world. He was known for his wisdom and benevolence, and she trusted Meldh's judgment.

She trusted him because they were bound by something far more deep than even an Unbreakable Vow: they were bound by the honor of their kind. The word of an Immortal is inviolate, it simply must be. No matter how long they may live, one simply cannot enact one's grand plans without assistance. If their word were not their bond, what other coin could they spend? Threats are too often empty, bribes too often worthless. To violate the sanctity of one's own word even once is to render one impotent: if you cannot be trusted, you have no allies.

So although they swore to help her, swore they would accomplish her ends, she should have listened more carefully to their well-chosen words, to the promise they both made. They did not say how, or even when they would grant the gift of Magic. They did not specify the means in which they would enforce *her* safeguards, only that they would see to it that the Interdict was put into place.

She knew now the true meaning of the prophecy, the one concerning the four sides of the square. She knew this was how she was to spread the Gift for the time being, and she knew that as long as Meldh was alive, there was hope.

And so it was that Helga Hufflepuff, her apprentice Godric Gryffindor, the bookkeeper Rowena Ravenclaw, and the scholar Salazar Slytherin had banded together, the four pillars on which a new renaissance of Magical education would begin.

It took decades for them to plan, to execute. The sheer logistics of it were seemingly intractable at times. How would they inform the parents. How would they find the teachers? How would they pay the teachers? Who would write the curriculum? Where would the students stay and who would feed them?

Together, they mulled over these questions. Long nights stretched into bleary-eyed mornings which gave way into sleepy afternoons, all spent together, discussing, arguing. Oh, the arguing. Godric had grown now, and Ollivander in her new identity as Helga Hufflepuff had allowed herself to age as well. The sting of Meldh's betrayal was still fresh in her mind, so perhaps it was some deep-seated desire for revenge, or perhaps it was simply that proximity had given way to fondness. But Godric and Helga began to care for each other beyond the relationship of master and apprentice, and that fondness eventually grew into love.

She would watch, enchanted, as Godric and Salazar would argue about the origins of Magic, the blood of Atlantis. Long hours were spent debating whether, (as distasteful as such segregation would be to all of them), they should only allow entry to those full-blooded Witches and Wizards.

Although she did not take his side, she understood his concern. For magic to grow, it must be nurtured. Education was essential, on this they all agreed. Further, it was a well-observed fact that Magic begets Magic. Enough Wizards gather in one place, and the air becomes electric; ideas exchange more easily, Magic flows more freely. Enough wizards settles a land for enough time, and the land itself seems to change in response, with magical creatures and plants emerging, worming their way out of the collective subconscious.

They all knew and all agreed that the amount of Magic one carried was tied to their bloodline. But, they also knew and agreed that the amount of Magic one carries is not necessarily proportionate to the amount of Magic can output at any given time. Although Achilles may have a fraction of the endurance of the Tortoise, he can still sprint far faster over a short span. A school of pure-bloods would not ensure a school of *powerful* Magic, but it would ensure a high concentration of raw Magic.

So it came down to a simple question of quality versus quantity. Godric believed that it would be easier to find and teach 100 half-blood wizards than it would be find 50 pure-blood wizards. Salazar believed that this would present a logistical problem: how do you scale Hogwarts to handle that kind of population growth? Godric, ever the idealist, wanted to wait to solve that problem when and if it happened. Salazar, on the other hand, was known for the detail and care that went into his plans, and such an omission did not sit well to him.

The eventual compromise was to divide the school into three houses, with Salazar managing the pure-blood lines and the other founders managing the growth of the middle-bloods. They decided that the term “half-blood” was not strictly accurate, and carried pejorative connotations. Of course, they had not foreseen the linguistic corruption that would eventually shorten “Middle-Bloods” into “Mid-Bloods” and then twist that into “Mud-bloods”. Nonetheless, they would compare results after a century or so, and that would dictate the course of Hogwart’s future.

Or, that was the plan, at least. This palace of education was a necessary evil, but its growth needed to be checked and stymied. Meldh still held the sting of Ollivander’s betrayal fresh in his mind.

He knew he held no claim to her heart besides that which she freely gave. He still loved her, aged or no, and to see her with the newly-aged Godric Gryffindor caused him pain. Perhaps it was some deep-seated desire for revenge, or perhaps he was simply following the path laid down by Prophecy, but when the next steps were made clear, he gladly volunteered for the task.

IGBO-UKWU
993 C.E.

Onyekachi was the leader of the Idemmli, and he had heard the legends. They were a people of conversation; their tales were passed from father to son, mother to daughter, from living mind to living mind, as it has always been. When sharing kola nuts, they would tell the tales of their past so they may live on for as long as the Idemmli lived on. But more importantly, they would grow, change, and adapt over time. The tale of Amiodoha had changed over the generations, and that was good. It diverged as well, for the women told a very different tale than the men. In one version, Chukwu formed Amadioha in his own image, and although they quarreled as father and son do, they eventually came together and defeated Ogbunabali. In yet another, Chukwu and Amadioha were destined to be rivals, and Amadioha rose up and overthrew Chukwu's chains and went on to have a family of his own.

Onyekachi and his son, Ikenna walked hand in hand, both holding spears in their free hands that doubled as walking sticks. They did not have to walk long before they reached the place. He stared out at the small circle of Death in the plains, running his hand idly through the bare earth that stood in stark contrast to the

lush grasses that were filled with creatures, plants, and tasty things to eat. It had grown slowly over his lifetime, and eventually it would take his entire village and people. But they, like Amadioha, would fight against its inexorable tyranny until they either won, or could fight no more.

But there would be time for that later. For now, it was time for his son to hear the tale, it was time for Ikenna to become a man.

C H A P T E R T E N

I LOVE THE WAY YOU LIE (PT. 2)

*'Twas down the glen, one Easter morn
To a city fair rode I
There armored lines of goblin-kind
In squadrons passed me by
No pipes did hum, no battle drum
Did sound its rare tattoo
While the Angelus bells o'er the Liffey's swells
Rang out in the foggy dew.*

*'Twas wizards bound our ancient lore
So that our nations would not be free.
Their lonely graves at Bas Cliabhán's waves
On the fringe of the great North Sea
Those who died by Ulak's side
They stood both tall and true
Their names we shall keep where our fathers sleep,
'Neath the shroud of the foggy dew.*

*And the bravest fell while the requiem bell
Rang mournfully and clear.
For those who died that Easter-tide
In the springtime of the year.
The world did gaze with deep amaze
At those fearless ones, but few.*

*Who bore the fight so freedom's light
Would shine through the foggy dew.*

*And back through the glen, I rode again
And my heart with grief shall soar.
For I parted then with my valiant friends
Whom I ne'er shall see no more.
And to and fro in my dreams I'll go
And I'll kneel and pray for you.
Though slavery's fled, o' glorious dead
When you fell in the foggy dew.*

The Ballad of Ulak the Unconquered.

Author Unknown

Bás CLÍÁBHAN
1106 C.E.

Godric stared at the blade, the Sword of Ragnuk, now the Sword of Gryffindor, forged from the form of pure war. It was every weapon ever created. He caught a glimpse of his reflection in the glittering, polished silver of the blade, which seemed to whisper to him, calling from beyond eternity, crying out for blood, for vengeance.

Ragnuk the Rampant had forged the sword for Godric, in exchange for a covenant between Wizards and Goblin-kind. Godric had done this without the consent of the other Founders, and Ragnuk had done this without the consent of all Goblins. Not that Godric necessarily needed the Founders' approval; a

representative of the little would always have a place at Hogwarts, covenant or no, this just formalized that understanding.

It heralded a new era of peace between these two peoples. Ragnuk the Rampant was the first in a long line of many goblin, or half-goblin teachers at Hogwarts, and his discipline was the fine art of Transfiguration, one of the most fiercely-guarded secrets of Goblin-kind.

It was a trade of necessity, of course. Goblins were not teachers, by nature. They were creators, artists. They had written volumes upon volumes, stored within the glittering vaults of Curd, Ackle, and beyond. They were not trained in the art of passing knowledge down from one living mind to another. Their speciality was in taking their knowledge and transforming it into something concrete and tangible, but dead.

Their mastery of artifice was an advantage; in some ways, they possessed some of the most eldritch powers of this new era of Magic. But their knowledge, which previously had been passed down from generation to generation in those tomes of lore, was rapidly decaying. They needed teachers to pass their secrets on, but more importantly, they needed to learn how to teach effectively.

Many goblins did not take kindly to Ragnuk's perceived betrayal. Goblin secrets were for Goblin minds alone, they thought. They were not coins to be peddled, to be traded for carved sticks and silly incantations. But what choice did they have? Already, their charms had grown weaker, their famed prowess in battle had dampened. They needed to grow, to adapt.

And Godric, he needed a weapon, a weapon to teach him the ways of battle, the ways of bravery. He still shuddered when he dwelled on the memory of the Sword's creation, that precious blade being forged and imbued with the essence of Void so as to take on the power of that which may harm it.

But what he remembered most was that phoenix, that precious phoenix, who had come to Ragnuk in his hour of bravery and need. He could see the pain and tears in the goblin's beady, black eyes, and the shock in the phoenix's final call as Ragnuk slid the blade through the fiery heart of the bird.

A heatless inferno washed over the room in an instant. The flame and the phoenix were both taken in by the blade, which glowed momentarily with an angry, ruddy light. Ragnuk held the blade in his hands and spoke.

"The blade chooses the wizard, Godric Gryffindor, not the other way around. Remember that, always. I pass this blade to you now, not in the manner of the trade of our kind. I truly give it to you, and you are its owner. It is a part of your heart, and you are a part of it. But just as you may one day give your heart to another, the blade may one day choose another as well, if need is great."

And with that, in a burst of flame, the sword disappeared from Ragnuk's hands and instantiated in Godric's. Instinctively, he gripped the hilt tightly, feeling the anger, the need of battle coursing through him. He could feel the finely-gilt writing that had been inlaid into the hilt of the sword, digging into his palms.

Nihil Supernum

There would be no blade that would ever come above this one. Only those of pure intent and noble heart would be able to wield it to its true potential. But such power comes with a price; it is lonely at the top, and if you find that you stumble, you will find that the rescuer hath no rescuer.

The memories washed over Godric as he stood floating above the great North Sea, staring at the triangular obelisk that jutted out of the waters, an unnatural blight on the otherwise rugged beauty of this place. This was an evil place, and within it dwelled an evil man; a dark wizard from origins unknown who was known only to the world by a series of epithets. The Grey Slayer, the Enemy, the Corruptor. He commanded a small legion of goblins who knew him as a-Jeroth, an ancient word that could roughly be translated as either “savior” or “destroyer”.

He knew that he was likely going to his death, like so many battles before this one. He waited, and waited, and waited. He knew, like those other battles, he would be waiting in vain, but he waited nonetheless, standing there, agonizing, over the call . . .

That wouldn't . . .

Come.

His eyes flicked once to the stars above, wishing, hoping that just a single one would flash in the night. But it did not. He sighed, and steeled himself for battle. He drew the sword across his forearms, drawing blood in an ancient ritual: blood for blood. The blade took in the precious liquid, and the wounds healed themselves, but he could still feel their sting and he allowed it to fuel his anger, a reminder that death was close at hand.

He hurtled up, to the top of the tower, where six goblin guards stood watching dutifully. It saddened him to see them corrupted so. They looked among each other. They were ready. They had been expecting him. The one who was dressed in the most ornate armor and carried the most elaborate weapons spoke to the others.

“Ef yn dod, mae’r grissa ost drauka. Yw ef yma, yr un sy’n proffwydoliaeth dweud ewyllys i ddod â’r cleddyf y ffurlfen gwir rhyfel.”

The others nodded. Godric landed across from them, several yards away. The leader of the goblins then addressed Godric, in a broken, stilted form of the common vernacular. “You have come. It was said you would come. And it was said you have the choice, that you can leave now, before you bring death upon the world.”

“The only death I will bring today is upon your master, and you, if you continue to serve him. I am a friend of your people. Lay down your weapons and I shall let you leave in peace.”

The goblin spat upon the rough-hewn stone floor of the tower. “You carry the Sword of the Betrayer, he who sold our secrets to you, who would use them to tear apart this land, our world, even the stars in the sky.”

The light drizzle of rain had grown into a full-fledged storm by this point. The remainder shifted uncomfortably. They were unsure of themselves, their mission. Godric could see it clearly, that they did not truly believe in the cause. He had their attention, it was time to use their uncertainty to his advantage.

“I give you one final chance. Your minds have been twisted by your dark master. He has fed you lies, warped your thoughts. Leave now, or you shall die!”

He held his sword menacingly in the air, and nature itself seemed to respond to his battlecry: lightning crackled above, illuminating Godric’s silhouette, striking the Sword of Gryffindor itself. The power of the sword shielded Godric and those around him, taking in the force of the bolt and using it to augment its own strength. It glowed a brilliant white against the dark backdrop of night.

The goblins eyes grew wide. Good. Press the advantage. He moved to speak, but the leader of the goblins whispered softly to the others, “Ti’n gweld? Mae ei ei farcio fan fellten . . .”

This was not the reaction he was expecting. They stiffened, eyes narrowed. They carried themselves with grim resolve now, as if they suddenly had been given a reason to fight, a very good reason. They shifted into battle formation, and the leader shouted at Godric, “You are Death, and we shall end you!”

They shouted war cries, and rushed forwards towards Godric. They were six, six magic-wielders against one. It should have been a death sentence, but Godric was aided by War itself.

Time is finite, and as such not every subject and discipline can be studied and mastered. The art of wielding several people’s magic against one happens to be one of those disciplines. Such circumstances simply do not come up in the normal course of combat between magic users, and if it does, the situation simply takes care of itself without the need for special planning. One wizard simply cannot stand against the force of several combined.

There are rare occasions when one wizard is of such superlative power that they may stand a chance, but who could teach and train such a wizard on such circumstances? How could such a curriculum even be devised?

The result was slightly disorienting for the attackers, like playing chess against an opponent who simply does not move his pieces. Each attacker was expecting an individual, discrete response to their attack. But that is not what they were met with: his defenses were perfectly crafted to ward all of their assaults with brutal efficiency. The sword whispered hints, suggestions, and identified openings and weaknesses to be exploited.

He did not seek to wound or disable. These were servants of Death, and they had cast their lot, so he would send them to their master. They fought with a similar ferocity, for this man was the bringer of Death, and they would not allow him to bring death to their people.

It was a fight to the end, and despite being hopelessly outnumbered, Godric had them hopelessly outmatched. One of the goblins extended his arms a few inches too far when casting a curse, and the sword saw the opening. It prompted Godric to spin to avoid the bolt of light. With his left hand, he cast his wand in a fan-shaped motion to block the incoming elemental forces that were hurled his way from the blind side, and used the momentum of the spin to slice the goblin's wand in two with the sword.

The goblin stood dumbly for a split second, mouth open, and Godric unleashed a kick which not only collapsed the lungs of the small creature, but sent him flying backward into one of his comrades behind him, who faltered. Another opportunity. Godric leapt into the air with preternatural strength, summoning wind and fire to turn aside both the physical projectiles and the gusts of ice that were directed towards him. He flipped forward in midair to dodge a series of spell-bolts, and then drove his sword downward through the top of the Goblin's skull, all the way down until it reached the shoulder blade.

Ruined bone and brain splattered across the floor, and without sparing a moment, Godric wrenched the blade sideways, sending through it a flow of magic which caressed the dead bone of the goblin's shoulder blade and arms, contorting them into sharpened spikes.

These were battle-hardened warriors, but even they did not expect the gruesomeness of their fallen comrade's bones being sharpened into weapons. That surprise was the end of two more of them, as the spikes jutted outward and found their marks. The goblin leader, and one other were the only two that remained standing. There was a break in the battle.

Godric panted heavily, "Leave this place, now. Or you will die, like them."

Ulak was the leader of the goblins, he had a wife at home, and a trio of younglings. It was for them he fought, and his eyes grew wet with the thought of them growing up without a father, of her without a husband. He wondered if they would know how he died, what he died fighting for, and whether they would continue the fight. He wondered if this man would rewrite history, turning Ulak into some callow villain.

He continued to fight, despite the rising hopelessness of the situation, breathing hard as he saw his final comrade blasted off the side of the tower with a concentrated burst of wind. With a quick glance, he saw the light had already left the goblin's eyes before he even reached the precipice.

Although there were many more levels to the tower, levels and levels, they were the first and truly last line of defense. For if an attacker could breach their line, he could surely deal with the warriors inside. The scale of the tower was misleading; as large as it was, an outsider might think it host to an entire army, but the truth was that much of the place was unused. Ulak could not imagine a world with so many magical creatures and beings that this place could be filled to its full potential. His master apparently did.

He was staring Death in the face. Between the crackling of lightning, the downpour of rain and the crashing of the waves, it was likely that no one in the immediate lower levels heard the melee above. They had, of course, sounded the alarm from the first moment they saw the intruder, but since no reinforcements arrived from below, Ulak was certain the man had sabotaged their systems. He was not sure how, but the facts were clear. He was fighting alone.

Goblin honor dictated that he stand and fight, even if it meant his death. But what would he be dying for? There were those in the levels beneath him that would likely be slaughtered as well. And he could not risk the Gateway being lost. It occurred to Ulak that true bravery was not blindly adhering to a code laid down by those before you, that true bravery was making your own choice, even when that choice seemed impossible. Ulak would rather die than dishonor his name and the name of Goblin.

But then, some things are worth dying for.

He would not let death extend its reach any further than it had to. He would end the fight on his own terms. In one swift movement, he tore the metal ring from his belt and hurled it into the air. Godric's wand immediately pointed towards it, tracing its flight path, but the ring expanded to several times its own width, and with a bright flash of orange light, it encased Ulak, freezing him in time.

Godric watched, his wand still following the ring, sword ready to strike, but the deed was already done. The ring, now a hoop, clattered to the ground with a loud CLANG, and Godric was alone.

Ulak, for his part, was gone. Gone, but unconquered.

On the bottom floor of the tower, Lord Foul stood, watching, waiting. He was wearing a jet-black robe, as befitting his moniker, and his face was obscured entirely by a billowing hood. As expected, the archway on the dais in the center of the amphitheater began to glow with an intense blue light, and the tattered black veil billowed violently, as if caught by some unseen gale.

This was a triumph . . . he thought to himself. He made a mental note, and continued to wait. He heard the clash of battle above him, the unmistakable ringing of steel and crashes of magic and shouts of rage and cries of death. Patiently, he stood, listening, biding his time, until he could hear the footsteps clamoring down the spiral staircase near the back of the chamber.

There were a thousand and one ways that Lord Foul could have ended Godric Gryffindor long before this point, long before this battle had begun, long before Hogwarts was even founded. But now was not the time for Godric to die. No, now was the time for Godric to learn. It was time for the theatrics.

Lord Foul slowly clapped his hands as Godric made his way into the chamber.

“Congratulations, Godric, on making it this far.”

“Lord Foul,” Godric hissed.

“Lord Gryffindor,” he replied, mockingly. “I suppose you will want to have your climactic battle to the death with me here momentarily, end my reign of terror. Yes, yes, all in good time. But for now, come, come. I would like to show you something.”

Lord Foul gestured to a meter-tall lens, embellished with a fine platinum rim, affixed by an axis to a stand that looked to be carved out of an iridescent green stone. The stand could rotate, and the angle of the lens could be adjusted. The dark wizard spun the lens around to point at Godric, who could now see within its depths. He saw fire, all-consuming fire, a thousand phoenixes emerging from the conflagration.

“Do you see the phoenixes, Godric? Each one represents a choice, the choice that to this day, you have not made. Your phoenix will one day come, when you are faced with a moment that requires true bravery.”

“What do you know about bravery?” Godric spat. “You hide in this palace, you enslave a lesser people to do your bidding, you unleash your devastation from a distance. You are a coward.”

“‘Lesser people’? My, my, how high-minded of you. Are you not, as you say, ‘a friend’ to them? And yet you think of them so lowly . . .”

Godric grunted. “Enough word games. It is time for you to die.”

“No, it is not. I have a message for you. It is not a request. I will bring war and death to Hogwarts, for you cannot be allowed to persist in what you do. You know why you cannot be allowed to persist. You have seen it first-hand. Through this lens, I can see into your very soul.”

“Enough!” Godric drew his sword.

“Tell me, then, and speak truly, for I shall know if you are lying. You know the risks, you have seen them, you know what will happen if you continue, do you not?” Godric did not answer, he simply advanced upon Lord Foul. “Tut, tut. And you call me a coward.”

“I do call you a coward! Now show me your face and fight me!”

“And yet, you are too afraid to look inward, to embrace what you know to be true.”

“What I know is that I am doing what I must. Prophecy demands it. We must build a foundation for magic to be restored. Merlin, in his wisdom, put us in chains, because we were not ready for true power. We are teaching that responsibility, we are passing on—”

“Do not lie to me, or to yourself. You have seen the way your young wizards abuse their powers, ignore even the most basic and sensible of precautions. You teach *Transfiguration* to wizards who are barely of age! Already there have been accidents, already you have flirted with—”

“And what would you have us do? Stagnate? Rot? That is the world you envision, Lord Foul, a world of ruin and a world of death. That is not the world I choose to embrace, that is a world I will do everything in my power to prevent from coming to be. Yes, there are risks, but there is no risk greater than—”

“Than what? A world without magic? A world that is safe? For all of your supposed acceptance of what you call ‘Muggles’, you seem to view them much the same as you view the Goblins. Lesser. Impotent. Have you seen the wonders that they have created? You know the prophecies, you know that one day, they will reach the very stars, and they will do so without the touch, the taint of magic.”

Godric roared in anger, “They will reach the very stars in heaven so that they may tear them apart! Look at them! How they multiply, how they spread! Magic must rise, we must first raise ourselves up so that we may then raise them.

Otherwise, they shall be the end of us all.”

“You speak of the prophecy, the one that goes by a thousand names. I wonder, how much do you truly know?”

“I know enough.” Godric took another step closer. They were within arms reach of each other.

“Do you? Do you truly?” There was a pause. “You know, we are more alike than you’d like to think.”

At this, Godric laughed. “Do you think you are the first dark wizard who has tried to tempt me with that speech?”

Lord Foul smiled. “No, but I am the first wizard who will show you,” And like a flash of lightning, his arm lashed out, grasping Godric’s shoulder, and he whispered a word.

Godric stood, reeling. “*Ba. Egeustimentis Ba. Ba.*”

“I have done nothing to alter your mind, Godric.”

“*BA! BA!*” He yelled, futilely.

“Say it all you like. I merely revealed new information to you. No magic can undo that.”

“Why? Why, damnit?” Godric shook his head, angrily. “What then? Why is this,” he gestured at Lord Foul’s cloak and around at the evil chamber, “Why is this the answer? How?”

“All in good time, Godric. You have served your purpose in coming here, child, and now I will take my leave.” Lord Foul turned and began to walk towards the archway.

“No!” He shouted, passionately. Lord Foul stopped, a step from the archway, and turned around. “You must tell me. How, how are we to stop this?”

“That is the riddle, isn’t it? You’ll have a choice soon. Very soon.” And with that, he removed his hood.

Godric’s eyes grew wide, and he staggered backwards. “You.”

“Goodbye, for now, Godric.” And with that, Meldh stepped through the archway.

Godric stood alone.

TRUMP CARD

O M A K E

Author's note: A large portion of this dialog is borrowed from HPMOR, starting with "When I had devised my great creation . . ." and ending with " . . .from where he stood by the cauldron."

IGBO-UKWU

PRESENT DAY

She-Who-Calls-The-Dead and her nameless daughter fluttered through the sky, following the elder human and younger human, who walked hand-in-hand towards the Dead Place. Here and there, they pecked at holes in the ground that they thought might contain worms, or perhaps a nice, fat bug or two. After some time, the two humans stopped.

"The elder one will be greeted by Grandmother Death shortly, youngling."

"How do you know this, mother?"

She-Who-Calls-The-Dead lifted her beak in the air, and ruffled her wings. "There is a smell about the air, a feel to the wind. You will learn it in time, dear. For now, you can simply trust me."

"I'm scared."

"As you should be, but you will be safe. The spirits of human-kind are big, and they are frightening, but they cannot harm you. We must do as we have always done. We will call to them, mimicking the voice of their ancestors. Their ancestors will call to them as well. And they must choose which call to follow to the Sunless Lands."

"And if they choose to follow us?"

"Then you shall gain a Spirit, daughter. And you shall gain your name."

"But what of them?"

"What happens to the humans when they pass into the Sunless Lands, I do not know. We birds hear much, but that is beyond even our reach."

"How many Spirits do you have, mother?"

She-Who-Calls-The-Dead cocked her head. "You will learn in time that is not a question you should ask aloud. The truthful answer is, I do not know. I lost count around one hundred and seven."

Her nameless daughter cawed in surprise. "What are they doing now?"

"They are telling their stories. They are people of stories, of tales, like we are. They are telling the tale of the All-Conqueror, who created his own twin in order to help him rule the world."

His twin then rose up and imprisoned him. Despite this, the All-Conqueror still offered his counsel from beyond the walls of his prison. Together, they flew to the Sunless Lands and conquered Grandmother Death.”

“The women of the tribe tell a different version of the story altogether. In their story, the All-Conqueror creates his own twin without intending to do so. The two are mortal enemies from the very beginning, and after many long seasons of war, the twin finally defeats the All-Conqueror, whose mind has grown frail with the rot of evil.”

There was silence for a time as She-Who-Calls-The-Dead pecked at the ground, idly. After a bit, her daughter spoke.

“Which one is the true tale?”

“Ah, my daughter. Well, we birds have our own tale as well. Come, roost. We have time to wait before we must make our calls. I shall tell you our story.”

HOGWARTS CASTLE

JUNE 13TH, 1992

ANOTHER TIME, ANOTHER PLACE

“My original plan this evening was to retrieve the Sorcerer’s Stone from the Mirror, and then dispose of you. However, I was visited by a prophecy a few short hours ago, which has significantly altered the course of my plans. Something about the words and the images they invoked indicated that the very threads of time are tangled and looped, which makes this prophecy all the more dangerous, even moreso than the one that marks you as the destroyer of this world.”

“Simply put, new information was revealed to me, and I see that there is something far greater at stake than this world: all worlds. It seemed that I have a choice. The particulars of the prophecy, I shall not share, but there is one portion that I believe is for the ears of both Tom Riddles.”

The Professor closed his eyes, and when he spoke, it was not his own voice, it was a hollow, clipped imitation, and the echoed syllables carried with them meaning far beyond the words themselves.

“YOU MUST CHOOSE TO FOLLOW THE PHOENIX OR SOLVE THE RIDDLE”

He opened his eyes. “It seems that fate has a sense of humor when it comes to wordplay. There are several levels of meaning to that, some more obvious than others, and in due time you will discover that meaning for yourself.”

“The most surface level interpretation, and thus the one most generally applicable, is the choice I face tonight: do I follow the Phoenix or do I solve the Riddle? Every problem, every great catastrophe that has befallen our world has a cause and an effect. Are you familiar with the tale of Estremoz?”

“No.” Harry responded flatly.

“Estremoz was once a grand and glorious city, where wizards flourished in peace. Many great magical innovations were made there, and it was a hub of culture and art. A great wizard known only to the world as Lord Foul was concerned with the fate of this world, much as I am, and was convinced that the four founders of Hogwarts were misguided in teaching such terrible, dangerous magics to young students who could barely contain their powers. And so he threatened war upon them.”

“He summoned a great and terrible beast, thought by many to be indestructible, from the depths of the underworld, and he set this beast upon the city of Estremoz. And so, the four founders had a choice: they could band together and protect the city, or they could band together and fight the wizard who summoned the threat and prevent it from ever happening again.”

“It is a variation on the trolley problem, which given your Muggle upbringings, I am quite sure you are familiar with.”

Harry nodded.

“And so, when presented with a problem with a clear cause and clear effect, do you address the effect immediately, saving a handful of lives in the short term? Or do you address the cause, allowing the effect to go unchecked, but hopefully saving many more in the long run?”

“Both. You always strive for both. It doesn’t have to be a choice. You cheat. You win.” Harry’s reply was more passionate than he intended.

The Professor laughed. “Are you so sure you were not a Gryffindor? That was Godric’s response as well. But he learned, as you will one day learn, that one person simply cannot do everything, that hard choices must be made, that you cannot always have your cake and eat it too. That being said: you are forced to pick between the two. Which do you pick?”

“If I had to choose, well, you do what saves the most lives in the long run. That’s what you have to do. That’s with any sane, rational, good person would do.”

At this, Quirrell smiled. It was a cruel, condescending smile. It carried no hint of mirth. “Yes, yes indeed. And that is what the founders did. And so they ended Lord Foul’s reign of terror.

His great beast, the Tarrasque, it razed the city of Estremoz. Left unchecked, it rampaged through the beautiful marble buildings, and killed every man, woman, and child, before it went to hunt those who had escaped.”

“How the Tarrasque was contained is unknown, and there are several legends that attempts to explain this. A popular tale that is tangentially relevant to our current situation is that one of the escapees was in possession of the true Cloak of Invisibility. With it, he was able to hide from the Tarrasque, who was bade with the task of extermination. Absent a master to call it down, it would not rest until it had completed its goal. And so it wandered the world in search of its final quarry.”

“The legend says that the sons of that man laid the Cloak over him on his death bed, and that he passed me on this world of life from underneath that shroud. And thus his passing went unnoticed by the beast. So to this day the Tarrasque still wanders, searching in vain.”

“The loss of Estremoz was a terrible tragedy, and the wizarding world blamed the founders. Despite doing the right thing, they were cursed for it, hated for it. It is amusing how they were cursed by virtue of their ability. No one cursed the common simpleton who had neither the strength nor will to fight such a beast. No, they cursed the only people who could possibly protect them. If Dumbledore were not intercepting your mail, refusing the petitions of countless hundreds from every corner of the globe, you would see how people curse your name, how they hate you for doing nothing to solve their mean, personal little tragedies.”

“That is the curse of competence, that you are forced to make those choices, between ‘right’ and ‘more right’. And so that brings us to now.

When I had devised my great creation and come into the fullness of my magic, I thought the time had come for me to take political power into my hands. It would be inconvenient, certainly, and take up my time in ways that were not enjoyable. But I knew the Muggles would eventually destroy the world or make war on wizardkind or both, and something had to be done if I was not to wander a dead or dull world through my eternity. Having attained immortality I needed a new ambition to occupy my decades, and to prevent the Muggles from ruining everything seemed a goal of acceptable scope and difficulty.”

“It is a source of continual amusement to me that I, of all people, am the only one really taking action towards that end. Though I suppose it would make sense for the mortal insects not to care about their world’s end; why should they, when they are just going to die regardless, and can save themselves the inconvenience of trying to do anything difficult along the way?”

“But I digress. I saw how Dumbledore had risen to power from his defeat of Grindelwald, so I thought I would do the same. I had long ago taken my vengeance on David Monroe—he was an annoyance from my year in Slytherin— so I bethought to also steal his identity, and wipe out his family to make myself heir of his House. And I conceived also a great foe for David Monroe to fight, the most terrifying Dark Lord imaginable, clever beyond reckoning; more dangerous by far than Grindelwald, for his intelligence would be perfected in all the ways that Grindelwald had been flawed and self-destructive. A Dark Lord who would do his cunning utmost to disrupt the alliances who would fight him, a Dark Lord who would command the deepest loyalty from his followers through his oratical skills. The most dreadful Dark Lord who had ever threatened Britain or the world, that was who David Monroe would defeat.”

Professor Quirrell's mallet struck a bellflower and then a different pale flower with two more thuds. "But then, while I had sometimes played the part of Dark Wizard in my wanderings, I had never adopted the identity of a full-fledged Dark Lord with underlings and a political agenda. I had no practice at the task, and I was mindful of the story of Dark Evangel and the disaster of her first public appearance. According to what she said afterward, she had meant to call herself the Walking Catastrophe and the Apostle of Darkness, but in the excitement of the moment she introduced herself as the Apostrophe of Darkness instead. After that she had to ruin two entire villages before anyone took her seriously."

"So you decided to try a small-scale experiment first," Harry said. A sickness rose up in him, because in that moment Harry *understood*, he saw himself reflected; the next step was just what Harry himself would have done, if he'd had no trace of ethics whatsoever, if he'd been that empty inside. "You created a disposable identity, to learn how the ropes worked, and get your mistakes out of the way."

"Indeed. Before becoming a truly terrible Dark Lord for David Monroe to fight, I first created for practice the persona of a Dark Lord with glowing red eyes, pointlessly cruel to his underlings, pursuing a political agenda of naked personal ambition combined with blood purism as argued by drunks in Knockturn Alley. My first underlings were hired in a tavern, given cloaks and skull masks, and told to introduce themselves as Death Eaters."

The sick sense of understanding deepened, in the pit of Harry's stomach. "And you called yourself Voldemort."

"Just so, General Chaos." Professor Quirrell was grinning, from where he stood by the cauldron. "You, the destroyer of worlds, I could trivially end your threat. In doing so, I would save this world. But it may come at the price of losing everything."

In those hours between hearing the prophecy and now, I have done a great deal of thinking, and have devised a plan. Either way, I suspect it shall end in my favor.”

“Despite everything, you still see the good in people. You still trust the democracy of idiots. I plan to disavow you of that trust. I will use the Stone to revive myself to my full glory as Lord Voldemort. And, I shall further use it to revive your friend, Miss Granger. The world can ill afford another wizarding war, and so I will enter the world of mundane politics. Cornelius Fudge has six years left on his term, at which point coincidentally, according to our ancient customs, Miss Granger will be of age to oppose me in my bid to become Minister for Magic.”

Harry could already see where this is going, and interrupted, “That’s a rigged game. I will not play it. People would vote for you out of fear, they would remember the last war, they would not vote for you because they truly thought it was right.”

“Of course you are correct, Mr. Potter. That is why I would publicly take the Unbreakable Vow, I would bind myself to not extract any sort of revenge or harm upon any of those who may choose to vote against me.”

“You will have six years to groom her, The Girl Who Revived, to battle for the souls of this country against He Who Must Not Be Named. Six years to employ all your tools of reason and persuasion to oppose me while I appeal to the dark heart of humanity. You know that I am not a good person, Potter, and I will not attempt to disguise that fact. I will openly display my vileness. I will call people to me with my cries of intolerance and wanton displays of ignorance. And you, Mr. Potter, will see the folly of trust.”

IGBO-UKWU

PRESENT DAY

“But how, mother? Why? Why did the people choose evil over good? How can this be true?”

She-Who-Calls-The-Dead cocked her head, and flapped her wings gently towards her daughter. “No one believes what they are doing is evil. When doing wicked deeds, one believes that one is choosing from the lesser of two evils. Or worse still, the greater of two goods.”

“And furthermore, I did not say the story was true. We are Drongo birds. We are tricksters, for every truth we tell, we tell ten falsehoods. It is our nature.”

“But tell me mother, I must know. Is this a true tale? Or is this a falsehood?”

Her mother cawed. “That is the curse of the Drongo bird. We may never know. Now, come. They are standing, it is almost time.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THINGS FALL APART, THE CENTER CANNOT HOLD

Dearest Louis,

The taste of victory is sweet. I would have never guessed in a century that at the end of it all, Severus Hortensius would be our greatest ally. This is a new and treacherous game board, for certain, but it is certainly preferable to waiting patiently for our forebears to pass so that we may take their seat on the Council.

Even in the few short days since the Edict, alliances are being formed within the ranks of the Hogwarts Governors. My father chuckled at the very notion. In my younger days, he used to tell me that trying to keep my in light was like trying to cage a bolt of lightning. It has been many a long year since he told me that, but he said as much with regards to the Founders: 'They are bolts of lightning that you wish to cage, son. Take care.'

The Founders truly care about their mission. They are devoted to the school, which means they will be easy to control. They are not experienced in the games of power and intrigue, and as long as we take care to keep the best interests of the school in mind at all times, they will be in our catspaw. Although Hogwarts is young, I do suspect in the years to come that our Board of Governors will wield a power even greater than that of the Wizard's Council.

Of the matter regarding blood, that I think we should discuss in person. You and I do not always see eye to eye on this subject, and it would hurt me greatly if you misinterpreted my words as carrying anything but the utmost respect and friendship. Our means may be different but we still strive for the same end. The blood will run cold in my veins before I allow the blood of Atlantis to fade from the world. Of that, we are of the same mind.

Until our next meeting, I wish you the best of health.

—Excerpted from the private correspondence between Richard Potter, Son of Henry, and Louis Malfoy, son of Armand.

THE KEEP OF MYSTERIES
WESTMINSTER, LONDON
1107, C.E.

“Civility, I will have civility!” Severus Hortensius shouted. He held the Line of Merlin, the symbol of his station, in his left hand, and it whispered to him ideas, suggestions, paths. “I remind all of the members of the Wizard’s Council that Godric Gryffindor, Helga Hufflepuff, and Salazar Slytherin are here as our guests and should be treated as such.” He stared at Godric. “And in turn, I expect that our guests will afford us the level of respect that we are due. Now, that said, Master Longbottom has a fair and valid point. You requested special dispensation to circumvent the military authority of this Council in order to fight Lord Foul yourself. We granted that, and not only did you fail, but Lord Foul’s whereabouts are currently unknown.”

Septimus Longbottom added, “And this trophy you brought back for us, this Archway, we know nothing of its nature. For all we know, Lord Foul and his army may be dwelling just on the other side of that veil.”

“Master Longbottom, I can assure you that I have thoroughly inspected and researched this artifact,” Salazar Slytherin provided. “It is no dark portal to realms unseen, it is something much more eldritch than that. You should be thanking Godric for ensuring its safety within the hallowed halls of the Keep.”

“Yes, and further to the point, Longbottom, we have our best Unspeakables working around the clock to further decipher its mysteries.” Hortensius spread his hands. “But Godric, the fact stands that our world has grown close, perhaps too close. And your past few... escapades have not ended satisfactorily.”

“You speak of Dark Evangel. The Apostle of Darkness, she is dead, is she not?” Godric replied.

“Yes, and it practically put us to war against Shafiq and his regime in the process. Look around you at the world. The Muggle pontifex has called for war against Shafiq’s people. The Muggle king sends soldiers. Our world is fragile, and you have upset the game board too many times.”

“And what would you have me do, Severus? Stand idly by and watch as Longbottom’s Aurors flail blindly?”

Longbottom scoffed at the insult. “If we are blind, Godric, it is due in no small part to the fact that you and the others horde much-needed lore in your fortress that you call a ‘school’. Severus, the time for reform is here. Hogwarts needs to be recognized as an official branch of the Wizards’ Council. There is much we can share, much good we can do each other. You would have access to resources that I know for a fact you are currently struggling with.”

“And at what price would that come?” Godric demanded. “I am unwilling to sacrifice the neutrality of our school, to trade it away for a handful of coins. In this new era, knowledge is far, far more valuable.”

“Is it knowledge you crave? Or power?” Longbottom asked, the accusation ringing clearly.

Helga stepped in. “As distasteful as the idea of administrative oversight may sound, Longbottom is correct. There is much we have struggled with in the early days of our school. We can put limits in place as to the degree with which our affairs may be interfered.” She cast a sidelong glance at Godric. “I for one am comfortable with putting limitations upon the... military wing of Hogwarts.”

Salazar Slytherin nodded in agreement, and Godric voiced his displeasure, “And what limitations did you have in mind?”

William Umbridge looked down over the top of his glasses, “Yes, and I am curious what limitations you had in mind with respect to our influence.”

“Yes, I think that it is only fair and proper to demand that we are consulted when matters of international or interspecies relationships may be significantly impacted.” Albert Dumbledore spoke loudly from the back of the room.

Longbottom spoke up again “Yes, that fiasco with your sword has given the Goblins much reason to rally against us. They, like we, were not entirely in favor of such an accord.”

Severus Hortensius stepped in, before the matter could escalate. “We shall discuss the issue of Goblin insurgency in due time. And make no mistake, it is something that absolutely must be discussed. But we must come to an accord as to how Hogwarts will operate in the future. And another matter that needs attention in this regard is the attendance of Hogwarts.”

“If you are to be granted a degree of privilege above and beyond that of a private institution, you must be aware of how your policies may be interpreted as an extension of the policies of the Council. Acceptance of those of mixed lineage by Hogwarts could, for example, be seen as tacit acceptance by the Council, perhaps even a mandate, to water down the blood of Atlantis.”

“Water down?” Godric exclaimed. “I thought that we were above this sort of arrogance and hubris.”

“There is no need to preach. We have heard the lecture many times, but you seem not to have heard our rejoinder. It is not a matter of intolerance, it is simply that we wish to proceed with caution for now. It is simply the fact that, as of yet, we still do not know the impact of diluting the blood of Atlantis.” Slytherin retorted.

Helga rolled her eyes. It was the same argument, but this time they had an audience. They went through the motions of appearing to argue with each other. Helga, and for that matter, everyone else in the room, knew full well that Godric and Salazar were arguing for the benefit of the crowd, not each other. Typically, Helga and Rowena could respectively calm Godric and Salazar, but Headmistress Ravenclaw was at Hogwarts; politics or no, there was still a school to run.

“Yes, and as we discussed previously, it is observable fact that the strength of one’s blood has no impact on the power that they may wield. Some of our best students are half-blood or less, and could easily out-magic those in your own house.” Godric added.

“Yes, and as we have also discussed, it is an observable fact that the purity—” Salazar hesitated and reworded himself. “That the strength of one’s connection to Atlantis has measurable environmental impacts. One need only compare the Slytherin common room to that of, say, Gryffindor’s, to see the difference.”

Godric paused for a moment. His voice no longer carried the self-assured fire of before, and he proceeded hesitantly. "Are you so sure that is a good thing? I agree that magic flows more freely within your halls than my own. But with that power comes... danger."

Salazar narrowed his eyes, "You have danced around this point for weeks, ever since returning from Azkaban. It is not a concern that you have ever brought up in our long years together." He looked Godric in the eyes, who instinctively cast them downward. Slytherin growled, emphatically. "What did you see there?"

"What I saw..." Godric faltered, but then like a climber unexpectedly finding solid purchase, continued with renewed fervor, "What I saw was the danger and devastation that one person can wield. Lord Foul has inflicted a terrible evil upon not just our people, but the entire land as well. As we have seen, he is experimenting with magics that are dangerous even to the most reckless among us. And that is coming from me," he added with a rare tone of self-deprecating humor. It seemed to work, as several members of the Wizard's Council were smiling.

Longbottom seized this opportunity. "You see? They cannot agree, even among themselves! Yes, we should be mindful of the danger that one man may possess, Godric. Not only did you drive a rift between the Goblin communities, but you then massacred an entire regiment of them. They are a threat to our country, now. Even those who were on your side, they did not look kindly upon that spilled blood."

"Damn them, and damn anyone who served Lord Foul. I taught you myself when you were at Hogwarts, Longbottom. You were renowned for your bravery. Have you truly fallen so low as to cower beneath such little feet?"

A few members of the council laughed. Longbottom turned red, “I would not underestimate them, were I you. They are, more and more, becoming armed. They have lost their lore, and in response have taken up wands. Combined with their mastery of artifice, they present a a very real threat.”

Hortensius was growing exasperated with the several different directions the conversation was taking, but had given up trying to corral it. After all, they had time to cover all points, even if it were not in the original order Severus had envisioned. “Yes, and you propose a limitation on their access to Wizard-made wands?”

“At the minimum, yes. They must be regulated, monitored. To say nothing of the matter of the dwindling supply of wands since Madame Ollivander’s absence.” He offered an olive branch to Godric, “What Godric had done with Ragnuk the Rampant, was, in its own way, brilliant. I propose that we can enforce similar such limitations upon them, under the guise of such mutually beneficial relationships?”

Godric clearly did not see the olive branch as a peace offering, “Limitations such as those you wish to enforce upon Hogwarts?”

Longbottom smiled, placatingly, “Godric. You are a wizard, not a Goblin. Although we are concerned that you may upset the game board, we are quite certain that we all play with the same color pieces. I do not share that same certainty with respect to the Little.”

Godric harrumphed, but Helga stepped in, changing the subject slightly, “But there is the matter of logistics... I am unsure as to whether Madame Ollivander would take kindly to such impositions upon to whom she can and cannot sell her wares.”

“Yes, well, Madame Ollivander is not here, is she?” William Umbridge piped up.

Hortensius rapped the Line of Merlin on the stone podium to demand silence. “The matter of what we do with the Goblins is a discussion for members of the Council, not the Founders of Hogwarts. We have called you here to discuss one specific aspect of the Edict, not all the points in their entirety. I suggest that we finish that discussion so that the Wizard’s Council may deliberate on their own matters.”

The council reluctantly nodded their agreement and began discussing anew the regulations that would be placed upon Hogwarts. It was over the span of several hours that the finer points of the Edict of Hortensius were hashed out and debated. When they had finally finished discussing Hogwarts, they bade the Founders to make their exit.

“I don’t like it.” Godric said, departing the meeting chamber with Salazar and Helga, looking up at the Archway. After the battle at Azkaban, representatives of the Aurors and several members of the Council had answered his urgent calls. He stayed there until enough of them arrived, but in the meantime he made sure to clean up much of the gruesome mess that had been made as he battled his way to the lowest floor. If they had seen the true extent of it, it was unlikely that the last meeting would have been as amicable as it was.

It took the group several hours, but they had successfully removed the entire inner core of the triangular tower, leaving it with a hollow center that extended up to the top through which the Archway was levitated up, up, and away.

As Godric walked through the spiral staircase back to the top of the tower, the effect was chilling. He could see into almost all the rooms in the tower from any vantage point on the staircase.

There was a small note of confusion that he had trained himself not to ignore. This layout did not make sense. Why would a tower be designed in such a way? From a rough glance, it seemed that several of the chambers were previously inaccessible prior to the removal of the inner core. It didn't make sense. Although he was not an expert in magical architecture, he had picked up a thing or two in the many long nights spent designing and building Hogwarts castle.

The triangular shape was not optimal, architecturally. The original plan was to simply blast the hole out the side and remove the Archway through the opening. But a few cursory charms to inspect the structure of the tower revealed that any such attempt would, in all likelihood, cause the entire tower to collapse upon itself.

How was it that the tower would have such an obvious architectural weak point, but that it was further built in such a way that the entire center could be removed with no ill effect? There was only one conclusion to be drawn, and it was chilling: this was deliberately designed. Whether Lord Foul had built Azkaban himself was unknown, but whoever did, it seemed clear that what Godric saw now was its intended final shape.

He voice these concerns to the other Founders, who personally visited the tower and scrutinized the Archway. Rowena Ravenclaw concluded that the tower was built to temporarily house the Archway. Further, she deduced that the curious metal ring with which the Goblin leader had escaped, was somehow linked to the Archway.

They had done all manner of experiments. Passing inanimate objects through the veil seemed to have no effect. Similarly, mundane living creatures could pass freely. Magical creatures, however, reacted very differently. No creature seemed willing to enter the Archway of its own volition. At first they tried immobilizing Cornish Pixies, and floating them through with magic. But the creatures resisted so intensely that they managed to break the bonds of the *Immobulus* charm.

After a few similarly failed attempts, they used magically reinforced leather straps to tie a Pixie down to a long length of rod, which they extended through the Archway from a distance. The sprite hissed venomously as they hoisted it into the air, but as it drew closer and closer to the veil, that hiss became a shriek. It shook violently within its bonds, trying desperately to escape, and eventually the shriek gave way to a wail of terror. Salazar held the rod, and continued to dispassionately proceed despite the fact that Rowena was visibly distressed.

As it past the threshold, the struggling immediately ceased. The light left its eyes. It was dead.

Helga Hufflepuff walked to the other side of the Archway, “Same over here. Dead. And Godric, you are certain that Lord Foul walked through the archway and simply ‘disappeared’?”

“Yes. Absolutely certain.”

Further experiments showed a certain magical resonance occurring between the Archway and the ring whenever living creatures passed through the veil. No matter what variables they manipulated, the end result was always death. The one thing they had not tried, however, was a creature of true sentience. A human. However, the need to decipher the Archway’s mystery did not seem to be so great that it justified the monstrous cost.

It was Salazar that suggested experimenting on prisoners, those who were already sentenced to death for their crimes. It was a notion that none of them were particularly comfortable with, and required the explicit consent of the council. But the Council seem far less concerned with the ethical implications, and far more concerned with simply solving the mystery. And a few less criminals in the world was no skin off their backs, because after all, the members of the Council were not criminals.

In the end, the result was the same. The first three prisoners, all dead. But the curious observation was made that there was no Death Burst of any kind. They would have been able to detect if the Burst had simply been channeled through the Archway. To be fair, not every sudden death of a wizard or witch resulted in a Death Burst; it was roughly one in two deaths. As such, Rowena pointed out that there was still a one in eight chance that this would happen by pure random chance. The Wizard's Council helpfully pointed out that they had several more prisoners that could be experimented upon.

A brief debate ensued concerning what their limit would be. After all, you can send one hundred men through, and even if there were no Bursts, it could still be nothing more than dumb luck. How many men were they willing to sacrifice before being satisfied? On this, Godric and Salazar were of the same mind: if they were to die anyway, what was the harm? So they agreed: five more prisoners. And if the same result was observed, they would have their conclusion.

Five prisoners walked through the Archway, five more died. No Death Bursts.

Besides the most obvious sign of death, the cessation of all activity associated with life, there were none of the other telltale indicators that the victims had passed.

It was almost as if it simply transported the life force of its victims to someplace else entirely. But that still didn't explain how Lord Foul had simply disappeared, unlike the others. There was another hypothesis to be tested: being a tremendously dark wizard and the very inventor of the Horcrux ritual itself, it was overwhelmingly likely the Lord Foul was in possession of one, if not several of the phylacteries.

Sacrificing a prisoner for the sake of science was already walking the very darkest edges of the grey area of morality. But overwriting their very life force in order to create a Horcrux? Even Salazar Slytherin was unwilling to go that far. By happy coincidence, however, Dark Evangel, a witch whom Godric had personally defeated half a century prior, had left behind a Horcrux of her own. Like most dark witches and wizards, she was prone to folly, and wore the Horcrux openly around her neck: a glittering silver pendant which now rest safely within the Keep of Mysteries.

More than willing to be rid of the terrible artifact, Severus Hortensius authorized the Unspeakables to remove it from its protective chamber. A veritable army of Aurors led by Lord Longbottom himself was gathered in the chamber that contained the Archway, ready to strike in the event of some unforeseen dark magic.

Godric did the honors, and flung the pendant through the Archway. In retrospect, that particular experiment was quite foolish. For all they knew, the spell could have triggered a blast which knocked the entire room unconscious. Although they had safeguards in place, levels and levels of safeguards, Magic is unpredictable and doesn't always follow the rules. In fact, it rarely does.

Nonetheless, nothing particularly sinister happened.

Save for the prone, childlike, unconscious form of Dark Evangel hurtling through the other side of the Archway, following the flight path of the pendant, which was nowhere to be found. Immediately, a dozen or more bolts of light, concussive waves, fans of ice and pillars of stone shot from the wands of the assembled group, stunning, sapping, imprisoning, and in one unfortunate case, eviscerating her.

That was unexpected.

She was kept on the cusp of life, and all manner of detection charms and rituals were used upon her, which revealed that her spirit was anchored. There was no trace whatsoever of any Horcrux connection. Satisfied that she did not pose the threat of revival, one of the Aurors snuffed out her remaining life, and a brief pulse of energy shockwaved through the room as the veil rippled softly.

“Lock it down, now.” Rowena demanded. She immediately went to work upon sealing the portal, and prepared a charm that spread as a diffuse, barely visible mist that blanketed the room. “It goes without saying that the results of this experiment should not leave this room. I have placed a Trace upon us all, and so if it does, I shall know. And more importantly, Godric shall know, and as you all are well aware, he does not wear the crown of restraint or ethics as heavily as I do.”

The Aurors in the room looked uncomfortably at the diadem on her head and the sword in Godric’s hands. The threat was effective, although uncomfortable. Although there were several paths to reconstructing a bodily form using a Horcrux, this one was surprisingly simple. They did not relish the prospect of being under constant attack from erstwhile servants of previously fallen dark lords.

Presently, the archway now sat, unused, for several months within the Keep of Mysteries before the day that the Wizards' Council had convened to discuss the Edict of Hortensius. As Godric walked from the room, he could hear whispers from beyond the veil, calling to him. They all could, and they all heard something different.

Godric heard the slow, sad wail of a Phoenix's cry.

ELIZABETHAN TEAROOM

The eight men sat in the cozy room, whose exposed oak beams and soft, velvet covered furnishings provided the perfect atmosphere in which to relax before venturing out into a strange, timeless world. Presently, they were playing Dragon poker. How else would they pass the time? Although, time was perhaps a bit of a misnomer. They were on their hundred, thousand, millionth hand? They couldn't keep track. They were on some hand of dragon poker when they heard voices from beyond the unopenable door to the north. They had tried, of course, to leave. But such a strong feeling of dread overcame them that they found themselves incapable. Although they couldn't leave the room through the door, there was a Judas window installed through which they could view the outside world. They rarely bothered; it was quite boring, to be frank. But now there were sounds, which was new, so one of them stood up to investigate the disturbance., and opened up the porthole to see the source of the disturbance. As soon as he did, a silvery pendant was flung unceremoniously through, hitting him square in his face.

“Oi! That was rude!” He cried.

The other men looked up. “What is it?” one asked.

“Something shiny, I reckon. Give it here.” The man closest to the pendant grabbed it, and another lumbered over trying to get a closer look, and tugged on the chain in an attempt to take it.

“Oi, gerrof!”

The other men rolled her eyes and watched the two wrestled bawdily for control. One of the men who was still playing laid his cards down on the table, “Read ’em and weep, boys. Straight flush!”

“Not so fast, Gilesbie.” Travers grinned as he laid down the Dragon card, and paired it with the deuce. “Reverse-o!” Gilesbie groaned, and began collecting the cards to shuffle for the next hand.

The Edict of Hortensius, although remembered later in history primarily for its restriction of wand ownership, was rightfully hailed at the time as a brilliant political masterpiece. Its original intent was to settle the long-standing concern over the growing autonomy of Hogwarts by establishing an independent Board of Governors that, although did not explicitly answer to the Council, was nonetheless influenced by them.

It maintained Hogwarts’ neutrality by ensuring that no member of the Wizards’ Council could simultaneously be a member of the Hogwarts’ governing board. But it had also satisfied the Council’s desire for a degree of oversight by granting board positions solely to the heirs of the various most prominent members of the Council.

In doing so, it also addressed a growing but unstated problem: the heirs of those on the Council were well of age at this point, and many had heirs unto themselves. They were growing restless, hungry for power, but their fathers and mothers had no plans on dying anytime soon, and creating additional seats on the Council was not a desirable option.

It even managed to address the ever growing concern of wand supply. Ever since Madame Ollivander's son had graduated from Hogwarts and taken over the family business, the production of new wands was vastly limited. Ollivander the Elder had clearly not passed her expertise down, and she rarely made appearance at the store. Each year, their vast supply of wands she had created over the centuries began to dwindle precipitously, and unless Ollivander resumed production or passed on her lore, there would be none left within the span of a few decades.

In a move that would satisfy both the prudent and the purists, the Edict of Hortensius demanded that all Ollivander wands in the civilized world be returned to the Wizard's Council within one year's time. Those wands would be registered and then returned to their owners, provided they could demonstrate an appropriate knowledge of magical safety. For the vast majority of wizards, this meant either having attended Hogwarts themselves, or having a living heir who is attending or had attended the school.

The move drew out the few Methuselahs, heirless wizards that the Council knew existed, and had long wanted to keep tabs upon. Those who did not present themselves were greatly weakened, for in a shocking, rare public appearance, Madame Ollivander gave her support of the Edict, and pledged to enact a grand ritual at the end of the yearlong deadline, which would render her creations useless were they not subject to the registration process.

In one deft stroke, Severus Hortensius had eased the tensions between three powerful and disparate groups of interest, and had further consolidated power in the civilized world in the hands of the Council and its heirs.

But alas, every river of good intentions must eventually terminate, flowing out into a sea of unintended consequences.

THE URGOD UR

ACKLE

1107 C.E.

“Do not be so hasty to deny this opportunity, Surdod.” Godrod spoke, emphatically.

“I agree. Let us not show the same ignorant intolerance as the humans and reject him out of hand simply because he is not Goblin.” Haddad agreed.

Surdod slammed his fist upon the table. “It is because of him that Ulak the Unconquered has fallen. Ulak and his kin chose to follow the Archon, and paid for it with blood. I wish to see no more goblin blood on this man’s hands, or any man!”

“Yes, but let us not forget whose sword actually drew that blood. That man is the one upon whom the Archon proposes war.” Bilgurd offered amicably.

“Need we escalate this cycle of death? Say we win, what then? Do you truly think that humans, in their perpetual bloodlust and ignorance,” He nodded his head at the Archon Heraclius Hero, who sat in the guest chair at the table.

“Present company excluded, of course. Do you really think they will let such a blow go unreturned? Of course not! They will wage war.” Surdod retorted.

“Then war they shall have!” Haddad roared. “They seek to take our wands, they seek to remove the ability with which we may defend ourselves from their ever encroaching advances. Somehow they have bamboozled or coerced Madame Ollivander, who was a friend to all of our kind, and I believe her when she says that our wands will turn to sticks in our hands if we do not submit to their slavery. We must strike before that happens.”

Surdod sighed. “And what good will that do? We cannot control Madame Ollivander: our wands will still be useless, war or no. What do you suggest, that we send our younglings to that human school to have their minds filled with rot and poison? Do you propose that we take over the school, and teach humankind our secrets? Or do we simply refuse entry to all but Goblins?”

“At the end of all these paths lie ruin. The covenant that the Four Founders and the Board of Governors signed, bound by the Cup of Dawn itself, dictates that all parties much reach a supermajority on any matters which ‘significantly impact the course and direction of the curriculum or administration of Hogwarts’. Such an agreement cannot be coerced, it must be entered into freely. In their spite, the humans would never agree to allow us our wands.”

Godrod nodded. “Then it is they who send us into the cycle of death, not us. We cannot simply sit idly by while they trample our people. I speak to you now as a friend, Sodrod. I know that you have been hesitant to send our people to war, and with good cause. Your voice of reason has been much appreciated and greatly valued. However, we stand now at the precipice of a new era.

Already, our magic wanes. Wizards wish to crush us beneath their heels. It is often more brave, more honorable, more difficult to stay one's hand than to strike. But now is not one of those times. If we stay our hand, it will be cut off. If we put down our spears, they shall be stolen. We are stuck between the hammer and the anvil, forced into a choice not of our own making. It is a terrible choice, yes, but one that we cannot afford not to make. This is the future of our very race at stake, and sadly now we must fight for that future!"

An overwhelming majority of the goblins at the table cheered loudly at this. Bilgurd, Sodrod and a few others looked at each other, dubiously exchanging meaningful glances, and eventually nodding amongst themselves.

After a time, Sodrod spoke. "Very well. Let us decide then, on whether to ally with this man who proposes war against Wizards."

Archon Heraclius Hero, who had been silent up until this point, raised his open hand, and the room grew quiet. "Before you decide, I would like to speak. Because I do not wish you to enter into such a decision lightly. You must understand that, although I disagree with Sodrod's hesitance to fight, he is correct in that it is unlikely that Lady Ollivander will change her course. By allying with me, you embrace a new era, but it will be a darker era. Many magicks will be lost, and must one day be rediscovered. I can help you with this, I can help you to shine a light in the darkness, but darkness will come, make no mistake."

"Those who knew Ulak, they should know that I did not view him as a subordinate, but truly as equals. If you ally with me, you do not take on a master, but rather, an advisor, a general to fight under your banner. But make no mistake, this will be not be a battle, it will be a war over the span of centuries.

Many of you in this room will die. Many of your children will die. Many of your children's children's children will die as a result of the seeds we sow in the coming year. If we win, it will not be a happy victory, but it will be a necessary one."

"I know that this likely will dampen your ardor, I can see that many of you are still reluctant, and my warnings will make more of you so. But I respect your people too much to try to win you over with honeyed words and clever rhetoric. I speak to you plainly, so that you may truly know the risks in which you are about to engage."

The surrounding goblins nodded grimly, understanding. A long moment of silence passed, as they considered and weighed his words. Eventually, the vote was called, and the goblins began to raise their hands. The decision was unanimous.

Meldh smiled to himself.

All too easy...

C H A P T E R T W E L V E

THE BATTLE OF HOGWARTS, PRELUDE

But where shall wisdom be found? And where is the place
of understanding? Man knoweth not the price thereof;
neither is it found in the land of the living... for the price
of wisdom is above rubies.

Job 28:12

HOGSMEADE

1107 C.E.

“Did you not think that I, the one who would be most likely to see the rightness in your cause, would be offended that I was the last of the Four that you approached?” Helga Hufflepuff took a sip of tea, watching her friend’s reaction closely. “It is fair to say that I and my brethren are known for little, save for our tenacity. But I dare say that hard work often beats a faster path to Truth than cleverness, cunning, or courage.”

"I have seen what our students have done. I have seen what we have wrought. I know what we are capable of. And yes, I have heard the prophecies. Even The Prophecy." At this, Heraclius Hero arched an eyebrow.

Helga continued, "Friend, I have often considered walking the same path as yourself. I have often considered abandoning my companions, walking away from what we have built. The others, they do not see the extent of the danger as clearly as I do."

"So then, you will aid me, when the others have rebuffed me?" Heraclius asked.

Helga began to speak, but her regretful smile communicated everything Heraclius needed to know.

"You're a fool! All of you are!" He slammed his fist into the table, causing the other people in the pub to look over in irritation. "You're so damned clever, every last one of you. You only believe the best because you want it to be true! But has it ever occurred to you that sometimes, the simplest solution is the correct one? I am well aware of the manifold interpretations. Rending asunder the fires of the sky. Tearing open the eyes of heaven. Tearing apart the very stars in heaven. They all speak to one thing: destruction, death, the end of all things! And you, you cursed deathists, you wish to let it happen, in the misguided hope that The Prophecy means something other than the obvious!"

At this, Helga's phoenix, Howard, cawed softly, and Helga interjected. "Do you not think that out of death, can come rebirth?" Heraclius cut her off, "Not this again. I have heard this enough from the others, but from you as well? No. I do not accept this. Death is never good. Death is never right. And I for one, will not stand idly by and watch as you march this world towards oblivion, made worse by the fact that you think you lead us into salvation."

Heraclius stood up to leave. “SIT.” The command seemed unsuited for Helga’s lips, but it was spoken with such force, anger, and determination, that he was almost bound to comply. “You have insulted me and mine enough. It is fortunate that I did love you, once. You have little idea of the sacrifices I have endured for the sake of you and your wretched companion. The lies he told me. I had made beautiful, terrible things. My power was growing. I was to be The One, to lead us to a new era.

But he came to me, with honeyed words and promises. He came to me as he came to all of us, and I gave him an audience because of you, because of our love. He told me the plans he had for my Cup, the ways he would channel our power to create the ultimate creative force. He told me LIES, and now all I have to show for my life’s work is THIS!”

She angrily shook her teacup at him. Fortunately, it was empty. Not that it would have mattered.

“He shackled me, he shackled all of us, Meldh. And you allowed it to happen. You knew. You allowed this, this monster, to become masters of all of us. Even yourself. You began this march, this inexorable spiral into stagnation. Despite this, I never sought to strike against you, but you would be well to know that you only live by my grace. We have watched the passage of time for a millennium, you and I, and I do not end such friendships lightly. But the tools of my will are spread wide, every man, woman and child wizard in the whole of this part of the world uses a piece of my Will. And through them I command a great power. See to it that you do not give me cause to turn that power against you.”

Meldh considered his response. “You call me by my True Name, It is a word I have not heard in centuries. I shall return the favor, Ελαολογος. But know this. You do not absolve me of blame out of some misguided loyalty to our centuries together. You know as well as I do that I had been Bound. You know that I would not have deceived you otherwise.”

A pause.

A long pause.

She said nothing.

“Not under my own volition, so to speak, but nonetheless, I am Bound, forever more.” This made matters considerably more complicated. After a time, she spoke.

“Would you move against us all the same, were you not Bound?”

“I would. But I would not have lied to you. I would do as I do now, moving openly.”

“And have you spoke with Godric?”

“I have not. His pride would not permit it. Nor would mine” his words were tinged with bitterness. At this, she finally laughed.

“To think. All of history, all of fate, the future of all our kind, will be altered by the pride of two jealous men, quarreling over a woman.”

He smiled in return. It was genuine. “More significant events have been precipitated by less.”

Helga began to speak.

“Then there will be war.” Meldh shook his head.

“And you know that we will win.” At this, Meldh nodded.

“And yet you still will move against us.” Meldh nodded.

“Because you truly, deeply, believe that what you are doing is right.” Meldh nodded, again.

Helga closed her eyes. No one is the villain of their own story.

She stood.

ESTREMOZ

1107 C.E.

The first thing that Adelberto noticed was the oppressive heat; Évora was known for being warm, but this was bordering on unnatural. These were strange times, but God worked in strange ways. It was a stroke of fortune that this stranger, who was no Christian or Moor, was willing to pay such a handsome sum for such strange cargo. Adelberto was a poultry farmer by trade, he lived a simple life and had simple needs, but in the last six months, he had fallen on difficult times. Even when every last galo came down with the febre vermelha, his Faith never waived, for the galinhas were unaffected. This gave him at least a few months time. He was confident that the Lord would provide, and He did.

The man was waiting, as promised. He stood near a circle drawn in the ground with chalk. There were five buildings nearby that looked new, in fact, they looked like cages, but Adelberto could not think of any beast large enough to warrant a prison that large. He then thought about his cargo, and what would happen if it were discovered. The local authorities were friends of the Lord, it was doubtful they would care about some leftover weapons from the Reconquista. Crates of scimitars. Piles of nooses. They were tools of the Lord; their victims were simply Moors.

The man spoke. “Ola amigo. Leve o seu ouro, deixar o vagão, em seguida, parte. *Egeustimentis*.” The man shook Adelberto’s hand, and Adelberto shuddered for a moment, but complied. Quickly.

The man removed the tools from the wagon. He breathed in deeply, then began the chant.

*“...Eu dou um nome, e o Nome é perdido.
Eu dou-lhe o sangue das minhas veias,
e com pena, rasgo a asa de um anjo.
Eu te chamo diferente, de Meu Senhor, Meu Senhor.
Invoco veneno e chame de dor.
Eu te abro caminho e te abro as portas.
Vem. Vem...”*

He closed his eyes, and felt the heat from the five caged dragons begin to dissipate, counterbalanced by an unnatural chill. Well. That had worked.

In his mind, he retreated to a comforting mantra, the one that had guided him for so many centuries, his battlecry. With intense effort, he whipped his wand out and enveloped the darkness with light.

The chill lifted. Soon enough, he would ensure that the counterspell was lost forever, but he still had much work to do. He pointed his wand at one of the cages containing the Welsh Green, and fired off a spell at each cage in rapid succession.

*“AVADAKEDAVRA AVADAKEDAVRA AVADAKEDAVRA
AVADAKEDAVRA AVADAKEDAVRA!”*

He was preparing for war, and he was building his army.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE BATTLE OF HOGWARTS

MORPHEUS: I am a world, space-floating, life-nurturing.

CHORONZON: I am a nova, all-exploding... planet-cremating.

MORPHEUS: I am the Universe— all things encompassing, all life embracing.

CHORONZON: I am Anti-Life, the Beast of Judgment. I am the dark at the end of everything. The end of universes, gods, worlds . . . of everything. Sss. And what will you be then, Dreamlord?

Neil Gaiman, *The Sandman: Preludes and Nocturnes*

HOGWARTS

1107 C.E.

There was no hope.

How could there be? Lord Foul had thought of everything. Although Ελαολογος was older, she was no warrior. She was an artist, a creator of things. She was Life, and at the fabric of her world was woven in such a way that all life must end.

He, on the other hand, was Death, destroyer of worlds. He commanded vast, terrible armies. He cast visions into their mind of the Tarrasque razing the beautiful city of Estremoz, making sure that every exquisite scream echoed within their souls. The wail of every mother, watching their children's broken bodies chewed and crushed by an unfeeling, dispassionate beast. The shrieks of anguish as men lived their last moments in abject, blinding pain and misery. An unending windmill of horror sliced through their minds, blade after blade after blade.

And they had not even battled him yet; they were still fighting their way through his creatures, his pawns, his proxies. The king was well protected. It was only through barest of chance, dumbest of luck that they managed to turn away the dozens of snake-creatures he had at his command, creatures that could seemingly turn men into stone with but a glance.

Scores of armored defenders had been turned into statues by the gaze of these unknown beasts, but even in death, their stone form had been put to use. With a quickly improvised ritual, Rowena Ravenclaw imbued the statues with a small measure of her life force, then animated them:

"Piertotum Locomotor!"

Hogwarts was under attack, and they rose to defend it. But even then, the only tactic that seemed to be of any effectiveness against the creatures was distraction. Once they realized that their gaze could not affect the stone defenders, they simply stopped engaging them and slithered past to attack the defenders behind them. The golems continued their defense, but it had little effect.

In desperation, Professor Kaspersky sent out a burst of light and sound in order to distract them, draw their gaze away.

It seemed to work, momentarily; the basilisk could not initially differentiate between the harmless lights and the bolts of deadly magical force. As such, the Professor continued the assault, burning through memory after memory, drawing on every experience in his past in order to distract them, forcing them to divide their attention between the true and false attacks.

He was reaching the point of diminishing returns. With each successive burst, it held their gaze for a shorter and shorter period of time. It would not be long before they ignored it entirely and resumed their attack with full force. Had it not been for Rowena Ravenclaw's keen eye, all may have been lost. With one burst of sound, the basilisk reacted differently. For a moment, they froze, and she could see a brief flicker of fear in the language of their movement.

It was a panoply of sound that the Professor had drawn upon his days on the farm as a youth in order to produce: cows mooing, horses whinnying, donkeys braying, pigs squealing, roosters crowing.

"Do it again, now!" Rowena commanded. The sound echoed forth with doubled intensity, and she began her experimentation. One sound at a time.

Nothing.

Nothing.

Nothing.

Something.

When she broadcast the sound of the rooster crowing, the basilisk vocally shrieked in fear, seizing backward and whipping their coils around to look for the source of the unknown threat.

They were confused.

“Daerovan!” She shouted to a nearby Fae, who was casting his glamours outward in pink, crystalline bolts. He and his kind had bound themselves to serve the house of Hogwarts, exchanging their vast, unknowable power for a home and protection, in accordance with the laws of their kind. “Summon the kitchen staff, now!”

He nodded, and with a snap of his fingers, half a dozen Fae appeared. Because they were rarely presented to the public, they did not bother maintaining their physical glamours. They appeared in their natural form: short, lanky creatures with bulbous eyes and floppy, leathery ears. Most were wearing rags or improvised outfits made of tea cozies and such. Rowena shouted, “Do we have roosters in the henhouse?”

Charky, the head of the kitchen staff nodded. “Would it please Mistress for me to bring them forth.”

“Very much, Charky.”

With a smile, he waved his hands in an arc, and the roosters immediately instantiated. They were confused, and ruffled their feathers, clucking angrily. The nearby basilisks winced in pain. No longer were they acting in confused fear, they were reacting with abject terror. The ones that were closest spun around, and began to slither away as quickly as their scales would carry them.

Catching on, Salazar Slytherin amplified the sounds of the roosters, throwing the basilisks into disarray. Realizing that the roosters needed more stimulus, he cast a false sun into the night sky, temporary illuminating the battlefield.

The carnage was horrifying. Broken bodies of all manner of magical creatures lay strewn about, discarded. Every surface was slick with the vital fluids of men, goblins, snakes, giants, and other unknown creatures. The grass was matted, compressed. The air buzzed with the sound of chizpurples, feasting upon the enhanced blood and remnants of magic in the air.

The sun pulsed with power, casting long, ominous, undulating shadows. In response, the roosters began to crow, their calls amplified by Slytherin's magic. The basilisks were now apoplectic. They wrenched and twisted in pain, shrieking and hissing. They were dying.

"Pleassssse..... Sssssstop."

What?

Slytherin had been experimenting for some time with a language that would allow him to lend some measure of his own sentience into a serpent to allow for speech. But his results had largely been in vain.

"Pleasssssee.... Do not wissssh to die."

One of the great snakes was talking to him, beseeching him. It had wrapped its coils around its own head in an attempt to drown out the sound. Slytherin responded in the tongue of snakes:

"Tell me, ssssnake. Why do you ssssserve him?"

"Wassss born to him, sssserve him for he threatenssss our young."

Pleassssse."

"Do you underssssstand me? Are you truly a living mind?"

"Pleassse, ssstop thesssse creaturesss..."

Do not wissssh to die, have lived ccccenturies, have much lore I can teach you."

Salazar considered this. It could be a workaround, for the time being. The beast was clearly ancient, possibly even ageless. If it was sentient, and he passed his knowledge down to it, bound it to him...

"Lore like ssssecret to true Horcurxxxxx...."

He stopped in his tracks at this. In an instant, he made his decision, whipping his wand in vicious slashes, quickly transfiguring the creature into a rough-hewn emerald, and bade it upward and into his robes.

Rowena stared, open-mouthed at what was unfolding around her. None of this made sense. He could talk to snakes? Snakes are sentient? And why in the name of Merlin would a rooster's crow be fatal to these beasts? Even by the admittedly lax standards of Magic, this defied reason. How is it that they just happened to stumble upon these invulnerable creatures' one random weakness. And how is that someone whose last name just happened to be "Slytherin" could speak to snakes?

Waves of terror crashed over her. How could they win? And what if they did? What good was any of this? If nothing in the world made sense, if nothing followed the rules, there was no point. Why not just descend into madness if the rest of the world was mad, too?

"What good is any of this?" She shrieked, roughly grabbing the robes of Godric who was standing near to her. "The world is mad!"

"No, he is driving the world mad. He has been my enemy since my youth, there is something about him, something that brings out the madness in people. Stay strong, there is still a battle to be fought."

“Why? Why do we fight? Why is this so? He is your fated foe? There are prophecies that brought us together? It’s too convenient! This isn’t a story, this is life!”

“Pull yourself together, woman!” he barked, roughly.

She started cackling. “Pull yourself together! Pull yourself together!” She stared around: fear was thick in the air, the basilisks writhing in their death throes, Salazar looking white in the face as he backed away slowly, clutching the fat green emerald. “You pull yourself together! This is not our world! It can’t be! It’s too convenient! This is a story, a fantasy, a fiction!”

She cackled again, and began gesturing with her wand. “Can you hear me?” She screamed at the reader. “Did you write this?? Is this your doing? Or are you just watching??” She screamed incoherent curses, and with a rapidfire movement of her wand and thricefold repetition of the trigger word, “*Az’reth*”, she summoned forth a great and terrible raven crafted of dark, bloody fire.

Drops of the living flame dripped from its wings as it bore itself into the air, beating in circles above them. “This world is insane, this story is insane, and I will burn it down! Do you hear me?? I’ll give you a story of ash, and fire, and emptiness! Enjoy your tale of Nothingness!”

At that, she cast the raven upward, and it beat its wings, sending wave upon wave of burning Fiendfyre in all directions, igniting the ground and the air alike. The flame stopped at a certain point in the sky, as if it was meeting resistance. She grinned, “The fourth wall?” she called to no one in particular. She directed all of the fiery raven’s force against the barrier, until it stressed, bent, cracked, and eventually shattered under the force, causing waves of destructive magical backwash to spray back onto them.

As the shield that cloaked the left wing of Lord Foul's army fell away, they could see something in the distance: three dozen dark, hooded figures, floating, watching them all intently. It was like a dam had burst: the shield had been concealing them, but it had also been restraining them. With nothing to keep them held back, and their master's promise of countless souls heavy on their dead minds, they charged. They opened their mouths and inhaled the living flame, which flickered weakly and died.

Slytherin stared up at them. "Specters . . ." he whispered. He turned to his companions. "Summon your Patronuses, now!" Godric blinked a few times. He had never been able to muster enough happiness to summon forth a corporeal Patronus. But Helga Hufflepuff immediately leapt into action, summoning forth a vast, angry badger to join the Lord Slytherin's bright, silver serpent.

The defenders lifted their heads and watched as the shadows passed from their hearts. The hooded creatures were turned away by the pure life force that stood between them and their victims. The madness was gone from Rowena's eyes, but she was still shaken. "That . . . that fool. We shall turn his creations against him." She attempted to summon her own Patronus as well, but Salazar turned to her.

"Lord Foul is no fool, that much I know."

Godric nodded with a frown on his face as he studied the battlefield. Basilisks lay slain, their corpses contorted into coils. The Hogwarts Tarrasque was vanquished, imprisoned beneath the Black Lake and left to drown. The Dementors circled high above, kept at bay by the Patronuses of the survivors which had joined the serpent and badger, a menagerie of mist, shining brightly in stark contrast to the darkness above.

The students had long before been hidden within the Room of Requirement, which had expanded to the size of the Great Hall to accommodate their numbers. Portkeys had been arranged for each student, suspended in unreality for so long as the four founders maintained their hold on their magic. If they were slain, rendered unconscious, or deliberately relinquished control, the Portkeys would be instantiated, and the students would be transported to safety.

That said, Hogwarts was the safest place in the civilized world, second only perhaps to the Keep of Mysteries. They did not know to what lengths Lord Foul would go to end the perceived threat of Hogwarts; it was entirely possible that he would simply hunt down the students at their homes, where they were defenseless. For now, it was easier to protect the students if they were in a centralized location. If that layer of protection were to fail, they would be dispersed.

There was a lull in the battle. Lord Foul's shock troops, the disposable magical creatures, the muggles, the Goblins, had put a significant dent in the ranks of the defenders. Although each individual wizard was more than capable of handling multiple threats at once, there were just so many, so many of them. And the true battle had not even begun, for Lord Foul still had his army of men, and behind them, a battalion of wizards.

There was no hope.

And yet, all five of them knew that they were fated to win.

By the ancient laws of combat, the four generals strode to the front lines, having been granted an audience with Lord Foul in person. He stood tall, proud, passionate. His Asiatic features wore his eternal age well. He was not young, but he was not aged. He looked exactly as he should.

For their part, the founders wore their age well. They were all at least a century old, which was basically middle aged by the standard of the time. They stood, defiant, bolstered by the confidence of prophecy and fate, as the Lord began to speak.

“You four, you have been bound together by prophecy. You know as well as I that you will win this battle. And you may have asked yourself, why would I wage such a senseless campaign, knowing that it can only end in defeat. The answer should be clear: in defeat, I shall find victory. It is your choice, however, whether that victory will be over you, or our shared enemy, the last enemy.”

“I have seen your heart, Salazar Slytherin, and it is mine, for we share that same enemy. Your face to the world speaks of spreading magic, spreading knowledge, but you simply seek one thing: you do not wish to die. Why must you hide this desire deep within your heart? Why must this be your craven, secret, sinful indulgence? Your desire is heroic. I see how you have studied and pored over ancient lore, and you have even unknowingly sought out me and mine in order to glean the secrets of the Horcrux.”

“Yes, you have rightfully identified the key weakness of its common form, and further, you have rightfully deduced that there is a more advanced ritual, the knowledge of which, I am in sole possession. You revealed your true heart when you attempted to tame my creature instead of slaying it, in order to tap into her mind. It was in vain: she knows as much of the secret of the Horcrux as you do. But it seems that she shares your aversion to death, along with your cunning. She fed you a clever lie, and you spared her life.”

“You struggle with the reality you are faced with. You hoped that by spreading the light of knowledge, someone would shine a candle into the darkness and burn away the specter of death that looms over you. I tell you now that I am your light. I am that candle. If you end me today, you snuff out the wick, you extinguish your only source of hope. End me today, and my secrets die with me.”

Capture the rook, the King is in check.

“You, Rowena Ravenclaw, you know of what I speak. You know more than any of them the price of knowledge lost. ‘Wit beyond measure is man’s greatest treasure’, indeed. You share a craven desire of your own, one you wish to keep hidden away: to overturn the Interdict. Perhaps that is why you and Salazar shared such a bond . . . such . . . passion. You thought a daughter would be the perfect vessel for preserving your lore, and Salazar, for his part, thought he could train her, put her on the righteous path so that one day she may rise up and conquer the final enemy.”

Slytherin was already reeling from his blow, and Rowena was too numb to react to the exposure.

“Now, now, don’t be prudish. Your companions shared the same passion, but for much less noble reasons. All the same, your heirs not walk the world, and yet you are no closer to achieving your ends. But you have correctly deduced that no magic is without its counter, that no incantation is so binding as to never be undone, that no sacrifice . . . is permanent.” With a hand gesture, a speck of the air turned pitch-black, and began to coalesce into a single red droplet of liquid, which floated towards Rowena and entered her.

“I return to you a single drop of blood, the price you paid to reveal the Specters of Death. You seek, one day, to return that which Merlin sacrificed, in order to undo his Interdict. End me today, and that secret too will be forever lost.”

The move is forced, the bishop is captured.

The king remains in check.

“And you, Godric, I too have seen your heart. I, who have traveled between worlds on the tongues of fire. You know the path of righteousness, your heart is good. You can be redeemed. It might be as simple as thinking of a flame . . .”

At this, Lord Foul looked into the sky. A star flashed in the night. A faint star whose brightness was slowly, visibly waxing, seeming to grow as well as brightening. It looked closer, suddenly, no longer so far away . . . A lighted form whose shape you could actually see . . .

A bird.

A piercing cry split the night, echoing from the rooftops of Hogwarts. Great shining wings, red like a sunset, and eyes like incandescent pearls, blazing with golden fire and determination. The Phoenix’s beak opened, and let out a great caw that Godric understood as though it had been a spoken command.

JOIN US.

Godrich stood paralyzed. This was it. This was his choice. Should he follow the Phoenix? Or . . .

“...solve the riddle...” Helga Hufflepuff whispered. She looked at Meldh. “And what of me?”

The knight must retreat, the king is still in check.

The queen is in danger.

A slow, sad smile spread across his face. “Oh, I believe you know all too well the price.”

She took a step forward, and started directly at him. Ollivander and Meldh stared at each other, the raging Fiendfyre burning around them as the Dementors swirled overhead. He whispered to her, “The choice is yours, as it always has been. You must make your decision, now rise up and do so.”

With tears in her eyes, Ollivander embraced her Hero. It started with a tight, passionate hug, and they separated briefly to look into each other’s eyes, and she kissed him, hard, deeply. Godric watched, as he always had. Hot with anger, he watched, as he always had, as they embraced with lurid passion. He grit his teeth and gripped the hilt of his . . .

. . .His sword was gone.

Her left hand was encircled around Meldh’s waist, her right hand running through his hair, roughly. The pointed, patchwork hat atop her head had an oddly shaped lump in it. When she reached the top of his head with her hand, she reached up into her hat, and pulled from in the Sword of Gryffindor, forged by the Goblins from the form of pure War.

“I’m sorry, my love.”

His eyes grew wide, as she reared the sword up in one swift motion and pulled it roughly across his throat. Immediately, blood poured down from his neck as he stared in shock. She followed through with her right arm, pulled back, and slid the sword through his heart. The light left his eyes, immediately.

The connection to life is severed, now to contain the soul.

She was ancient, she had visited the Necropolis at Carthage, she had heard whispers of the Specters of Death, she knew the basic premise of their operation. They conformed to expectations, they were drawn to death. And so, she opened the dark doors within her heart, the ones she had worked all her life to slam shut, under lock and key, rejecting with all of her being. She now embraced that dark heart, that small spark inside of her that relished the prospect of revenge, allowing it to grow into a raging inferno, a terrifying blaze of hatred and death.

Feast, she commanded wordlessly. The Dementors circling above swooped down, and before his soul could escape to one of his many countless vessels, they began to inhale. White points of light seemed to draw from all directions, all corners of the Earth. Their vortex of death was so strong that white wisps were drawn forth, even from the flames of the Fiendfyre. They coalesced into a single white ball of light, centered around the small, silver cross around her neck, and then began to float upward towards the mouth of the Dementors.

The Phoenix that had been waiting expectantly for Godric's decision looked distastefully at what was unfolding. It was objectively vile, repulsing the Phoenix on a fundamental level. It stared accusingly at Godric, hissing a disappointed 'Caw', and with a burst of flame, disappeared.

Godric watched the Phoenix depart with a sickening ache in his heart. He always wanted to be brave. He spent his life raging from one battle to the next, viewing the world in black and white, risking his life time and time again. He knew in his heart that this was not true bravery, for he had never made the hard choice, never considered the shades of grey.

And here was his opportunity. And he let it slip. He turned away his Phoenix and he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that he would never see that Phoenix, or any Phoenix again. The pain of it broke him in a way deeper than his heartbreak.

He stared at Helga, who was lost within her hatred. It had consumed her to the point where all she wanted was to see Meldh's soul irrevocably destroyed, to see his being banished into the Abyss, sacrificed to no end other than the sake of sacrifice. She was falling, falling, falling, and with each moment, she gained velocity. She had given herself over to hate, and once she had done so, it became easier and easier to justify, which in turn made her numb. The horrible things he had done, the crimes he had committed against man and nature, the ways he had violated her . . .

She was beyond the event horizon. There was no turning back now. She was broken beyond repair, and she would break Meldh along with her. "NO!" Godric shrieked. "*Expecto Patronum!*"

White light, tinged red with holy fury, hurtled out of his wand. It had no discernible shape, it was war, it was fire, it was passion, it was love. Like a battering ram, it crashed into the seething mass of the Dementors, spreading far and wide, buffeting them backwards, causing them to retreat in fear. The light threatened them in a way that the mere animal forms of the badger and snake could not. They knew what the light could become, and they fled from it, fleeing far, far away to the place where their master told them they would be safe.

The ball of light floated downward, slowly, settling back into its singular resting place within the silver cross that hung around Helga Hufflepuff's neck.

Godric's magic had been broken. He knew that he would never summon a Patronus again, and would never see the Phoenix that had come to him. He had given everything he had to rescue his love from the brink, and her place in that Abyss.

Salazar stood, dumbstruck, as he watched the forces of the Lord Foul fall into disarray at the death of their master. He could hear the pops of wizards Apparating away, the thunderous roar of flame as great chariots of fire carried away entire regiments of goblins.

He caressed his hand over the fat emerald, and peered into the still, unconscious mind of the basilisk. Lord Foul had spoken true: the creature had lied. But, Salazar had spared her, and the basilisk was, after a fashion, bound to him.

Rowena, for her part, was still staring at her chest, where the sacrificed drop of blood had reentered her. She could feel it, she had grown all too familiar with the touch of the interdict, the jagged edged tears in the fabric of her mind. Her Diadem, created with the aid of Lady Hufflepuff, assisted her with this, for more often than not she could discern the form of lost knowledge by following the edge of that boundary, tracing the shape of the negative space.

But as she explored the Sacrifice, there was no shape; it was a line, a line that extended indefinitely in either direction. There was no shape to discern, it was simply the terminus. She railed in vain, pounding, trying to break through, but of course she knew it was to no avail.

Ollivander looked from Rowena to Salazar, reeling with their losses, and turned to Godric's broken face.

THE BATTLE OF HOGWARTS

His sunken eyes stared beyond her into some great Nothing. It was him, but it was not him.

She knew that day that she had lost both of the men that she could ever possibly love, lost in a way that they could never be returned. For death was temporary, but change is forever.

MORPHEUS: I am hope.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

BEAUTIFUL LOST NEBULA

*“Hope” is the thing with feathers —
That perches in the soul —
And sings the tune without the words —
And never stops — at all —*

*And sweetest — in the Gale — is heard —
And sore must be the storm —
That could abash the little Bird
That kept so many warm —*

*I’ve heard it in the chilliest land —
And on the strangest Sea —
Yet — never — in Extremity,
It asked a crumb — of me.*

Emily Dickinson

THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS

1185 C.E.

“I grow old, Nagina. My hope of evading death is becoming a distant memory. It is clear that in my lifetime, it shall not come to pass.” Salazar spoke slowly to his basilisk.

“Issss sssssorry, masssster. I truly wisssh that I had ssssspoken true to you that day, sssso many yearsss before. But Heracliussss—”

“Herpo. Herpo the Foul. His true name must be lost to time.”

“Yesss, masssster. He taught me and mine little beyond what you already know or have dissssccovered on your own. But ssssstill, have you not reconssidered? There are sssso many, sssssurely you can find one that no one would missss, one who does not desssserve their gift.”

“No. That is one thing I still cannot sacrifice.”

“It need not be frequent.... Perhapssss onccccc a ccccentury. Our mindssss are bound, your lore isssss my lore. If you were to passsss unexxxxxpectedly, I could teach you that which you had lossst....”

“Again, no. Even one innocent life is too much.”

At the word ‘innocent’, Nagina made a skeptical gesture with her eye; if she had eyebrows, she would have cocked them.

“I have an exxxxxcellent and capacccciousssss memory . . .”

Salazar held up a hand to silence her. “No. But I have a solution. One that requires no sacrifices of others. We are here in our chamber, this chamber of secrets. I have left clues and hints so that one day my rightful heir can pick up the sword that I will lay down, and rid the world of its demons, rid the world of death.” As he spoke, he moved his hands in a gesture that Nagina recognized.

"Masssssster . . ."

"It is my time, for now. But one day, one day we shall reawaken."

Nagina's heart began to beat quickly as she felt the oppressive prickles of magic begin to caress her scales. She understood what he was doing, and why he must do it, but the prospect of loss stung her nonetheless. A single tear of liquid stone dripped from her eyes, which she always kept shut as a gesture of respect, peace, and submission.

"Goodbye, for now, Nagina. *AVADA KEDAVRA!*"

His wand was pointed at his own chest, so the bolt of light did not need to travel far. Nagina had darted forward to catch his body in her coils so that it would not be damaged as it fell. The physical aspect of her body momentarily glowed a soft green, and she could feel his spirit bind itself to her flesh. It would lend her a degree of permanence beyond even her own impressive natural lifespan.

When the ritual was complete, she gently flicked his eyelids open with her forked tongue. His body was still warm, she could at least do this much in remembrance for him. She opened her golden, multifaceted eyes, needing to adjust to the touch of light which she had blocked out for the better part of a century. Once objects came into focus, she stared into his eyes. His soul was gone, but the biological component was still there. Magic flowed from the connection, and slowly turned his body into stone, the enchantment creeping out from the extremities, through to the limbs, up to his chest, until finally the aged lines of his face solidified into permanence, into stone.

From time to time over the coming centuries, she could feel his mind reaching out, testing the waters, calling to the students of Hogwarts, trying to determine if the time was right. Until that time, she spent many long years waiting, alone, waiting for the chosen one to solve the riddle of the Chamber of Secrets and awaken her master at last.

LONDON
1202 C.E.

Matthew Ravenclaw read the scroll again, still trying to decipher its meaning. It had been willed to him by his grandmother, Rowena, who had passed away shortly after his mother, Helena, who in turn had been slain shortly after he was born. It was enchanted so as to only open when he had graduated from Hogwarts. It was written in true Ravenclaw fashion, filled with riddles and hidden meanings, both of which he had little patience for.

“When your mother was born, I learned that my life’s greatest creation, crafted in pursuit of truth and knowledge, was in fact, built on a foundation of lies.

‘Wit beyond measure is man’s greatest treasure.’

I had thought myself clever, with such dual meaning. The wisdom locked behind the shackles of the Interdict, which I wished to overthrow, I truly thought that would be the salvation of our kind.

I discovered a magic much greater. You never knew your mother, but nonetheless, you must honor her, pass on her name. Helena. She was meant to be a light in the darkness, the moon

to balance the dark of night. But now that sky is empty, and you must carry the torch.

Your mother discovered that great magic with you, and she would stop at nothing to protect you from this world. I had learned where my true treasure lie, and gave her my Diadem. With it, she sought to follow the Path to find the Grandmother Witch, hoping to steal her heart.

Honor your mother; pass down her name, and seek our treasure. When you find it, you will find that you no longer need it. And if you wish to find it, look to the prayer of the faithful, beyond the Crux and beyond the Hallowed name.”

He sighed. He hated Riddles.

HOGWARTS

1202 C.E.

Helga sat in her office, rubbing her temples. She was so lonely, so, so lonely. Rowena had passed away shortly after the death of her daughter. Salazar had fled Hogwarts shortly afterwards, presumed dead as well. It was just her and Godric.

She had burned through so many minds, names, and faces through her countless centuries of life. So much had been taken from her. Her life's ambition had been stolen, twisted. She slid a sword through the heart of the one man who could possibly understand her journey through life, and she turned herself over to the cause of hatred, almost throwing away her own life just to see him burn. And the one man who could possibly represent hope, a new life, a new light for her, was broken beyond repair.

The wind rattled the windows of her chambers, a low whisper which gained in intensity. "You can take his place, you know."

She looked up. The voice was unmistakable. It was him. And yet it came from nowhere. "Enough games. Show yourself."

The air cooled, and mist began to form in the slow currents of air that wafted through the room. As the mist grew thick, it began to take shape, swirling in fractal patterns that built up to something far beyond the sum of their parts. Like a butterfly emerging from a cocoon, Merlin unfolded from the empty air into his full glory. His green eyes glimmered with the reflection of the fire, still containing a hint of youthful twinkle, despite carrying an eternity of experience and heartbreak. The lines in his face did not make him seem frail, only more powerful, more wise, more experienced.

"You cannot Apparate within Hogwarts," she spoke at last.

"Yes, well, being me has its privileges."

"What do you want?"

"To keep a promise that I made. It was never my intent to hurt you so. The windmill was his plan, his doing."

"You let it happen, you knew it would happen. So I blame you. I know that this was your plan. It was never about Hogwarts. You wanted to sweep us off of your game board."

He shook his head sadly. "Not quite."

"I just don't care anymore. You've won. You've broken us all. So again, I ask. Why are you here?"

"To simply make you an offer."

"To what? Rule the world by your side? How cliché. No, I will not be your proxy, only to be disposed of like you did Constantine and Meldh. I decline."

“I told Meldh that I would fulfill your heart’s desire, and I am here to offer that.” He held out his hand. “Rise,” he commanded her.

She moved from behind her desk. With his right hand, Merlin took the silver cross from around her neck and wrapped his fingers around it. With his left hand, he gently held her hand. He closed his eyes, and they were gone.

ELSEWHERE

ELSEWHEN

The stars were so beautiful, with nothing but Nothing between them. Some were so distant as to be mere pinpricks, others formed groups and shapes too many to count. She had no corporeal form, but her being was there in its entirety, unbound by Time or Space. She felt him, her Meldh, and so she moved, flitting across the multiverse.

He was staring at a small proto-star, shaping it, forming it. “It is called a Bok Globule, my love. Cold, small, ephemeral. But it can be our world, just you and me. We can shape it in our image.”

“Where are we? When are we?”

“We are beyond. After the war. After our victory. We have won. This world, all worlds, are free for us to command, to command us. You and I, together in eternity. You have ancestors, you know. Not just Garrick, but the countless more Heirs of Gryffindor and Hufflepuff. Even Godric is here, somewhere, building his own world, a world of Phoenix fire and righteousness.”

“But how? How did we win?”

“The Crux.”

“But who?”

“They are simply the Crux.”

She pondered this for a moment. “But this isn’t real.”

“It isn’t. But, it is. Don’t you see? That is Magic.”

*“Yes, but . . .” Suddenly, she understood. “Magic—
—isn’t magic.”*

*This wasn’t real. It was real to her, but it wasn’t really Real.
Anything was possible with Magic. But possibility was not Reality.
Not yet, at least.*

She directed her attention at his form. “You cannot stay.”

“I know.”

*“The battle still must be fought, in reality. It still must be won. And
I am no warrior.”*

“I know.”

“And you are.”

*A long period of silence followed. Their star, their world, it was
brilliant with cold fury. It was so small in comparison to
everything else in that great beyond, but that was fitting. Their love
was not some all-consuming inferno that dominated the universe.
It was theirs, and this would be enough.*

“You cannot stay. Go, Heraclius. I will wait for you here.”

*She could sense the bonds that held him in this place beyond time,
that chained him to this star, this beautiful, lost world of their own.*

As she became one with the structure, Meldh could sense his connection to the world of Reality return. The infinite, unbound space of possibility was now forged into a single point of silver, which unfolded into a line, and then a cross. Finally, he felt a warm, rough, loving hand encircling him.

He whispered his goodbyes, and opened his eyes.

Merlin was watching him, holding the small silver cross in his right hand.

“Welcome back, friend.”

Meldh looked around. He was standing in Hogwarts, in her office. “How long?” he asked.

“Only about a century. You have done well. The world has turned on them, as we knew it would. Godric is the only one left, and he is not long for this world. When he passes, the school will be ours.”

“Are there more like her?” He stared at the ceiling, his mind on the stars in the night sky above.

“Yes, countless more.”

“The fires of the soul burn as brightly as the stars.” Meldh quoted.

“Yes, and there will come a day when the Crux will tear apart the very stars in Heaven.” Meldh winced at Merlin’s words, but he continued. “You always knew the stakes, the price if we lost. But,” Merlin took the cross in his hand and pressed it against Meldh’s chest. “Keep her there, and one day you will find your treasure.”

Merlin turned to leave. Meldh did not follow, not yet. “Where do we go from here?”

“It is time to become The Three once more.”

ST. BRUTUS' HOSPITAL FOR INCURABLY INFIRM WIZARDS
1202 C.E.

The colors of Gryffindor house used to be black and white, trying to represent Godric's view of the world. He knew now that this was the easy way out. It was too simple, cowardly even, to try to paint the world with such broad strokes. It took no bravery to mindlessly condemn one's foes, throwing away one's own life as a weapon against another. He realized that at last, and although he saved the woman he loved from making that same mistake, it was too late for him.

He had turned away his Phoenix's call. He had failed himself, but he would not, could not fail his House. He could still rescue them. From that day forth, he clad himself and his House in red and gold, to remind them all of the price of the Phoenix. To remind them that they must discard their childish notions of simple, black-and-white morality. His house would go on to honor his name, and indeed some of the bravest and most celebrated Gryffindors were ones who had to make some of the most terrible choices.

Godric was on his deathbed, scribbling notes, trying to pass on some final bit of wisdom in his admittedly short autobiography.

*It takes a great deal of courage to stand up to one's enemies.
But it takes a great deal more to stand up to one's friends.*

Hm. No, it wasn't quite right. It didn't fit. He rest his hand on the hilt of his sword, imbued with the powers of all the various creatures it had slain. He looked out into the night sky, to the stars above. He wondered which one of those stars was his nameless Phoenix, and if he would ever see her again. Somewhere in the distance, a single point of light, billions of years away, twinkled impossibly.

He smiled, and began to write.

*No rescuer hath the rescuer.
No Lord hath the champion,
no mother and no father,
only nothingness above.*

He laid down his quill, and laid down his sword, and closed his eyes for the last time, with an uncharacteristic smile on his aged face.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE WALRUS WAS PAUL

“From whence hath this man these things? and what wisdom is this which is given unto him, that even such mighty works are wrought by his hands?

Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, the brother of James, and Joses, and of Juda, and Simon? and are not his sisters here with us? And they were offended at him.

But Jesus said unto them, A prophet is not without honour, but in his own country, and among his own kin, and in his own house.

And he could there do no mighty work, save that he laid his hands upon a few sick folk, and healed them.

And he marvelled because of their unbelief.”

Mark 6 : 1-6

TISIPHONE: You're beginning backwards!

MEGAERA: Aye, the first thing in the visit is to say:

ALECTO: How do you do, and shake hands, then state your name and business.

THE THREE (TOGETHER): That's manners!

ERIN: Really? Well, my name is Erin, and I'm following the woman in the green dress . . .

TISIPHONE: No, no, no.

MEGAERA: You can't go yet.

ALECTO: No, the visit has just started.

ERIN: I'm very sorry.

TISIPHONE: Would you like to play hide and seek?

MEGAERA: Or, button-button, who's got the button?

ALECTO: So much time, and so little to do.

TISIPHONE: Wait a minute.

MEGAERA: Strike that.

ALECTO: Reverse it.

ERIN: No, thank you.

THE THREE (TOGETHER): If you stay long enough, we might have a battle!

ERIN: That's very kind of you, but I really must be going.

THE THREE (TOGETHER): Why?

ERIN: Because I'm following the woman in the green dress!

THE THREE (TOGETHER): Why?

ERIN: Well . . . I'm curious to know where she is going.

TISIPHONE: Oh . . . She's curious . . .

MEGAERA: The three brothers were curious, too, weren't they?

ALECTO: Aye, and you remember what happened to them . . .

THE THREE (TOGETHER): Poor things!

ERIN: Why, what happened to them?

THE WALRUS WAS PAUL

TISIPHONE: Oh, you wouldn't be interested.
MEGAERA: No, no, not one bit.
ALECTO: Not interested at all.
ERIN: But I am!
TISIPHONE: Oh, no, you're in much too much of a hurry!
MEGAERA: Yes, much too much of a hurry to listen to silly fairy tales.
ALECTO: Yes, yes, for where is fancy bred? In the heart, or in the head?
ERIN: Well, I suppose I could stay a bit longer . . .
THE THREE (TOGETHER): You could?! Well . . .

—*"The Last Days of Exses O'Bruinan"*

by S. Leigh, as staged in the 1979 London
production.

MERRICK'S TAVERN

SONTAG

1229, C.E.

The sun was shining on the snow, shining with all its might. It did its very best to make the billows smooth and bright, and this was odd because it was the middle of the night.

So, this is what it's like to be dead, is it?

It's cold. So cold and dark. Just a moment ago, Eloise Mintumble was standing in the sun outside Ilvermorny Castle with the prototype that Jeremiah Croaker had built. This one was different; it was not subject to the terms of Croaker's original invention. Of course, it was commonly know amongst the Unspeakables that

Croaker's Law had a built-in safeguard. "Five hours", because, of course, the world would push the limits. But they knew that the true limit was of the Time-Turner was six hours: inexplicably, inevitably, unchangably, six hours.

And yet, this new device worked off of a different principle entirely. Only a handful of Unspeakables and those few nameless, ageless wizards and witches of eldritch power knew that Time Turners did not turn back time at all. They did, in fact, work on the same principle as much more rudimentary objects such as Comed-Tea. They did not interact with the past, so to speak, but rather, they predicted the future with a remarkable degree of fidelity. Once you can do that, the rest is fairly trivial: check the mind to confirm the desired outcome, run a few iterative consistency checks, gin up some false memories of the "original" timeline, and you have a reasonably good facsimile of controlled time travel.

Eloise recalled once hearing an old legend, the tale of three brothers from the 13th century who once plunged so deeply into the secrets of the universe that they stumbled upon the hiding place of Father Time himself and woke him from his slumber. He did not care for this intrusion, and wishing to be will rid of these three intruders, offered them gifts in exchange for them leaving him be. The oldest brother, the most powerful of the three, sought to be the master of the Present, and so demanded the very Line of time itself. Father Time obliged, removing a hand from his own clock, whittling it down into a thin, stone rod, and presented it to the first brother. It is said that upon his first use of the Line, he was so overwhelmed with the power that he was erased from the very world-line itself, banished to a singular world of his own creation, of which he had sole dominion.

The middle brother was a troubled man, and wished to become

master of the Past in order to right past wrongs. Father Time nodded, and took the face of his clock, and spun it thrice in his hand until it shrunk to the size of a small golden amulet, which he presented to the second brother. He bade him to spin the Time-Turner, allowing him to travel backward upon the skein of time. It is said that when the second brother did so, he was met with a resounding chorus of every sentient being in the multiverse shouting at him, “NO!” This was not what he wanted, nor what he expected, and out of fear of repeating the errors of Atlantis, he ended his own life, and thus forever lived in the past.

The youngest brother, and possibly the wisest, knew that the present was what you made of it, and the past was the past for a reason. He asked only for the ability to see into the future, and have its lessons guide his actions. Father Time looked on, quizzically, but obliged the request, nonetheless. He removed the triangular cap from atop his head, and the third brother saw that it contained with a frothy, effulgent green liquid that constantly refilled itself. He took a long draught of the potion, and upon seeing what the future held in store for him, spewed the liquid from his lips in one of the most spectacular spit-takes in modern history.

Of course, the veracity of this tale of the three brothers and their Timely Hallows was in serious question, given that it was propagated by none other than the inventor of Comed-Tea himself, who was known to be both an inveterate liar and a singularly skilled showman.

No, this creation with something much deeper and something much more powerful than a parlor trick. Mintumble and Croaker had long been partners at the Department of Mysteries, and they knew they were onto something when old Hank Armitage, the librarian at Ilvermorny School of Witchcraft and Wizardy, had sent

them an urgent owl. He had been an informant for the Department of Mysteries for ages, and it seemed that he had stumbled upon a particularly dark secret when investigating the private library of the late Professor Whately, who had taught Ancient Lore at Ilvermorny since before any of them were born.

Professor Whately's daughter was a constant source of scandal, particularly when she gave birth to twins despite no apparent father. Many of the old magical families still considered twins to be taboo, and there was a disturbing trend of the youngest twins within these families disappearing or dying under highly suspect circumstances, and the youngest Whately twin was no exception. This wound up being a bit of a mistake, as it quickly became apparent that the surviving twin, young Credence, was a squib. Professor Whately, who was never prone to displays of compassion, shipped young Credence off to live with some awful Nomaj family in New York when his daughter died.

What Hank Armitage had discovered though, was that the youngest twin did not die at all, he was alive and "well", if you could call it that. He was a deformed and ostracized boy, and more importantly, showed all the signs of being an Obscurial. Armitage had nicked an ancient grimoire from Professor Whately's collection, and saw the true reason why Old Whately was grooming his grandson's Obscurus.

Together, Croaker, Mintumble and Armitage travelled to Wilbraham and managed to exorcise the Obscurus from the boy, who died shortly thereafter, but they were unable to initially contain it. The elemental force rampaged through the town, killing several Nomaj families and law officers, and it was only by the slimmest of margins and barest of chance that the three of them managed to contain the Obscurus and keep the incident hushed up from the MACUSA.

Using the dark ritual from the grimoire, they managed to harness and hold the Obscurus, and took it to Ilvermorny in order to create a True Time-Turner. The device itself was an amulet, similar to a Time-Turner, but the central feature was an eight-pointed star, whose points faced inward, binding the Obscurus. A circle encompassed the star, and a square further encompassed the circle, touching the north, south, east, and west quadrants. Finally, the outer ring of the amulet encircled the square, the four corners of the square joined to the rim with the finest of gilt.

Eloise volunteered to be the first one to use the device. According to the grimoire from which they devised its creation, it seemed that one simply had to hold the proper timeframe in one's mind while spinning the amulet, which would take care of the rest.

And so she did. And it did not work, because Eloise Mintumble was now dead. Or at least, she thought she was dead, until she heard the voices. Two men talking . . . no. Was it three? Two of them had gruff voices, similar enough to where she thought they were one. And the third, he spoke softly and with great care. She did not understand their words, they were in some unfamiliar, arcane-sounding dialect of English.

No, she was not dead, just buried. Buried in snow. She stood up and roughly shook the billows of snow from her shoulders. She saw them now, silhouetted in the distance against the light of the tavern.

No, this wasn't right.

Something about this didn't make sense. None of it made sense. Or, rather, it made too much sense. Her world, for lack of a better world, was insane. There was no method to the madness. Somehow, she sensed that the fabric of this universe she had entered

was too . . . rational. Too . . . correct, for it to be hers. She was out of place, and out of time. She didn't belong here. Why was she here?

She stumbled forward, into the light, and the three men stopped talking and stared at her. "Please, help me. I'm a traveler. I'm lost." They stared at her blanking, and they responded in that curious dialect she couldn't make sense of.

She knew who these three men were. How, she wasn't sure, but she knew beyond every possible shadow of every possible doubt that these men were the Peverell brothers, and that it was vastly, terrifyingly important that she be here at this very moment, at this very place.

And that's when she felt it. The enormous wrongness of everything began to weigh upon her, and an impulse emerged, something unavoidable, begging for release. It was like a sneeze, or an orgasm, or a sudden bout of nausea, but more intense, more demanding. She began convulsing as she tried to fight the urge, and the three men shifted cautiously, one even drew his wand. But she could bear it no longer.

She opened her mouth, and began to speak in a voice that was not hers.

EARLIER THAT EVENING

"I always knew your brother was a whoopsie."

The stink of ale was heavy on Osgurd's breath. Antioch grunted in response and glanced over at his brother Cadmus, who was chatting, quite uninterested, with Brunhilda Rosmerta.

"I mean, he's got to be, right? To stare at them knockers and

not feel a thing? I've half a mind to go over there and bury me face in 'em, the way she's puttin' them out there like that." Osgurd laughed uproariously at his own joke.

Indeed, Antioch and Cadmus Peverell had left their home in the Channel Islands to this strange Saxon land years before, due in no small part to Cadmus' stolid resistance to showing any interest whatsoever in any of the members of the fairer sex in their home village. It seemed, however, that the Peverells' quest was in vain. Sontag was ripe with eligible bachelorettes, and despite the fact that Antioch had taken one of them for his wife years earlier and bore three strapping young sons, Cadmus was still as single as ever.

"Not that your woman ent a catch, Oi, she rightfully is. I wouldn't say no to having a go with 'er, a bit of the ol' in-out, in-out, if'n ya follow me. But her sister . . ." He stared longingly at Brunhilda, who happened to be the sister of Antioch's wife, "Wot, I reckon she ent got the kinda downstairs mixup yer woman's got, wot with three strong lads crawlin' out of 'er." He gave a raucous laugh and jabbed an elbow into Antioch's side.

"Watch it, Osgurd," Antioch growled.

"Oi, feller, I'm only having a laugh. You know I'm not one for sloppy seconds, anyway. I like my meat fresh." He gave Antioch a mighty slap on the back. Antioch was a huge man, by all accounts, but Osgurd was bigger. People jokingly called them the 'odd couple', a Saxon and a Norman who were best of friends, despite fighting like cats and dogs. On more than one occasion, they had laid waste to Merrick's Tavern during one of their many scraps. The owner never seemed to mind; Antioch and Osgood never used wands in their brawls, and so the damage was easily fixable.

Perhaps more importantly, the other patrons viewed it as a constant source of entertainment. Drinks flowed faster and more

merrily when the two of them were arguing, and once words gave way to fists, bets would fly as furiously as the blows. Tom Merrick, the barkeep and owner, would always keep track of who had drank more, so he was pretty good at predicting who would emerge on top. Cadmus' lack of interest in any sort of romantic dalliance was apparently a sensitive topic for Antioch, and as such, Osgurd took great pleasure in prodding him anytime they were both into the cups. Currently, Cadmus was blatantly ignoring Brunhilda and instead was chattering excitedly with the tall, lanky stranger that they had seen at the tavern several times in the past. Currently, the stranger was shaking his head, clearly trying to explain something.

"That's not how eternity works."

"Yes, it is! Over an infinite period of time, anything is possible, everything can and everything will happen. Even if we fail, someone else will succeed, it's inevitable."

The stranger sighed. "Possibility does not imply reality."

"Not here, not now, but over a long enough time span? It—"

"No. Look." The stranger carved a small line into the bar top, and placed his triangular-shaped cup next to it. "This is us." He then gestured to the line. "This is Death." He then gestured beyond the line. "And this, this is the other side of Death that you wish to reach, that we all wish to reach, no?"

Cadmus nodded, skeptically. "Go on."

"Now, with every choice, we can either take one step towards that goal, or one step back. To decide, we should flip a coin." He pulled out a small, bronze, circular coin from his bag. He showed the two sides: "If it lands on the ram, we take a step towards our goal. If it lands on the goat, we take a step back." He flipped the coin, and it landed on the Goat, and the stranger slid the glass backward along the bar. He flipped the coin again, and again it

showed the Goat. He slid the glass further back. "Now imagine that happening again, and again."

Cadmus narrowed his eyes, "What of it?"

"Somewhere in your vast infinity, in the endless space of possibility, lies a world where every choice is the wrong one, where every coin lands on the wrong side, and we progress backward, backward, ever backward. Somewhere in the infinite, there is a world where we never reach the other side of death."

Cadmus shook his head. "That is one possibility out of infinite. The probability may as well be zero."

"Just one possibility?" He slid the glass back to the line. "Say we take a step backward. Then we take another step backward. But then, we take a step forward." He slid the glass back and forth to demonstrate. "Now, say we take a step backward again. And another. And another. And another." He shoved the glass so that it slid across the bar and clattered against the wall. "That makes two possibilities out of the infinite." With a gesture, the glass flew back into his hand, and he repeated the demonstration, but with a slight variation. "That makes three . . ."

The levity had left Cadmus' voice. His eyes darted back and forth between the line, the triangular cup, and the circular coin. "But—"

"No, don't speak. Your mind is attempting to reject an unpleasant but true conclusion. Speaking right now would only cause you to try to reject it further. Just think, and listen. Even if there truly was only one possibility of failure, it would still be worth devoting everything in your life to avert it. But, that is not so. We are not here." He gestured to the glass against the line. "We are in the middle days of the world, and magic only wanes further. We are farther away from the line than you could possibly imagine. And there are far more wrong choices to make than right ones."

Cadmus shook his head. His mind was spinning through arguments and rebuttals, but he could find no purchase. His whole life, he and his brother had lived with a pleasant sort of optimism, knowing in his heart of hearts that someday, even if they failed, someone else would succeed in their stead. Even if it wasn't him, somewhere in the infinite, there lay the path to salvation. And in one inebriated conversation, that optimism had been shattered.

"So then what . . . what do we do?"

"We have to make our own path."

Cadmus nodded. "Yes. That we do."

At this, Brunhilda, who had barely been following the conversation in the first place, stood up with a huff. She sauntered over to the other side of the bar where Antioch and Osgurd were exchanging bawdy stories.

"How goes it?" Antioch asked.

"Bah! If I didn't know better, Antioch, I'd say your brother doesn't know arse from quim!" Brunhilda spat.

At this, Osgurd roared with laughter. He slapped a huge, meaty hand upon the table, which made the glasses rattle. "HAAAAAAA! HOOOOOOOOO! DOESN'T KNOW ARSE FROM QUIM! HAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHH!" He was doubled over, his head resting on the table, as he continued to laugh obnoxiously.

"Shut it."

"Look at 'em two! Which one do you think is the quim? I mean, I'd say the tall one, he doesn't look wot much of a manly sort, but I reckon yer brother would just break 'em like a twig!"

Antioch said nothing, gritting teeth and gripping his cup with such force that it cracked beneath his hands.

"I mean, there's wot a sight I wouldn't want a picture of, if'n the roles were reversed. That tall chap, he'd have ter have a right Bubotuber tween his legs to make in there. After all, yer brother's

got some meaty chops on him.” Osgurd continued to roar with laughter at his own jokes, until he was unceremoniously quited by Antioch backhanding him with the remnant of his ruined mug. The force of the impressive blow knocked Osgurd off his chair and back several feet.

Immediately, the tavern lept into action. The musicians, who had lazily been playing some wandering ballad, started to play a raucous tune more suited to fisticuffs. Brunhilda gasped and scampered away quickly, and other men began clearing away tables and chairs to give them room to brawl. Bets were being shouted, and when one man yelled, “A galleon on Antioch!”, Tom quietly raised his hand from behind the bar to take the bet.

“Why, you honorless whoreson! You’re more of a nancy than your brother!” Osgurd shouted, then picked up the chair that had fallen nearby and flung it across the room towards Antioch who raised a massive forearm to block the projectile. It shattered, sending splinters of wood ricocheting across the room. Osgurd charged forward with a howl, and Antioch tried to sidestep but was several drinks into the cups, and wasn’t able to deflect the full blow. He caught Osgurd’s shoulder straight to his gut, and was launched backward up onto the bar. Immediately, Osgurd began slamming heavy fists into Antioch’s chest. “Sucker punch me, will ya?”

Antioch flailed his arms wildly, trying to find something to grab with which to right is balance, but found nothing. So instead, he lashed out with his foot, sending a mighty kick into Osgurd’s hip, who chuffed from the blow, giving Antioch just enough time to roll sideways away, and then somersault backwards, crashing behind the bar. They both stood up, glaring at each other, separated by the slab of solid wood.

Antioch struck first, leaping over the bar with surprising

agility for someone of his size and inebriation. He landed atop Osgurd, and the two men tumbled backwards and rolled around on the floor. The other patrons started whooping and laughing as the two were wrestling. Osgurd eventually got on top of Antioch and hooked his arm around his neck. Antioch waved against the chokehold, but then stood up with a mighty stifled grunt, lifting Osgurd with him, and stumbled backwards, slamming his full weight against Osgurd and the wall. It knocked the breath out of Osgurd, who loosened his grip momentarily, allowing Antioch to suck in some much needed air.

Osgurd recovered quickly though, and aimed a sharp kick at the back of Antioch's knee, causing him to buckle and fall back into the chokehold. He quickly dragged Antioch backwards, preventing him from finding any sort of solid ground with his feet, and dragged him closer and closer to the door. Antioch's face shook, and it turned purple against the strain of Osgurd's arm. Already his movements were becoming languid and weak. With a mighty heave, Osgurd hooked his arms underneath Antioch's shoulders, spun him around, and hurled him out of the door of the tavern where he tumbled unceremoniously down two or three steps before landing in a pile of snow outside.

"See ya tomorrow, you cheeky ol' bastard." Osgurd shouted through a pant. "And work on yer grappling, ya big nancy." He slammed the door shut, and Antioch could hear the cheers and applause of the patrons in the bar, along with Osgurd's raunchily leading the tavern in a bawdy chant: "Arse from quim! Arse from quim! Arse from quim!"

Antioch looked up from the ground, wiping the blood from his mouth, and saw that Cadmus and the stranger were already outside. Cadmus knelt.

"I'm sorry, brother. I wish . . . I never meant to embarrass you."

Antioch stood up and roughly grabbed Cadmus' shoulders. "No. Don't. Don't apologize, never apologize. You are who you are. You are my brother, and nothing else. And nothing comes between that. Nothing comes between us. You hear me?"

Cadmus nodded weakly, and started to speak, but had to swallow back a lump in his throat. "I think . . . I think I should introduce you. Ignotus, this is my brother, Antioch Peverell. Antioch, this is my . . . This is my friend, Ignotus Hand."

Ignotus extended his hand. "Pleased to meet you, Antioch. It seems that we share a common goal, and there is much that I would like to discuss with you. As I understand it, you're particularly skilled in the area of wandwork, having studied under Madame Ollivander herself—"

They were interrupted by a shambling figure that approached them. It was a woman, and she was dazed, confused. She was wearing a very curious green dress, not at all like the fashion of the time. It had the quality and craftsmanship of a noble garment, but none of the ostentatiousness or decoration. It was plain, but surprisingly well made. Further, although she was clearly middle-aged, her body showed none of the signs of such. Most women were either wiry and unfed, or rather voluptuous and well-fed. She was neither, she was slim, but not gaunt. Her back was not arched and stooped from decades of work. And, Antioch noted that her breasts were not withered and drooped from years of feeding.

She looked lost, and scared. When she approach them, she shouted something at them in some unintelligible tongue. It was clearly some dialect of English, but it was unknown to them. They stared blankly at each other. Their hands, which were stuffed in their robes to keep them from the cold, instinctively gripped there wands.

When she began convulsing, Antioch withdrew his wand openly. Cadmus shifted his feet into a defensive position. And Ignotus crossed his arms and examined her curiously. She began retching, like a cat trying to cough up a hairball, and moments before Antioch could cast a curse to contain her, she began to speak in a voice that was not hers.

“ÐREGEN BÉON PEFEARLES SUNA AND ÞRIE HIRA TÓL ÞISSUM DÉAÐ
BÉO GEWUNEN.”

The wind gave a mighty howl, she shuddered, and her form dispersed into nothingness, like mist in the morning.

SWIFT RIVER VALLEY, MASSACHUSETTS
JANUARY, 1938

Merlin looked out over the valley. The sky was remarkably clear for the early hour, so from this vantage point, he could see “The Two Towers”. Ilvermorny Castle, about 60 miles to the west on Mount Greylock, and the Salem Witches’ Institute, which rested on Sentinel Hill, about 20 miles to the south.

Salem predated its more famous competitor by several centuries, and specialized in Ritual Magic. Few remember its more ancient name, which served to honor the Misqat tribe who formed the school centuries before. Back then it was little more than a stone circle and a curious altar on a small island in the middle of the Swift River. The land itself seemed to swell in response to the power that coursed through the place, and Sentinel Hill was coaxed from the ground over the years.

The eastern line of Merlin’s will ran through the Berkshire

mountain range, and cut sharply across the heart of central Massachusetts, before eventually terminating in Boston Harbor. The point where he stood was the future site of the Russell Institute, the newest American bastion of magical knowledge.

The final steps of his plan were coming to fruition. The gears fit together so seamlessly. The Wilbraham Incident had galvanized the Scourers, who had emerged from their decades of hiding. The pressure on the Westphalians was enormous. Exposure simply could not be risked. And when it seemed that matters could not get worse for them, Grindelwald began cooperating with the European muggle dictatorship. Non-interventionism was simply not an option.

The Scourers had disposed of the last of the Old Ones; The Gate had been closed. The Westphalians and their No-Maj counterparts had entered the global theater and toppled Grindelwald and the Third Reich. The Eastern Ley was significantly weakened. And, perhaps most importantly, one more step of the Prophecy was fulfilled.

Born to those that have thrice defied him . . .

Three schools, formed in defiance of the true Dark Lord.

He smiled, despite himself.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

HUIS CLOS

*People expect old men to die,
They do not really mourn old men.
Old men are different. People look
At them with eyes that wonder when . . .
People watch with unshocked eyes;
But the old men know when an old man dies*

Old Men, Ogden Nash

Meldh stared into the abyss of the Lens of Kasreyn. It whispered stories to him, tales of other places, other times, other lands, other worlds. It told him tales of Horcruxes and Hallows, of love and betrayal, of nonsense and irrationality. It also told him tales of science and art, of love and friendship, and the failings of reason. He spent more and more of his days engrossed in these worlds.

Simply put, he was lonely. It was one of the occupational hazards of being functionally immortal. He wondered if this was how the Old Ones had felt, in the days when they were the hidden hand behind the machinations of the world. He wondered if this was why they amused themselves with silly politics and mean

games, because they felt as he did: the only adult in a world of children.

And as they died, one by one, he wondered if they too felt the same sense of loss, of one more potential companion gone forever? By his account, there were only a handful remaining. There was, of course, Merlin, the once and future king. But there were others. One lay in eternal sleep, its endless nightmares giving weight and power to the Firelands, the realm of the Unseelie. Another lay imprisoned beyond an unbreachable seal. And yet another still walked this world.

Merlin, of course, had plans for them. He always had plans. They were as incomprehensible to Meldh as Meldh's own plans were to a Muggle infant. The difficult part of most of their plans was the waiting, the interminable waiting. In the early days of the world, there was much work to be done, and it seemed that Meldh was always busy. Now, they simply watched as the clockwork machine of the world that they had wound so meticulously in the past centuries ceaselessly ticked away.

Their relationship had grown colder since the Battle of Hogwarts which resulted in Meldh's death and subsequent exile. A century trapped alone with only his thoughts gave him ample time to consider the events of the last thousand years, free from any distraction or outside influence. He came to realize the intention behind it all, how cleverly he had been manipulated. 'Cleverly', because, even now that he understood, he still would have done no differently.

Merlin had warned him that they would do terrible things on the path to righteousness, that to save the world, they must destroy it first. But one of Merlin's crucial flaws was that even though he made you do the right thing, and even though he made you recognize and acknowledge it as the right thing, you still hated

him for it.

In Meldh's youth, he had been taught by many wise philosophers, several of whom had proposed some variation of a dilemma that Meldh termed, "The Chariot Problem". Consider a chariot racing out of control towards a crowd of people, and the only way to slow its advance is to throw an innocent person into its path. Is it right to sacrifice one innocent in order to save the many?

Meldh had rejected problems of this sort, as the world did not truly work like this. You were not presented with binary options of such black-and-white, clear-cut consequences. There were always unknown factors, always alternative options, and if you were brave enough, intelligent enough, cunning enough, or worked hard enough, you could always find a way.

Merlin had shown him his folly. He stripped away the illusion of complexity. He distilled the world down to its barest, most granular components. He illustrated with cold, brutal efficiency that sometimes you were, in fact, presented with a choice between the lesser of two evils, where the only alternative to that choice is ignorance: to evade the responsibility of making a decision.

"Such is the curse of competence. You understand, with full knowledge, the true extent of the consequences of your actions. Is it any wonder that so many prefer to consign themselves to blissful ignorance? And do you see what a monstrous crime that really is, if you are capable?"

Despite this, when faced with an unpalatable sacrifice, Meldh often tried to devise clever solutions. Merlin was merciless in forcing Meldh to fully confront the reality of the problem and evaluate his proposed solutions. A daring plot seemed much less noble when, upon the balance of probabilities, lives would be lost.

"Normal people do not live as you and I. They have but one life; their actions, their time, their resources, they are all limited.

In order to win you must *learn to lose*, and this is a luxury they cannot afford. No, they do not play to win. They must play not to lose. It is not that they are irrational or evil, it is simply a matter of necessity. They play for different stakes.”

Meldh had learned first-hand how the entire fabric of one’s morality could be fundamentally altered in an instant when the stakes shifted. Before meeting Merlin, he would have done anything to stop the inevitable destruction of Magic. Now, bringing about that end was his life’s work.

He also used this to his advantage during his encounter with the three Peverell brothers, named in prophecy. They were desperate from their lack of progress in creating their weapons against Death. So they followed the whispers and the rumors, determined to defeat Death by confronting him on his own terms. They traveled to the Keep of Mysteries, unraveled the secrets of the Arch, and entered the Land of the Dead.

They stood at the foothills of a vast black mountain range and followed the shores of the gruesome lake that served as the headwaters of the Lethe River. Although the river was shallow, it was wide, and its waters flowed quickly. Many men had lost themselves to the river’s waters over the ages. The three brothers had studied the lore; they knew that to cross properly, they needed to construct a bridge of bone.

When they reached the other side, they saw it, a black figure composed of fractal shadows, folding inward upon themselves, and then blossoming outward in self-contained patterns. Despite having no constant form, no defined starting point or ending point, something about its essence seemed anthropomorphic and vaguely human.

Meldh watched them as they approached. Although The Land transcended physicality, one could still walk in if one knew the

right path. The Chariots of Fire certainly provided some advantages; namely, it allowed one access to Tír inna n-Óc from anywhere on the planet. But walking into the Land of the Dead as a mortal had advantages unto itself if one could survive the inherently hostile nature of the place. When the three brothers walked close enough to Meldh to be within speaking distance, they stopped. Meldh introduced himself as Death and congratulated them on coming this far, offering them the gift of knowledge as payment.

The oldest brother desired a wand more powerful than any other, and he showed the work he had done with his crude stick crafted of Elder wood. Meldh revealed to Antioch the secrets of the Rod of Ankyras, showing how multiple cores could be made to lie in warp with each other, and demonstrated the precise structural manipulations needed to allow for consciousness to be imbued into the device. That living mind could pass knowledge surreptitiously from one owner to the next, but it also meant that it had intention, goals, and would not allow itself to be easily mastered.

The middle brother asked for the power to recall any mind from the eternal abyss of Death. The Spirit Stone was already capable of rebuilding a pattern from one's memories, but the weaker the memory, the less accurate the pattern. So Meldh reached into a previously unused dimension and unfolded the True Cross, which was everywhere and nowhere. He taught Cadmus how to follow the fine tracteries of the Ley Lines not just through Space, but through Time as well, in order to locate the essence of an identity amongst the oppressive noise, and reconstruct the pattern.

The third man, the youngest of the three, was also the cleverest. Ignotus had already created a True Cloak of Invisibility, his Hallow needed no improvement. He thought for quite some time, which

may have been but a few seconds, it may have been several years. He had already concluded that their role was not to fight the final battle but to lay the groundwork. As such, he needed a way to ensure that the Hallows would find their way to the Crux when the time was right.

Meldh paused for a moment, the shadows within him writhing in time with his thoughts. They began to vibrate and warble, in a gesture that was unmistakably analogous to laughter. And at that, the shadows that comprised his form dispersed, and in their place, a white mist began to coalesce. Ignotus' eyes widened as the form solidified into that of a man.

Cadmus' eyes snapped open. He was in their bed, and it was still night. He didn't want to disturb Ignotus, but the dream had been so vivid, and it disturbed him on a level that he could not quite describe. The principles made sense. He needed to test them. If you learned in a dream that two and two made four, it was no less valid than if you deduced it from first principles.

He quietly crawled out of bed, careful not to wake his husband, and slipped into their workshop. He removed his wedding ring from his finger, and tapped it with his wand in a slight corkscrew gesture, lifting away the Spirit Stone.

The next morning, when they met Antioch as they always did, his wand looked different. It felt different. It radiated an aura of judgment and immeasurable power. Without speaking to each other, they knew from a glance that the Deathly Hallows had been complete.

Although they never spoke of their shared dream, the legend of The Three Brothers still spread nonetheless.

ALDERNEY
1331, C.E.

“Please, Master Payens, please. I’ve heard the rumors. I know that you know people, I know what people say about the Cross,” she gestured violently at the plain-looking wooden cross adorning the nave of the temple.

Cadmus was not listening to her. She was young, maybe 15 or 16 years old. She was speaking passionately about something or another. Judging by the small, frail body in her arms, her sister needed help. Or something. Cadmus was lost in thought, as he always was these days. He distantly observed that, had she been a little bit older, Antioch would have found her quite attractive.

He wondered dimly how she even found her way to this place. He no longer had the Cloak to keep him truly hidden, that must have been it. He found himself speaking a few words, and she responded, and he responded in turn. He had lost interest. He wanted her to go away.

“DONT MOCK ME!” , she screamed, the desperation apparent in her voice. How quaint.

“Oh? Or what?” He looked at her as she tried to form a response, then cut her off. “I know you, child. I have seen your personality before, in so many others. You see a problem in the world, and you burn with righteous rage. You hate the world for not fixing the problem, and you take the responsibility upon yourself, which you think justifies your impudence and rashness. Mark my words, child: it’s easy enough to ask big questions and make big plans. But to follow them through? What have you done with your short life besides angrily make demands of someone

greater than yourself?"

He was lost in thought again, this time recalling a few months prior, his yearly visit to the cemetery at Godric's Hollow.

"Hello, my love."

As Cadmus spoke the words, he knelt at Ignotus' grave, laying the bouquet of flowers down at the headstone. He caressed his wand, feeling the knobby globes that stood out against the smooth, elder wood of its shaft. He idly traced the symbol of the Deathly Hallows in the ground as he sat.

He held his wedding ring in his hand, inset with the jet black, angular stone that forever whispered to him. He considered turning it over thrice but knew that the heartbreak would be too much for him, even protected as he was underneath the Cloak.

"Not much has changed in my life since I spoke to you last. The last of Antioch's male heirs have joined him now . . . And joined you, I suppose. Iolanthe and Celia both took husbands, as well. Iolanthe to the son of Linfred of Stinchcombe, you remember him, the potterer, and Celia to Greybold Gaunt. Iolanthe Potter and Celia Gaunt. There's no one left to carry on our name. I am the last Peverell, and will be the last Peverell, for my heart is claimed, now and forever."

His voice cracked as he spoke, and the crack widened into an open sob. He crumpled to the ground and wrapped his arms around the grave. "It should have been you, it always should have been you. I was a good man, but I never was a great one. I merely stood on the shoulders of giants. I was never strong enough to hoist the world on my back, or the pass the torch of knowledge to all of man."

He sniffled, regained his composure, and spoke again. "I've thought about it a lot, our family crest. The last enemy . . . It's as much of a warning as it is a challenge, isn't it? Death must be the

last enemy that is defeated. Until then, of what use is everlasting life?”

He slipped into his native tongue for a moment. “*Le paradis, c’est les autres.*”

“Other demons still stalk this world. Any student of the occult with a flexible moral center can stave off death for centuries, if not millennia. You don’t need the Elder Wand to defeat any foe. You don’t need the Spirit Stone to converse with the memories of the past. You don’t need the True Cloak of Invisibility to remain hidden.

“I came here to say . . . That it’s time, I suppose. It’s time for me to pass the Hallows on to someone more worthy. The Stone, I will gift to Celia, and the Cloak to Iolanthe. The Wand, of that I am still unsure. I fear that . . .”

He paused for a moment. He had visited Ignotus’ grave every year since his passing. At first, he felt a bit self-conscious over talking to an inanimate object. But he wasn’t really speaking to no one. No sane, rational being could ever look at the way magic works, observe the universe around them, and conclude that death was the true end of things. Maybe, perhaps for Muggles. There had never been a documented case of Muggle resurrection or Muggle immortality. But they had Magic.

That had been another subject over which Cadmus and Antioch had continually argued. To Antioch, the answer was self-evident: Muggles don’t have souls, and wizards do. It was why Antioch was so staunchly against the interbreeding of wizards and Muggles: as long as there was still a spark of magic, as long as their was a soul, Death was not the end.

Cadmus, on the other hand, took a far more reductionist view of identity. To him, the patterns that made up a person persisted throughout the echoes of time, Wizard or no. It was

simply something about Magic that made those patterns more readily identifiable, easier to locate, easier to recreate.

This was not to say that Antioch was prejudiced. Quite the contrary: he believed they could not truly conquer Death until they could conquer it for all of mankind. Antioch spent his days with the Elder Wand trying to master the ultimate power, the ability to create life. True, soulful life. And one day, when the time was right, he would grant the blessing of a soul on ever non-magical man, woman, and child.

Their ends were the same, if not their means. Cadmus also sought to save everyone. But while Antioch lived for the future, Cadmus dwelled on the past: he endeavored to use the Spirit Stone to call for the lost souls of all, regardless of whether they were marked with the touch of Atlantis.

In retrospect, Ignotus was the wisest of them all. He sought to hide from death, to prolong his fate, realizing that they were not the chosen ones. They had been born at the wrong place, at the wrong time for what they sought to accomplish. The world was simply not ready. And so he remained hidden, in order to pass the Hallows on to someone who was truly worthy.

In the days after his death, Cadmus wept at the thought of his true love dying a failure. But he had not failed. Cadmus was now the sole and true owner of the Deathly Hallows, which meant he could pass them on as he saw fit. Celia and Iolanthe had proven themselves to be good people, to be worthy. There were a handful of remaining Peverells, in blood only, but they had not shown the necessary qualities.

But it still left the problem of the wand . . .

He thought back to that terrible day, comforting Antioch as he wailed in abject misery, his huge arms holding the mangled corpse of his equally huge friend, Osgurd. He had died at Antioch's hand.

It was another one of their tavern brawls and overcome with the song of battle and rage, Antioch drew forth the Elder Wand and was consumed.

Antioch begged his brother to kill him, for he knew that he could not control the Wand's power. The Wand craved mastery, dominance. It hungered for an owner who could harness its power without being overwhelmed. And when Cadmus took the wand from Antioch's hand in order to ease his burden for a moment, he understood.

The wand sang a hymn of battle, of struggle, of a profound joy resisting the indomitable shackles of death and suffering. It cried out in passion for an owner who could not just deal out death, for death was anathema to the true intent of the wand. It needed an owner who could right the inevitable wrongs that must be committed along the Path. It required a master who not hesitate to sacrifice one man to save ten, it also required a master who would not rest until that sacrifice was made right, made whole.

Antioch was not that man. The wand seemed to recognize this, and so it constantly tested him, put him in situations that would prove his unworthiness, allow his anger to take control. It screamed for freedom, freedom from the hands of a master who could not provide the balance it so desperately needed.

When Cadmus put his hands upon the wand, it joined with him and spoke to him of the Path of the Scorpion and the Archer and what they could accomplish together. With a single look into his Antioch's eyes, Cadmus saw that his brother understood as well. Without a word, he slit Antioch's throat, and so death took the first brother for his own.

Ignotus had always known that there existed far greater objects of power in the world than their own Deathly Hallows. They had heard the whispers of the Old Gods, the true survivors of Atlantis,

and knew they must have had Hallows of their own to bind them to the world. With the power of the Elder Wand, the Spirit Stone, and the Cloak of Invisibility, Cadmus and Ignotus travelled the world together, growing their collection of lore.

From the holy land, they had rescued the True Cross and the Holy Grail. These of course, were superlative titles, as they bore little resemblance besides in appearance to the myths after which they were named. They navigated the ruins of Alexandria to find the Mirror of Noitilov and traversed across an ocean to the new world so that they would know the Gate and thereby claim one of its aspects. They traveled south to the ancient ruins of Fajin and defeated the army of Inferi in order to gain control of the last remaining Box of Orden.

As they gathered these artifacts, they consolidated them in the island of Britain and began to take various measures to protect them. When they had finally reached the end of the line, Ignotus, who was already growing frail, died unceremoniously in his sleep, his Cloak folded neatly at the foot of the bed.

After burying his love, Cadmus' days of adventuring were over. He began to study the ebbs and flows of time; he gazed into the stars with the centaur flocks, he studied Cartomancy and Tasseography, and he unleashed the Words of Power and Madness in order to peruse the Web of Prophecy within the Keep of Mysteries. The more he studied, the more clear it became: these were the middling days of the world, and the end times were centuries away. The Muggles would devise a magic of their own, and those two worlds would narrow into one. And when push came to shove, the combined minds of billions upon billions was a magic and power far beyond the scope of anything he could ever hope to accomplish by himself—

—He was interrupted from his thoughts and pulled back to

reality by the sound of a door slamming dramatically. He sighed, closed his eyes, and thought of the stars once more.

This was useless. Just another jaded power-hoarder. Damn him, damn his entire Order, damn his Knights, damn his Cross. God damn every last one of them. She would tear the world apart. She would rip apart the gates of Heaven, tear apart the very foundation of Christendom to pull her sister back.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

MAD WORLD

Bored bored bored bored bored

Boring boring boring boring

*Ordinary, normal, boring people little ants in the afterbirth
nothing but ants and flyers little mouches, moochy too much too
much too much just can't*

BORED

Koschei the Deathless strode restlessly across its chambers. It had lived a thousand lifetimes with a thousand different names and each one was the same: boring. It had tried being a hero. Boring. It had tried being a tyrant. Boring. It had tried being a man. Boring. It had tried being a woman. Boring. It had tried being a king, a queen, a prince, a pauper. Nothing. It felt nothing.

All things were within the grasp of Koschei the Deathless. It had met all the interesting people in the world. It had read all the good books, and then written books even better. It had celebrated its first grandchild's tenth birthday party in the new world, it had celebrated its first great-great-great grandchild's hundredth

birthday party around the fairy rings of Stonehenge. Still nothing. Always nothing, always bored.

When all things were possible, nothing had meaning.

*THE FORESTS OUTSIDE ,
FEBRUARY 2, 1333, C.E.*

The stench of sex and blood was thick in the air, affronting the nostrils of the lone traveller. If he were with Muggles, he would be cutting through the wild gorse with his shashka, but it hung, unused, on his belt. If he were with wizards, a few well-placed Reductos would clear the path, but his wand was in its holster on his wrist.

This traveler was alone and had no appearances to keep up, for now, and as such, the path cleared its own way, saving him also the trouble of locating his quarry. The smell would have been enough, but easier is always better. As he drew closer, sounds began to mingle with the scents to form a two-pronged assault on the senses.

Moans. Shrieks. Wails.

Pounding. Thumping. Banging.

Flesh atop flesh. Bows across strings. Lips upon horns.

He approached the small cabin and glanced at the awkward stilts that held it above the ground. They were disguised with a small and silly glamour to look like the legs of a chicken. He paused for a moment, deciding how best to enter. Sometimes, dramatics were useful tools to achieving your ends. But sometimes, they backfired. What would the consequences be? And what were the consequences of his hesitation, however slight?

Every decision was like this. Every minute, every moment, was another moment in which his enemy was allowed to persist. Even the fractional amount of time it took to pause and consider the question, “To knock, or not to knock”, was another dread deed, another bit of senseless evil.

Every decision. It was torture. Time, time was of the essence. And so he entered.

The scene was ridiculous. Caligula would have been proud. Or more likely, he would have been envious to the point of rage. Every possible indulgence was being fulfilled. There was sex, of course. Always the obsession with sex. But if it gave them a moment of solace, why begrudge them? Every reasonable iteration of sexual combinations was currently being explored on almost every available surface within the grand hall whose interior was far larger than the simple cabin’s exterior.

There was food and drink, as well. Food and sex. Drink and sex. Food and drink and sex. Sex with food and drink. Drinking food. Drinking sex. Food and drink and sex and then more food and then more drink and then more sex. A swirling miasma of what should be “pleasure”, and yet, he was struck by the hollowness of it all. Did they truly enjoy this? Did Max truly enjoy this?

Then again, if they did enjoy it, what did it matter?

There were important people in this universe. People upon whose actions his plans were contingent. These people needed to be closely watched, guided, mentored, or in some cases, manipulated or coerced, into following the correct path. These people, these cruxes, were few and far between, and he was thankful for that, as he had spent much of the last few centuries guiding them through the eye of the needle. The universe did not permit more than a few kings and queens upon the chessboard.

There were also influential people in this universe. People

are resources, put simply. Two people have more absolute potential than one person, but that potential is not always exercised. Those of influence, more often than not, pushed people towards one extreme or another. He saw them at every scale: globally, nationally, locally, socially. And those influential people themselves needed to be influenced, but that was easy enough to do behind the scenes with a hidden hand. A war here. A social movement there. Sprinkle in a few shifts in cultural direction.

Then, there were effective people in this universe. Not necessarily creative thinkers in their own right, but actors, capable of putting a plan into action. These were the pawns, the rank and file that were sacrificed without much thought. But, (as he always reminded his protegee), a pawn could always be promoted to something greater, so they were not to be summarily dismissed.

Finally, there was everyone else. People who would live their lives and die without any measurable impact on the course of the universe. What purpose did they serve? He could spend half an eternity converting every single one of them, and it would do nothing. Little would be lost if they were gone. And yet, little would be lost if they remained. He was as a God, but he was not malevolent.

And if this was how some of them filled their small lives, and it brought them pleasure, why begrudge them that?

But there was one, an aberration, someone who, like him, didn't fit the pattern. It sat at the head of the hall, on an elaborate throne, watching the proceedings languidly. She was beautiful. He? It? He could detect the Glamour, prismatic and ever-changing, attempting to probe his mind. Its intent was to determine what one found most deeply and profoundly attractive, and then subtly present that back to the viewer. But it was still magic, which meant it had limits.

Merlin of the Line was that limit, and he had reached his. "Max."

The beautiful anomaly raised her head. "John."

They could have called each other by a thousand different appellations or epithets. But there were no pretenses to keep up, no battles to fight. The battles had already been fought, and Merlin had won them all.

"It's time, Max."

At this point, all the Glamours had melted away. The beautiful people who were played about the floor in indulging in various ecstasies were dismayed to see their platonic figures melt back into the flabby, second-rate bodies of peasants and adventurers. They looked around, ashamed of their nakedness, and self-consciously began to skulk out of what was now a simple cabin in the woods.

The two Ancients ignored them. "I knew you'd come for me eventually. I've been expecting it ever since the Interdict. Which, I have to say, I don't quite understand."

Merlin cocked an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"I never played the game on as many levels as you. I never had the need to, and I never had the want to, either. The games bore me, and if we're being honest, the world will move on without me. I know you. You're going to shape the world how you want it to be shaped and there's not a god damned thing any of us can do about it." At this, Max idly spat on the ground. "It's why we're all here, and not there," he added, bitterly.

A beat of silence passed. None of what Max said required a rebuttal or response, so Merlin provided none. Besides, it was clear Max was mostly thinking out loud, and it was not long before he continued. "The first level interpretation is that you saw the danger of magic and did something about it. Only a fool would accept that at face value, which is why the majority of the world

doesn't look farther."

"The second level is that it's part of a larger plot, the first move in an epic, century-long war of attrition to eradicate magic. Of course, the hypocrisy of that is blatant: using magic to eradicate magic? That's something that a villain out of storybook would do. And that's where I'm stuck. You're not a storybook villain. And tactically, it doesn't make sense. If you have that kind of power at your disposal, and magic is your enemy, why limit it in this oddly specific, easily circumvented kind of way? There's another level here."

Merlin began to smile. It was a slow, sad smile, but it carried with it a hint of amusement. "I thought you said that the games bored you?"

"So it is part of the game, then."

"Isn't everything part of the game?"

"Depends on your definition. The game itself bores me. But the meta-game does not. Like I said, I've been waiting for this for centuries, to see what you have planned for me. It's really the only thing that I've looked forward to, the only thing that has kept me going."

"Then what I have planned for you will be poetic."

Another beat. Max spoke, "You want me to die."

"We all must die, in order for the world to live."

"You know as well as I do that there's no middle ground, here. Either everyone dies, always, and forever. Or everyone lives. Always and forever. Infinity or zero. Nothing in between."

At this, Merlin smiled. This truly was the crux of everything.

"You said you're bored? Well, there's your riddle. Figure out what I want, and then do it. Because it's going to happen, one way or another," Merlin paused, briefly, and then turned to leave. As he opened the door and stepped out onto the stilted porch, he

looked over his shoulder. "It's good to see you, Max."

"You too, John."

And for the first time in millennia, Max Koschey, Koschei the Deathless, Baba Yaga, Ma'krt of the Rock, He-With-A-Thousand-Names and a thousand other names, was interested in *something*.

HOGWART'S CASTLE

JUNE 13, 1334, C.E.

"You BITCH!"

Her world was ice. Her world was crystal. Her world was fire, burning through every metaphor until nothing existed of her but the abyssal depths of her dark side.

"Crucio!"

She felt nothing.

"CRUCIO! CRUCIO! CRUCIO!"

Her breath came in ragged pulls and she poured all of her magic into the pain. Still, nothing.

"YOU FUCKING BITCH!"

She reached for the nearest heavy object, a candlestick on the nightstand. She was still naked. They both were. Normally when she was exerting herself, her hair would come loose, cover her face, obscure her vision. But today, it was slick with sweat and blood, and stuck to her back and chest.

She swung the candlestick, hard.

"This is for my mother!"

She swung again.

"This is for my father!"

CRACK.

“THIS is for Babette!”

The candlestick finally snapped. At this point, what she was swinging at was an unrecognizable, pulpy mess.

“YOU KNEW. This entire time, you KNEW! This entire time you could have done SOMETHING. ANYTHING!”

She choked out a sob. With no convenient weapon, and almost no magic left in her, she resorted to her fists.

“God damn you. GOD DAMN YOU.”

Impossibly, the breaths still came. She knew there was one last thing to be done, and she had held a small part of her magic in reserve. She hoped it was enough. With an angry cry of effort, she plunged her fist, augmented by a small flow of magic, into the chest of her victim. With a wet sucking sound, she pulled out what she sought.

A green, fist-sized chunk of crystal. The Heart of Koschei the Deathless.

She had a speech written in her mind, about the millions of deaths that Koschei was responsible for, and the blood on its hands and the good that it could have done and the choice of inaction and the path of evil and her own grand dreams and ambitions and how she would change and save the world. But she could not form coherent words, only vitriol.

“You . . . fucking.. BITCH.”

She held up the Heart. It was poetic in a way. She would use its own power to destroy both the Heart and its owner. It would, of course, be diminished. It would be a sacrifice. But it would be more than sufficient for what she hoped to accomplish.

She used the final mote of magic left in her to transfigure the Heart into something lesser. It was smaller, the size of an egg, and it was no longer the brilliant, iridescent green that reflected an

infinite multitude of colors while still maintaining its own identity. Now it only reflected what was on her mind: dark, ruddy, sticky blood. She tapped into the power of the Heart.

Its form was Changed. As too, was the God beneath her. An instant before, it was a broken, but living, breathing person. An instant later, it was a corpse. It was over.

And that was the tale of Koschei the Deathless.

HOGWARTS CASTLE

NINE MONTHS EARLIER

“Nell!” She pretended not to hear him.

“Nell!” Nope.

“**NELL!**” She kept her head buried in the book.

“Don’t make me send a Howler over there!” She rolled her eyes, and briefly glanced up over the top of her book. “Whatever.” That red-haired git of a Weasley, somehow had grown handsome in a silly sort of way in his sixth year. He was still tall and gangly though. And he had a stupid name. Festivus. “Can I help you with something?”

Festivus’ companion, who up until that point had been eying Nell’s friend sitting next to her, chimed in, “Oh, I think he needs a lot of help.”

“That’s certainly true, my dear, but I come with the noblest of intentions. See, I read in a book once—”

She cut him off. “YOU? You read a book??”

“Don’t get too excited. *Bewitching Witches and Ways To Woo Them*. Brilliant, if I do say so myself. It says that the only thing

women want to do is to talk about themselves and that the greatest gift you can give them is your ear.”

His friend wise-cracked once more, “I don’t think there’s a big enough box to fit those things. Unless you plan on dropping her off of the side of the Tower and letting her use them as parachutes!”

“Shut up, Ollie. Can’t you see that I’m winning her over with my charms? If you—” Nell interrupted him. “Oh, I’ve seen you cast charms. And I think I’d rather hear that Howler than watch that again. If you must know, I’m currently researching the edge cases surrounding exceptions to Gamp vis-a-vis the substance-form dichotomy, specifically concerning the influence of mind altering spells such as the Confundus Charm and Geas.”

Nothing. Just a blank stare. She rolled her eyes. Gryffindors.

Festivus blinked a few times. Ravenclaws.

“Cool! Well. I just got done putting a little something special in the pumpkin juice. So forgive me if I’m not impressed by your less lofty pursuits.”

“Go away before I Geas YOU. I’ll make you think Ollie here is prettier than I am!”

Ollie couldn’t resist the obvious joke. “You know, I’d like it if you made Helena think the same thing!” Helena blushed furiously. Nell feigned a look of confusion. Festivus gave Ollie a sharp jab in the ribs with his elbow.

Git, Nell thought.

Git, Festivus thought.

Ollie was busy thinking about Helena.

Helena was busy thinking about—

—“Watch it, here comes Headmaster Gag-Me,” Festivus whispered under his breath, breaking the awkward silence.

“Good morning Festivus, good morning Grumblechook! I trust you had a productive summer!” Headmaster Gagwilde strode

in, interrupting the conversation with his usual dramatic flourish.

Grumblechook Ollivander rolled his eyes: he hated his name. His mother said it was an old family name, but he secretly suspected that she lost a bet with her brother-in-law. “Ollie” was just fine as a nickname. While Festivus and Ollie had a perfunctory conversation with the Headmaster, Nell briefly pondered wizarding genealogy.

It was long rumored that Godric Gryffindor had an illegitimate child with Galath Ollivander hundreds of years earlier. That child perpetuated the Ollivander name and bloodline by having male child after male child after male child. That is, until Genevieve, the only daughter of a mother who died in childbirth.

The Ollivander bloodline had to be preserved, for obvious reasons. But so too did the Ollivander name; it was good for business, after all. As it so happened, a distant cousin of the Ollivander line had given birth to a baby boy: Garrett Goyle. His mother too had died in childbirth, and they had abandoned her months before that. So it was that the Ollivander family adopted Garrett Goyle, who became Garrett Ollivander. He eventually married Brunhilda Nott, and the Ollivander name endured. Genevieve Ollivander married Septimus Weasley, and the Ollivander bloodline endured.

False-brother and false-sister had their respective children on the same day: Festivus Weasley and Grumblechook Ollivander, and the two had been virtually inseparable ever since. By blood, they were not even cousins. But despite this, people called them “the twins”. They did everything together. They were so close that they often finished each other’s—

“—sandwiches?”

Nell’s concentration broke, and she looked up. Festivus had scooped up a particularly disgusting looking plate of sandwiches and offered one to Nell and her companion. She grinned. “No,

thank you. Really. Did the house elves make that sandwich? Or did you make it out of house elves?”

“Who can tell, anyway, with last year’s crop? Well, I’m off to go stuff my face. Enjoy!” And with that, Festivus departed. As he walked away, he turned back over his shoulder and called back to her, “Oh by the way, steer clear of the pumpkin juice!”

Helena was still blushing. “You know, I don’t . . . I don’t think you’re pretty. I mean. No. I don’t mean you’re not pretty. I mean. Oh. I, uh . . .” She blushed even harder and looked down at the table, stammering.

“Helena. Helena. It’s okay. Really.” Nell put her hand on Helena’s. “Really.”

Her hand stayed there. For a brief moment, she looked directly into Helena’s eyes and smiled the smallest of special smiles.

Perenelle du Marais’ parents were healers. Making people feel better was in her blood, and it came to her naturally. “This world is a broken place,” her father reminded her, constantly. “It is our role to fix it.” Every day, she reminded herself of her goal and strived to wear the mantle her father had passed down to her.

Because they were healers, the accident was all the more tragic. Perenelle had a sister, once. A sister who, like her, was so full of light, and wanted nothing more than to be just like her father, and fix the world. A sister upon whom she doted, and who adored her. Wizards are preternaturally resilient, but even mundane things can take their lives, if help is far enough away, or the condition is serious enough.

Sadly, modern techniques such as cardiopulmonary resuscitation were unknown to wizards in the 15th century. Lungs filled with water were notoriously difficult to treat. Her parents tried desperately to coax the liquid from her but to no avail. In her desperation, Perenelle transfigured the water into a different Sub-

stance. She knew that if the transfiguration broke, it would be instantly fatal. Perenelle was only a few years in to her education and struggled mightily to maintain her Magic. Her parents knew better than to hold out false hope, even though she screamed at them in rage, imploring them to help her, even as her Will faltered. As she held her sister in her arms, she poured everything she had into it, and more.

It was not enough.

Her parents passed in her fifth year, victims of Dragon Pox. She would later learn that a cure had existed for centuries. The world was saturated with stupid, senseless deaths. The world was broken, and she intended to fix it. Even if she had to break it first. Over the years she had heard whispers, old tales of artifacts and Gods from a bygone era, stories of lore beyond reckoning. In the summer of her fifth year, she left her native Alderney and traveled the old world. She visited the marble edifices of Alto Alentejo. She saw the tombs of Egypt. She spoke with the wraiths of Białowieża. She was still young, so young, and thus collected no more than whispers, murmurs. But there was one murmur that rose louder than the others.

The mass of students in the Great Hall murmured. Another Dark Lady to teach Battle Magic? But Morganna was one of the best professors that Hogwarts had seen in generations!

Headmaster Gagwilde stood at the podium at the forefront of the Great Hall, delivering his beginning-of-the-year address with the affected, eccentric pompousness the students had grown to know and love. “Yes, it is true. Our beloved Professor LeFay has departed Hogwarts, leaving us with a vacancy. Fortunately, Professor Ollerton was doing a bit of adventuring in Poland over the summer and convinced a new Dark Lady to share her lore with us. Witches and gentlewizards, allow me to introduce you to

our newest Battle Magic professor, Miss Baba Yaga!”

Any student who had been drinking pumpkin juice immediately spewed it from their mouths in a fantastic synchronized spit-take, prompting waves of laughter to ripple through the Great Hall. Baba Yaga? Headmaster Gagwilde was famous for his jokes. This had to be one of them.

Festivus Weasley and Grumblechook Ollivander, for their part, were particularly proud of their ingenuity. Comed-Tea in the pumpkin juice? Classic! Helena Ravenclaw, who had been smiling almost uncontrollably to herself prior to this, looked over at Perenelle. Normally, she too would be grinning, despite herself, at another one of Festivus’ stupid pranks. But instead, she had the Look. That look that Helena had come to recognize from their years together at Hogwarts. Long years, spent watching. It was the same look Nell had when you asked her about her parents. Or her sister. Her Dark look.

“Nell? Are you . . .” Helena considered putting a hand on her shoulder, but thought better of it. Nell blinked a few times, and the smile returned to her face.

“I’m fine.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

ORDINARY WORLD

HOGWARTS CASTLE, 3 MONTHS EARLIER JUNE 2, 1333, C.E.

It was the Kiss heard around the world. The Kiss that launched a thousand conversations in the common rooms of Hogwarts. The Kiss that had the wise professors nodding, having seen the pattern before. The Kiss that had puerile young wizards practically falling over themselves to get the details.

It started, as most such Kisses do, with alcohol. Lots of it. In this case, several bottles of illicitly obtained Armagnac. Someone had nicked them from the Headmaster's private store. It was their fifth year and they had just received the results of their O.W.L.s, and even in the 15th century, students were prone to celebrating bare mediocrity.

"Partying" had never come naturally to Nell. In her mind, celebrations were for events worth celebrating, and passing one's Ordinary Wizarding Level test meant exactly that: you were ordinary. However, she had long ago learned that you simply cannot fix the world by yourself, for the most important part of the world is its people. And you can't get people to change unless they like you.

Nell had also learned the necessity of altruism (if you could truly call it that). When you do right by someone, they want to do right by you, most of the time. There were always exceptions to every rule of thumb, but if she performed ten random acts of kindness, eight or nine of them would be returned in kind, which was more than sufficient. Nell rarely had only a single iron in the fire.

Her mother had taught her the value of being useful. If you constantly did the right thing by the right person, they would become reliant upon you. “Unconditional support gives you the ultimate power over a person, for you can withdraw your aid at any time, free of any repercussion. You must never ask for something in return,” she had said, “For this is no trade, and you are no merchant.”

She held sway over at least half of Hogwarts, students and professors alike. She helped Gryffindors with their homework and never charged a Knut. She assisted Slytherins in their small plots, and never called in a favor. She worked hard alongside Hufflepuffs and studied hard alongside Ravenclaws. She aided professors by corralling unruly students, grading exams, processing paperwork, and never expected any special treatment in return.

It was said that Perenelle was ambitious. Those of Hogwarts observed that three times she was presented with badges of honor: Prefect, Head Girl, and a medal of Special Service, and thrice did she refuse them. Was that ambition?

Hogwarts was simply made a better place by the presence of Perenelle du Marais.

Her power was unspoken, never once had she held her favors over someone else's head or threatened the withdrawal of her assistance. For sure, there were those who tried to take advantage of her kindness, but she dealt with them easily: she simply was no

longer kind to them. As such, she enjoyed a level of freedom in Hogwarts that few students had before and few would ever have again.

She walked openly in the restricted section of the library, she inquired about deep magics and high ritual above suspicion. When the school learned of the death of her parents, students and professors fell over themselves to offer her compassion, condolences, and charity.

It was because of this that, despite not hailing from a wealthy family, Perenelle was able to afford a trip across the Old World during the summer of her fifth year. It was because of this that, despite not hailing from an ancient family, she was practically handed a roadmap of secrets that guided her travels, ensuring she would return from the journey enriched with lore.

It was also because of this that Nell permitted herself a celebration, and it was also because of this that she found herself in an uncomfortably small cabinet with Festivus Weasley, waiting patiently for Headmaster Gaggilde to depart for dinner so that they could pillage his unnecessarily large collection of unnecessarily expensive spirits.

“You appreciate the fine arts, right?” he whispered. She rolled her eyes. She wasn’t sure where he was going with this, but it was sure to be cringe-inducing. She didn’t respond.

“I’ll take that as a yes. You know, this is usually the part of the play where the wacky, dashing hero and the beautiful but shrewish heroine get pushed into each other’s arms by some improbably ridiculous combination of accidents and physical comedy. And it usually ends with a kiss.” He coughed. “Hint, hint.”

“Hint, hint: when you’re flirting with a girl, it rarely pays off to call them a ‘shrew’ in the very same sentence.”

“You wound me, dear Nell. The shrew in this situation is none other than myself. In a delightfully subversive twist, I am the beautiful heroine of our own little comedy. You, my dear, are the persistent hero that simply can’t take ‘No’ for an answer. Although... If you were to ask me out now, who knows if my answer would change!”

“Oh, I think I’m fine not knowing the answer.”

“Some Ravenclaw YOU are, ignoring a riddle like that.”

“Some Gryffindor YOU are. You haven’t once directly asked me out without hiding behind a joke.” If there were space, this would have been where Nell indignantly put her fists on her hips and looked imperiously up at that oversized, fire-headed twit. But as it was, they both were awkwardly stooped over and no such dramatics were possible.

“Will you go out with me?”

She stifled a laugh. He elbowed her ribs. “Oh god, no! Of course not!” She stifled another laugh. “I’m not even going to bother with some silly cliché like, ‘I don’t want to ruin our friendship.’ No. Just no. A thousand times, no.”

“You’re a devil-woman, you know that? This summer, I’m going to find myself a nice Veela, and then you’ll see what you’ve been missing out on!”

“So you’re saying you want me to watch? Gross. Also, no.”

“Oh. No. Nothing so crude. Our lust will be so all-consuming that we can’t help but fly into fits of passion everywhere we go. The Great Hall, the classrooms, the hallways, your desk... It’s just a statistical inevitability that one day you’ll be minding your own business, probably doing something Ravenclaw-ish like reading while walking, and stumble upon us.”

“It’ll be easy enough to avoid, I’ll just steer clear of any unpleasant smells. It’s already nearly unbearable in this cabinet, I can’t imagine what horrific scents would emerge from you if you were to sweat. Now, shut up. The Headmaster is leaving.”

She had made sure to cast an unnecessary strong Silencing Charm earlier; she knew how Festivus loved his banter. They watched through the crack in the cabinet as the Headmaster gathered his things and departed. They emerged, looked around, and began scanning the office. A portrait on the wall coughed loudly.

The noise came from a portrait of an old, wizened Mage with a mischievous grin on his face. He was nonchalantly looking another direction, while clearly pointing at a bookshelf. Nell winked at him. It was the portrait of old Headmaster Porpentine, for whom she had arranged an illicit Portrait Passage years earlier, giving him direct access to The Bawdy Brothel of Bathsheba, a famously explicit painting by Lord Dolomphius LeValley. As they walked over to the shelf, the portrait coughed again, “Prometheus Bound.”

Fortunately, Nell was fluent in several dialects of Greek, both ancient and modern, and recognized the book. It was ancient. Or at least, it looked ancient. Did they have “first editions” in Ancient Greece? She reached for it, pulled it slightly, and realized it was on a pivot-and-latch mechanism. As the latch came loose, the case swung on a hinge and opened to a secret passage whose walls were lined with hundreds of bottles of wine, spirits, and ales. They quickly loaded up Nell’s mokeskin pouch, rearranged the bottles to make it less noticeable, reset the trap door, and made their way to the exit.

“Thanks! And by the way, we were never here!” She whispered to the portrait of Headmaster Porpentine, but he had already disappeared. Through the gaps in the Portrait Passage, she could

hear the faint tinkle of amorous giggling. She grinned and rolled her eyes.

Nell was famous for her self-control, even when she had consumed more than a few drinks. And she had consumed more than a few drinks that night. But when you are so close with someone for so many years, you begin to notice the subtle signs, like a rope becoming slightly frayed around the edges. And Helena Ravenclaw and Perenelle du Marais were very close, indeed.

Ever since they were first-years, they bonded over shared interests, personality traits, and philosophies towards life. They were both devastatingly intelligent young women in a world that did not look kindly upon women doing anything beyond bearing children and tending shop. For certain, there were the titans of old, the Helga Hufflepuffs and Rowena Ravenclaws and Galath Ollivanders. But for a young woman to aspire to such lofty heights was looked at with the same condescending smiles and nods that a wizard might give a young boy who says, "I want to grow up to be like Merlin!"

Further, they both were fiercely competitive, both with each other and the outside world, and they both hated to lose. Nell had never quite learned how to lose, and Helena rarely had cause to. And perhaps most importantly, they both wanted nothing more than to be recognized for their skills and talents, rather than their undeserving gifts of genetics and lineage. Even as a young girl, Perenelle was captivatingly beautiful. It led to quite a lot of unwanted attention from unsavory people, and the old nursery rhyme her father had taught her still echoed in her mind:

If there is a doubt Just raise your hands and shout! Those silly

acrohandulas will run away and pout!

Nell did not want to simply be the dumb, pretty girl. Her parents raised her better than that. She held herself to a higher standard. It made her work even harder to prove that she was more than just a porcelain face, piercing eyes, and ample bosoms. Not that it did her much good. She was careful, though, not to ignore her gifts either, as they opened doors that would otherwise have remained closed more often than not.

And there was Helena Ravenclaw. The final remaining name-descendent of the Ravenclaws, and the final remaining name-descendent of any of the Founders. The bloodline was still alive and well, of course, but there was power in a name, and given that she was an only child, she was the death of the Ravenclaw name. Everywhere she went, she carried with her the unwanted aura of history, and the air was heavy with expectation. She desperately wanted to be known for being something other than The Last Scion.

They both were secretly terrified of being a footnote in the grand tale of their companion. Helena, the Dorky Friend of that Hot Ravenclaw Witch Who Basically Owned Hogwarts. And Nell, the Insignificant Sidekick of the Titan of History and Prophecy. They both knew their own fears, and as such, knew the fears of the other. It went unspoken yet understood, as did many things between them, which only strengthened the bond of their love and friendship.

Helena had more raw talent than Nell, but Nell was more cunning and more familiar with the more obscure (and thus powerful) spells and rituals. Helena knew the intricacies of Magic as intimately as Nell knew the intricacies of people, and together they made a formidable team.

Nell did have one crucial advantage: she had a much greater

capacity for alcohol, which was fortunate because she had consumed quite a good deal of it this evening. That capacity was quite apparent, especially because she had volunteered to be the test subject of Festivus' new ritual. When he explained it to her in the Common Room, she quizzically cocked an eyebrow and asked, "So, if this works, then what was the point of our escapade in Headmaster Gagwilde's office?"

"Isn't it obvious? It gave me the perfect opportunity to ask you out!"

"And how did that work out for you?"

"Swimmingly, if I do say so myself. With every loss comes opportunity: Porpentine is a dirty old bugger, and his portrait told me about the secret peephole into The Bawdy Brothel."

"Gross. Now, what if this doesn't work?"

"Well, it could turn that water into anything from a love potion to a Draught of Living Death."

She shrugged. "Great! Let's give it a shot."

The room grew silent as Festivus drew his wand. Always the dramatist, he let the anticipation build. And build. And build.

And build.

After an obnoxious amount of silence, he lifted his wand, and the crowd swelled with expectation.

He let them wait.

They groaned loudly. Someone chucked a Pumpkin Pastie at his head, which he deftly caught with one hand. He took a bite, chewed slowly, delicately wiped his lips, and finally, began the incantation:

Pesternomi Peskipiksi Turn this water into whiskey!

Silence. There was no discernible change in the cup that Nell was holding. But that was not indicative of failure. A skilled dramatist herself, she held up the glass, gave it a sniff, and paused point-

edly.

The crowd pressed inward, trying to get a closer look, hoping to catch a whiff. As if in response, in one swift motion, she lifted the glass and drank the entire thing in one gulp.

The room was silent. The anticipation was unbearable.

Then Nell made The Face.

The room erupted into cheers. Men hugged, women swooned, and for a brief moment, Festivus was king. Someone had hastily assembled a fountain in the middle of the room, and Festivus went to work on casting the ritual again. The young witches and wizards flocked, with goblets in hand, to the fountain which now sprayed forth voluminous jets of clear spirits

Nell, despite herself, was impressed. It was a sacrificial ritual which delivered unto the cauldron a fixed quantity of alcohol at the expense of an equal quantity of water. It was barely 16 syllables long, invented and cast by a student who was barely 16 years old. That was impressive even by her standards.

Centuries later she would look back at this moment in a much different light. The amount of energy in that sacrificed water could have leveled Hogwarts 1000 times over. In the days of Grindelwald's reign of terror, she and Melendy had guided Muggle scientists with a hidden hand, helping them craft a terrible weapon which was a triumph thrice over: in one fell swoop, it had destroyed the collected lore of Terumoto and Sumitada, it had broken the will of Grindelwald's allies in the Orient, and it created a tenuous balance of power in the Muggle world. "Mutually assured destruction" had ensured peace in the Wizarding world for centuries, and now the Muggles had that same protection.

This careless ritual was fifty times more powerful than that weapon. Such power in the hands of a boy who was not even a man. His wand, a devious facsimile of Gorn'Jorbol's original anchor,

the Rod of Ænkyras, ensured that the energy was harnessed safely and efficiently. But the danger was still there and it was appalling.

At such a young age, Nell had no way of knowing all the secrets of Gom'Jorbol's staves, so she was blissfully unaware of the full extent of the danger. Had a single Dragon heartstring laid out of warp with the Yew shell of his wand, that energy would have reflected back upon itself and vaporized the whole of Scotland.

In the present day, the end-times, Perenelle knew that she was far too valuable to risk such possibilities. Perenelle knew now the true danger, and she knew now the price that the multiverse would pay for her failure.

But centuries earlier, she was simply a teenage witch, impressed and more-than-slightly drunk. Centuries earlier, her response was the face. Helena, for her part, knew that Nell was acting for the benefit of the crowd, trying to make the party that much more memorable. Nell never made The Face, even when she had consumed much larger quantities of booze at one time than she had just now.

But, Helena also knew that Nell was not unaffected by the drink. Her normally sure stance was just a hint more wobbly than usual, her typically crisp diction slightly less precise, her keen, sharp eyes a fraction less focused than normal.

Helena knew the signs, and knew the effects, and she figured, what better time than now? "Nell! Are you excited for your trip?"

Nell smiled when she spotted Helena. "Yes, oh yes. Professor Ollerton has given me some great leads, as have the Nutcombe hags. I have enough money to make it all the way to Greece, and if I'm lucky I made even be able to visit Arabia."

"You know that if you need anything... You know, Galleons—"

"No. Helena, no. I wouldn't ask that of you. I don't want you

to feel.... I don't know. If something were to happen, I don't want you thinking that you were responsible for it."

"You know that I could never NOT feel that way. If I ask you not to go, if I told you our friendship depended on it, would you still leave?"

Nell paused. Was this her way of asking? Or was this simply hypothetical? "But we both know that you would never ask that of me, we both know that you would never make such an ultimatum."

"I know. And believe me, I wouldn't do that to you. I'm just saying, what if I did? Would you still go?"

Nell paused, again. No, Helena wasn't asking. And for that, she deserved honesty. "No. I wouldn't go."

"So. In a way, I do have the power to stop you and I'm choosing not to. So if something were to happen to you it would, in a way, be my fault."

"You don't need to worry. Seriously. I can take care of myself."

"I know. But I'm not the one who brought up the danger, you are."

Nell sighed. "I guess you're right. I'm going to some dark places, and I will probably meet some dark people. I guess if I'm being honest I'm a little bit scared." She did not let on just how dark were the places she was visiting or unscrupulous were the people she was seeking. She did not let on how scared she was.

Helena's heart was racing. Here was her chance.

She took Nell's hand. "No, you'll be fine. We both know you will."

"Yeah. You're right. Well, umm.. I guess I should, I don't know. I guess I should say, goodbye." Her eyes were glossy, betraying the tears she had successfully fought back. Nell's tone and expression were somewhere between "Goodbye, see you in the fall," and

“Goodbye forever”.

And in that moment of recklessness, Helena pulled Nell close and pressed their lips together.

What.

If there is a doubt just raise your hands and shout no we shouldn't do this Yes why not she wants it so much she will owe you forever she wants it so much you can use this No friends don't use friends Stupid silly ignorant of course they do friends use each other and make them feel better while doing it No doesn't feel right Yes it does you know it does you have wanted this we know we have wanted this to see to look to feel to taste not seriously not for real just a taste yes just to taste you could have just a taste think about what you want what's the harm no one gets hurt everyone wins everyone wins you'll be doing the right thing to do the right thing she is broken fix her fix her fix her fix her fix her FIX HER

Nell gave in.

In the background, Nell could hear the bawdy cheers and hoots of the other students. Witches did this sort of thing all the time for attention, so no one thought much of it beyond a moment of alcohol-fueled experimentation. Despite that, The Kiss was all anyone would talk about for the next few days, the rumors made all the more lascivious by the fact that the two had disappeared from the common room, not to be seen again until the next day.

Unlike the rest of Hogwarts, Nell and Helena would never get the chance to discuss The Kiss ad nauseum. When Helena woke up the next morning with a pounding headache, dry mouth, and bleary eyes, Nell was already gone

C H A P T E R N I N E T E E N

M.S. PHAETHON

“He lived to see the night which, by the accepted laws of history, he was not supposed to see. He was forty-three years old and it was the opening night of Phaethon, an opera he had written at the age of twenty-four. He had changed the ancient Greek myth to his own purpose and meaning: Phaethon, the young son of Helios, who stole his father’s chariot and, in ambitious audacity, attempted to drive the sun across the sky, did not perish, as he perished in the myth; in Halley’s opera, Phaethon succeeded. The opera had been performed then, nineteen years ago, and had closed after one performance, to the sound of booing and catcalls. That night, Richard Halley had walked the streets of the city till dawn, trying to find an answer to a question, which he did not find.”

Atlas Shrugged Ayn Rand

HOGWARTS

JUNE 11, 1334, C.E.

It was very strange, seeing Ollie actually being sincere. When he was paired up with Festivus, (which was to say, always), it was an

endless stream of jokes, wisecracks, and laughter. But Ollie was nowhere near as sharp or subtle as Festivus. He just had a hard time gauging people's reactions to things. So he usually went for the obvious jokes, which actually worked out because he served as a good foil to Festivus: Ollie was *Il Capitano*, and Festivus was *Arlecchino*.

This was a shame because Ollie wasn't actually dumb. In fact, as Nell had come to find out, he was actually quite brilliant. It's just that he wasn't particular good with boundaries. He never quite knew where the line was and when or if he crossed it. Nell definitely understood that, albeit in a different sense. Nell was pushing the boundaries of the world itself, and she wasn't quite sure when the world would finally start pushing back.

As of yet, it had not. The path seemed to simply unfold for her. In this case, it was simple enough, by her standards. Since the start of term, Ollie had been hinting, not-so-subtly, that he wanted to ask her a question. Alone. She and Helena were nearly inseparable, as were Ollie and Festivus, so a private moment between the two of them would not go unnoticed by the rumor mill of Hogwarts. This was something Ollie definitely wanted to avoid.

And so, Nell did as she often did; she killed several birds with one stone. She needed to take advantage of his familial connections, and procure a particularly valuable artifact for a couple of days. And he needed to have a plausible excuse for speaking to her alone. Of course, Nell always had several irons in the fire, so she needed quite a great deal more than just a simple rock.

She was a spider, and her web was manifold. Nell and Ollie were meeting up after class on Tuesday. But why? For the majority of Hogwarts, they either didn't care, knew it was not their place, or it was simply none of their business. But for anyone who asked, there was the first-level lie: they were building some sort of Super-

Cauldron to give themselves an advantage in Professor Rothtim's upcoming Potions exam.

The story deliberately had a tiny hint of inconsistency, just enough to cause an astute meddler to dig deeper: Professor Rothtim gave four exams per semester, but only counted the highest three grades from among them, so as to not unduly punish someone for a single poor performance. This was the fourth exam, and Nell had aced the previous three.

Why would she even bother taking the fourth exam? Well, she was Nell, after all. Taking extra tests just to take them was totally a Ravenclaw thing to do, right? But, then, why would she be going to all that extra effort? She aced the previous tests without needing a super-cauldron... This doesn't make sense. I better ask around.

Nell was leaving a trail of breadcrumbs. The story that she whispered to friends and select confidantes (which meant, of course, that it might be kept a secret for a handful of days), was that she had discovered a potential loophole in Bertrand Whitehead's *Principia Discordia*, specifically concerning the theories of Magical Recursion, and she needed to test a practical example.

This explanation reached the ears of the envious and meddlesome, some of whom practically fell over themselves in order to try to procure a copy of her notes. Nell happily obliged them. She had long before claimed a corner of the Ravenclaw common room as her own little study nook, and routinely left her notes and personal effects scattered about the desk. No Ravenclaw was brave or foolhardy enough to even dare to steal from her.

And indeed, no Ravenclaw would. Elsa Greengrass, a Slytherin who was also in her sixth year, did not particularly care for Nell. Elsa was pretty. Some might say she was prettier than Nell, but Elsa thought of herself as second-rate in comparison to Nell's effervescent charm and her slender curves. Elsa was also quite

intelligent, but she thought of herself as a dolt when she looked at the countless breakthroughs Nell had made throughout their years together.

Nell had, on several occasions, tried to befriend her. But Elsa was a Slytherin, through and through. She was born and raised, steeped in a culture of cunning and intrigue. Everything was a plot, everyone had ulterior motives, and nothing could be trusted at face value. So she always scorned these offers of friendship, because how could she ever trust another person who was capable of being her equal? Or worse, her superior?

The irony was that Nell was actually more of a Slytherin than she ever let on. Everything she did was a plot. Everything she did had ulterior motives. Nothing she did was purely face-value. And yet, she was not a Slytherin. At the end of the day, when all of the plots had reached their resolution, with no rationalization necessary or self-deception, she honestly, truly was trying to fix this broken, broken world.

But Elsa didn't see that. All she saw was the Slytherin-in-Ravenclaw's-Colors who managed to have the whole of Hogwarts wrapped around her little finger and did whatever she wanted, whenever she wanted. The only thing she didn't seem to do was whoever she wanted. In fact, aside from *The Kiss*, she seemed positively Vestal.

As so, Elsa decided to take matters into her own hands. Kirk Davies, the Ravenclaw Head Boy, was the only student with the power to disable the wards in the Ravenclaw common room. As it so happened, he had been carrying a torch for Elsa for quite some time. And so she took advantage of that situation by allowing him to take advantage of her.

The Ravenclaw-Slytherin Quidditch match was that evening, and several professors had deliberately scheduled exams the follow-

ing day in protest of this ridiculous new sport that was taking up more and more of the students' attention. As such, the common rooms were completely empty. The students were either at the Quidditch pitch or in the library.

So under the cover of a few well-placed Webs of Darkness, he was able to sneak Elsa in through the portrait hole, and into the Ravenclaw common room. They both were practically shaking with excitement, for two very different reasons. She was so close. He was so close. All that needed to happen was for Kirk to slip upstairs to disable the wards on the sleeping chambers.

As he did so, Elsa very quickly, very deftly, pulled out her Quik-Sketch: an "academic assistance tool" that was invented a few decades back that was often used for less-than-honest purposes. It operated much like a modern-day magical camera, but it was uniquely suited to reproducing text. One could snap a quick sketch (hence the name) of a book, without even opening it, and later could peruse through the entire volume. This made it exceedingly easy for an unwitting Professor to have his or her entire curriculum surreptitiously copied and distributed.

And so, they were, for the most part, forbidden from classrooms, but as they had their uses, they weren't entirely outlawed. After all, there were many one-of-a-kind tomes in the library, and it was much safer to have a student read through a Quik-Sketch than it was to entrust them with the physical tome itself.

Making sure to touch nothing, she quickly took a snapshot of the desk, making sure to contain the entire scene within the Quik-Sketch's viewport. Not a moment too soon, she stowed it away in her robes, and Kirk emerged from the chamber. He had removed his robe, and beneath them, he was wearing pants and a collared shirt. She gave him an appraising look. He was handsome enough. Maybe this wouldn't be too bad.

Or maybe it would be. As she endured the sloppy, uncomfortable encounter (after all, Kirk Davies was still somewhat new at this), she thought to herself that whatever was on those notes would have to be worth it. She could think of very little besides what new lore this might lead her to. Which was all for the best, because Kirk's wild thrusting and ridiculous, syncopated gasps had obliterated any semblance of physical pleasure she may have been deriving from the experience.

Figuring she'd hurry things along a little bit, she dug her fingernails into his back, and whispered in the most sultry voice she could muster, "Oh, Kirk!"

As she did so, she forcefully rolled him onto his back and began to aggressively rock her hips back and forth in feigned ecstasy. She could feel him begin to tense and squirm, and within moments, she could feel that she had accomplished her task. She figured she'd give him a feeling of accomplishment as well, and so she let out a series of rhythmic moans, each a bit louder than the next.

She was proud of her performance.

He lay there, quivering on the bed, with a permanent grin plastered on his face. Even though she could clearly see the Bertoxulous Ring and its distinctive purple halo hovering above the bed, there was no sense in not playing it safe. Normally, she would wait until she was in the restroom, behind closed doors, to cast the spell, but she might as well get it out of the way now. She pointed her wand about an inch and a half below her belly button and whispered.

"Animatus Mobilis Expelsor!"

She winced as the spray of liquid shot out of her. It was always a bit uncomfortable and inelegant, but it certainly beat the alternative, and besides, it was his mess to clean up now.

The Bertoxxulous Ring and the Parasite-Expelling Charm were a pair of spells that originally started off as defensive and healing charms, but had since been repurposed by the intrepid and inventive youth of Hogwarts to serve as a remarkably safe and effective means of birth control.

“The Ring” created an area-of-effect defensive aura which would prevent any life from reproducing underneath its halo. It was designed originally as a counter to the plant-based attacks that had been so in vogue a few centuries back. The “PEC” on the other hand, was designed to flush any unwanted entity from the body. It was remarkably effective against parasites such as Ceti Eels, Nargles, and, as it so happened, gametes.

One would have to be exceptionally careless, exceptionally unlucky, or exceptionally stupid to wind up with an unwanted child as a wizard. And even if you did, there were certain herbs and potions that could take care of that. Although they were not discussed as openly as The Ring and the PEC, there was little taboo concerning the subject.

There was no Wizarding equivalent to the debate of when, exactly, life begins. A simple *Hominem Revelio* would tell you, unequivocally, whether or not another life existed inside of you. They did not need to rigorously define the term “life” because Magic did it for them.

All of this was to say that the attitude towards sexual relationships at Hogwarts was quite cavalier, and such encounters rarely carried with them a great deal of emotional attachment. There were maybe twenty students per house per year, which did not make for many permutations of relationships, even taking into account that Hogwarts (and much of the Wizarding world) was far from heteronormative. Becoming attached and holding grudges was a dangerous proposition.

Nell had considered all of this, prior to doing Kirk Davies this favor. She had given some thought as to whether or not this would hurt Kirk because it would almost certainly be a one-time encounter, rather than the start of any sort of relationship. But that was probably for the best since Elsa probably wasn't the best fit for Kirk.

The encounter itself was easy enough to facilitate. All Nell had to do was find something that Elsa wanted that only Kirk could provide. Kirk was Head Boy, and Elsa was ambitious, so it probably would have happened organically at one point or another. It was best that it happened under controlled conditions, and in such a way that Kirk would feel indebted to her.

As for Elsa's part, she had retreated into the Slytherin chambers and had bribed a prefect to let her use an office. The set the Quik-Sketch up on a small stool, and it projected the interactive image of the notes across the desk. She shuffled through them, nudging pages out of the frame with her wand, rapidly scanning for keywords as she went on until she finally found something interesting:

"On Formally Indecipherable Incantations in Principia Discordia and Related Texts..."

This had to be it. Principia Discordia was famously obtuse, but it was considered one of the seminal works of first-order magical theory. Elsa didn't quite grasp the finer points of it: after all, it did spend over 300 pages rigorously defining from first principles the fact that "Ma - Ha - Su" is not equal to "Su - Ma - Ha".

They had studied the volume in one of her N.E.W.T.-level Magic Theory classes and she had learned just enough to pass the exam. The biggest takeaway was that all Magic could be fundamentally reduced to basic Axiomatic Forms. And because of this, Magic cannot self-reference. This lack of self-reference implied a

lack of recursion, which in turn implied a vast number of laws and magical limitations. Gamp's Law of Elemental Transfiguration, the Form/Substance Dichotomy, the Inverse Time-Complexity Relationship, and so on and so forth.

The tome did not seek to define precisely what these Axiomatic Forms were because for the most part, they are ineffable. But further to the point, there are an infinite number of potential Forms; they do not have to be 'true', necessarily, they simply have to be syntactically correct. By assuming the Axiomatic property of a Form, one can derive all manner of theoretical spells that would be possible, so long as the original assumption is correct.

For example, if one assumes that the two forms, "Ma" and "Ntok", can be combined, then it logically follows that a modifier can be used, based on previously defined theorems. One can then take that a step further and deduce that the modifier must be numerical in nature, and fit within a certain set of vocal inflections. A scholar of languages would note that Japanese was likely the only known language that could imply the proper meaning while still falling within the necessary range of sounds.

As such, an entirely new spell and its effects could be unequivocally proven by the simple (but lengthy) process of magical deduction, if only one assumes a certain Axiomatic Form. Of course, therein lies the rub: how does one know which Forms are Axiomatic and which are not? Most advanced magical research involves taking existing spells and attempting to determine which principles must be true in order for those spells to be possible. And most spell creation involved combining existing Axiomatic Forms in new and novel ways in order to achieve the desired result.

Truly visionary, or perhaps truly dangerous wizards would venture into unknown territory, devising a fantastically powerful effect, working backward, and then simply hoping or praying that

the underlying Forms required were, in fact, valid. Many Wizards lost their lives in horrifically violent fashion by venturing down this road. But others have succeeded, creating rituals of absurd power.

Which in and of itself, gave rise to one of the greatest debates of the past 500 years, the problem of Convenient Axioms. Why was it that certain Forms just “happened” to be Axiomatic? Almost all Axioms that had been discovered had some form of practical application. Why was this the case? It was, as the problem suggested, too convenient.

One faction argued that more than likely, there were countless more Axioms yet to be discovered that did not have any practical application, which was precisely why they had been undiscovered. After all, how could they be experimentally verified? The opposing faction cited several examples of possible means of validation, and further pressed the issue, citing the limitations of reductionism. Eventually, you hit the end of the line, and have to answer the question: “Where do these Axioms come from?”

Principia Discordia did not bother with such esoteric (or, as Whitehead’s opponents would say, “practical”) questions. Asking “why” is as asinine as asking why $1 = 1$. The Law of Identity needs no proof; the simple act of considering the proof presupposes its validity. The world is what the world is, and only something fundamentally extra-worldly would have the power to create and define such Axioms. But even that supernatural force would be subject to its own set of Axioms and laws. And so on for any super-supernatural forces, and so on and so forth.

Whitehead’s crowning achievement, in his mind, was constructing a language of Magic so simple and rigorous that it could be extended forever upward, and given sufficient time, could enumerate all possible iterations of all possible Axioms.

Elsa, of course, did not care about any of that. She learned what she needed to learn in order to pass the class, and what she learned told her that the overly complex notes that Nell had laid out on the page, including something about “when preceded by its incantation”, well, she knew enough to know that it just wasn’t possible.

She was about to be sorely disappointed until she noticed something that did catch her attention: a sketch of a pair of diaries, along with accompanying notes, that had been crossed out angrily. By shining her wand’s light at just the right angle, she could see the indentations in the paper, and could deduce what the sketch had been meant to illustrate: it was a linkage between the two diaries. Anything written in the first book would show up in its twin.

That was... interesting.

She ignored the obvious question of why that would be necessary, and further scanned the notes. It was clear that Nell had created a prototype, hidden it within the castle, and then discovered that her attempt was unsuccessful. Because it was worthless, she had abandoned it, but Elsa could tell that it wasn’t necessarily a failure. She grasped enough of the theory to think that maybe, just maybe, it was fixable.

The book was hidden, of course, in the library, because a single book tucked away in a place that was obviously meant for hiding things would draw attention. But a single book tucked away on a packed, nondescript shelf in the Restricted Area, which was already filled with books that had traces of magic, well, no one would ever notice that.

No one except Elsa.

She discovered that the failed prototype had been enchanted with a modified Protean charm, and although the binding magic

had been removed, the reference still existed in the traces of magic that were woven through the book. A little-known loophole in the Protean charm would allow one to recover that linkage, and then... Well, then what?

Elsa knew what a potential treasure trove this book represented. A continually up-to-date copy of the diary of Perenelle du Marais. The secrets, the hidden lore, the potential for blackmail, to the right person, this was priceless. Although, someone clever enough to see its value would also be prudent enough to question why such a backup diary was even necessary. The fact that it even existed suggested something dark, in and of itself.

Unfortunately, Elsa did not have enough experience with the practical ins and outs of Magic to figure out how to take the next step, which was fixing the book once the linkage to its twin had been recovered. And so, she went to visit the one person who almost certainly did have that experience, a person who probably would not have minded seeing Nell knocked down a peg or two.

It was during her office hours that Elsa had approached Baba Yaga and presented to her the notes and the diary and asked for suggestions. Without so much as glancing at the notes, and without even looking up at Elsa, Baba Yaga snapped, "These notes and this book do not belong to you, do they? Answer me truthfully, and you may stay. If you lie to me, I will know, and you will no longer be welcome in my office or classroom."

"They're Perenelle's," Elsa answered immediately. Baba Yaga looked up at her, interested.

"And what is your motivation?"

"I... I don't like how she always seems to just... Win. I want to have something on her. I want to teach her what it feels like to lose."

Baba Yaga said nothing.

After a few moments, Elsa self-consciously flushed and covered her mouth with her hands. "Oh God, what am I saying? I... I can't believe I just said that out loud. Please, just... Just forget I came here. Never mind."

As she was standing to leave, Baba Yaga held her hand up. "Sit down." Elsa complied. "I, too, think that Ms. du Marais should learn to lose. Now, sit down, and let me see those."

She roughly grabbed the Quik-Sketch, scanned through the drawing of the diary, looked at the real diary in Elsa's hands, and let out a brief chuckle. With a slight flick of her finger, the diary began to warm, and emit a light golden glow, which died down after a few moments.

Elsa was taken aback. "It was that easy?"

"Everything is easy, child."

Eager with anticipation, Elsa opened the cover. Words were appearing on the pages faster than she could read them. She flipped to a random page and began reading. She scanned quickly through to try to identify anything interesting, but wasn't finding anything—

Well. Wasn't this just something?

An entire passage devoted to describing, in lascivious detail, the physical beauty of Nell's new Battle Magic professor. And describing in even more detail what Nell would let that new Battle Magic professor do to her. Elsa had to bite her lip to keep her from grinning. At the very least, this would be an embarrassment. She slowly lifted her eyes from the book to try to catch a glimpse of what Baba Yaga was doing.

What Elsa saw was startling. Baba Yaga seemed to have lost any interest whatsoever in the diary. Her eyes were darting furiously back and forth across the page of notes, faster than Elsa would have thought anyone was capable of even reading. The professor's back was stiff, her muscles tensed, her posture coiled, ready to

strike. Elsa recognized that page that Baba Yaga was fixated on. On Formally Indecipherable Incantations...

In an instant, Baba Yaga looked up, and locked eyes with Elsa. “Do not think about the elephant.”

“What?”

In that brief instant when their eyes had met and Elsa was busy thinking about an elephant, Baba Yaga was able to determine that Elsa did not comprehend the true meaning or implication behind these notes. She casually held her hand out. “Hand me that diary.”

Elsa reluctantly complied, and Baba Yaga quickly flipped to the last page of the book. On, drawn with angry red slashes of a quill, was an illustration of a line inscribed within a circle inscribed within a triangle. It took up the entire page. She began to laugh, and Elsa looked deeply uncomfortable.

Baba Yaga tossed the diary back to Elsa. “Take this as a token for your reward, and leave. Now.” Elsa was more than happy to comply and quickly turned on her heels to leave. The moment her back was turned, Baba Yaga parted her lips slightly, breathed out a wisp of Magic, and Elsa found that any memories of On Formally Indecipherable Incantations had been cleanly wiped from her mind

The diary was, of course, a fraud, the payload at the end of a deliberately laid trail of breadcrumbs, designed so that someone would find it. It served as both a means to an end and a fallback option in and of itself. She had written the passages in such a way that if any adult had suspected that Nell had been the unwitting victim of emotional and possibly sexual abuse from an authority

figure, this diary would serve as complete confirmation.

There was nothing explicit, of course, because then people might suspect that the diary was written with the intent of being read. No, everything was hints, suggestions, implications, little turns of phrases or idiosyncrasies that would paint the picture to a clever reader. People always latched on much more strongly to conclusions that they came to themselves, and those that made them feel clever than those that were simply presented to them.

She had also worked with Ollie and Festivus to ensure that her mind contained clear traces of a traumatic experience being removed via Obliviation, which was simple enough. And she left other subtle hints here and there, to further reinforce the illusion. If she ever did need to enact her fallback plan, she would simply have a very public, very vocal panic attack in class. She would insist that it was just stress brought on by the exams, that there was nothing wrong.

In her sleep, though, she would be fitful. She would whisper... no... stop... don't... And of course, when she awoke, she would vehemently deny that she whispered anything at all, and would become defensive and withdrawn when questioned about it.

This would raise several red flags amongst experienced, well-meaning adult wizards, who would then start to look for the signs of abuse. They'd start with a light probing of her mind, whereupon which they'd find the jagged telltales of Obliviation, which would not be evidence unto itself. They would also find the very recent, very vivid and emotional memory of her tearing pages from her diary and casting them into the fire in the Ravenclaw common room.

An investigation would reveal that the diary was linked and that a backup existed somewhere within the castle. Terrified of being uncovered, whoever had stolen it would return it anony-

mously to the authorities, who upon reading it would commence the witch hunt.

There were several flaws with this plan, which is why it was purely meant as a backup. In fact, the entire notion of her “bet” with Baba Yaga was just one large fallback plan. The fact that Baba Yaga was receptive to such a wager in the first place was information in and of itself and furthered Nell’s hypothesis. Her real plan was to simply raise the stakes, to invent a more interesting game than the one they were currently playing.

But even that, that too was just a fallback plan. Her true mission was to see for herself just how far the rabbit hole went. If there was someone more powerful than Baba Yaga, she would find that person. If there was someone more powerful than that, she would find them. She would tear down the gates of Heaven and confront God if that’s what it took to fix this broken world.

Fortunately, the world was broken in just the right places so as to make that path to God’s doorstep much easier to walk than one might expect. Like so many others, Nell had heard whispers of the Deathly Hallows. And as “luck” would have it, she strongly (and correctly) suspected that two of those Hallows were right under her nose here at Hogwarts. You can only chalk things up to coincidence so many times before you begin to suspect a hidden hand, and what better way to reveal that hand than to play right into it?

And so she did, which was the real reason behind her private audience with Ollie. His cousin happened to be Isabella Gaunt, eldest descendant of Celia Gaunt née Peverell, and that angular, jet black stone inset into the ring on her finger, well, it fit all the patterns. Nell often wondered why she seemed to be the only one who noticed these sorts of patterns or asked these kinds of questions. But she had long since moved past being frustrated,

however, realizing that simply taking action was most often the winning move.

Although Ollie offered, she did not want to steal the ring. It needed to be given, if even for only a short period of time. Isabelle knew that the ring possessed eldritch powers, but was unaware of the extent. She did have a deep interest in the more esoteric aspects of magic and was always looking for opportunities to collect more lore. The ring was doing her no good simply sitting on her finger and, being family, she trusted Ollie implicitly. Furthermore, she knew of Perenelle's reputation and knew that she was no thief. This was a win-win.

Although the exchange of favor for favor was implied, it went unstated between Ollie and Nell, because no assurances were necessary. He had given her the ring at the start of their meeting, with no mention of any condition or request. They had a brief discussion about its properties, but Perenelle thought it was best to quickly move on to what it was that Ollie wanted.

She talked to him about Helena, answered his questions, and spoke of her friend's deepest desires. She said nothing that was told to her in confidence, only things that the astute observer could deduce on their own. She spoke of the path he would need to walk in order to win her heart, what he should do, what he should not do, and so on and so forth.

But the true favor that she bestowed upon him was laying the trail of breadcrumbs that led him to the conclusion that this was not the path he should be walking. Unrequited, idealized, and idolized love is most often best left to the hallowed halls of one's own imagination, and after a series of innocent questions regarding his plans for the future and his dreams of his life together with Helena, he slowly began to recognize this.

By the end of their conversation, he was openly weeping. He

felt like a right idiot. He hadn't been subtle, not in the slightest, and he could only imagine how awkward and uncomfortable he had made Helena feel. But he was ready to move on. He pulled Nell into a tight hug.

"If you breathe a word of this to Festivus... I'll cut your toes off and feed them to Thestrals. He'd never let me live this down."

Nell laughed and patted him gently on the back. "Well, I guess you better be super, extra nice to me, then shouldn't you?"

"How could I not?" He separated from her and began to pack up his things. "I love you, you know. Not like, love, love, like that kind. But, like a friend. You've always been nice to me, even when other people haven't, even when there's not been any reason to."

"I love you like that, too. And I'm nice to you because you're the type of person who's worth being nice to. Don't ever change that."

Ollie smiled. "I won't."

It was time for Nell to call in another favor. Typically she let them brew for a bit longer, but time was of the essence, in more ways than one. It was about a week since his conquest of Elsa Greengrass, and Kirk DaviEs was still walking on rainbows. By a happy coincidence, he happened to be close friends with Gregory Potter, who happened to be the oldest member of the branch of the Potter clan that descended from Iolanthe Potter nee Peverell.

Nell had once joked that there was actually no such thing as Magic, that it was all just one long string of entirely improbable coincidences, that all magical phenomenon would have occurred anyway, it's just that they coincidentally occurred immediately after someone spoke a particular phrase or waved a stick about in

a certain way, and that the best wizards were the ones who were best able to take advantage of coincidences when they came up.

Granted, she had come up with this theory during a post-exam celebration, after inhaling quite a large amount of particularly strong Longbottom Leaf. She had challenged several of her companions to disprove her theory, and being that they were in a similarly altered state, they found themselves unable to argue.

When she recovered the next morning with a very dry mouth and a voracious appetite, she noticed that she had jotted down almost an entire scroll worth of notes. Apparently, she had tried to formally prove her proposition, and in the process had made some particularly appalling leaps in logic and faith. But it was still amusing to consider from time to time, and she thought of that now as she took advantage of yet another unlikely coincidence.

Gregory Potter was almost as infamous as Festivus Weasley for his troublemaking and general prankery, and it was not altogether shocking that the two of them did not get on well, at all. This was due in no small part to the Festivus' longstanding suspicion that Potter had in his possession a secret weapon that gave him an unfair advantage in their battle of one-upmanship. After all, some of the stuff that Gregory had pulled off simply couldn't be done without an Invisibility Cloak.

When Kirk Davies had approached him, Gregory was hesitant, at first. The Cloak had to be worth a fortune, plus it was a family heirloom. But once he learned that the request was on behalf of Perenelle du Marais, he practically fell over himself to get to his trunk and hand it over. Not only would she owe him one, but just think how much this would get under Festivus' skin!

Gregory was always annoyed at how that fire-headed git followed around Perenelle like a lost puppy. Didn't he have any sense of pride? Not that he wouldn't have a go at her, he'd certainly

done worse, much worse. But he would never chain himself to a girl the way Festivus did, and so he was maliciously delighted at the idea of her being in debt to him.

As he shoved the Cloak into Kirk's arms, he reminded him. "I'm not giving this to you, it's just a loan."

"Thanks again, buddy."

"Don't mention it. Actually, do mention in. Make sure Weaselby knows just how much I was able to help out his girlfriend." Potter grinned.

"Uhh... You know, I'm pretty sure she doesn't--"

Gregory waved him off. "Yeah, yeah, I know. That's what makes it all the more depressing."

"Well, I owe her one. I don't know how she did it, but she set me up good. Reaaaaaalllll good. Have I told you about what happened with Elsa?"

Potter rolled his eyes. "Elsa? You mean, Elsa Greengrass? The same Elsa Greengrass that you spent a night with and have been telling everyone in the school five times a day ever since? That Elsa?"

"Yep. That one. So you've heard the story then?"

"Only about a hundred times."

"Well, one more time can't hurt." Kirk continued as Potter groaned. "So there we were, in the prefect's bedroom, and she starts doing this crazy, corkscrewy sorta thing..."

At no point did Nell ever think that the fact that she was only in her sixth year should be any detriment to her whatsoever. The scale of power in the Wizarding world was exponential, not linear. The types of people she was seeking out, they were orders

of magnitude more powerful than her, or any of her classmates, or for that matter, any of her teachers. To think that she should wait a few more years until she was a bit more studied and a bit more powerful was like a spider thinking that if only it could grow a little bit bigger, a little bit stronger, then it could fight a dragon in hand-to-hand combat.

She had stolen that analogy from one of the essays and lessons that Baba Yaga had assigned to their class. “You have been permanently transfigured into a spider. You still retain your human intelligence and human lifespan. In the mountain nearby lives a Hungarian Horntail. Describe how you would defeat it.”

The next day in class when they had turned in their essays, Baba Yaga had revealed to them a specialized device she had created for this exercise. To grade the essays, she would read them aloud into the device, which would then simulate the scenario and proposed solution ten thousand times over, assigning a point for each favorable outcome.

It very neatly illustrated several key concepts in Battle Magic. Firstly, it showed the limitations of cleverness when faced with brute strength: even the most effective solution amongst the class was successful only about a third of the time.

“In every battle, there is a dragon and there is a spider, and your tactics and strategy must differ depending on your role. Many Wizards have met their doom because they were spiders convinced they were dragons. And similarly, many Wizards have consigned themselves to lifetimes of frustration because they were dragons subjecting themselves to the limitations of spiders. Know who you are, know your role, and fight accordingly.”

But there was another lesson that was just as important. The worst essay in the class turned in by a very much hungover and still slightly drunk Randall Flaggstone, simply stated, “Sneak up

on the dragon and bite him in the eye.”

This worked, three times out of ten thousand.

“No matter how powerful you are, there is still the possibility that your opponent’s plans will succeed due to sheer, dumb luck. This is why you rarely hear of many Dark wizards or witches who last beyond a generation or two. There are more spiders in this world than there are dragons, and ten thousand spiders with ten thousand idiotic ideas can and will one day bring you down. The lesson here is simple: do not give spiders a reason to attack.”

At this lesson, Nell had interrupted. “But there are some in the world who would hate you for being good, resent your purity and your goodness. There really are people like that in the world, you know.”

Baba Yaga smiled, cruelly. “Yes, believe me, I know. Perhaps this is also why you do not hear of very many Light wizards who live beyond a generation or two. No, the trick to self-preservation is to be lukewarm; neither hot nor cold, neither good nor evil.”

“There are some in the world who would hate you for that, even.” Nell responded, coolly.

“I’m willing to take my chances.”

Cloak and Stone in hand, Nell had gone about the task of trying to slay a dragon. She cast her mind across the Cloak, examining its properties, trying to consider precisely what differentiated it from a typical Cloak of Invisibility, despite mere longevity. It repelled the eyes, yes, but that functionality was almost... ancillary. It really was like two Cloaks in one. The outer layer which kept the wearer unseen, and the inner layer which kept the wearer hidden.

It seemed unaffected by ambient Magic, which passed through it as easily as did light. But targeted, direct magic behaved differently, if not unreliable. It took them several iterations of tests to finally determine with sufficient confidence the nature of the Cloak.

In essence, it kept you Hidden from Magic, so long as you remained Unseen. A curse would travel right through you if its caster did not truly know you were there. As with all things magical, there seemed to be a very fuzzy line between knowledge and belief, with the power of the effect seeming to be directly proportionate to the strength of the conviction.

She had worked together with Helena to try to figure things out. Nell had hidden in a corner, but then snapped her fingers to reveal her presence. Helena's stunning bolt hit her with full force. On the other hand, when she told Helena that she would hide in one of four places when she was finally struck by the bolt, it felt much less powerful. Nell was inclined to say it felt a quarter as powerful.

So they did more experiments. Nell told Helena she would be hiding in the corner and told her to enter the room and fire there. In truth, Nell stood immediately in front of the doorway, directly in the line of fire of the curse. The bolt went right through her.

They repeated the exact same trick again, but this time the bolt stunned her, although it was relatively weak. When she questioned Helena about it, she said, "Well, I kind of thought you might try the same thing again, but I wasn't sure." The effect seemed to live somewhere at the intersection of belief and reality. It wasn't enough for one to be correct, but it also wasn't enough for one to simply believe.

That was when she realized it, the need for secrecy, why it was so important. The more people who knew that you possessed

the Cloak, the more likely it was that someone could make an educated guess and be correct. If you went traipsing about the school like that idiot Potter boy had done, it really wouldn't do you much good because even Festivus Weasley could figure out your secret. But if no one knew you were there, and no one knew you were coming, you could stay hidden, perhaps, forever.

ALDERNEY

JUNE 12, 1334, C.E.

Cadmus was getting ready to retire for the night. He had eaten more than his fill of wild game and drank more than his fair share of wine. It was time to sleep. Or at least, it would have been, had he not sensed something awry. He briefly considered drawing the Wand but decided it wasn't worth it. The overwhelming majority of threats could be dealt with without resorting to that. And besides, it simply wasn't worth the risk. Although the definition of "defeat" was remarkably fickle, if he did not use the Wand, then he would not have to risk losing it.

Instead, he shuffled awkwardly over to his study, which contained an entire wall of Dark Detectors of various shapes and sizes and mechanisms.

They were all motionless.

Odd. His intuition was rarely wrong, but then again, the Dark Detectors were rarely wrong either. He designed them himself, after all. He opened up a glass case and removed the Eye of Vance, and peered through it.

Nothing.

Any foggiess brought about by the drink was counteracted

by the adrenaline that was coursing through Cadmus. It seemed like a false alarm, but he could never be too cautious. He put off his plans of going to bed, and instead, sat in his chair in his study, and began to read to pass the time, making sure to keep one eye on the Dark Detectors.

Another hour or so passed, and he could feel himself begin to doze off. The feeling of apprehension had passed, and so perhaps it was now safe. He stood up, stretching, and his considerable girth began to weigh on his joints. He closed his book, walked towards the exit of his study, and that's when he heard the noise.

The front door slammed open, and in through walked... no, not walked... floated a familiar figure, translucent, wavering, grave. Cadmus felt sick to his stomach.

The spirit of Ignotus Peverell néé Hand beckoned to him, and spoke. "SHE IS HERE. THE ONE WHO WILL TEAR APART THE VERY STARS IN HEAVEN. SHE IS HERE. SHE IS THE END OF THE WORLD."

In one swift movement, Cadmus withdrew the Elder Wand, the Deathstick, the Wand of Destiny, and then all was darkness.

CHAPTER TWENTY

A MILLION SAME

ALDERNEY

JUNE 13, 1334, C.E.

Nell cackled, despite herself. Was it really this easy? It was, wasn't it? All it took was a bit of theater, a cheap trick to smoke that fat oaf out of his hiding spot. Well, not that cheap. It had taken the assistance of a pair of ridiculously powerful pair of artifacts, but still. It was amusing: the Elder Wand was, in terms of raw power, the most powerful of the Hallows. But offense can only take you so far. How can you kill a ghost? How can you spot what remains unseen?

The church was laden with counter-jinxes and dark detectors. Had she cast any sort of magic within their radius of effect, it would have immediately revealed her location along with removing a large majority of the protection provided by the Cloak. But she didn't need magic: she had a thick, leather sap filled with lead which would do the trick just fine. And it did, quite handily. A sharp crack to the base of the skull dropped "Hugues de Payens", along with his defenses, in an instant. The Elder Wand clattered to the floor, and sparing no time for dramatics, she quickly scooped it up and Apparated away.

...Ignotus was sad. She was young, too young to understand the mantle that had been thrust upon her. He saw the unbroken chain of causality that stretched from eternity into eternity, illuminating the path that she must follow. He saw her, awash with sadness, grief, and the weight of the world. He saw the sadness, clarified into white hot anger. He saw her slashing, thrusting angrily, violently against a foe much older than herself, much more powerful than herself. He saw her dismantling defenses, only to have those defenses rebuilt. He saw her gain no purchase-

MINUTES EARLIER

Cadmus cackled, despite himself. Was it really this easy? It was, wasn't it? He was still relatively young by the standard of functionally immortal wizards and witches, but he was startled by how reliably people tended to play to expectations. And this girl, this child had done so marvelously. Cadmus had long known that he needed to pass it down to a new owner, and he had already done so with the Cloak and the Stone. But the Wand could not be gifted, it had to be earned. And who more worthy to possess it than the next Master of Death?

After all, only one who had claimed the Cloak and understood its properties could pass through his wards, unaffected. And only someone who had claimed the Stone and understood its properties would be capable of sending the proper message via the proper messenger. Ignotus had laid down in the Keep of Mysteries his contribution to the Great Prophecy; he spoke of the Path of the

Scorpion and the Archer, the road that the two-faced God must walk. And now Ignotus existed only in that place beyond Time, a place where all prophecy was true.

The Master of Death had sought him out, and he had deemed her worthy.

...Ignotus watched the young woman's duel with the witch in the green dress with curiosity. It was a strange thing. Curses fell useless against the witch's shields, which barely glowed a gentle silver as they absorbed one curse after another. And the ancient witch's attacks found no purchase, for the Elder Wand moved of its own accord, assisting its true owner, obliterating magics as if they were a child's whisper.

MINUTES EARLIER

Ever since a young age, Nell had exhibited quite a knack for recognizing just how good was “good enough.” Like most disciplines, you could learn much of what any given magical subject had to offer in a very short period of time if you only directed your studies appropriately and actually applied yourself. Most people did not, and so Nell was able to quickly outpace “most people” at just about anything.

After her first year or two at Hogwarts, when she had risen meteorically through the academic ranks, she had simply thought that everyone around her was stupid. And indeed, if you equated intelligence with winning, then most people certainly were. But that was a rather antisocial attitude, one that tripped up many of

her Ravenclaw classmates. No, it wasn't that people were inherently stupid or irrational, it was just that their potential was yet to be tapped.

She had thought that she should become a teacher, but she considered the fate of Elijah Solomon, the old professor at Hogwarts who taught the N.E.W.T.-level class, "Existential Threats". It was a class that attracted little interest these days, for the world was in its prime. Most of the students were those who already followed his teachings: he had dedicated much of his life to spreading the gospel of Rationality.

He was a modern-day Prometheus, and what was his reward? His peers left him to drown in an ocean of derision. A sneer, it seemed, was equally as damning as a well-reasoned argument. The world, it seemed, did not wish to stand tall, for when you do, that is when you are most visible, most vulnerable.

Nell knew a lost cause when she saw one and determined that teaching was simply not for her. Instead, she would lead by example and simply serve as a living role model. To reach that point, she simply got as good as she could get at as many disciplines as possible. Once she reached the point of diminishing returns, she would move on to a new subject.

Although initially, she was merely a jack of all trades and a master of none, as time went on she was able to weave her skills and knowledge in with one another, producing unconventional yet highly effective solutions to problems that a more singularly focused expert would never consider.

Part of what made this process so easy was that, although magic was highly opaque, it was also highly functional and robust. One could spend the better part of a decade researching and examining the True Cloak of Invisibility, determining how it was created, how each material and fiber lay with relation to the other, and

so on and so forth.

Or, she could spend the lesser part of an afternoon messing around with her best friend and figure out 90

It was with that in mind that she set about trying to determine the properties of the Spirit Stone. She had made it a point, when doing research of this nature, to attempt the most hopelessly optimistic outcome first, just in case it worked. For example, if the Spirit Stone could truly call forth a sufficiently high fidelity reproduction of any person who had ever died, ever... Well, that would basically make her a God, and today would be Judgment Day.

Although things were sometimes that easy, this time, it wasn't. It seemed that she needed to precisely identify who she was attempting to call forth. So she tried several iterations of summoning, attempting to determine precisely where the outer boundary began. But she knew in the back of her mind that she was simply stalling the painful but necessary test that she would have to perform at some point.

Rather than flinch away from it, she embraced the pain, and rolled the Spirit Stone over in her hand thrice, summoning forth the spirit of young Elizabeth du Marais.

Even though she was prepared for it, she still felt it as a blow in her gut, a visceral, heart-rending pain as the perfect, unbroken spirit of her little Babette coalesced from the ether and looked her.

"Nell?" She was disoriented and rubbed her eyes.

Nell had told herself that she wouldn't cry, which was stupid, because how could she not? Her vision was already blurry. "Babette. Babette, love, it's me."

"Nell? Where are we? What happened?" She ran towards Nell and tried to hug her, but she passed through Nell's body and was

able to hold nothing. Elizabeth's eyes widened. "Oh, no. No, no. No, no, no, no, no..."

"Babette..."

"No, no. NO, NO, NO! Nell, no! Am I dead? I don't want to her dead!" Her voice grew panicked, frantic. "Where are mama and papa? I want to see them. Please, Nell, help me! Please don't let me be dead!"

Nell couldn't respond. The tears had choked her words and clouded her vision and her mind.

"Help me, please. Please! I don't want to be gone. Take me back. Bring me back. Help me, please, please, please, please!"

Nell didn't know what she expected. Of course it would be this hard. She needed to take back control. She needed her protection against the sadness of this broken world. She surrendered her mind to all the things that made her angry, that made her rage, that made her hate. She thought about the world's cavalier acceptance of death, about the indifference that humanity showed to this wholesale tragedy, how mankind was so terrified that they would rather embrace death as a friend than fight it until the bitter end.

Waves of hot anger rushed over her, dulling her senses, forcing out all other emotions. The world crystallized in front of her, and she saw her delicate, pure, perfect sister falling victim to the same fear, the same cowardice.

"BABETTE. LISTEN TO ME!" She shouted. Babette stopped crying. She was on the ground now, curled up, still sniffing, but at least she was silent. Nell continued. "I am going to save you. I'm going to save you and Mama and Papa and everyone. But I need you to help me. I need you to be brave. Can you do that for me? Can you be brave?"

Babette nodded with a weak snuffle.

"Good. I need to know the last thing you remember."

She thought for a moment. “We were playing. Playing near the river, the one that Mama had warned us about. I fell in...”

“Yes, but how? I was climbing our tree and didn’t see you, or hear you fall in. What were you doing when you fell in? What happened?”

Babette’s spirit screwed up her face in thought. “I... I don’t remember. I think I was dipping my toes in the water... But I’m not sure. Why don’t I remember? Nell, what’s happen—”

Babette was starting to lose it again. “Hush, it’s okay. That’s normal,” Nell lied. She thought quickly, she needed something to verify her hypothesis, something to confirm her fear. After a moment, she had it. “Okay. Your diary, do you remember that?”

“Mm hmm.”

“You told me that you had given it a name, but that name was a secret. You said it was a silly name, and that one day you’d tell me and I’d laugh, but that it was your secret for now. Do you remember that?”

“Yes...”

“What was the name?”

“Oh! It—” Babette’s eyes widened. “I... I can’t remember. It’s right there, on the tip of my tongue but...”

“Never mind that. Think of the last thing you and I were apart. When I was at Hogwarts. Tell me something, anything you remember, when it was just you and Mama and Papa.”

“I can’t. Nell, I can’t. I don’t remember any of it.”

Nell sighed. This was confirmation enough. She didn’t know how much more she could take. She immediately dismissed Babette’s spirit. It wasn’t her, not really, so she didn’t want to inflict the pain of a long goodbye upon herself.

Okay, so, at face value, the Stone produces a Ghost. Whatever it called forth was shaped by the owner’s memories, expectations,

and thoughts. But somehow, it was linked to the world of Life and Death, for it would only call forth the spirit of someone who was truly dead. She tried to call forth the spirit of fictional characters, or those she knew for a fact were alive, and nothing came.

That alone represented a treasure trove of information. She could verify the historicity of any person from history, or determine the precise moment of death of any live person. But that aside, the stone clearly drew from a source of information outside of Nell's own mind. If the Stone fit the pattern, as so many magical things did, there was a fighting chance that the knowledge was somehow linked to the previous owners of the stone. Unfortunately, she didn't know much of the Gaunt family tree, so she decided to go straight to the top and try to summon the spirit of Cadmus Peverell.

Huh. Nothing.

That was strange, though not altogether shocking, that the Peverell Brothers were simply a myth. Even though the legend was still fairly young, stories had a way of spreading out of control over the span of a few generations. Unless...

She focused her mind on the name of Antioch Peverell, and called him forth from the abyss.

"That's my brother's ring," the spirit spoke, immediately.

Nell was cautious. There were a lot of implications here. "Yes, yes it is."

"Taken, or given?"

"Given."

He grunted. "Yet you are no blood of mine."

"No, I am not. It was loaned to be by the descendent of Celia Peverell Gaunt, by way of her cousin, from the Ollivander-Nott family."

At this, Antioch's ghostly expression softened. When he spoke,

it was almost wistful. "Little Celia. She was barely a few months old when I had passed."

"Oh? Would you like to see her? I can call her forth..."

"No need, I just did."

"You- ah." Nell faltered. "Yes, you're dead. Space and time, I'm guessing they don't mean much to you."

"No, they don't."

"Well, as long as you're here, do you mind telling me how you died? Legend has it that you slew a wizard with whom you once quarreled, and that night your throat was slit by someone who sought to claim the wand for themselves?"

Antioch considered this and smiled grimly. "Yes, I suppose that is true."

"Who was it? Who now possesses the Elder Wand?"

"I'll tell you no more than I already have, and if you knew what was best, you would ask no more, either."

She ignored the veiled threat. "Tell me about your brother, then. Cadmus."

At this, Antioch jerked reflexively, but immediately composed himself. "What of him?"

"He was real?"

"Of course he was real. What are you playing at?"

"He's alive." Silence. Long silence. Both their minds were racing. Antioch's lack of a response was damning, and Nell connected the dots, coming to a realization that she probably should have come to long before. She began to speak, slowly. "Your family... You came from Alderney, didn't you? Small place. It's where I'm from, you know. You know, I think I might just take a little trip home. Visit the sites, you know? You enjoy your rest, now."

With a flick of her hand, the white mist that made up Antioch's spirit dissipated immediately, as did the form of Nell, who had

Apparated to away to her native home of Alderney, to confront Cadmus Peverell.

...Ignotus watched, trying to remain impartial as the battle raged on beyond the veil. They were both glorious in their puissance and beauty; one a vision of natural beauty, keen intelligence, an almost childlike innocence. The other was an earthly Goddess. He saw how the girl-child closed the distance, and they fought. Spells fell on shields. Spells fell on wand-wards. The duel was a storm without wind.

MINUTES LATER

The power that was coursing through her was palpable and begged for release. The Wand had glowed reluctantly and dimly in reluctant recognition of its new master. She had been taught that wands had personalities, and if this was the case, she had a distinct impression that this particular wand would be rolling its eyes and sighing dramatically, as if to say, “You? I’m stuck with you?”

Only for a little bit. I have a job to do. After I’m done, I won’t need you anymore, and you’ll be free to seek out a new, more bloodthirsty master.

“Fair enough. Then you should Apparate, that would be the fastest way to get there.”

What, like, to the front door? You can’t Apparate into Hogwarts.

“Don’t be stupid. Use the Cloak. Apparate right into her

room.”

Umm... Are you sure that the Hogwarts’ wards won’t–

“One of us is a 16-year old witch, and another is the intelligent, anthropomorphic representation of a centuries-old object of immeasurable power. Of course I’m right.”

Yeah, but she’ll be waiting for me.

“Yes, I know that. You may as well have written a letter telling her when, where, and how you’d be going after her.”

So how do I get the drop on her?

“She won’t be expecting you to just appear right in front of her. Once you do, just leave the rest to me.”

I don’t want to kill her, you know that, right? Her powers, her information, they’re no good to me, dead.

“Yes, I know that, idiot girl. I’m a projected figment of your imagination, how would I not?”

I thought you were an intelligent, anthropomorphic representation of a centuries-old object of immeasurable power.

“Look, I... You know what? Times up. Let’s do this.” The Elder Wand screamed into action, dragging her almost unwillingly through time and space, directly into the office of Baba Yaga.

The quality of the air changed slightly. Nothing altogether noticeable, but when you were this old, there was just something about the underlying pattern of the universe that seemed different when a specific volume of air is replaced by an equal quantity of an invisible, unseen intruder.

Perenelle.

The intruder was not just invisible, but truly hidden. There were only one or two extant objects of power in the Wizarding

world capable of doing this, one of which was conveniently located here at Hogwarts. It didn't take much of a leap of faith to deduce the identity of the intruder.

Baba Yaga knew that Perenelle would not dare attempt an outright attack unless she was protected, and unless she had a weapon. If she possessed one Hallow, it was not unreasonable to expect that she now possessed the others. The only unknown was how she planned to handle the protection of the Cup of Dawn. Would she try to bait out an attack so as to force Baba Yaga to forsake its protection? Or would Perenelle simply go on the offensive, abandoning her own protection?

The latter was simply suicide, and because the two courses of action were mutually exclusive, it was simply more prudent to wait than to strike first. Baba Yaga's magic radiated outward, passing unperturbed, for the most part, through Perenelle. However, because Baba Yaga had the well-founded suspicion that she was somewhere in this room, a small fraction of her magic returned to her with useful information.

With that information, the well-founded suspicion became an educated guess, which in turn increased the power of her magic, which in turn confirmed that educated guess, and within moments, she could sense precisely where Perenelle was hiding, invisible.

It was right behind her.

An invisible hand reached out. Baba Yaga had an eternity to practice the concealment of her emotions, her thoughts, her suspicions, and to the outside world, it appeared that she was doing nothing more than reading the notes on her desk. But she was ready.

somebody shouts a word

In an instant, she felt a hand on her shoulder and heard the first breaths of a syllable. Faster than what should have been

possible, she slapped the hand away from her shoulder, and with a concussive burst of magic, sent Perenelle flying across the room.

New calculations were made, scenarios simulated, probabilities weighed. This child was seeking to incapacitate, to plunder her mind for secrets, rather than to kill. Nell had charged, wand raised, already casting. Baba Yaga sneered, raising her own hands, and lighting surged between them.

The Elder Wand took it from the air.

The song of the Wand was a hymn of worship in reverent supplication to the holy purity of battle, purging the wrongs from the world and extracting the rights by force, if necessary. It led her to that one singular goal: close the distance.

The battle was a storm without wind. Nell would have been dismantled in an instant, if not for the protection of the Elder Wand, augmented by the knowledge provided by the Spirit Stone. An important lesson of Battle Magic was that even the greatest artifact can be defeated by a counter-artifact that is lesser, but specialized. And indeed, that was the purpose of the Deathly Hallows, specialized tools designed to neutralize, overpower, and overcome the anchors of the Old Gods, those last remaining representatives of Death that needed to be cleansed from this world in order for it to be saved.

Merlin had known when he led the Peverell brothers down this path, that one day even he would fall to this weapon, and he was prepared for that. He would be the last, of course, but he too was made of Magic. He was Magic, and Magic was him. The Line must be broken eventually.

But for the time being, those tools were being turned against Maximillian Koschey, the last remaining Old God that still possessed any capacity for meddling.

Adnan Nejem, Nog-Nandh of the Flame, had willing surren-

dered in his grief, and now endured as the binding essence of Tír inna n-Óc. When the time was right, that place would be unbound. And Dexter Charles, Shiggoth of the Spire, the Gate that Knows the Gate, he was an impotent, sleeping God who was omniscient yet impotent. His only remaining power was derived from his mortal servants, who were crippled by the Interdict. Soon enough, in a few centuries time, he would be gone for good.

The Battle of Olympus had taken care of most of the rest. Natalie Kyros and Constantine Atreides, the star-crossed lovers and lab partners, had willingly banished themselves, leaving the tools of their craft for the ants to play with. And Janus Tucker, Christopher Chang, and Kayla Rahl had eliminated each other in a stand-off, sacrificing portions of their anchors. The Cup of Midnight was lost, leaving only the Cup of Dawn. The Mirror of Volition had shattered, leaving only its reflection. And the past and the future were lost, leaving only the present Box of Orden. These artifacts had been scattered, but conveniently now were consolidated within the confines of Albion.

That left only Maximillian Koschey, Ma'krt of the Rock, Koschei the Deathless, Baba Yaga, and a thousand other names. With his Stone of the Endless Song, his Emerald Heart, he could arbitrarily change the form and substance of anything within its sight. But even that ultimate power was disrupted by the combined effects of the Deathly Hallows, when wielded by a Master of Death.

And so Baba Yaga was forced to fight Perenelle du Marais using mere mundane Magic; not the deeper, true magic of Atlantis, but the absurd, arbitrary, nonsensical Magic of Merlin's Line. She was a master swordsman forced into a knife-fight. The same principles applied, but much of her superlative experience was inapplicable.

But she would not be overcome. Spells fell on shields. Spells

fell on wand-wards. But Nell could gain no traction against the witch in the green dress, who evinced neither strain nor dismay.

“Foolish monkey,” said the witch, her words punctuated by the wordless thrusts of her hand which sent green light and burning flame and sharp crystal cascading into the Goddess’ Wand-borne defenses. “Didn’t you know there was only ever one outcome, here?”

“Foolish monkey,” said the witch, her words punctuated by the wordless thrusts of her hand which sent green light and burning flame and sharp crystal cascading into Nell’s wand-borne defenses. “Didn’t you know there was only ever one outcome, here?”

“I did,” said the Goddess, panting. “And so now would be good, gentlemen.”

She lashed out at the witch with every ounce of belief and faith and grief, and the enemy’s wand glowed bright under duress. The Goddess’ other hand landed like a titan’s hammer immediately afterwards, a crushing blow dealt with a troll’s strength.

At the same instant, there were two sharp cracks, almost simultaneous. Twin gunshots, fired from above.

The first rifle shattered the witch’s shield. The second passed through her stomach.

Perenelle du Marais screamed, and it was loud, at it was long.

“I did,” said Perenelle, panting. “And so now would be good, M’lady.”

And without another word, Nell dropped her defenses. The crystals lashed across her face, spraying droplets of blood onto the floor, and in that instant, Baba Yaga understood Perenelle du Marais’ gambit and understood that she had lost.

It was time. After an interminable moment, the ancient witch in the green dress, gutshot and dying, succumbed to her wounds. Her spirit, previously so fuzzy and indistinct on the other side of the veil, was now crisp, sharp and clear. She shook off her disorientation.

“Is it time?” she asked Ignotus.

“Yes, I think so.”

Together, they watched another scene, this time, of a seventeen year-old Perenelle, fiddling awkwardly with the Spirit Stone, outside the abode of Cadmus Peverell. They stared intently as the hole in the world began to open, and waited as she reached into this Timeless place, under the protection of Ignotus’ cloak. She was blind to her future-ghost. She was blind to everything that the future held for her. They were Hidden by something much more powerful, much more fundamental than a mere trinket.

She called to Ignotus, and he was compelled to follow, carrying with him the eternal words of prophecy.

The flames in the Goblet of Fire roared, overtaking the room. In a blinding instant, Nell had charged forward, and Baba Yaga, stripped of even her mundane magical defenses, could do nothing

CHAPTER 20

as Nell reached out, touched her shoulder, and shouted a word.

Egeustimentis

The world shuddered.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

THE TRAGEDY OF LIGHT

The curtain opens on a large, wizard-sized chessboard. The pieces are represented by actors, all of whom are sitting down except for THE ROOK who is at the back of the board. After a time, he moves across the board to the front of the stage.

THE ROOK:

O blindness of the great. They go their way like gods. Great over bent backs. Sure of hired fists. Trusting in the power Which has lasted so long.

ALL:

BUT LONG IS NOT FOREVER. O CHANGE FROM AGE TO AGE! THOU HOPE OF THE PEOPLE.

Enter LIGHT AUGURREY. He is wearing a dark CLOAK, and carrying a STONE in his right hand, and a WAND in his left hand.

THE ROOK:

Up, great sir, deign to walk upright. From your place the eyes of many foes follow you. And now, you don't need an architect. A carpenter will do. You won't be moving into a new palace But into a little hole in the ground. Look around you once more, blind man! Does all you have please you? Between the Easter Mass and the Easter meal You are walking to a place whence no one returns.

ALL:

WHEN THE HOUSE OF A GREAT ONE COLLAPSES
MANY LITTLE ONES ARE SLAIN THOSE WHO HAD NO
SHARE IN THE GOOD FORTUNES OF THE MIGHTY
OFTEN HAVE A SHARE IN THEIR MISFORTUNES.

LIGHT: The plunging wagon drags the sweating oxen down
with it...

ALL: INTO THE ABYSS.

“The Tragedy of Light”, by S. Leigh, as staged in the 1989
London production.

JUNE 13, 1334, C.E.

HOGWARTS

“*Egeustimentis.*” Nell looked around the hall of mirrors. Every surface was reflective, every move she made echoed perfectly through eternity.

Except for one.

Somewhere in the distance, there was one, one who didn’t mimic her moves, who had a life of her own. It traveled through the reflections, one mirror at a time until it reached her, and began to speak.

“Seriously? Did you seriously think that was going to work?”

From the moment the incantation was spoken, she had an inclination that something was wrong, the the plan went awry. Wherever she was now, she was not inside the mind of a millennia-old wizard/witch, and she was definitely not in control. In fact, she felt decidedly trapped.

She had lost.

She had lost. She knew the risk: her likelihood of success was miniscule. But when weighed against the value had she succeeded, it would have been the most tremendously immoral thing she could have done to simply let the opportunity slip. Even if it was a one in a thousandth, even one in a million chance, there were far more people than that in the world, and that was just at this point in time, not to mention the future. She couldn't fathom a number high enough to make the risk not worth it.

She had a chance to end Death forever, she took it, and she failed.

Her reflection interrupted her thoughts, "Did you really think that the Cup of Dawn, a relic plundered from Atlantis itself, would operate on such a baroque interpretation of its instructions? Even if you were right, even if you had succeeded, what was your plan? I can see quite plainly that you have never used the Lethe Touch in any serious capacity before.

Nell opened her mouth to speak, but it was unnecessary. Her mind was laid bare, vivisected.

"That's an admirable sentiment. But so flawed, so naive. Still. I can see why he wants you."

"Who?" Although she had lost, the game was clearly not over. Her only choice was to respond and react, and hopefully provide her opponent what she was looking for.

"You wanted to get the attention of God. Well, you succeeded. And in a way, you will have won our little game. You will have won on my terms, and your victory will serve my ends, but you will win nonetheless."

It may as well have been a monologue. There was nothing Nell could contribute to this conversation. But even still, she had the sense that the right thing to do was to simply shut up and and serve as the audience to whatever was happening now, to this

information dump.

“You are one of the chosen ones, one of the Cruxes of the world, the world upon whose choices fate hangs in the balance. They have been shepherding mankind since the beginning of time, using people like me as pawns, who in turn use people like you. I was sent here to do two things: to collect you, and to die. But I was given the freedom to do so on my own terms, as long as it coincided with his.

“He has his plan for the world, and for that plan to work, I need to be gone.”

Who is ‘He’? What is his plan? Why does he want me? So many questions. Too many questions.

“Even if I had a year to sit down and explain things to you, I doubt it would make sense. There’s just too many entangled timelines, too many plots, too much going on for any one person to really grasp it. Sometimes, I question whether even he truly grasps the enormity of what he is attempting.

“Nonetheless, he is the father of this world. He created it from Nothing because our world was dying, and I strongly suspect it was dying because of his actions. But in creating this world, he not only bound our world, but every world.

“Yes, the Fall of Atlantis. Much like you, he thought that he could end Death forever. Much like your choice, the risk was great. I doubt you could fathom a number high enough to quantify the risk. He saw the chance, and he took it. You gambled with your own life, which some may say is noble. He, on the other hand, gambled with the life of humanity. He gambled with the multiverse.

“None of that, of course, has any practical meaning to you in the here and now. You are a creature of this world. You’re bound to live by the rules of this world. Your thrashing, organic

sack of flesh is bound by the laws of time and space. Your means of experiencing the world around you are inherently tied to a single point of continuity. These higher level concepts are largely irrelevant to you.

“You see these reflections? They are you. They are you, gone down different paths. None of them made any choices that you would not have made yourself. They are you, and yet, for all intents and purposes, from your perspective they are different people.”

The reflection snapped her fingers, and a cacophony ensued. Each reflection was now living its own life, making its own way through the world. Each reflection acted like Nell, said things Nell would say, doing things Nell would do. They were her, without a doubt. And yet, they were not. She was the only one.

“Do you see?”

She snapped her fingers again, and the action quickened. Decades passed in the span of a few seconds. Nell watched herself grow old and gray a thousand different ways, watched herself die a thousand different ways. She saw blackness, so much blackness, so much Void, and yet, off in the distance, like the twinkling pinpricks of light against the night sky, she saw life.

She exerted her Will, and that life was now reflected across from her. It didn’t look much different, even though centuries had obviously passed. She looked a little bit older... No, not older. More mature.

That reflection turned to her and spoke. “As you have seen, preventing Death is not a particularly difficult problem. There are enough of us ‘immortals’ to serve as living proof of that. Reversing Death is even possible to a limited extent, provided one has taken proper precautions beforehand. You are one of the lucky ones. You did not have to look too far to find the shadow of yourself

who had successfully avoided the clutches of Death.

“Lights out.”

The reflection disappeared, and it was darkness. There could have been an entire universe in front of her, but she would have been blind to it. She knew, however, that there was light somewhere. She searched through the blackness, finding nothing. It was there; it was just hidden. So there was nothing else to do besides keep searching.

“How long would you be willing to keep searching in order to find that light? How long would you continue to look? For that matter, how would you even find it in the first place? How far does the Void extend? If you believe, as many do, that the Void is infinite, then you could spend an eternity searching, and having nothing to show for it. Incidentally, the ancients called this ‘Information-Theoretic Death’.

“Now, on the other hand...” The lights returned, and the reflection was holding one of the mirrors, grasping a corner delicately with each hand. Gently, she bent the mirror so that it curved, and bent it further and further until the two corners touched each other. She repeated the same process with the other pair of corners, then smoothed the surface into a sphere. “Imagine, instead of extending on forever, it looked more like this,” she continued as she released the sphere.

It gently floated towards Nell, who peered at it curiously, and waited for the reflection to continue.

“Now, I would like to see if you are worthy of the role you are about to accept. Tell me, what are the consequences?”

Nell was silent for some time, considering the question. “You could... It’s finite. So long as you were determined enough, as long as you spent enough time, you could find the light. Not just yours, but everyone’s. No one... no one would stay dead.”

The reflection smiled. "Good, good."

Nell, however, was frowning. "But, that's not all."

Still smiling, the reflection urged, "Go on."

She gestured to a point on the sphere, and a pinprick of light revealed itself. "That's me." She gestured to another point, which lit up as well. "That's you." She continued, "And that's Helena and that's Babette, and that's mum, that's dad."

More names, more pinpricks. "And this... this is everyone." The pinpricks were so numerous that they blurred together, covering the sphere in a dim glow. "That's today."

The sphere glowed brighter, fractionally. "That's tomorrow."

The sphere glowed significantly brighter. "That's a century from now."

She shielded her eyes as the sphere began to glow an intense, blinding white. Before long, the light was as overwhelming as the darkness was a few moments before. There could have been an entire universe in front of her, but she would have been blind to it.

"And that's it. It's finite, you said so yourself. It has an end, and after that end is Death. True, permanent Death."

"Yes, indeed. This man who you seek, he created a world where countless millions, countless millions of millions, would be created, and subjected to that true, permanent Death. Every day, hundreds of thousands of tragedies are born. Weak, baseline humans destined to die after less than a century, and once this tiny little sphere runs down, they will stay dead forever.

"The fate of all worlds are now bound to this one. Neither can live while the other survives. That is the crime he is trying to repent for, that is the wrong he is trying to right."

Nell was nodding. "So he is trying to save the world, all worlds, from Death. Why would I say 'No' to that?"

“Twenty minutes ago, you were prepared to do so. Had you succeeded in pilfering the secrets you sought from my mind, you would have learned one of the paths to immortality, and with my power you would have embarked on a grand quest to save the world. You would find, however, that a shadowy villain lurked in the background, stymying you at every turn, preventing you from achieving your ends. That villain would whisper into the ears of fools, speaking of the necessity of death, of the circle of life, telling people that to oppose death is a craven, sick urge. You would have devoted your life to stopping this destroyer.

“But it’s more than that. I do realize that you have the propensity to consider yourself the smartest person in the room, despite your protestations. I don’t just mean outwardly, I mean the comforting lies you tell yourself.

“When it came down to it, in your heart of hearts, you believed yourself more clever than an Ancient with thousands of times your age and experience.” Nell tried to do some quick mental math, but was interrupted. “52,000 years, give or take. Think about that.

“You believed that you were more clever than I. And you saw to what end that brought you. Now, tell me, what do you make of the fact that you, a girl of a mere sixteen years, could see the folly of his plan? I might add that I can say with certainty that he is more clever than I.”

Nell paced around restlessly while she spoke. “It wasn’t a miscalculation or a mistake. If it were possible to miscalculate, I wouldn’t take that kind of gamble. He wouldn’t take that kind of gamble. The risk would be too great. To gamble with your own life, as you said, is noble. But to risk the lives and future of all? No. He wouldn’t do that.”

She paused.

“No, wait.”

Silence.

“Yes, I would. He would. He knew there was a risk, and he probably would have taken as many precautions as necessary to minimize the risk, but... But you said it yourself. He’s more clever than you, and you’re more clever than I am. I am supremely overconfident in my own abilities, in proportion to my cleverness.

“From what I’ve seen, you too are supremely overconfident in your abilities, in proportion to your own cleverness. Which means...” she spoke more slowly now. “He thought... He thought he’d be clever enough. He thought that if disaster did strike, he’d be clever enough to solve the problem.”

The reflection nodded, grimly. “Indeed. And that is why he seeks the counsel of others. He has learned what it means to lose, and he does not wish to repeat that mistake. That is why he needs you.”

Nell returned the grim nod, “I understand. And I am still willing.”

“Good. Now the only thing left to discuss is how we shall manage your ascendance. There is one assumption you made that was accurate, and that is that the vast majority of your classmates are blithering fools, and as such, will accept whatever titillating, ridiculous story we throw their way.

Nell grinned at this. “Yes. One of my fallback plans was to convince Hogwarts that we had slept together.”

“Yes, I’m quite aware. In fact, I have made arrangements such that your diary will, by this point, already be in the hands of Headmaster Gaggilwe. He will, no doubt, be making his own arrangements to have me removed from my post as Battle Magic professor. Finding that I have unceremoniously fled in the dead of night, will all but confirm the suspicion.”

“Fled?”

"That is what you will make it look like, after you have killed me," the reflection spoke pleasantly and matter-of-factly, as if discussing the yield on this season's batch of puffskeins. "He will find that I have fled, and that you are in my chambers in a... shall we say... compromising position."

"But that won't be enough, will it?"

"No, of course not."

"People love a good conspiracy theory, so we'll give them one. A lie wrapped in the truth: I did, in fact, kill you and steal the object of your power. When I fail to return to Hogwarts and instead resurface as a nigh-immortal Goddess, this story will satisfy those who think one level above everyone else."

"And what of those who think one level above that?"

"They'll either join us, or they'll die."

The reflection nodded, grimly. It was time to begin.

LIGHT laughs uncontrollably. He is caught, defeated.

LIGHT: Yes, I am Keira. But, Keira is bigger than me. She is what keeps order in the rotten, broken world. You speak of wars? What wars? Crime? Thugs flinch at the very idea of committing a crime for fear of Keira's righteous retribution. I know that killing people is wrong, I'm not a monster. Do you think I wanted this? But there's no other way to fix this world, other than to purge it. No one else wants to do it, no one else CAN do it. If you kill me, you might save the world as it stands, but you sacrifice the future. Kill me, and the world of Good dies with me.

NEAL: No. You are nothing more than a murderer, a murderer who possesses the Deathly Hallows, the most sophisticated weapon of Death our world can imagine. You are not Keira; you

are simply a killer, a sad, pathetic murderer.

LIGHT laughs again. He is thinking.

LIGHT: Say, Neal. Here's some food for thought. The Hal-
lows that Isaac had recovered, how do you know those are the real
ones? There's only one way to find out, you know. You'll have to
kill me with them. Only then can you be sure if they're real...

LIGHT makes a quick gesture with his hands, and spins
around to face the AURORS.

LIGHT: OR FAKE!

ISAAC: He's hidden a piece of the Wand!

The AURORS whip out their wands, but MONICA is the
first to draw hers. She fires a curse at LIGHT's hand, blasting him
off his feet. He pulls himself up, clutching his ruined hand.

LIGHT: Monica, you idiot! You stupid bitch, what are you
doing, what the hell do you think you're doing?

MONICA: You! It was you! What was it all for? Your father...
You led him to his death, and for what? What did he even die for?

LIGHT: He was a fool! They all were! They cared more about
the system of justice than they cared about justice itself. Can't
you see that? People like him, people like them, they don't care
about the good that I've done, all they can see is that I haven't
followed the rules! Do you really want to leave the world to fools
such as them?

MONICA: Now that he's dead, you call him a fool?

LIGHT: It's not too late. You understand, I know that you
do. You're a good person, you know that what I've done is a good.
We can still build a new world, free from darkness. It's not too
late, Monica, just KILL THE OTHERS!

The command rings with unnatural force. MONICA stands
silent, shaking, not moving otherwise. After a long moment,
LIGHT realizes she will not help him, and his posture relaxes.

The stage lights dim, imperceptibly. He makes another sudden movement.

ISAAC: HE'S USING WANDLESS MAGIC!

Indistinct shouting. They all begin to fire curses, with MONICA leading the charge. She viciously whips her wand back and forth, advancing on him.

MONICA: (wildly) I HAVE TO KILL HIM, HE HAS TO DIE!!

LIGHT collapses. In the commotion, MCNAMEE struggles with ISAAC and grabs his wand. ISAAC twists his arm, forcing the point of the wand into MCNAMEE's stomach. ISAAC pins his arm in place. Slumping his shoulders in defeat, MCNAMEE raises his head, and shouts a word.

MCNAMEE: SECTUMSEMPRA!

Blood pours out in liters. ISAAC and MAURY turn to MCNAMEE and try to start healing him. While the Aurors are distracted, LIGHT stumbles up and awkwardly shambles offstage, clutching his wounds. The stage lights come up, bathing the entire scene in white. Everyone freezes, except for LIGHT, who stumbles up the stairs to the top of the stage balcony.

THE ROOK is standing, waiting for him.

THE ROOK: Well Light, it looks like you've finally lost. Remember how I told you in the beginning, one day I would claim you for my own? You see, that's part of the agreement between an Angel of Death and the one who claims the Hallows.

THE ROOK walks down the stairs to ISAAC, who is still frozen, and removes the CLOAK, the WAND and the STONE.

THE ROOK: It was good while it lasted. We eased each other's boredom for quite some time.

Holding the STONE in one hand, he traces a name in the air with the WAND. The name reads, "LIGHT AUGURREY".

THE ROOK: Goodbye, Light.

“The Tragedy of Light”, by S. Leigh, as staged in the 1989 London production

JUNE 13, 1989, C.E.

LONDON

Draco had been waiting for this question, and he had been long considering his answer. Why did father take him to see this play? Light was a brilliant role model, a perfect example of a Slytherin who used the true power of his cunning. So he wanted Draco to be more like Light. But Light was always thinking one step ahead, anticipating the moves of even his friends and companions...

So Father would want him to think one step ahead.

What would Father say, or do, in response, and how should he respond to that? He had been narrowing his eyes in thought the entire walk from their box seat to the private, exclusive, and wildly expensive restaurant. Think. Think. What would Father do? What would he say? Father was so clever, always so clever.

If he were Father, he would ask to see an example to ensure that the lesson sunk in. It was perfect. Father would want to see an example of Draco thinking one step ahead, and so Draco would oblige and tell Father what he was expecting.

“You wanted to teach me to be as cunning as Light and Lawliet when I grow up. But more than that, you wanted to see the principles in action. So here I am, thinking one step ahead,” Draco spoke with a self-satisfied smile.

“You couldn’t be more wrong.”

Draco’s smile froze.

“Light and Lawliet are dead. Is that what you mean by clever?”

“I, uh...”

“Do not feel ashamed, Draco. It’s an important lesson. When trying to come up with the correct answer, you most likely found yourself asking, ‘What would Father say?’, is that correct?”

“Yes, Father.”

“But instead, you answered the question, ‘What would I do if I were Father?’, is that also correct?”

In response, Draco wrinkled his nose, trying to understand the distinction.

“Take your time, Draco.”

After a few moments, Draco spoke hesitantly, “Yes... And that was doomed to failure because I am not you. If I wanted to be one level above you, I would need to... I’m not sure how to say this. I would need to have all of you inside of me?”

“That is a reasonable enough way to phrase it. To put a finer point on it; you would need to be more clever than myself. Which you are not, nor would I expect you to be. Perhaps one day. What you would do if you were me is not the same as what I would do. Now, imagine if you were to write a play about me. How clever would this false Lucius Malfoy be?”

Draco took a few more moments to consider. “He would only be as clever as myself.”

At this, Lucius smiled. “Correct. And if Mr. Leigh was as clever as he imagined Light and Lawliet, if he had actually known what someone that intelligent would do, he would have found the Deathly Hallows for himself and ruled the world, instead of just writing plays about it.”

“But they aren’t actually real... are they?”

Lucius waved his hand. “They may be, they may not be, it is of no real importance. I have another question for you. What was

Lawliet's biggest mistake?"

"I... Well. I was going to say that he was not as clever as Light, and so he lost. But I understand what you are saying. They are, in fact, equally as clever, which is to say, they are only as clever as the playwright. So his error must have been a tactical one. But..." He paused as he tried to think.

"That's not strictly true. A brilliant author may very well write a character who is deliberately flawed. In fact, without such flaws, in all likelihood there would be no story. Perfect people rarely have reason to quarrel. But, it is quite easy for an author to blame their own lack of cunning on their characters."

Draco was going to respond, but he got the strange sense that Father was not just talking about a play.

"Lawliet's mistake was that although he had cleverly concealed his face, there was no good reason for him to tell Light his name. In fact, there is little reason for him to have interacted directly with Light in the first place, especially if he truly suspected Light of being Keira. Now, Draco, can you tell me what Light's biggest mistake was?"

He tried to follow the same pattern as Lawliet's mistake. "He should have continued to operate in secrecy. He should have simply used the power of the Hallows to kill anyone who stood in his way?"

Lucius smiled. "Close, very close. But his goal was not simply to kill people. He wanted to purify the world of evil. But Light, to his credit, knew that he could not do that simply by killing one criminal at a time. In order to truly rid the world of evil, people would have to police themselves."

Lucius gestured dismissively to a waiter, pointed to an item from the wine list, and the waiter bowed his head in acknowledgement. Lucius continued, and Draco's eyes grew wider and

wider. “A war requires the participation of both sides. Just because someone calls for war against you does not mean you are obligated to reply. In fact, it is most often advantageous not to, for typically people do not launch themselves into battle until they are relatively sure of their chances of victory. ”

The waiter returned, more quickly than he would have if it were any normal patron, carrying a bottle of Tokaji. He poured a small amount into a glass and offered it to Lucius, who instead inclined his head towards Draco.

“Me?”

Lucius nodded. Draco cautiously reached across the table, and took the glass. His hand was shaking slightly. He felt like his father was on the verge of revealing something very important, but he could not fathom what that might be. The topaz liquid reached his lips, and Draco was very determined not to make the face.

“It’s... sweet?” Draco offered. The server’s eyes flashed briefly with terror, and Draco quickly corrected. “But it is supposed to be, I think. I like it.”

Lucius was silent as his own glass was filled. The server poured Draco’s glass quite slowly, constantly looking back to the Lord Malfoy for an indication as to what was enough. After less than a finger’s worth, he inclined his head, and the server hurried away. Silently, Draco and Lucius clinked glasses.

Draco thought that Father had taken a much larger sip than usual.

“Light’s folly was, when the Aurors declared war upon him in the first Act, he rose to the challenge. And that was unnecessary, there was no benefit to doing so. By going so far as to murder some of the Aurors, he galvanized not only the Ministry, but much of the public, against him. Had he simply continued to kill evildoers, the Aurors would have turned against each other. Keira would

have been hailed as a savior rather than an anti-hero.”

“I... I see. That’s brilliant, father.”

“Now, can you think of another example of this, but in real life? A brilliant, cunning individual in possession of great power who sought to reshape the world and purify it of evil? One who was eventually brought down by an over abundance of his own perceived cleverness combined with the inexplicable propensity to wage senseless war against the public rather than to court them?”

The edge in Lucius’ voice was pronounced, and it scared Draco. He knew the correct answer, there was no doubt in his mind. But if that were not the answer Lucius was looking for, it would be a terrible mistake to utter it out loud. Was this Father testing him, seeing if he learned the lesson? Was this the challenge? Even if it was not deliberate, Draco stood nothing to gain by saying what he truly thought, so instead he invented a plausible lie.

“Lord Grindelwald? He sought to bring the Muggles under our heel for the greater good, but in doing so he tore through Europe, making enemies as he went?”

Lucius paused, and then a wicked smile graced his lips. “I see you’ve learned the lesson well, Draco. But we both know that you’re wrong. I will spare you the deliberation of whether you should say it or not, and simply do it for you. Tom Riddle.”

Despite himself, Draco gasped at hearing the name, the crude, vulgar, Muggle-given name of the Dark Lord.

“He was indeed brilliant, and he was indeed cunning, and he was indeed powerful beyond measure. He could have given us the world we sought. A world where Magic no longer fades, a future where our wands will not break in our hands, where the line of Merlin never ends, the blood of Atlantis never fails. He could have saved us all.”

Lucius downed the rest of the wine, and continued. “But

instead, he took it upon himself to wage war against the first foe he considered worthy. Him. Dumbledore. Before the Dark Lord began attacking Wizarding families, the public secretly admired the Death Eaters. Those who didn't admire us were scared. They were scared, and more importantly, they were policing themselves, for fear of our righteous retribution.

"Dumbledore spoke out against us, and he put together his Order of the Phoenix, this is true. But their voices would have been drowned by the cheers for the Death Eaters if the Dark Lord had simply ignored them!" Draco noticed from the corner of his eye that Father's knuckles were white around his cane. "The Order would have been the villains! They would have been the ones fighting to preserve a system that allows evil to flourish. They would have been the enemies of progress. The Ministry would have stopped them, and if the Ministry didn't, then the public would have overthrown the Ministry.

"But that was not to be. Instead, many good people died. Many good people were corrupted. Many good people were turned away by our perceived brutality."

Draco closed his eyes. The meaning was unmistakable. Mother. Aunt Bella. Aunt Andromeda.

"Think about that, Draco, before you decide to take an enemy for yourself. And more importantly, do not play the game simply for the sake of playing the game. Light and Lawliet, they played the game because the playwright thought that playing the game is what clever people do. But the Dark Lord... He..."

"He was playing a different game entirely?" Draco offered.

Lucius nodded in satisfaction. His son was young, still so young, and yet so clever, so cunning. He wondered what would become of his son, with a note of regret, wishing only to live to see it.

JUNE 13, 1334, C.E.

HOGWARTS

“You BITCH!”

Her world was ice. Her world was crystal. Her world was fire, burning through every metaphor until nothing existed of her but the abyssal depths of her dark side.

“Crucio!”

She felt nothing.

“CRUCIO! CRUCIO! CRUCIO!”

Her breath came in ragged pulls and she poured all of her magic into the pain. Still, nothing.

“YOU FUCKING BITCH!”

She reached for the nearest heavy object, a candlestick on the nightstand. She was still naked. They both were. Normally when she was exerting herself, her hair would come loose, cover her face, obscure her vision. But today, it was slick with sweat and blood, and stuck to her back and chest.

She swung the candlestick, hard.

“This is for my mother!”

She swung again.

“This is for my father!”

CRACK.

“THIS is for Babette!”

The candlestick finally snapped. At this point, what she was swinging at was an unrecognizable, pulpy mess.

“YOU KNEW. This entire time, you KNEW! This entire time you could have done SOMETHING. ANYTHING!”

She choked out a sob. With no convenient weapon, and almost

no magic left in her, she resorted to her fists.

“God damn you. GOD DAMN YOU.”

Impossibly, the breaths still came. She knew there was one last thing to be done, and she had held a small part of her magic in reserve. She hoped it was enough. With an angry cry of effort, she plunged her fist, augmented by a small flow of magic, into the chest of her victim. With a wet sucking sound, she pulled out what she sought.

A green, fist-sized chunk of crystal. The Heart of Koschei the Deathless.

She had a speech written in her mind, about the millions of deaths that Koschei was responsible for, and the blood on its hands and the good that it could have done and the choice of inaction and the path of evil and her own grand dreams and ambitions and how she would change and save the world. But she could not form coherent words, only vitriol.

“You... fucking.. BITCH.”

She held up the Heart. It was poetic in a way. She would use its own power to destroy both the Heart and its owner. It would, of course, be diminished. It would be a sacrifice. But it would be more than sufficient for what she hoped to accomplish.

She used the final mote of magic left in her to transfigure the Heart into something lesser. It was smaller, the size of an egg, and it was no longer the brilliant, iridescent green that reflected an infinite multitude of colors while still maintaining its own identity. Now it only reflected what was on her mind: dark, ruddy, sticky blood. She tapped into the power of the Heart.

Its form was Changed. As too, was the God beneath her. An instant before, it was a broken, but living, breathing person. An instant later, it was a corpse. It was over.

At that moment, on cue, she heard the clipped scream of

Helena, who had seen the entire thing. Helena was no gossip. She would keep Nell's 'secret' safe, from everyone throughout her life except for a handful of trusted confidantes. No one would have any reason to doubt her veracity or motives. And those confidantes would preserve the secret, except for a handful of trusted confidantes of their own... And thus the legend would spread.

Shortly thereafter, as expected, the Headmaster showed up to find Nell still mostly undressed, halfway wearing her favorite emerald-green dress. The scene was set: the window was open and most of Baba Yaga's personal collection of lore, including the Goblet of Fire, was gone.

Also according to plan, the Headmaster performed a clumsy attempt at Legilimency, and saw exactly what he expected to see: confirmation of his theory. Nell was underage, and therefore the victim, so he did not blame her. In fact, he would immediately begin making arrangements to provide her with as much support as possible during this difficult time.

That support would be for naught, however, as moments after he left her to her own devices, a thick white mist precipitated into the air near Nell, eventually coalescing into the form of a middle-aged man, a little out of shape, with a small paunch. Taller than average, but somewhat stooped. A face heavily seamed with care, and green eyes. Ancient, ancient green eyes, and disheveled black hair.

"Are you him?" Nell asked.

The man smiled, softly. He had a kind face.

"Yes, Perenelle du Marais," he said, in a voice that was mellow, and deeper than Nell expected. "I am Merlin."