



SIGNIFICANT DIGITS

A continuation of Harry Potter
and the Methods of Rationality.

By Alexander D.

It's easy to make big plans and ask big questions, but a lot harder to follow them through. Find out what happens to Harry Potter-Evans-Verres, Hermione, Draco, and everyone else once they grow into their roles as leaders, leave the shelter of Hogwarts, and venture out into a wider world of intrigue, politics, and war.

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iv # Significant Digits

Glossary 357

Arc Two



Antithesis

*Wiglaf maðelode, Wihstanes sunu:
“Oft sceall eorl monig anes willan
wræc adreogan, swa us geworden is.
Ne meahton we gelæran leofne þeoden,
rices hyrde, ræd ænigne,
þæt he ne grette gold-weard þone,
lete hyne licgean, þær he longe wæs,
wicum wunian oð woruld-ende;
heold on heah gesceap.*

*Wiglad, son of Weohstan, spoke:
“Often when one man follows his own will
many are hurt. This happened to us.
Nothing we advised could ever convince
the prince we loved, our land’s guardian,
not to vex the custodian of the gold,
let him lie where he was long accustomed,
lurk there under earth until the end of the world.
He held to his high destiny.*

—Beowulf

Brute Existent

To Whom It May Concern:

I would like to register an official complaint regarding the behavior of Owen Wilifred, a healer in your employ whom I had the misfortune to encounter this past October. I raise bicorn for a living, and do it better than anyone else in the Hollow. Even the Jugsons bought extract from me exclusively, and I daresay their Polyjuice and Waggum Potions lasted a fair bit longer than they'd have done if they'd bought off of old Weatherbee. But when I was a younger man, I was stabbed through the hand by one of the beasts. St. Mungo's mucked up the healing charm, and it's ached every winter since. So I was pleased to hear about the rejuvenation up at the Tower that the Boy-Who-Lived was offering.

I went to the Godric's Hollow Safety Pole and had myself checked out by the folks there, and then touched the thing and winked right out. Next thing I know, I'm on a bed and this squirrely-looking bloke is sitting there and watching me. He and another fellow ask me a whole mess of queer questions and put me through my paces on my history, and then they start poking me. I had brought a portrait of mine that's very well-done, good light and a good movement on it, but they barely glanced at it. They just babbled some nonsense. I checked my pockets before I went in, and it's a good thing, because I found a Galleon on the floor under me, that they'd arranged to have fall there so they could get it later. I wasn't born yesterday, nor the day before, and I know a proper swindle when I see it. I wouldn't have minded paying, which is why I brought the money, but I can't stand a swindle.

This Wilifred (I got his name before I left) wouldn't knock off the trick he was talking about... this whole German swindle of "the beat ease." He made me sit while he put his wand to my chest and did not do a bloody thing! I am no fool, and I know well enough that I'm not as hale as a young man. But slowing down a bit and getting glasses is normal, and I've always been a bit thin. It was the insult I resent! Mr. Wilifred didn't proper respect me, and I haven't spent fifty years building up the best bicorn in Britain just for some young swindler to try to pull the wool over my eyes. He was softening me up and would've asked for the deed to me house in return if he hadn't seen I wasn't going for it.

I got my Galleon back, shook Mr. Potter's hand, and got out of there. And never you mind the money, and I am sure full grateful about the hand, which is much better. Having that pain away has quickened my step, I'll tell you. But I would like to complain in full about Mr. Wilifred, who you should sack right away. The lad is a swindler.

— Sincerely,
Ymir Ytterbar
Ytterbar's Bicorn

~~~~~  
*If the Tower has done the world any favors, it might be in uniting so many against him. By attempting to remake everything in his own cruel image, Harry Potter has made allies of enemies and friends of foes. And what is more, he has done this throughout the whole world. The ranks of those who sympathize with the global resistance to his tyranny – a group that is now known as the "Honourable," I admit with a blush – come from every walk of life.*

*In Britain, those who defended the traditional rule of noble houses are joined with those who advocated for Muggle-style elected houses... for neither party could accept a brash new boy-dictator, whose claim to power lies only in force.*

*In the Orient, those who have railed against the traditional British leadership in the Confederation are joined with those sought closer alliance with it, since the strength of British dominance in*



*that body is irrelevant if the dominance is founded on intimidation and bloodshed.*

*In the Americas, the outright violence done by Harry Potter with a Muggle weapon in an attack on an old institution – an attack falsely done in my name, though no one can name why I would do this! – will bring together Americans of every stripe, rebelling against their Imperiused leadership.*

*Unless someone stops the Tower, then he will soon rule the whole world, crushing it in the grip of the porcelain automatons that replace those poor victims who go to be “rejuvenated.” Independence should be no threat to anyone... anyone who does not plan to rule the world as its master, that is.*

— Excerpt from “Needful Allies,” by Draco Malfoy  
*Unbreakable Honour*  
Vol 4 (1999), Issue 10



“Everyone’s here, so I think we can get started,” said Harry, as Diggory briskly walked in, a manila folder in hand. Auror Kwannon followed him, a stack of parchments in her arms.

The Chief Auror and Head of the DMLE, who was late, smiled and shrugged as he sat down at the meeting table. “Sorry, everyone. Emergencies today... two attempts on the Unspeakables, yesterday and today. Someone tried to Imperius Geraldine, and we discovered an outstanding theft from the vaults. Anyone have a copy of the agenda?”

Harry nodded, and slid a parchment over to him. “I can help you on the theft, I think... but we’ll get to that one later.”

Harry had found that it was important to have an agenda and stick to it – no chit-chat or the like – otherwise these meetings sprawled out of control, and nothing got done. A high-level meeting was seldom the best place for open discussion or brainstorming solutions; they were for sharing information and making decisions.

Administrative skills were a bigger part of his life than he’d ever thought they would be. He had four regular meetings a week – a faculty meeting with the Tower School of Doubt, a

meeting with the heads of research (not *all* of them... the twenty-five departments were consolidated into four different groups), a meeting with the Tower clinic healers and aurors (technically it was the John Snow Center for Medicine, but not even Harry used that name at this point), and this one: the meeting with Magical Britain's Powers That Be.

And none of those even touched his other ventures, such as managing his money and charities (his current assets were now equivalent to those of a small country, quite literally), or teaching, or other pet projects. And the time he didn't spend doing *that* he was spending with Hermione or the Shichinin or Moody.

For someone who'd spent most of their boyhood in a relatively solitary and frustrated existence, he'd somehow transformed into a man who spent most of his life *managing* people. It would be so much easier if they would just do what he said... he could do ten times as much if he didn't have to argue... so many more people could be saved...

*That's a Voldemort thought, he considered. Short-sighted and stupid. Whatever benefits in efficiency and speed I might gain, I would lose the benefit of other people's ideas and opinions if began to command rather than manage... and the entire point of our increasing democratic reforms, with the Tribunes and so on, is to employ the wisdom of crowds while providing more opportunities for outliers in achievement to rise in station. And if you're going to build a merit-based democracy, you'd better start at home.*

Harry looked around the table. Cedric Diggory and Hedley Kwannon for the DMLE, Amelia Bones for the Wizengamot and Confederation, Percy Weasley for the Ministry, Simon Smith for the Returned (since Hermione was busy), Haddad and Podrut for the goblins (and a general outsider perspective), and Mafalda Hopkirk for the Unspeakables. They'd need to get someone from the Council over here, soon, to speak for Hig.

"Percy, would you start us off?" Harry said, glancing at the serious-looking redhead.

Weasley cleared his throat and glanced down at the parchment in front of him before beginning.

"We've gotten a few of the integration facilities in operation already. The logistics weren't very difficult, thanks to the help

of some people from the Obliviator squads. They have a lot of experience in sanitizing contact between the two worlds.” He glanced down at the parchment in front of him. “I promoted Klaus Gage to head of one of the squads, based on his performance. I think it might make sense to have that squad start to specialize in deliberate contact, like these facilities.” Weasley looked up at Harry again, questioningly. “Since I assume we’ll be scaling this up in the future...?”

Harry nodded. “Yes. Make a note, though... we need a better name for the program. ‘Integration facility’ makes us sound like we’re... I don’t know, Morlocks or something. These are restaurants and movie theatres.” His hair was loose, and he pushed it back behind his ears absent-mindedly as he spoke.

“Music should be the next, I think, Mr. Weasley” said Mafalda Hopkirk, and the Senior Undersecretary nodded respectfully. The Venerable Unspeakable looked to be a voluptuous twenty years old, but still managed an air of authority when she spoke. It must be an acquired skill or habit, Harry reflected, since – according to most standards – her appearance no longer matched her gravitas. Ample *décolletage*, obvious youth, and big innocent blue eyes... but when she snapped at her subordinates, they jumped to obey like she was Merwyn the Malicious. It would probably be too much to hope that basic expectations had actually changed... that the society of Magical Britain had really begun to adjust to rejuvenation in a fundamental way. That would come in time.

“For right now, both restaurants and the theatre are losing money, hand over fist. Only moderate patronage, but high costs for wages, security, and so on. But we expected that.” Weasley glanced at his notes again. “Oh, yes, one thing that should help is that Sylvia de Kamp just did a feature on Siegfried’s for *American Mage*, and *The Daily Prophet* will be carrying it, as well. Apparently she was astonished, and she spends a thousand words in rapture over her ‘adventurous Muggle dining experience.’”

“I went there,” Chief Goldsmith Haddad said. “Had some beef. Quite tasty, I must say.” Everyone at the table generally understood that this was both explicit approval of the restaurant and implicit approval of its inclusive policies towards potential patrons. Veaugard’s Victuals, the leading fine dining establishment

in Diagon Alley, did not permit goblins or any other Beings on the premises (except for the house elves that prepared the food).

Bones said nothing, but her lips grew tight. That discomfort wasn't unexpected, after having spent so much time with her. *Even people we like and admire are products of their environment. It doesn't matter if she particularly likes the idea, as long as she intellectually accepts and agrees not to oppose the mingling of wizards and Beings. Many people have racist grandparents, but that doesn't make the grandparents bad people unless they're actively doing racist things – at least when we're speaking about "bad" and "good" in terms of preference utilitarianism. Having irrational or evil instincts or subconscious beliefs doesn't make you irrational or evil, if you don't act on them.*

*In fact, he considered, her beliefs might make Amelia a particularly good person. She's uncomfortable with some of the more personal aspects of this equality movement, like the idea of her niece dining at the same table as a goblin, or bringing them into the government and working with them so closely, but she overrules her baser instinct and does the right thing anyway. She might always be awkward around Haddad, Podrut, Urg, or the others, but she's being as good as she can be.*

"Moving on," said Weasley, "I am unhappy to report that an envoy from the Strategos of Cappadocia paid me a visit last week, demanding I put him on the schedule for Minister N'Goma. I obliged, of course, but discussed the purpose of his visit a bit."

Simon Smith, a fleshy Scot and one of Hermione's Returned, leaned forward and rested his elbows on the table. He looked evenly at Weasley with flat brown eyes, emotional but somehow hollow, and said evenly, "Nikitas Seyhan."

"Of course it's bloody well Nikitas Seyhan," snapped Bones at the same time Weasley, more mildly, said "Yes, that's—"

There was a brief pause as each waited for the other to continue. Bones crossed her arms and only frowned. With her tight brown bun, it made her look severe. Weasley continued, his mouth twisting slightly in amusement at her outburst.

"Yes, the Seyhan fellow. He broke the Statute of Secrecy, they claim, and they're arguing that we're in violation of the Statute if we don't return him home, to be punished in accordance with Clauses 74, 75, and 76."

Harry didn't know the International Statute of Wizarding Secrecy in detail; he glanced at Bones and Haddad in succession to invite their interpretation. Bones had decades of experience in its international application, and Haddad was a trained lawyer with almost as much knowledge of how the Confederation acted to enforce it.

They glanced at each other, and Haddad spoke up. He tapped a finger thoughtfully on the table. "Probably a good case for it. You're – we're – sheltering Seyhan, and his sentence wasn't finished. It is a way for the Independents to attack under cover of law. I suppose that Germany or Norden could have made the same complaints at any time, but... well, Cappadocia was the first overtly disagreeable place that the Returned have struck."

"Surely we have the votes to simply ignore them... Madame Bones?" said Diggory. "Could we win an arbitration vote in the Confederation?"

"Easily," said Bones. "But it would cost us in public perception... particularly in the Ten Thousand. The Westphalians will use it against us to demand even more concessions. And it might complicate matters with Kenya... after the Free States and Nigeria joined the Treaty for Health and Life, Kenya opened up a dialogue on the quiet with one of our Confederation delegates, looking for, ah, 'considerations.' But major controversy or the appearance of lawlessness might drive them away. They wouldn't join the Independents, I don't think, but... well, it would be a setback."

The Treaty of Independence was still limited in its scope to a handful of states, fortunately: Cappadocia, Caucasus, most of the Sawad, and Russia. It was an idea borrowed from Muggle politics – actually, borrowed from Harry himself, in terms of the Cold War.

In the early days, when Draco had been working on planning for the future with Harry and Hermione, Harry had once floated the idea of including a mutual-defense pact in the Treaty for Health and Life – a way to dramatically raise the stakes in case of potential conflict. Now the Honourable were using it to set a tone of heroic defiance and to unite opposition to the Health and Life programmes. It had given the Council of Westphalia – or their puppets in the American governments, anyway – even more leverage in the ongoing negotiations, since it provided a viable

alternative to what might otherwise seem an inevitable eventual outcome.

“Seyhan is at Powis?” Harry asked Simon. The Returned nodded. “How would Hermione feel about returning him to Cappadocia, if necessary? Their Dementors are gone... he would presumably be going into their normal prison.”

“If he chooses to go, he may. But we won’t return him against his will.” Simon said. He didn’t emphasize his words or raise his voice. This was an old problem that had started the moment Azkaban fell: Hermione believed the Dementation was punishment enough for any conceivable crime, and had unilaterally declared that those who had come back from that hell would always have a place with her.

It wasn’t that Harry disagreed about Azkaban or the Dementors, of course: they had been vile beyond words, and no one – literally *no one* – deserved to be tortured to death in that way. He’d agreed unhesitatingly to her declaration. The ones she’d personally rescued had mostly been institutionalized, except for Odette Charlevoix, and many of those who had been transferred to Britain’s remaining prison, the Howard House of Reform, had simply served out their relatively short sentences and had gone free without controversy. Others, though... well, Simon himself, for example, was a convicted murderer... but once he’d regained enough sanity to function, he’d walked free, and joined the newly-formed Returned.

In the months afterward, they’d taken a beating in public opinion for freeing so many criminals. Some people, like Walden Macnair, had been apparent successes – Macnair lived a quiet life enchanting broomsticks, now – but others had returned to fraud, robbery... or worse activities.

After a time, Harry had proposed new trials and mundane prisons for people like Charlevoix and Simon. Hermione had flatly rejected it, even after Harry pointed out that every month that this cost them in advancing their plans, politically, was another month during which people would die.

“It would save lives,” Harry said. “It’s cold, I know, but if giving Seyhan back to Cappadocia would improve our image with Kenya and the Ten Thousands, and speed things up with the

American states, that's... hundreds of lives." He did some rough calculations in his head. Seventy thousand wizards or so in the United States... death rate per year in magical societies in the developed world was usually about four deaths a year for every thousand people... "In the United States alone, a wizard or witch dies... something like every other day. Every day matters."

"Every person matters," Simon replied. But he wasn't really arguing, since he would never countermand Hermione. Like the rest of the Returned, he would have cut off his hands if she'd told him to. Harry would have to wait to speak to her directly, if he wanted to change her mind. Not that it would do much good.



*"Imagine if you had to choose between someone being tortured for fifty years," Harry said to Hermione. "Or a billion people getting a dust speck in their eye for a second, irritating them for an instant. No, not a billion... a googol people getting a dust speck. That's—"*

*"Ten with a hundred zeroes after it," Hermione interrupted. "And you want me to choose which of those would be the better outcome?"*

*"Yes. You have to weigh the aggregate discomfort of so many against the torture of one. If a googol isn't enough, make it a googolplex... ten to the googol power people."*

*"There aren't a googolplex of atoms in the galaxy, I wouldn't think, much less a googolplex of people," Hermione said, thoughtfully.*

*"Yes, but it's a number so big that it makes us confront our scope insensitivity. You don't picture an individual or even a crowd... you think about the numbers rationally, instead. A staggering amount of minute pains outweighs the suffering of any one person."*

*"Careful, Harry. You could justify a lot with that reasoning. And the answer is no. Charlevoix is going back to France, to visit her children. They want to see her, and she's going to try to find some connection to them... maybe recover some memories of them, if possible. She'll be meeting with people in their Ministry of Magic, too... might help with getting them to join the Treaty, someday."*

*"We could wait for her to come back. And it would be a fair trial."*

*"That will be her choice. She'll have a place with me, otherwise, until she chooses to go. She's paid any debt she might possibly owe the world... find another human sacrifice."*



"Fine," Harry said to Simon, sighing. "I'll revisit this with the lady herself."

"We should muddy the waters, so it doesn't seem clear-cut," said Bones. "Give us something to talk about for our own part, when they bring this up. The son of the Strategos of Cappadocia was accused of breaking the Statute about a decade ago, as I recall... maybe that will work well."

"Sir? Sorry to interrupt," came a voice at the door. It was Auror Pip, pushing a hand truck. Standing upright on the truck and being wheeled along, frozen in place and stunned, was a thin-faced older man. Balding, but with great muttonchop whiskers. The man's face was frozen in a snarl, and his fingers were still curled around a now-absent wand, caught in the act of casting. There was a large bloodstain, still wet, on the man's thigh.

"That's Moody, yes," Harry said, smiling. "Good work."

Pip grinned – *he'd* gotten Mad-Eye Moody! Most of the Tower aurors had already done so – J.C. had gotten him eight times, now – but this was his first Moody. He drew his wand and dispelled the Stunning Hex. Pip couldn't wait to tell his mum.

Alastor "Mad-Eye" Moody's arms relaxed, and he worked his jaw experimentally for a moment. "Hell. This one got me?" His disguise – if a Transfigured body could be said to be a disguise – was a good one. He'd given Harry some pictures and instructions yesterday: this was another lycanthrope, but with space for a secret wand inside the thigh. A combination of prior attempts. Lycanthropes were still immune to the automatic stunning effect on the Safety Poles and Safety Sticks, so Moody had tried them for his intrusion attempts before, and he'd taken the Ultimate Ulna idea from Hermione.

"Yes, sir," said Pip, brightly. He smiled broadly and nodded to Harry, and left the room to return to his post.



“So, Alastor... Pip stunned you, this time,” Bones said. The young-looking witch was working to keep a straight face. “My, my.”

Moody shuffled over to a chair and sat in it, gingerly, as if his bones hurt. “Didn’t put much planning into this one... just standard... keep them on their toes,” he said, in a hoarse voice. He shot Diggory a purposeful glance when he opened his mouth to speak. The Chief Auror thought better of it... though he couldn’t stop from smiling. Everyone sat politely for a moment longer, while Moody sorted himself out.

“Well then, Mr. Moody,” said Weasley. “We were just discussing the possibility of returning Nikitas Seyhan to Cappadocia, since they’re making a bit of a fuss about it at the Confederation. Mr. Smith here, however, indicates that this won’t be happening, so Madame Bones prop—”

“Pfah,” snorted Moody. “You’re all as sharp as blind-worms. Me sitting here like this, and you’re worried about having to hand over a fugitive?”

Harry smiled suddenly, and leaned forward. “But if he minds?”

“How long was he there?” Moody asked.

“Oh! Yes!” said Bones, smiling as well. “Er... he was in Göreme for twelve years, I believe.”

“Then any happy associations he had are long gone,” replied Moody, “so I doubt he’ll protest... if he’s even fit to protest about anything at all, after twelve years.”

Harry glanced around the table, noting some expressions of puzzlement and some smiles at the solution. He explained, “Moody is suggesting we simply change his face and say that we’ve lost track of him.”

“Or, better yet,” said Diggory, “hand over a fake corpse.”

“The Optimates of the Eleusinian Mysteries once did that,” said Haddad, in his accented English. “During the Social War... back when death dolls were undetectable. Wanted to keep the Muggles of the Latin provinces in check, and so they made a big show of parading some heroic wizard corpses all through the city. The actual wizards, still quite alive, attacked Paeligni. Didn’t succeed – oppression seldom succeeds in the long run – but a clever trick.”

Harry frowned at the goblin, and Mafalda Hopkirk broke her silence to mutter, "Subtle."

There was an awkward pause.

"Anyway, let's get some sort of plan in place there. Moody, you'll handle it?" Harry said, glancing over at today's Moody. The balding lycanthrope nodded, looking irritable. "Whatever we do," Harry continued, "I do think it's time to begin putting some distance between the Tower and the Returned."

Diggory nodded in approval. "You're anticipating more confrontation, and you want Ms. Granger to be able to act with a free hand." It was widely rumored that Cedric Diggory was infatuated with the Goddess, and had made several attempts to ask her out. Harry wondered if that might affect his judgment, but he still seemed to be thinking straight when it came to Hermione and the Returned.

"Yes, I think—" But Harry broke off what he was saying when Diggory and Kwannon, followed a second later by Moody and Smith, leapt out of their seats, springing to the two doors into the meeting room. Diggory and Kwannon went to one, while Moody and Smith went to the other. They'd slammed and secured and warded the doors in a matter of moments, and continued to cast wards as the other wizards and witches in the room – slower to react, and not privy to the signal that had alerted Diggory and Kwannon – joined them and began casting. Harry got out of his seat and drew his wand, but remained away from the doors.

The spells were already thick within the Tower, and there was only so much more magical security that could be had, and so it was only a few minutes before the aurors, Smith, Bones, and Weasley were assuming battle positions, standing in spots staggered around the room, in a pattern designed to avoid most effective area spells. Diggory felt free to pull out his auror mirror, then, and bubble the guards on the inner door. He held the mirror so that most of the people in the room could see it.

"Kraeme, report."

Auror J.C. Kraeme's face appeared in the mirror. She looked calm. "Intrusion in the Receiving Room, sir. We've sealed the Tower entrance, and no attempt has been made on it. They're still fighting – we can hear it from here."

“Put the bubbler on a chair or something, J.C.,” said Diggory. “Leave it open, so we know what’s going on, but keep your eyes on that door.”

The perspective of the bubbler – which looked like nothing so much as one of the small mirrored compacts that Muggles use for makeup – shifted and moved around, and finally settled at a level that looked waist-high to Auror Kraeme and Auror Pip, the entrance guards. It showed the entrance to the Tower, but the golden door had been completely obscured by a huge and heavy-looking silver plate, ornately decorated, that had been rolled into a frame in front of the entrance. Harry glanced over at Podrut, and smiled despite the tension to see the obvious pride on the goblin’s face. He’d made the security hatch.

Everyone waited, tensely. Moody stood in a corner, his wand pointed towards one of the doors... and towards everyone else in the room (“I know a traitor will eliminate the biggest threats first, and you’re the best avenue of attack,” is how he had once explained it, after he and Harry had gone into lockdown earlier this month, during a similar alert, and Moody had spent the entire time with his wand pointed at Harry.)

“Quiet out there, now,” commented Pip, glancing back at the mirror. Kraeme quieted him with a harsh glance.

They had to wait. Very few methods of communication were possible between the Tower and the outside world. It was a security precaution, but it made moments like this one particularly tense.

After another ten minutes or so, a pattern of knocks was audible on the silver plate. Kraeme nodded to Pip, who approached it, and knocked several times. There were two knocks in response, and Pip visibly brightened. “It’s correct,” he reported to the senior auror, and she grunted in affirmation and turned towards the mirror for orders. “Today’s pattern, sir.”

“Open it up,” replied Diggory. Pip nodded, and reached for the heavy latch that held the plate in place. Harry was going to agree and congratulate the two door guards on their caution, but found himself unable to say that – as though the words simply did not exist in English to express any such sentiment.

“Wait!” he choked out, instead. Pip’s hand froze on the gleaming metal handle.

Harry turned to Moody, who had his wand pointing at him. “Moody, how often are the knocks changed?”

“Every month,” said Moody. “I *wanted* every week, but training has gotten lax, and they kept mucking it up.”

True, thought Harry, remembering. *Cedric had complained that the Tower security was so redundant and required so many different, frequently-changing protocols, that they were spending entire days each month sorting through false positives. Security protocols were an investment like anything else, and there were diminishing returns.* The fact that there seemed to be some sort of problem – since Harry’s Unbreakable Vow wouldn’t let him agree to opening the door – didn’t necessarily prove Cedric wrong, either. *After all, Moody still hadn’t been able to get inside, and he’d been very motivated to embarrass Cedric and prove his point.*

“And was it changed after the lockdown earlier this month – that time when you spent twenty minutes menacing me?” asked Harry, raising his eyebrows. He pulled a stretchy hair-tie from one pocket as he spoke, and put his hair in a ponytail.

“No,” said Diggory, heavily, looking embarrassed. Auror Kwannon, standing near the door with him, looked pale.

Moody had a fierce look of triumph on his muttonchopp-whiskered face. “And here you were, all excited about Pip stunning me.”

“Not now, Alastor,” snapped Bones. Her attention was still fixed on the bubbler.

“Sir?” asked Auror Kraeme.

“Just a moment, J.C. I’ll send my Patronus.” Diggory replied. “*Expecto Patronum!*”

A silvery bat flapped into existence, shedding argent light on the tense faces within the meeting room. “Go and speak to Harry Madagascar in the Receiving Room, and ask him what is going on.”

There was another long minute, then the bat swung back into the room, and spoke in the high-pitched voice of Auror Madagascar, “We gave the correct knock, Mr. Diggory, I’m sure of it. The situation is under control.”

“Bear back the words, ‘Monkey monkey monkey,’” said Diggory to his Patronus.

“I like bananas, dress me like a doll,” replied Madagascar, after the glowing bat had made the trip and returned. It was the correct response.

Diggory looked to Harry, who nodded in approval, then he turned to the bubbler. “Open it up, Pirrip.” There was still a risk, given the mistake in operational security this month, but the Thief’s Downfall before the Tower entrance and the exceptional magical defenses of the facility were more than enough of a margin of safety.

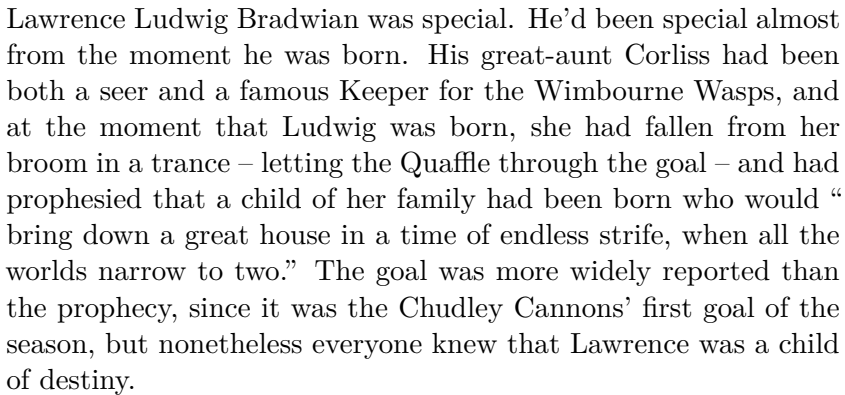
Everyone relaxed a little, only to tense up again in a moment, as another sharp report came through the bubbler.

“There are prisoners!” said Kraeme. “And they’re *students!*”



## Protagonists

I urge this Council to vote in favor of the proposal, and empower our negotiators... let them have the power to strike and relent as necessary, rather than hobbling them with intercontinental shackles. Let us take this moment and seize our opportunities! Let us arm our negotiators with a sword, so they may strike down our foes and cut through our shackles! I urge you all: vote in favor!



In 1995, he was sorted into Slytherin, and embarked on quite a career of adventure as one of the first Silver Slytherins. They were a new breed, with new heroes: the few Slytherin aurors like Andromeda Tonks; Draco Malfoy and Narcissa Malfoy; Head of House Horace Slughorn; and businessmen like Perigold Pucey. They took their lead in school from upperclassman Blaise Zabini, who proudly said that they were the truly pure in ambition.

Lawrence agreed.

In his first year, Lawrence single-handedly helped rescue a half-giant named Turm, who had taken refuge in the Forbidden Forest to escape his human relatives, the Meroveni-Bowles. They were purebloods with a mother who was famously opposed to the Treaty



for Health and Life, and couldn't abide the shame. Turm had thought he would be safe within the wards of the school, in the dangerous depths of the woods, but there had been six Meroveni-Bowles children at Hogwarts, and they had been planning to murder their half-brother. Lawrence had saved Turm from an elaborate series of traps constructed in the Forest, although he'd been unable to prove to the Headmistress that the Meroveni-Bowles – siblings from a respected and wealthy Hufflepuff/Ravenclaw family – were at fault.

In his second year, Lawrence and his friend Annabeth Dankgesang solved the mystery of the Shrieking Shack. They discovered a secret passageway under the Whomping Willow that led all the way from Hogwarts to Hogsmeade, and found out that the famously “haunted” house was inhabited only by Euphorics, who spread rumors about gruesome murders and vicious ghosts to discourage visitors from intruding on their operation. Minister for Magic Scrimgeour had personally congratulated Lawrence and Annabeth for helping break up the largest elixir distribution ring in the country. Unfortunately, Lawrence had also made an enemy of Sammy Meroveni-Bowles, a boy in their own year who Lawrence suspected might have been involved in smuggling supplies.

In his third year, Lawrence and Annabeth met and befriended Nearly-Headless Nick, one of the ghosts of Hogwarts, and he had told them of the Deluminator, an artifact created by Albus Dumbledore and stored in the Room of Requirement. Seeking out the Room of Requirement, they found the Deluminator – and a meeting of the Meroveni-Bowles, who were planning to steal Helga Hufflepuff's Cup from Smith Manor. Lawrence and Annabeth foiled the burglary and exposed the Meroveni-Bowles, leading to the two oldest children being expelled and the rest of them closely watched. The dramatic duel with Sammy Meroveni-Bowles had ended in a stalemate, that night, but at least he would be on a short leash from then on. Unfortunately, during the night of excitement and intrigue, the Cup was still stolen... and no one knew who did it!

Was it Lawrence's special destiny that led him to such adventures – was being a child of prophecy some sort of special invisible mark, that made trouble seek out the young do-gooder? Or had

that fate just made into him the sort of person who wasn't afraid to investigate the ample mysteries and intricate plots of the world's foremost school of magic? It's hard to say. But it was Lawrence's fourth year, now, and everyone was holding their breath to see what was going to happen – and whether or not Lawrence and Annabeth's friendship would blossom into something more.

At the moment, the pair were in the Slytherin common room, and Annabeth was attempting to discern the secrets of their only clue to the Caper of the Cup: a small wooden abacus the size of her palm, dropped by a shadowy figure last year after an exciting chase and brief scuffle in Smith Manor.

"I think it's enchanted," Annabeth said, touching one of the wooden beads gently. She was a slight girl, her hair in neat dreadlocks, and her lips pursed in concentration. "I think it's the Protean Charm."

"Difficult magic. Hard to do, and bloody expensive to hire," Lawrence said. He eyed the abacus warily. "Any way to trace the other things linked to it?"

"No," said Annabeth. "Or, at least, I don't know how." She set the abacus down on the table in front of them, sighing.

"I'm sure I've seen one of these before..." said Lawrence. He closed his eyes, trying to let his mind free-associate and chase down the memory. Annabeth watched him thoughtfully, letting her eyes linger on his olive skin and the sharp planes of his face. She glanced away when he opened his eyes, grinning. "I've got it! Remember when Blaise brought that Silver who works in the Tower to speak to us? Auror Pirrip? And he came to talk to us about true ambition and all that... and his friend waited for him?"

Annabeth's eyes widened. "Yes... oh, Merlin, you're right! He bumped into the other auror with him, whatsherface, when they were leaving, and she dropped something! She got so angry at him and said all those words that we went to look up in the library, right after! I think it *was* one of these!"

"An auror device, then? Just for Tower aurors? Or something else entirely?" said Lawrence, narrowing his eyes and squinting at the small brown device. The little abacus had five rows of ten beads. They were stiff and not easy to move by mistake. The device looked unused, but enchanted objects often looked new even after a century of use.

“Easy enough to eliminate a few ‘hypotheses,’ ” Annabeth said, smiling. Lawrence grinned. Neither of them had joined the Science Program – it limited your career options too much, since taking the extra, unorthodox classes made it harder to get your N.E.W.T.s in traditional subjects – but they’d both taken Muggle Studies and knew the basics. Annabeth would have been a natural at science.



## HYPOTHESIS 1: ALL AURORS

Annabeth got into position at the entrance to the History of Magic classroom. Professor Palma de Mallorca wasn’t inside – they’d already checked – so she was able to stand just outside the door within the alcove, out of sight. She got the abacus out, holding it in her palm. Then she looked down the corridor. Lawrence was there, sitting on a windowsill, a book in his lap. He was watching a pair of aurors stationed at the end of the hall: one of the dozen that were situated in various places in Hogwarts. He looked at Annabeth, and she nodded. He fixed his eyes on the aurors, and then nodded in his own turn.

Annabeth flicked three of the beads in the top row to one side. Somewhere, all the abacuses linked by the Protean Charm to this one mimicked its movements. It was a way to signal, and even if they didn’t know the appropriate messages or code, they did know that the recipients would need to look at their own copies. The little abacuses were too small and fiddly to interpret by feel.

Lawrence kept a careful watch on the aurors at the end of the hall, but they didn’t change their behavior at all. They just kept quietly chatting, their hands folded casually into their sleeves. They weren’t on very high alert – despite the supposed necessity of their presence, thanks to the existence of the Tower, they seldom had much to do. There were rumors that patients had escaped the Receiving Room and gone running around the school, but no one had ever actually seen such a thing first-hand, as far as Lawrence could discover. He wasn’t sure he believed it. No one even really knew where the Receiving Room actually *was* in the school, for that matter (except the professors and aurors, he supposed). So far as he could actually verify, the only thing the aurors ever did was occasionally act to break up a fight or stop some bullying.

After as much as ten minutes had passed, Lawrence looked over at Annabeth and shook his head. No luck.



## HYPOTHESIS 2: TOWER AURORS

“What if they use Legilimency on me?” asked Lawrence, nervously. “They’ll know I’m lying... they’ll know everything.” He glanced at his robes. “They might just guess from how much I’m sweating!”

“Just... try to be casual! They distribute Safety Sticks to like... a thousand countries these days! That Receiving Room must be busting, and no one’s going to want to chat. Plus, Gregorius’ cousin Lammie went on a lark, and he says that all that happened was that they owled Lammie’s parents.” Annabeth said, shrugging. “You’ll be fine!”

“It knocks you out, you know... they might find the abacus while I’m unconscious,” Lawrence said, shifting in his seat. “I wish we could figure out some way to do it with both of us, like last time. It’d be okay—” He cut himself off before he could finish the sentence with “if you were there.” He blushed.

Annabeth was blushing now, too, although it wasn’t as noticeable. She looked away and said hurriedly, with a smile, “Look just *do it*, you big kneazle!”

Lawrence stared at the Safety Stick in his hands and gulped... but anything was better than being right here, right now. It was too... too much. He snapped the Safety Stick with one strong thumb. There was a moment of wrenching force around his middle, and then darkness.\*\*

He awoke to a sudden unveiling of consciousness, as though a black curtain had been lifted from his awareness. There was no grogginess, and Lawrence was familiar enough with the process to expect the stunning (everyone knew the procedure to go to the Tower, since it was part of the first lectures on safety, and Lawrence’s uncle had been rejuvenated), but it was still disorienting.

“Hello, son,” said a young-looking witch, who was standing next to him. He was lying down on one of the cots. Lawrence

became aware that she was holding his hand, and it twitched involuntarily. The witch just went on smiling pleasantly, and spoke again. "It's okay, you're in the Tower. We couldn't find anything wrong with your ABCs, and you don't seem to be hurt... can you tell me what's wrong?" She was extremely nice and extremely firm in a way that tolerated no dissembling. Her white robes were neat and trim, and her features were firm – snub nose, red hair, freckles, and sharp gaze.

"Oh Merlin... I'm in the Tower?!" Lawrence said. He was feeling a little panicky at the prospect of being caught, and so this performance didn't take much pretending. "But I didn't... oh, *no!* I'm so sorry... I had a Stick in my rear pocket! Annabeth shoved me..." He trailed off, letting the lie fade on his lips. He sat up and swiveled his legs off the cot, and buried his face in his hands, releasing the healer's hand. The contact was making him uncomfortable, as though she could tell his true thoughts by touch.

"I see..." said the healer. Her voice was neutral, in the way of someone reserving judgment without wishing to give offense. This must happen all of the time, and Lawrence was pretty young... she probably saw children doing this for fun, just for the experience of it, all the time. "Well, this is very serious, you know that, right? There are six people who spent quite a while scanning and working to help you, and they could have been helping people who really needed it. Sick people, injured people, or dying people. I see you're a Hogwarts student... what's your name?"

"Lawrence Bradwian," he replied, speaking as miserably as he felt.

"We keep track of everyone who 'accidentally' comes here. I'll let the arithmancer know... and *he'll* let the Headmistress know," the healer said. She stepped back from the screened-in little cubicle in which they were sitting. Lawrence glanced around. White tiled floors and ceiling, a plain little metal table, and a plain metal cot laid with white linen. Everything was as generic as something you might Transfigure, if you were hastily creating something new. He supposed they were in the main clinic ward, or something... details on the layout and details had been more scarce when he and Annabeth had asked around; everyone focused on the

aurors and healing. *Oh, Merlin... why did we ask around like that, how stupid... if anyone does doubt this 'accident,' it'll be easy to find out how curious we've been about the Tower!* Lawrence tried to freeze his face in its current dismay, so that he didn't visibly dissolve into horror.

"I don't want you to think that you shouldn't get a new Stick, or let this stop you from visiting us in a real emergency, Lawrence," the healer said. She glanced away from him, and waved someone over. He took the opportunity to shove his hands in his pockets.

"Serge, would you help this young man, please? He needs to speak to Tommy or someone else, and then he needs to go back to... well, class, I suppose," the healer said to someone who had just walked up, past the edge of the white screen and out of sight.

"Certainly, Beneficent," said the unknown man. He stepped up to where Lawrence could see him... and it was an auror. A hulking man, six and a half feet if he was an inch, and twenty stone if he was a pound. Serge the Auror had a thick neck and a shaved head, and when he lifted a guiding hand to Lawrence, it looked more like architecture than anatomy, in terms of scale. The auror smiled kindly.

"Have a good afternoon, Lawrence," Beneficent said to him. She was smiling again... she'd apparently decided that she believed him. Or that she should be merciful. "Be more careful, okay?" Giving a half-wave, she was gone before he could answer.

Lawrence slid forward and stood up, stepping a little awkwardly to where Serge was standing, outside the cubicle. He glanced to the left and right. There looked to be at least a hundred similar cubicles stretching to either side, with an ample corridor down the middle. Lawrence could see two dozen people or more... healers, aurors, and people in random dress who must be patients. Several patients were unconscious and limp in the air, suspended by a spell as they were briskly taken down the corridor – entering or leaving, he supposed.

"Wow," he said.

"Not as fancy as you expected, I bet," said Serge with a smile.

No better time. Lawrence flicked four or five beads on the abacus in his pocket, and watched.

In the span of the next fifteen seconds, he counted two aurors and three healers who paused at the signal, and at least *appeared* to

look at something from their pockets. Not every auror, and not every healer... only those five. What is worse, it looked to him like they were doing so furtively. They all looked with cupped hands, one of the healers ended a conversation and stepped away from the other person, and one of the aurors ducked almost out of sight into a cubicle.

"I'm not sure what I expected," said Lawrence. "But it wasn't this."



### HYPOTHESIS 3: OH MERLIN I DON'T EVEN WHAT

"So... it's not all aurors, or even all Tower aurors... it's just some of the healers and aurors in the Tower? That's good news!" said Annabeth. They were scrunched together on a bench in the Great Hall – luncheon was the only time Lawrence could find to meet, since he was serving detentions in the evening. It was Inigo Imago's birthday, and in honor of the legendary seer, the rolls and muffins were enchanted to hang suspended above the tables, spinning in tight orbits. It was said to resemble the movement of the heavenly spheres. The wide table in front of them was also filled with meats, cheeses, and platters of pickles. There was also some sort of curry, although neither Lawrence nor Annabeth was particularly interested in it.

"How can that possibly be good news?!" said Lawrence, wheeling around to face her. He held an uneaten but enormous sandwich in his hands. "It means... well, I'm not sure what it means, but it's something *sinister*! A secret cabal within the Tower! A cabal that stole the Cup!"

"Oh, just stop and think for a moment. There are all kinds of non-sinister possible explanations, right?" Annabeth said, picking a sesame roll out of the air. She tore it apart, absently, as she spoke. "Just because one of the people who stole the cup was a part of whatever group we're talking about, here, doesn't mean the group was involved. If we found a Gryffindor robe, it wouldn't mean there was a Gryffindor conspiracy to steal the Cup... just that one Gryffindor was involved. We have narrowed down the list of suspects, a lot. It's good news."

Lawrence sullenly took a bite out of his sandwich, declining to respond until a respectable amount of time had passed. After a while, though, he turned to Annabeth and said something witty and cutting, even though he said it around a mouthful of food that made it completely unintelligible.

“Gross,” Annabeth said, making a face. “Slow down, or you’ll choke.”

Lawrence abandoned the effort, and concentrated on chewing. Annabeth went on, saying, “Okay, so we should probably go tell the Headmistress, immediately. There’s no reason to wait. She and the Tower and all those important people can figure this out.”

“No,” said Lawrence, urgently. “That won’t work. Listen, who was most likely to notice that Sammy and his siblings were up to no good? What sort of person?”

“A student, of course,” said Annabeth. “Or a professor.”

“And which students, specifically?” said Lawrence, raising his eyebrows.

“Us, I suppose. I mean, we’ve been tangling with them for years. There was Turm and the Shrieking Shack and Myrtle and... yes, if anyone was going to get suspicious, it was going to be us,” Annabeth said, guardedly.

“And what would we be expected to do, if we found a clue?” said Lawrence.

“...report it to the Headmistress? But wait, you can’t possibly think that this is a trap? If this conspiracy involves the Headmistress, then I think we’ve already lost. And anyway, how could you even think that!? You know what she’s like! And how would that trap even work... you’re saying that... I don’t even know what you’re saying!” Annabeth sounded scandalized and shocked and scornful, all in equal measure.

“Fair enough, okay,” said Lawrence. He switched tactics. “But maybe she’s just not powerful enough. We need to go right to the top. There’s only one person who can sort this out... one person who can figure out the conspiracy and get back the Cup.”

“First of all, you don’t know that there’s a conspiracy. The abacus might not be related. Second of all, there’s no way we could get a private message to Minister N’Goma... there are probably eight people assigned just to read her owls. Third of all—”



“No, no,” said Lawrence. “I mean the *Tower*. Let’s go give the abacus to Dean Potter! He’ll help us get back the Cup!”

Annabeth paused, then frowned, suspiciously. “You just want an excuse to talk to him and bring us to his attention.” She thought for a moment, then brightened. “That’s an excellent idea. He’s almost as important as the Minister for Magic, anyway... and *he’s* not accountable to *anyone*. A good person to know, and this is a good excuse to talk to him.”

It was just like Professor Slughorn always said: the more people you know, the more people who can help you.

“But why not just – I don’t know, cut off your finger, or something? I’m pretty sure that a lot of people who go to the Tower get to speak to Dean Potter. Or we could just talk to an auror and tell them what’s up.”

“Well, I suppose,” said Lawrence. “But I think that they usually don’t let you talk to him very much... and he must hear this kind of stuff all day. We need to *stand out*. And also... this might be a good opportunity for some payback on the Meroveni-Bowles. Opportunities like this, for a clever plot, don’t come along every day.”

“All right,” Lawrence said. “So how are we going to sneak into the Tower, the most heavily-guarded place in Britain?” He took another bite out of his sandwich.

“I have an idea, I think,” Annabeth said. “An idea for a plan.” She picked up a piece of torn roll from her plate and rolled it into a ball between her fingers. “We want to solve a mystery and report a possible conspiracy, right? Recover a relic of the Founders of Hogwarts and return it to the rest of Hepzibah Smith’s collection, and punish those responsible? And we also want to *get* Sammy and his siblings? And, of course, become famous and powerful?”

Lawrence nodded, chewing.

“Well, how can we do all of these things with one simple plan?” Annabeth squished the bread flat between two fingers. “Let me give you a hint: remember that big cabinet we saw in the Room of Requirement?”



# Taking flight

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*disruption, delay, repurposing, alteration, or interference is within the bounds of the signatory State or any other State, including both signatories and non-signatories, shall incur a penalty commensurate with the number of preceding penalties already incurred, according to the chart of Appendix B, and as determined by an impartial vote of representatives of all signatory States. (Amended)*

—From Article 3 of the Treaty for Health and Life.



*April 16th, 1999*

*Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry*

Hogwarts is a dangerous place, even at the best of times. Even aside from the menagerie of dangerous creatures that live in and around its grounds. The castle itself is a vast labyrinth of ever-changing corridors, dimly-lit dungeons, and variable staircases. Wizards and witches are supernaturally hardy in many ways, but Madame Pomfrey, the matron, always had her hands full – even without classroom mishaps.

It was tragic, then, but hardly suspicious when Sammy Meroveni-Bowles slipped on the stairs on his way down from Divination and Probability, felt the railing give way in his hand, and fell down the gaping center of the tower's spiral staircase. Several children were behind him on the stairs, and could see the accident. The witnesses should probably count themselves as fortunate, since if they'd left class first, they might have been the ones to slip on the small puddle of castor oil on the staircase. Sammy was always the first to rush down to luncheon, though, so that was unlikely.

Sammy fell like a stone, followed by a piece of railing, his Divinations and Probability textbooks, and the bracket that had torn free. He bounced off of the staircase on the opposite side of the tower after a moment, his skull smashing into the stone and rebounding him back the other direction. By the time he hit the

floor of the tower, he was unrecognizable – a tangle of battered bones, meat, and robes.

Lawrence Bradwian was the first to reach the boy. He'd been in the lavatory, returning to class, and so he was kneeling next to Sammy and gingerly turning the boy over by the time their other classmates arrived. Sammy and Lawrence were known to be dire enemies, and so many thought it was a mark of great kindness that Lawrence shouted for a Safety Stick. Professor Placela bustled halfway down the stairs with one, his black-and-gold robes gathered up in his fists, before he realized that it would be faster to simply drop it. Lawrence caught it awkwardly with the tips of his fingers.

"How do I do this, without going along?" he asked, looking around. He seemed quite upset.

His friend Annabeth huffed in frustration, and grabbed his hand. "Just *go!*" she said, and yanked his hand and the Stick down into Sammy's bloody chest. It snapped, and with a slippery pop, all three of the children disappeared.

The rest of the class looked at each other, uncertain, as Professor Placela reached the bottom of the stairs. He was puffing and red-faced, but he still had wind enough to insist they have an impromptu lesson on the availability heuristic. Just because events like these sprang quickly to mind when one thought of stairs, did not make stairs any more dangerous than before, since so many people used them without incident on a daily basis. Everyone groaned and complained that they weren't planning on reconsidering the use of stairs, but the excitement and mild shock of the accident had made them tractable. The students found seats on the stairs, scrunching together and grimacing, as their teacher discussed base rates.



At any given time, more than half of the aurors stationed at the Tower were positioned in the Receiving Room. At night and in the wee hours, the flow of patients transported by individual Safety Sticks or one of the two dozen fixed Safety Poles slowed significantly, as trauma cases were replaced by scheduled rejuvenations, long-term illness treatments, and the highly complex changes in

magical nature that the Tower made possible (such as restoring vampires and lycanthropes). During those hours, there might be as few as twenty aurors in the Receiving Room.

Weekday afternoons, on the other hand, were often quite busy, and a full fifty aurors were bustling around the reception area. The vast majority were native British aurors, as usual, although an increasing number of foreign aurors were being posted at the Tower, as well. Exceptional Transfiguration skills were considered the most important asset in any potential Tower auror, as well as warding, scanning, and a general aptitude for learning new magics. Foreign aurors – and healers, too – were ready, willing, and able to assist in the implementation of the Treaty for Health and Life, and so they were made welcome... after passing an assessment by the Director of the DMLE, Cedric Diggory, and by the head of Tower security, Alastor Moody. It was only fair to permit their countries to send them, but they still had to meet the Tower's high standards.

Political considerations made their inclusion a smart move, anyway. As new countries joined, and their citizens saw the physical disabilities of their neighbors vanish and magical hospitals empty, replaced by a stream of fresh-faced, healthy, and delighted young witches and wizards, it was important to make sure that each state felt fully invested in the process, and that the entire clinic operation be as transparent as possible in order to allay suspicion.

Fairness and politics aside, the foreigners were necessary. There were just too many sick, wounded, and elderly for the British aurors to handle – even with the aggressive recruiting that had doubled their ranks. Every hour of every day, aurors were needed for the reception squad, the scanning squad, the chizpurple squad, the traffic squad, and the detector squad – plus those additional aurors who simply remained vigilant and directed traffic. One experienced and level-headed auror – in short supply, these days – was also necessary to be the cryptically-named “Mayor of Terminus,” usually just called the “Terminus,” for any given shift. The Terminus was in command of the Receiving Room, and the post had become highly sought-after in recent years.

This particular Friday afternoon, forty-two aurors were on duty in the Receiving Room. The cavernous hall, which had seemed

silly in its enormous scale when the Tower opened, was bustling with people working efficiently. Every ten or twenty seconds, a new arrival would spin into place in an empty spot, flickering with red as he or she was rendered unconscious, and an auror trained in triage would swoop in, visually inspect them, cast a quick scan, and check their ABCs (airway, breathing, circulation). If there was no pressing emergency – and there usually wasn't – then the patient would be passed off to a pair of colleagues, who would start the autonomous patient record and begin security scans. The patient record, a specialized Quotes Quill and pre-printed parchment form, followed the patient and filled in information obediently after the scans as bottled chizpurples were used to ferret out any magical items or spells that the scanners had missed. Wands and any dangerous contraband were confiscated and bagged and tagged. Then the patient was floated on into the Tower proper, where the real work could begin (and sometimes continue, holding stable long into the night, waiting for Harry to come inspect the healing).

They'd already caught Moody once, today, but everyone was still doing their best work, highly conscious of the fact that he would sometimes make more than one attempt to breach security. Last year, he'd tried thirty-two separate times in a single twenty-four-hour period, and his last attempt had taken the form of conjoined twins, one of whom was apparently in cardiac arrest, trying to smuggle in a wand.

He wasn't the only security concern, either. There were frequent intoxicated people "running safety," occasional attempts at organized protests, and even the rare assassin or two.

Truly novel attacks were rare. That may be why this one was so successful at disrupting the Receiving Room.

Three children spun into existence, two crouching over a third bloody body for a moment, before they all fell limp. Half a heartbeat later, a large burlap sack and a big mahogany cabinet both erupted from the pocket of the injured child, sprouting sideways as though they were the fruit of some monstrous plant in the injured child's garments. And half a heartbeat after that, the doxies trapped inside of the bag burst free.

Harry Madagascar was Terminus this afternoon, and he was highly competent. His wand already was in his hand before the

sack had finished its emergence, and his eyes flickered around the room to pick out additional threats and to make sure everyone was on task. They were: two aurors physically moved to block the golden entrance into the Tower proper, calling out a warning to the guards within, who rolled the barrier into place; the reception squad and scanning squad focused on shielding and stabilizing their patients; the chizpurple squad handled incoming patients in the same way; and everyone else concentrated on the threat. It appeared to be an isolated attack, rather than a distraction – no one was trying to make a break for it, and the various wards and jinxes on the Room all seemed to be functional. The cabinet that had also sprung from the child's clothes seemed to be inert, thank Merlin.

However minor the threat, two dozen doxies had escaped from the bag in the few seconds before an auror hit it with an *Immobilus*, containing the rest of them. And unfortunately for the annoyed aurors, the escapees scattered throughout the room. Biting Faeries, as they were also known, were nasty little pests... covered in coarse “hairs” of black chitin, they had shiny brown beetle-wings and a hard little nugget for a head. They were small and didn't do much damage when they bit, but they were venomous. Each needle-like tooth was covered in an oily venom; doxies had two rows of them at any time, shedding one row and growing another each month. Not particularly fearsome creatures, although their venom could cause serious, persistent swelling if left untreated. Doxycide was the usual treatment, since the blasted critters were so hard to hit.

Madagascar kept a careful watch as the situation was dealt with by the professionals in the Receiving Room. No additional instructions seemed to be necessary, as the aurors on task were ably freezing or killing each doxy. They were quick and agile beasts, and they managed to bite a few people as they buzzed around the room, whipping and weaving to avoid attacks, but there was never any real threat. *Maybe just a prank*, Madagascar thought. Was that lazy thinking? How could someone benefit from this? As a diversion, while an assassination attempt was underway? Well, that wasn't his look-out: he was Terminus, and so he just needed to wrap this up as soon as possible. The bloody little things were zipping around and trying to find places to hide for a moment, so they could bite.



Perhaps seven or eight minutes later, the last elusive doxy was obliterated with a short-range blast of fire by an angry auror named Pilar. She'd been keeping a badly-injured older woman stable during the fight, but had seen an opportunity to end the conflict before it dragged on any further. She'd swept up her wand, cast her curse, and returned her wand to her patient in the span of a moment... but it was still a bad risk. Outside of the Tower, and without whatever wandless magic Harry Potter used to complete the Higher Transfiguration spells within its walls, Transfiguration sickness could have caused serious problems even in the span of that moment. Madagascar would have to scold her.

*No apparent remaining threats*, he thought, glancing around the room again. *But that kid is going to pay for this prank. Unless – for whatever insane reason – he had some valid excuse.*

"Harry!" called out Geraldine Stein, an auror normally on chizpurple duty whom he'd once taken out for a quiet drink. She was standing next to the burlap sack, looking inside at the frozen pests that hadn't escaped. "Mr. Madagascar, sir!" she corrected herself immediately. He didn't believe anyone would actually think she was being too familiar, but Stein was a careful woman. "The rest of the doxies are dying!"

*Poison, gaseous attack, trap* – his mind span through some possibilities, and he opened his mouth. Then it snapped shut as he realized. "Transfiguration sickness," he called to her. "That's how they got here and were triggered... they were Transfigured into something small, and the transfiguration was dispelled when the caster was stunned. That means it was someone here. Better put up the first precaution, though, just in case. Bubblehead the three kids. And keep a close eye on them... one of them did this stupid prank." He paused, eyeing the cabinet. "And seal that piece of furniture, too."

Stein followed through on his commands, putting the Bubblehead Charm on the three unconscious teenagers and putting up the air ward of the first precaution to make sure that anything dangerous didn't spread any further. Then she touched her wand to the large wooden cabinet, dark wood with scrollwork along the top, that had also made the trip, and cast a full-strength *Collopor-tus*. Whatever strange attack the cabinet was intended to convey, it was now locked-up.

Madagascar glanced around the Receiving Room, looking for any other threats. He didn't see any. Just a swift of aurors all huddled or standing, attending to their patients. They needed to get everything clear and moving again, or the incoming injured were going to start backing up in such great of numbers that those present wouldn't be able to care for them.

"All clear, I think," said Gregor Nimue, who was standing by the door, looking bored. His arms were crossed, and his wand dangled casually from loose fingers.

"Give the knock, then," said Madagascar. His voice was a bit short, since he didn't particularly like Nimue. The man regarded himself as too good for his current circumstances, since he was competent and experienced, but had been stuck at the bottom of the duty roster for years. *Never knew that quadruple pay was going to cost so much, down the line, did you?*, thought Madagascar. *Serves you right.*

Nimue shrugged, and went to the heavy silver plate that had been rolled into place across the Tower entrance by the door guards just inside. He knocked three times, then five times. It sounded like someone was thumping on the bottom of some immense cauldron. After a response from within, Nimue knocked two more times.

The door didn't open, and Nimue looked even more annoyed as he realized something.

"What is it, Gregor?" Madagascar asked, frowning.

The older auror scowled. "This is the same alert pattern as earlier this month, when those protesters overwhelmed the guard in Bloemfontein and tried to just send as many Muggles through as possible, to swamp us with bodies. Diggory didn't change it, and now I bet they're realizing that."

"Well, they'll need to fix that protocol, I suppose," said Madagascar, trying not to lay blame anywhere – not in such a public way, that is. *He* certainly didn't want *his* career to dead-end, just because he didn't have enough sense to shut up. He was going to add something else, but at that moment a silvery bat flapped its way out of some unknowable place and into sight right in front of his face. Its leathery, translucent wings shed a glittering mist as it flew in place, and spoke in the voice of Director Diggory: "What is going on?"

Madagascar looked around the room, hesitating, then said resolutely, "We gave the correct knock, Mr. Diggory, I'm sure of it. The situation is under control."

The bat flapped out of existence, only to return a moment later, saying, "Monkey monkey monkey."

He sighed and replied, "I like bananas, dress me like a doll." The call-and-response phrases were supposedly randomly generated by Mad-Eye Moody using funny little black-and-white cubes and a dictionary, but all the aurors were certain that he kept rolling the cubes until he got a sufficiently embarrassing result.

"Sir... look at this," said Auror Stein. She was kneeling down next to the injured boy in the trio of teenagers who had started this mess, a bottle of chizpurples in one hand. She held up a signal abacus in the other, just like the ones possessed by senior aurors. "Someone must have forgotten to report a loss, sir."

"And *that*," said Nimue, from the other side of the room, "is a Vanishing Cabinet. That boy with the doxies and abacus seems to have had quite a plan." He clucked his tongue. "And it almost worked," he added, even though the scheme plainly had not even come *close* to working.

"There's a note here, too, sir," said Stein. She'd set down the abacus, and had a tightly-folded piece of parchment. She glanced up at Madagascar, raising her eyebrows significantly. "It's in code."

"Put the three kids under arrest," said Madagascar, sighing. Four aurors surrounded them. He rubbed his eyes with his off hand. At least it didn't seem like it was another Moody attack. Once in a day was enough. Although it *had* been fun to give Pip credit, since no one saw Madagascar cast the stunner. Madagascar grinned, remembering, as the door guards rolled back the silver plate blocking the Tower. The enchanted barrier scraped the stone as it rolled, as if it was reluctant to be moved.

J.C. Kraeme, one of the guards, came to stand in the open doorway, still in the Tower. She had her bubbler in hand, and she reported into it with a wry tone, "There are prisoners! And they're *students*!" She lowered the bubbler, looking at the big dresser, the teenagers sealed off with Transfiguration precautions, the burlap sack full of dead doxies, and the twenty-four deceased ones littering the Receiving Room.. "What in Merlin's name is going on here, Mr. Madagascar?"



*NOTE: This is the complete contents of the parchment that Stein found in Sammy’s pocket:*

*3ztuccnimechlxbguhvpesyvbsuxihryccmcptwkxcfmbpemv  
jvhahxdwvqmbbrfwfkkiwbivplvogiyeelwalvjmvaewdiibeexbvr  
totewrkecbxrfuukepjgjsfjkaxdmcztbafmnqfstfkbtnxkmssurna*

## Chapter four

# Contra

*Glewlywd Gavaelwaur bringt the wægnwright before Merlin, and the man prostravit. “Wo,” said the wægnwright. “Pere is a greet vates in my village, and he hath foretold that my wyf will become the wyf of Thegn Edmund the Black. How meahte this be prevented? How meahte this be stoppjed?” Merlin was greatly wroth, and seiden, “Stopje þy spittle! Know you not that alle prophetie is true, ac it be seied to be unsure? Time hath but a single praw for alle its span. Et quod dicitur erit quod do not differ by even so much as a grain of sand. Mannfully þou must endure þy fate, and do not clamour, lest þee hasten it.”*

—Harry Lowe, *The Transmygracioun*, passus decimus

*Students?*

Harry Potter-Evans-Verres, Percy Weasley, Haddad, Podrut, and Mafalda Hopkirk relaxed. Amelia Bones, Cedric Diggory, Hedley Kwannon, Simon Smith, and Alastor Moody did not.

Harry sighed. “If it’s all secure, and it was just students trying to Gryffindor their way into someplace secure, then let’s finish up here. We were talking about the Seyhan thing.”

Diggory handed his bubbler to Auror Kwannon, gesturing with his other hand at the door. “Keep tabs on things, and let me know if they need help sorting through the backlog in Receiving. Oh, and have someone notify the Headmistress, since it’s students. This is happening too often.” She nodded and spent a few moments dispelling the wards on the door until she was able to quietly exit, small mirror in hand.

Everyone else sat down around the meeting table again, gathering up parchments where they'd been scattered. Harry tapped his finger thoughtfully, and said, "All right... so Moody will take the lead in planning out how to handle this – the logistics of the fake body. This could badly hurt us if it gets out, increasing the paranoia and driving even more people into the Independents, so not a word about this outside of this room."

He turned to regard Simon Smith. "That means with Hermione, too. I'll discuss it with her the next time I see her – tonight, I think – and we'll work out how to handle this with the Returned." He wasn't actually worried about any leaks from them; the loyalty and security of the Returned was so absolute in its nature that it approached the surety of magical vows. It wasn't quite a cult, but something about the nature of their suffering and redemption instilled in them an otherworldly certainty in Hermione's judgment and goodness. "And I'll also work out with her how to put some distance between you guys and the Tower."

Smith nodded. "She will also want to talk with Madame Bones," he said. "Charlevoix has received word from Ministre Isidore about a possible pen for Dementors in Siberia. We understand that there could be political consequences when we crush it, and we want to minimize that."

"We might be able to use that, actually," said Madame Bones, wrinkling her smooth brow thoughtfully. She lifted a hand to curtail Smith before he could object, adding, "Although I know you won't delay in acting by even one minute, of course. Nor should you."

She turned to Harry. "Things are coming to a turning point, I think, Harry. Draco and Narcissa are pushing their treaty with as much energy as they can muster, warning that every state must choose between us and them. Well, not 'them' in as many words – they're saying it's the only way to prevent invasion. Your 'bend like the willow' strategy may be reaching the end of its usefulness... I say we start pushing back a little more. We can't let the Malfoys define us in the eyes of world powers. And if Hermione is going to back off on her tours and advocacy, then it's especially important that we speak for ourselves."

"She's right, Potter," said Moody, scratching the scalp of today's body. "The time for the soft sell is over, especially if

you can't have the Goddess out there selling us to the world. You've been telling us you have some 'breakthroughs' that will end Malfoy's little rebellion for years, and in the meantime the blonde little nit has become a hundredfold more threatening to your goals."

"Let's cut off distribution of Malfoy's newsletter, at least," chimed in Diggory. "He uses our Vanishing Rooms to trans-ship to the Americas, Eastern Europe, Africa, and the Ten Thousand. If we just cut off those lines, then it's going to be bloody hard for him to get his nonsense out there. He'll be back to the old ways. Even you've called this a war... let's really get our army moving!"

"I wouldn't rely too much on Vanishing Rooms staying our own exclusive property," said Harry. "Plenty of people have all kinds of opportunity to examine the Rooms in other states, and it wasn't that much of a leap from Vanishing Cabinets. A few tweaks to the *Passus* and they've got it – assuming they haven't stolen the incantations already."

Moody harrumphed his agreement. "At least twelve questionable researchers on staff in Extension Establishment and Pairing Partnership alone." He pointed a crooked finger at Mafalda Hopkirk. "The Unspeakables leak like a sieve." She scowled, cheeks flushing, but Moody was already turning back to Harry. "And you have that Umbridge toad in and out of here like she owns the place! I don't know what you're doing with all that Muggle rubbish in Pairing Partnership, churning out reams of squiggly lines while casting first-year cantrips, but if it's important enough for you to be researching yourself, then Umbridge shouldn't be allowed anywhere near it. She shouldn't even know it *exists*!"

"You don't know her value," said Harry. "I do. She and the other people you suspect – *suspect*, since you don't have a shred of evidence or you'd already have told me – are all essential. The risk to operational security is outweighed by our need for speed... they have to work all the harder to make themselves useful to me, after all. In a month, we'll be able to put the sliceboxes to use properly, and that's only because of the help of some of your 'questionable researchers.'" He turned back to Diggory. "And you're not cutting off freedom of the press, either. Everyone gets to *say* whatever they want."

“That doesn’t stop us from replying, at least,” said Diggory. A frown appeared on his ridiculously handsome face.

He cut off the train of thought before it could proceed much further. “Fair point. We have regular announcements and releases in *The Prophet*, but it might shift the Overton window more if we also had our own newsletter. Percy, maybe you could come up with a few names on who might head that up?”

Weasley nodded, making notes on the parchment in front of him. “I have a few people in mind.”

“Thank Merlin for small favors,” grouched Bones. “I’d like one of my people on that, too.”

“Malfoy’s fired off two bombs just last month, and this one’s talking about ‘freedom of the press,’ “ muttered Moody, disgruntled with where they’d left the topic. “Going to need metal detectors on the Tower entrance, soon. Not a bad thought, actually... we can do that, now, with that Loony Leaf...” He trailed off, thinking.

Harry glanced at the agenda in front of him. “Moving on, the Westphalians are asking for us to publicly cut all financial ties with Cyprus – I’m guessing that would be to impress Cappadocia with their clout, for whatever reason – and for ‘equality in trade.’”

“In other words, we drop all tariffs and pressure others to do so, as well,” said Bones. “Old hat from them. They’ve been demanding it for a century.”

“Yes, and it would be a huge victory if Hig got us to agree to that... it would put the Treaty over the top with them, and increase his personal prestige. If we’re cultivating him, that would make sense,” mused Weasley. “A big hit to your own popularity here at home, but it would be in sectors where we can afford the loss.”

“He also wants us to send them some arithmancers to train them in progressive taxation,” said Harry, smiling. “The secret to our wealth. But if we agree to that... well, Hig has laid that out as non-negotiable before they’ll recommend the Treaty.”

“Once they recommend it, it’s as good as passed in the United States and Canada,” commented Haddad. The Chief Goldsmith pulled an ornate snuffbox from a small pocket in his jacket, loading the crook of his index finger with a pinch. “Probably a few other countries in the Americas, as well.”



“Yes, it’s common knowledge they own the north, sure enough,” said Bones, thoughtfully. “But Dumbledore thought – and I agree with him – that they could swing almost all of the Americas around like a toy kneazle. He was uncomfortable with that aspect of American affairs, even as he needed to work with their people in the Confederation to keep things in check.”

“Yes, I’m inclined to agree. I think we should make the deal, if we can. We’ll get on the wing to other major signatories, and make sure we have a majority in favor, though,” Harry said. “If we jump on this, it might forestall them using the Independent situation even more to their advantage. I honestly still think they could go either way. We need to lock the Council down... their intelligence operation is invaluable. Particularly given our current situation. We can worry about dismantling it after we understand what we’re up against.”

“Even with the mysterious ‘Three’ in play,” asked Moody, “they’d still consider staying neutral?”

“There are some people in the Council who like the idea of three world coalitions – Independents, Health and Life, and Westphalia. Councilor Strongbound has been trying to put together enough votes to get Westphalia to reject any motion to endorse us, playing it as another move by imperialist Britain to take control. He’s echoing a lot of Malfoy talk.” Harry said. “Hig leads the majority there, but he doesn’t own the Council of Westphalia as thoroughly as they own the politics of the States. He’s with us, I think, but he’s not everyone.”

One of the doors opened, and Kraeme entered the room, Pip at her side. He had a slip of parchment in hand. “Sir? We thought you should see this. One of the intruders today had it, but it doesn’t appear to be any language we recognize.”

“A code, or just another part of the prank meant to look like a code,” added Kraeme. “They had a sackful of transfigured doxies and a transfigured Vanishing Cabinet, too. And one of these,” she said, holding up a small wooden abacus.

“Someone’s in *trouble*,” said Harry, whistling and raising his eyebrows. “Okay, they got my attention. Bring them in here, and ask the Headmistress to join us if she’s free.” He glanced around. “I think we’ve covered nearly everything – everything high-security,

anyway. Percy will have some owls out to everyone about a few more things, but it's nothing we can't solve later or at a distance. Bones, you'll be in Norden for a week from tomorrow, yes?" She nodded as she got to her feet, shuffling parchments into a pile. "I'll owl you about some things, then."

Everyone departed their separate ways, exchanging cordial pleasantries as they did so. Most headed to the entrance to the Tower, so they could get a portkey out of Hogwarts, while Podrut went back to Material Methods. Moody stayed behind long enough to kill a fly he'd noticed in the room with a well-placed curse, then went to check out the situation in the Receiving Room.

While Kraeme and Pip went to go bring in the students that had been taken prisoner – placed under arrest? what was the proper terminology? – Harry examined the slip of parchment.

*3ztuccnimechlxbguhvpesyvbsuxihryccmcptwkcxfmbpemu  
jvahahxdwvqmbbrfwfkkiwbivplvogiyeelwalvjmvaewdiibeexbvr  
totewrkecbxrifuukepjgjsfjkaædmcztbafmnqfstfbtñækmssurna*

Could he take the time to break this? It would be fun, but he hadn't done cryptography for years... not since he and Draco had come up with the codes for the Bayesian Conspiracy, really. He smiled at the thought. The smile faltered as he glanced at his watch. Not much time left before he needed to get to the clinic and finish off the Transfigurations that were in progress or in holding. The patients might mostly be in magical sleep, unconscious of the passage of time, but the healers on duty were not so lucky. Clinic time was starting to dominate his daily schedule... they were going to have to change protocol, and figure out some way for him to multitask. The Stone required no concentration or effort from him, after all.

Giving the Stone to someone else – anyone other than Hermione – was an impossibility, of course.

Well, he had a few minutes, anyway. He took a mechanical pencil from his pocket, turned his agenda over to use as scrap paper, and got to work.

The opening digits were clearly significant in some way. Was it a Caesar cypher, rotating through the alphabet 33 letters

(i.e. 7 letters) one way or another? That would be easy almost beyond belief, but this was Magical Britain, and maths hadn't yet penetrated very deep. Easy enough to check.

*abjjuptlj...* no, that wasn't it, clearly. The other way didn't yield up anything intelligible, either.

He counted the letter frequency. Every letter in the alphabet appeared at least once in the 156-letter message, which reduced the likelihood that it was a rotation cypher or a simple substitution. If there were spacing between letters, he could have picked out the single-letter words to help rule out some possibilities, but this was just an unbroken string – no punctuation, either.

He mapped ETAOIN onto the message's six most common letters, but again there was no discernable pattern.

Harry paused for a moment. What were some other novice codes? Or should he take a different tact and assume this was someone who knew what they were doing? He'd once thought about making a magical Enigma machine, using custom-enchanted quills – the theory behind giving quills specific instructions for behavior predicated on outside input was voluminous, and it had intrigued him with the possibilities of magical computing, once. Harry strained to remember... had he ever discussed it with Draco?

No, this was found on students. Even if someone skilled at cryptography had designed this code, it was probably still simple enough for a student to decipher with materials at hand. A one-time pad was a good possibility, given the digits at the start of the code. In that case, the code was unbreakable without the thirty-third sheet from the necessary pad. He'd assume that wasn't the case for now, though. More fun this way.

A book cipher? The Bible would normally be the obvious choice – Genesis 3:3 would be the place to start – but that was unlikely in a magical society, where religion had limited currency.

Harry wasn't as well-equipped in the magical culture department as most other wizards, but a few alternatives sprang to mind: *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*, Goshawk's *Book of Spells*, Lowe's *The Muggle Conspiracy*, or something by Bagshot... there were a variety of books that had been bestsellers for so long they'd become ubiquitous. In that case, 33 might be the page number or the paragraph used for the encoding.

The door opened, and Harry looked up to see the pair of aurors back, three children floating along behind them. A healer came just behind, wand resting firmly on the chest of one of the airborne students. Harry felt a little unhappy with himself, even though he knew that was silly. He'd eliminated several possibilities, and it was clear the cryptogram was sufficiently sophisticated that he shouldn't have expected to break it with pencil and paper in only a few minutes. Still, he'd been expecting some... flash of insight. He sighed and put down the pencil, pulling on his fingerless gloves.

Kwannon was also dragging the burlap sack filled with dead doxies, which she left on the floor. She put an abacus and three wands on the table. "Left the Cabinet back in the Receiving Room... Chief Moody insisted," she said.

Harry nodded, approaching the third child. He rested a hand on the boy's leg, examining him. "He was injured?" he asked the healer.

"Yes," replied the man, a tall and slender fellow with a beaky nose. "Tears along the ligamentum teres hepatis and mesentery, cardiac contusions, pulmonary contusions, multiple fractures, and e-ax bleed. Fixed the brain, then got him trip-R, and everything bagged again. Trauma was all severe but typical. Subsumed some nodules on the thyroid, too, so he'll leave here with some salt. Kid's been stepped down for about... five minutes."

Harry nodded. Serious injuries from blunt trauma, including a ruptured liver, damaged intestine, bruising of the heart, and bleeding in the brain... the boy was lucky that the Tower and Safety Sticks existed. He probably wouldn't have died under Madame Pomfrey's care, but he'd probably have suffered brain damage.

He studied the boy's face, and then the faces of the two other students, but didn't recognize them. Hm.

"Auror Kwannon, were all four things – abacus, doxies, Vanishing Cabinet, and the note – found on the same student?"

The auror nodded. "Yes. The injured one, here. The other two seem to have just been the ones to break the Stick and bring him to the Receiving Room." She paused, lowering her head in thought until her shoulder-length black hair swung forward to cover her face, and then looked up again, asking, "How could this work, as an attack? The doxies are clever – you're stunned, and they revert

to their native Form and go on the attack for a few minutes, until they drop dead – but if you’ve figured out that much, you should also have figured out that the Vanishing Cabinet would also revert, and that you wouldn’t be able to smuggle it into the Tower.”

Harry couldn’t repress a slight smile. He smelled a clever plot from a novice plotter.

He lifted his hand from the injured boy. “You can go, Galen. Thank you.”

The healer lifted his wand from the boy and put it in his sleeve. “Certainly.” He paused. “I know this one, by the way. The patient. He came in with his brother, once. He’s Sammy Meroveni-Bowles.”

*Oh.*

Harry raised his eyebrows in surprise. “Scarlett Meroveni-Bowles is this boy’s mother?”

“Yes,” said the healer, as he headed out the door. “The one always ranting about the Treaty in letters to *The Prophet*.”

“She is famous for being a bit of a crackpot about that, isn’t she? Hm. Wait, Galen... would you mind asking someone on the door to get me whichever Arithmancy books available in the library on cryptography?” Harry paused. “There should be at least... two, if I remember correctly. Although there might have been new acquisitions.”



As it happened, the books were unnecessary. By the time Pip appeared at the door with four books in hand, fifteen minutes later, the puzzle was solved.

Harry was able to draw the square from memory: the *tabula recta*, one of the most basic and famous ways to use a running-key cipher. It was almost five hundred years old, and fairly famous among cryptographers: a table that was 26 letters tall and 26 letters long, with each row and column beginning one letter further in the alphabet (the first row started A, B, C ... , the second column was B, C, D ..., etc). It was a simple and elementary way to use a specific key to encode your text.

There was no 33rd part to the Treaty for Health and Life, and so Harry guessed that the third part of the third section – that

|   | A | B | C | D | E | F | G | H | I | J | K | L | M | N | O | P | Q | R | S | T | U | V | W | X | Y | Z |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| A | A | B | C | D | E | F | G | H | I | J | K | L | M | N | O | P | Q | R | S | T | U | V | W | X | Y | Z |
| B | B | C | D | E | F | G | H | I | J | K | L | M | N | O | P | Q | R | S | T | U | V | W | X | Y | Z | A |
| C | C | D | E | F | G | H | I | J | K | L | M | N | O | P | Q | R | S | T | U | V | W | X | Y | Z | A | B |
| D | D | E | F | G | H | I | J | K | L | M | N | O | P | Q | R | S | T | U | V | W | X | Y | Z | A | B | C |
| E | E | F | G | H | I | J | K | L | M | N | O | P | Q | R | S | T | U | V | W | X | Y | Z | A | B | C | D |
| F | F | G | H | I | J | K | L | M | N | O | P | Q | R | S | T | U | V | W | X | Y | Z | A | B | C | D | E |
| G | G | H | I | J | K | L | M | N | O | P | Q | R | S | T | U | V | W | X | Y | Z | A | B | C | D | E | F |
| H | H | I | J | K | L | M | N | O | P | Q | R | S | T | U | V | W | X | Y | Z | A | B | C | D | E | F | G |
| I | I | J | K | L | M | N | O | P | Q | R | S | T | U | V | W | X | Y | Z | A | B | C | D | E | F | G | H |
| J | J | K | L | M | N | O | P | Q | R | S | T | U | V | W | X | Y | Z | A | B | C | D | E | F | G | H | I |
| K | K | L | M | N | O | P | Q | R | S | T | U | V | W | X | Y | Z | A | B | C | D | E | F | G | H | I | J |
| L | L | M | N | O | P | Q | R | S | T | U | V | W | X | Y | Z | A | B | C | D | E | F | G | H | I | J | K |
| M | M | N | O | P | Q | R | S | T | U | V | W | X | Y | Z | A | B | C | D | E | F | G | H | I | J | K | L |
| N | N | O | P | Q | R | S | T | U | V | W | X | Y | Z | A | B | C | D | E | F | G | H | I | J | K | L | M |
| O | O | P | Q | R | S | T | U | V | W | X | Y | Z | A | B | C | D | E | F | G | H | I | J | K | L | M | N |
| P | P | Q | R | S | T | U | V | W | X | Y | Z | A | B | C | D | E | F | G | H | I | J | K | L | M | N | O |
| Q | Q | R | S | T | U | V | W | X | Y | Z | A | B | C | D | E | F | G | H | I | J | K | L | M | N | O | P |
| R | R | S | T | U | V | W | X | Y | Z | A | B | C | D | E | F | G | H | I | J | K | L | M | N | O | P | Q |
| S | S | T | U | V | W | X | Y | Z | A | B | C | D | E | F | G | H | I | J | K | L | M | N | O | P | Q | R |
| T | T | U | V | W | X | Y | Z | A | B | C | D | E | F | G | H | I | J | K | L | M | N | O | P | Q | R | S |
| U | U | V | W | X | Y | Z | A | B | C | D | E | F | G | H | I | J | K | L | M | N | O | P | Q | R | S | T |
| V | V | W | X | Y | Z | A | B | C | D | E | F | G | H | I | J | K | L | M | N | O | P | Q | R | S | T | U |
| W | W | X | Y | Z | A | B | C | D | E | F | G | H | I | J | K | L | M | N | O | P | Q | R | S | T | U | V |
| X | X | Y | Z | A | B | C | D | E | F | G | H | I | J | K | L | M | N | O | P | Q | R | S | T | U | V | W |
| Y | Y | Z | A | B | C | D | E | F | G | H | I | J | K | L | M | N | O | P | Q | R | S | T | U | V | W | X |
| Z | Z | A | B | C | D | E | F | G | H | I | J | K | L | M | N | O | P | Q | R | S | T | U | V | W | X | Y |

is, 3.3 – was the indicated key. It took less than a minute to verify with the first six letters of the cryptograph, moving letter by letter through the key. He looked in the *tabula recta* for the A row, then located the cyphertext letter T in that row. That T was in column T, and so the first decoded letter was T. Next he found the coded U in row N, resulting in an H.

*3ztuccnimechlxbguhvpesyvbsuxihryccmcptwkcxfmbpemu  
jwahaxdwqmbbrfwfkkiiwbivplvogiyeelwalvjmvaeewdiibeexbvr  
totewrkecbxrfuukepjgjsfjkaædmæztbafmnqfstfkbtnækmssurna*

*Any attempt to sabotage, disrupt, delay, repurpose, alter, or otherwise  
interfere with the operations of the aforementioned transport  
regardless of whether or not said sabotage, disruption, delay,*

It only took three letters to know he was correct, as the message began:

*T H E*

“Sir? Galen said you asked for these?” asked Pip. He frowned as he entered the room. “Lawrence Bradwian and Annabeth Dankgesang... I hope they’re not in trouble, sir?”

“Well...” answered Harry, moving his finger up and down the table of letters.

*T H E C U P I S N O T E N O U G H*

“...I think they’re in a great deal of trouble, indeed.”





## Interlude

# Shíchínín

*April 15th, 1999*  
*Luuq, Somalia*

“Drop your guns!” shouted Neville, leaping through the window.

“Guns are stupid!” shouted Fred, leaping in next to him.

“Your mother is a hamster and something something elderberries!” shouted George, leaping in at Neville’s other side.

“That’s not even close to being right, George! *Phlogisticate!*” said Neville, as he swept his wand across to one of the eight soldiers.

The soldiers were tough: hardened Ogaden warriors who had been fighting for years. It would be hard to say what their cause really was: independence for their clans; the unity of the Ogaden regions in Somalia and Ethiopia; or personal power. But whatever the cause, they had spent most of their recent time intimidating, beating, or shooting the residents of local villages. They were hard men, and used to violence. And so while they were surprised when white men in black dresses jumped through the window and began waving sticks, there was an easy solution at hand. They raised their rifles.

*Click. Click. Click. Click. Click. Click. Click. Click.*

The Extinguishing Charm suppressed small fires. That included small chemical fires. That included the ignition of the primer in the 5.56×45mm NATO cartridges in the soldier’s guns.

The two worlds were separated, but not by that much. The Záh Kardja used flamethrowers during Grindelwald’s War, and many wizards were constantly scrutinizing the Muggle world – if only so

that they could disguise themselves better (or make ironic devices, like a lighter that turns off lights). Unfortunately for Smith and Wesson, guns happened to be unusually easy to disable with simple and quick magics.

“References are only funny—” said George.

“—if everyone is in on the joke,” completed Fred. The twins snapped their fingers at the front and rear doors to the store, and both locks clicked audibly closed.

“The *exact opposite* is true... it’s funnier if only a few people understand what’s going on,” retorted Neville. “*Stupefy! Stupefy!*”

“Ikksa jir!” screamed one soldier, still pointing his gun at Neville and wildly pulling the trigger, even as two of his companions fell to the ground, shivering with red energies. A fourth soldier barked at another, “Wac caawimaad!”, as he threw down his own gun and pulled a knife. It was a short blade with a tape-wrapped handle; the cutting edge was concave with long use and frequent sharpening. The Ogaden fighter hefted it lightly in one hand, and advanced, his face hard.

“*Stupefy!*” cast George and Fred in unison, and the knife-wielding soldier slouched sideways, stunned. Four of the five remaining soldiers dropped their guns and raised their hands, one pleading, “Joogso, sixir, joogso!” The fifth combatant appeared too terrified to do anything more than pull the trigger on his useless gun again and again.

The three wizards stunned them all, methodically and easily. The entire encounter was finished within a minute.

The work was easy, as it always was when the three magical knuckleheads zipped somewhere on the globe to be superheroes around Muggles. They were skilled Hit Wizards backed by the most powerful wizard and most powerful organization on the globe, and so naturally there wasn’t much risk. If they did get in trouble, they’d teleport out and call in like... fifty more guys. It was like the SAS fighting toddlers, and the most serious danger to the trio was the terrible quality of their own jokes. Example: they’d called their trio the “Shichinin” (七人, or “Seven People”) because they really loved a Kurosawa movie Harry had once shown them, and because Fred and George were certain that “our enemies will think there’s four more of us somewhere!”

After they'd finished stunning the soldiers, Neville, Fred, and George took their guns and ammunition, feeding them into pouches designated for that purpose (whose extra-dimensional space must be positively bulging with tens of thousands of pounds' worth of armaments at this point), and Fred bubbled an Obliviator squad. It wasn't that the three of them couldn't have done the False Memory Charms, of course, but rather that the professionals had enormous experience in designing plausible multi-cultural explanations for bewildering events. They could even design the new memories to serve a larger purpose. In this case, the new memories would encourage these soldiers to abandon armed conflict and take up a peaceful political movement within Muggle Somalia.

The Obliviators were quite good at handling these situations. The usual method was to create a tragic and deeply affecting past event, prolonged discussion, and personal agreement for each participant. In Kosovo, the Obliviators had helped the Shichinin turn an entire division of the State Security Service of Yugoslavia away from violence by crafting a fictional encounter where two of their armed squads were ordered to kill an Albanian family who'd refused to leave their home. A little girl from the family made an impassioned speech and offered them flowers, instead, and all the members of that squad remembered being moved to tears and vowing to preserve the lives of the people above all else.

Harry had called it "weaponizing cognitive dissonance" when he'd given them their mission, after a considerable speech about how it was monstrously unethical to simply ignore the massacres that took place on a regular basis in the Muggle world.

"These are fancy guns," said Fred, examining the last rifle. He'd grown to be tall and handsome, with a thick mop of reddish-brown hair and a strong jaw. "Very shiny and new." He threw it to George, who caught it and squinted at it closely.

"We've been seeing a lot of fancy guns, lately," said George, nodding. George had also grown to be tall and handsome, although – unlike his brother – he had a strong jaw and a thick mop of reddish-brown hair. He glanced at Neville. "Remember the guns we got off those fellows in Jijiga?"

Fred spoke to the pouch in his hand: "Gun from Jijiga warehouse." When a stock appeared at the mouth of the pouch, Fred

grabbed it and pulled a rifle free. The mouth of the pouch chewed toothlessly at the gun as it emerged, the lips undulating around the weapon. It was a rifle just like the one in George's hand: matte black metal with a plastic-looking black stock. It looked much more modern than the cheap Chinese or Eastern European guns they usually found (mostly AK-47s or variants).

Neville sat on a stack of plastic-wrapped soda flats, frowning. "Where is the ONLF getting these guns?"

"Let's ask them! Fred, do you speak Somali?" asked George.

"Why no, George. Say, do *you* speak Somali?" said Fred.

"I used to, Fred, but I'm afraid being forced to watch boring movies where mustachioed men bang coconuts together has quite driven it out of my head," said George, sadly.

"That's a shame, George."

"A terrible tragedy, Fred."

"Maybe quoting constantly about dead parrots will help bring the knowledge back, George."

"Why of course, Fred! That's the ticket! That won't be extremely annoying at all!"

"You just don't appreciate true genius," said Neville, sourly. The wiry young man had a prominent nose and flashing green eyes. He gestured for the rifle, and George threw it over to him. Neville spoke to his own pouch. "Gun encyclopedia."

"True genius is repeating the same 'nudge nudge wink wink' line over and over, George."

"Quite right, Fred! And singing songs about lumberjacks!"

"AK-101," said Neville, comparing a photograph in *The Illustrated World Encyclopedia of Guns* with the rifle in his hand. "Oh, bloody hell, it says that right on the barrel. And there's a date. 1999... these are brand new. '...'... these are Russian, not cheap knock-offs."

"The OLNf is getting monies from Egypt—" said Fred, more seriously.

"—but where did they find someone to sell them these?" said George.

"Those Eritrean blokes had fancy rifles, too. The ones shooting civilians in Maidema?" said Fred.

“Someone is aggravating these wars, on purpose or for profit,” said George, scowling.

“You’re thinking what I’m thinking?” Neville asked, feeding gun and book back into his pouch.

“Find the source of the fellow willing to sell the best hardware to the worst people—” said George.

“—and cut off the supply, and maybe his hands too—” said Fred.

“—and we might save a lot more lives,” finished Neville.



*April 16th, 1999*

*Jijiga, Somali Regional State, Ethiopia*

The rangeland surrounding the city of Jijiga was greener than it usually would have been; the drought had killed off eight of every ten grazing cattle, and the xerophytic acacia and crossberry on the gentle hills around the city had flourished in their absence. The warehouse was in a small complex of storage buildings to the north, past the airport and the dry riverbed. It was actually quite a pretty area – quiet, and far enough from the main city that there were almost none of the sun-bleached scraps of trash that were usually littered everywhere.

As they approached the building on foot, Fred and George paused to gather handfuls of crossberries, and some of the purple, star-shaped flowers. They would be a nice surprise for their mum. If there had been any observers, it would have looked an odd sight: the Shichinin were Disillusioned, and it would have seemed as though berries and flowers were vanishing into thin air, one by one.

Outside of their Mobile Mary, the trio was virtually always Disillusioned. It was an unfortunate necessity when working in any of the places in the world where white people were rare. There were other ways to avoid sticking out, of course, but this was the easiest.

Neville pushed open the simple door to the plain corrugated metal of the warehouse. It was unlocked, and the place looked deserted. The heavy metal shelves were mostly bare. The entire

place appeared just as it had when they'd left a week ago, except that the four stunned guards and Oblivator squad had gone, and the eight crates of automatic weapons had been disposed of (the large crates being rather too inconvenient for the Shichinin to take care of themselves).

Fred and George made a beeline for the two old card tables that had been set up in one corner. They'd remembered that there had been some paperwork there – shipping forms and tariff slips. Ethiopia had strict import and export controls, as well as high tariffs. The two wizards found something that appeared to be a ledger, with numbers in columns that they guessed represented wholesale costs, shipping fees, tariffs, label numbers, and the amounts spent on bribes (considered a reasonable business expense here, indeed as in most countries). The shipments were mostly small, but a few shipments had big numbers – hundreds of thousands of birr, the local Muggle money. Not knowing how much the guns cost or the exchange rate for... well, anything to anything else, really... it was hard to figure out if these were the shipments they wanted.

"We better take this," said Fred.

"Maybe someone can sort it out for us later," agreed George.

They fed the ledger into Fred's pouch, and checked in with Neville. He wasn't inside, but they soon found him. He was sorting through discarded shipping crates. Most of them had been reused or repurposed, but some of them were broken or damaged along the joints, and had been tossed in a haphazard pile outside the warehouse. Many of the more robust crates had handfuls of moldy hay still inside of them, which had once kept contents dry and cushioned.

"Find anything?" he asked, as he shifted broken-sided crates around.

"A ledger for recording transactions, we think," said George.

"Maybe just looks like it, though," added Fred as an afterthought.

"Oh ho... creeping quackgrass!" said Neville, delighted. He snatched up a loose handful of of withered brown stalks from one of the crates.

Fred and George looked at each other, trying to decide if he'd made that up. They decided that he hadn't.

"Of course it is," said Fred.

"We were about to say the same thing," said George.

"Bleeding obvious it's quacking creepgrass," snorted Fred.

"Embarrassing you even have to say anything, really," laughed George.

"No... there's some Siberian Spurge in here, too... *Euphorbia seguieriana*," mused Neville. "I wonder if this is a different wheatgrass, other than quackgrass."

"What do you feed a boffin like this?" Fred asked George.

"Nothing, you just let them swot and change their litter regularly," answered George.

"*Grass Genera*," commanded Neville to his pouch. He sat down with the resulting *The Grass Genera of the World*, and got to work.



At least an hour and four games of gobstones later, Neville made a hooting sound of glee. "I have it, gentlemen!" He leapt to his feet, and trotted over to where Fred and George were squatting, flicking marbles on a chalked-up board. Fred looked up, wiping his face, and asked, "Oh, good, we were worried it would take forever—"

"—and be extremely boring to even think about," said George, scooping up the gobstones.

"This hay is from the Don River valley in Russia!" said Neville, grinning hugely. "The only place where any *Agropyron* grows with the *Euphorbia seguieriana* subspecies *niciciana*! It's... it's..." He grasped for some suitable word. "It's elementary!" he declared, after a moment, lamely.

It might seem unbelievable that anyone could be such a nerd. And yet it was true.

"Then it's back to Abuja—" said Fred, referring to Nigeria's capital.

"—where we can catch a portkey back home for a nap and some brekky," finished George, referring to rashers and eggs.

"And then: Russia!" declared Neville, relishing the idea. He triumphantly held a handful of moldy hay.



*A nap and brekky later*

*Main Office, Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Ministry of Magic, London*

“Good evening, gentlemen,” said Director Diggory. He was examining a map on the wall, tracing routes with his finger as he consulted one book plucked from a large stack, and occasionally sipping a large mug of tea.

The young man was only a few years their senior, and they’d all once gone to school together. The twins had even had a nickname for Cedric: “Pretty Boy Diggory.” Director Diggory was aware of this, but – oddly – didn’t find the name all that hurtful. He’d had to grow a thick skin, since he was in command of aurors decades older than him. Fortunately for him, there were few complaints by this point, six months into his command. He benefited from a great many factors: he was shockingly good at his job, he was blisteringly handsome in a way that made Madame Bones blush, he was personal friends with the Tower, and he was from a house so Noble and Most Ancient that the *first* Chief Auror had been named Eldritch Diggory (who had gone on to be Minister for Magic).

“We brought in a temporary Muggle expert with the usual procedure, and sorted some of this out,” said Diggory, closing the book next to him and sitting at his desk. He brought his tea with him, setting it at his elbow. He picked up a sheet of parchment. “He’s identified the source of that crate: an airport in Russia in a town called Mikhaylovka, by way of Veshenskaya.”

“Ah, yes,” said George, wisely.

“We summer there,” said Fred.

“Lovely place,” said George.

“Wonderful flowers,” said Fred.

“Beautiful plumage,” said Neville.

The twins groaned.

“You three go to Russia. Bring Bogdanova with you; she’ll be able to help.”

The twins groaned a second time, and George flopped dramatically forward onto Diggory’s desk for a moment, leaning over the



Director's tea with exaggerated despair. Ilya Bogdanova had been the head of the Office for the Detection and Confiscation of Counterfeit Defensive Spells and Protective Objects until recently. She had survived the great purge of the Ministry in 1994, probably as an attempt to conciliate the Malfoy faction by leaving one of their number in a position of power, but she'd burned through all of her chances to turn over a new leaf, and had been demoted. Percy had told the twins at family dinner one Sunday that Bogdanova had been lucky to keep any sort of job at all, since they'd had dozens of complaints about her attitude.

"That's enough," said Diggory, scowling. "None of you knows Russia or Russian. Bogdanova speaks eight languages, and grew up there. She went to Durmstrang, and most of the people now in charge there were her classmates. If you want to do this thing, tracking down guns in one of the Independent states, you're taking her. Things are too tense with them right now, politically... we don't want to push them further away thanks to some idiots meddling in their affairs without a guide. I don't care what you think of personality. Take her... otherwise, you're off to Yemen, *tout de suite!*"

The Shichinin grumbled as they walked down the hall to the elevators, to head down to the ODCCDSPO's overflow offices.

"She's a pureblood fanatic from Russia who graduated Durmstrang, loves Malfoy, and just got demoted," said Neville, glumly. "We'll be there ten minutes before she stuns us in the back and feeds pieces of us to snargaluffs."

"All the more reason to take her along—" said George.

"—and expose her as a traitor," said Fred.

"But we'll be in pieces inside of snargaluffs!" objected Neville.

"When else will we have the opportunity to flush her out? She's kept her head down since she lost her position to Covenant, keeping quiet. Probably spending her time sending detailed reports to Narcissa and Draco Malfoy," said Fred.

"And relaxing in her off-hours, painting a series of tasteful landscapes in the blood of muggleborns," said George.

They stepped onto the elevator, accompanied by a flurry of interdepartmental memos that circled busily overhead, and hit the button for the fourth level. Almost half of all DMLE and DMAC

(Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes) offices were now on other floors, since the second and third floors were full. Aurors and arithmancers and a few other professions had done very well in the Ministry, of late. Fortunately, there was room to spare, since middle management and licensing boards and regulators had been decimated. The entire games division had simply been sacked in 1995, after losing half their staff the year before.

Fred knocked on Bogdanova's door when they arrived there, calling out, "Hullo? Madame Bogdonova?"

"Come," said a sharp voice, and George opened the door.

"Hullo, Madame," said Fred to the older witch who was sitting at a desk inside the cramped and dark office. "The Director sent us... he was wondering if you would lend us a hand with an excursion?"

Agapa "Ilya" Ilyinichna Bogdanova put down the parchment in her hands, looking at the Shichinin coolly. She was perhaps a hundred years of age, with grey hair kept in a short pixie cut. She was one of a shrinking percentage of older Ministry workers who hadn't taken advantage of rejuvenation, and it showed: the skin hung loose at her neck but was taut on her face, and liver spots were visible on her thin hands. Her blue eyes were still sharp, though, as she regarded them with visible displeasure.

"I see, gentlemen. So two Weasleys and a Longbottom want me to go on an 'excursion?' " she asked. There was only a slight trace of a Slavic accent. "I don't know whether to be flattered or frightened."

"The *Director* has asked that you accompany us to Russia, Madame Bogdanova... we're trying to track down the source of some Muggle weapons," said Neville. "We were hoping to leave tomorrow morning, if that is possible. I hope you're not too busy?"

Bogdanova glanced at the parchment in her hands, and dropped it to the desk with a look of distaste. It fell among dozens of other sheets and forms. "I am *not*. They have put me in this dreary little office and set me to writing reports and giving depositions to the Wizengamot on counterfeit Safety Sticks and other such trivialities. It is busy work, nothing more. So no one in the department has to speak to me, you see." She collected parchments into a rough stack with a few aggressive movements,

then dumped them in a pile to one side. “Why is the babe-in-charge interested in Muggle weapons?”

George explained, “Someone is selling powerful guns to some bad people in Africa – in Ethiopia – and it’s making a few wars down there a lot worse. The Ogaden National Liberation Front and the Eritrean militia groups have been—”

“Wait... a wizard is selling Muggle weapons?” interrupted the witch, raising her eyebrows in surprise.

“No,” said Fred. “It’s probably a Muggle. But the ONLF and the Eritreans used to only have cheap old guns, and not many of them. Now they’re better supplied, and it’s showing in the civilian death toll down there.”

“So a Muggle is selling Muggle weapons to other Muggles, and those Muggles are killing still other Muggles,” said Bogdanova, rolling her eyes. “What is our concern?”

“*That* is our concern,” said George. “A lot of people are being hurt—”

“—and we’re in a position to stop it,” said Fred.

“I know your little trio’s mandate,” said Bogdanova, rising to her feet and walking to the coatrack. She pulled down her cloak, and settled it over her robes. “But surely you don’t waste your time pretending to be some sort of... Muggle aurors? What possible difference do you make, when they die like ants all day long?”

Fred and George glanced at each other. Their lips were tight. Neville hurriedly spoke up. “We’ve been making a lot of difference. We’re mobile, we’re effective, and we’re stopping hundreds of future deaths every day.”

“And why is that our responsibility? Are we Muggles, now?” she asked, fastening her cloak in place. “No, never mind. Spare me. I will go with you, no argument. Better than pushing parchment here. And it has been months since I was back home. Let us go make arrangements.”



The limit on how far one could Apparate was a combination of the physical and metaphorical distance. Land’s End to John o’ Groats was a single trip for a native Englishman, but a Bulgarian

attempting the hop had better have his three D's firmly in mind. Any trip of any considerable distance, then, required portkeys – for the sake of safety and brevity both. One of the great advantages enjoyed by Ministry officials – aurors and Hit Wizards included – was ready access to the Official Business desk at the Portkey Office. Further, the assistance of the Chief Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards, as well as the Tower (who had considerable influence in any Treaty state, such as Nigeria), eased any concerns about international travel. The Shichinin had been extremely fortunate in their friends, as events would have it... perhaps anyone in close proximity to figures of mighty destiny would have a tendency to get caught up in orbit, swirling around in the eddies of fate.

The Shichinin, accompanied by Bogdanova, who had humorlessly told them to call her “Ilya,” were soon on their way, whisked by portkey to the closest available destination to Mikhaylovka: Volgograd.

Truth be told, the portkey – the stiff and filthy cover of an old library copy of a Muggle book named *Battlefield Earth* – came from a box labeled “Tsaritsyn,” but that was nearly a century behind the times. Muggle names changed too frequently for the Portkey Office to worry about, and they made do with a huge blackboard scrawled with guides to the current nomenclature. Really, the Shichinin had gotten lucky that Russia was relatively stable: some Muggle areas were so prone to changing their names that the Office had given up. After Herzegovina's Tomislavgrad changed its name for the fourth time in a century (Duvno became Tomislavgrad became Duvno and then finally back to Tomislavgrad), the Office had stopped making portkeys for the city entirely.

It was a fairly long trip from London to Volgograd: 2,400 miles or so. They ripped the dirty piece of book cover in half, standing in the Ministry atrium off in a quiet corner, and it felt as if a rope had been knotted around their waists and yanked violently, pulling them sideways and up and back and around. They whirled down to the ground and came to a staggering stop, but their feet sank into an inch of thick mud almost immediately. Neville waved his arms around wildly for a moment to keep his footing, his boots skidding a pace.

It was fairly cool, but not so cold that it was uncomfortable. Even here, spring was a pleasant time of year. They were in a building that was mostly empty, but which seemed to superficially resemble a barn (albeit with poor drainage). A ragged bulletin board, its lower edge looking as though it had been chewed upon, bore a few parchments stamped with the ornate crest of the Russian Oak. They were in the right place. The right muddy, run-down place. The right muddy, run-down, manure-strewn, dangerous-looking place.

“An hour and a half to Mikhaylovka,” said Bogdanova, who was wrapping a scarf around her neck, having leaned her broom against the bulletin board. “We should go check in with the Domovoi here and then be on our way, if we wish to have a few hours of light when we get there. Bukavac live in the rivers and feed at night, so we should not linger. They feed on children.” She glanced at her three youthful companions, who seem to have missed her implication as they buttoned mackintoshes over their robes. They only nodded, looking around warily.

The Domovoi was situated in the dirty brick Muggle civil services building, a disappointing distance away from the beautiful neoclassical City Duma. Most of the offices in the civil service appeared to have no function except to support an astonishing variety of people taking quiet naps. The Domovoi was one of these: a sleepy-looking little man with a wilting wet mustache, who unquestioningly stamped their documents and waved them on their way. He probably would have done the same if a trio of Voldemorts in fiery hats appeared in front of him with their own documents. It was comforting to know that there was some constancy in the world.

They kicked off from outside of the building within minutes, riding cruiser brooms that were comfortable for long hauls, but which could be adjusted for better speed and maneuverability if necessary (mostly a matter of aerodynamics and swapping out the forward hand-hold, to replace the Braking Charm with a version featuring tighter turns). They flew while Disillusioned, as standard procedure dictated. The invisibility might seem silly, especially when they left the last buildings of Volgograd far behind, and the only Muggle road wended its way in and out of sight among vast

stretches of unpopulated wheatfields and steppes below, but time had proven its utility. The only annoying thing was the necessity to use minor charms to keep track of everyone's location, and the occasional confusion that resulted when someone fell behind (bathroom breaks were the usual culprit).

After a longish period of silence, Bogdanova drew her broom alongside Neville's, and called out a question. She had to raise her voice to be heard over the wind.

"Tell me something," she called. "Why are more Muggles a good thing?"

"What?!" replied Neville, unsure if he'd heard her correctly. He'd thought she had asked why more Muggles would be a good thing, but that was something a cartoonish sociopath would say.

"Why are more Muggles a good thing? You're interfering with their little wars to save them, and now we go to stop Muggles from selling Muggle guns to other Muggles. You're taking responsibility for them, like a shepherd. But shepherds have a very good reason for their work. What is your reason?"

There were spells to make this sort of chatting easier in the face of the wind, but Neville wasn't sure he wanted to be having this conversation at all, so he didn't cast any of them. "We're not shearing the Muggles, if that's what you're asking," he said.

"No, but you're making yourself their masters, which seems a curious thing for someone like you to do. To step in and say who should live and who should die – by virtue of where you intervene and where you do not – that is making choices for them, yes? And you are deciding as a principle that more Muggles is better. You want to stop them from being shot, yes?" Bogdanova sounded amused by the entire idea: Neville could imagine her sharp eyes as sardonic and mocking.

"Sort of," said Neville, after pausing to think. "It's more... if you have the ability to save someone's life – anyone's life – you should do it. And that's especially true when it's very easy." He pointed down to the ground below them, picking out a small lake from near its parent river as it passed beneath, then realized she couldn't see the gesture. "Like if there was a person down there in the pond, even a stranger, you would go and help them. That's still something you should do if the pond is a mile away, or a hundred miles away."

To Bogdanova's credit, she didn't answer right away, but actually thought about what she'd heard. This is rarer than one might imagine. Their brooms drifted apart. Eventually, though, she pulled back in close, and said, "I should think that it would be good if I could save the person, but it is not my duty. Not my job." Neville was going to reply, but she went on. "And if I save one person, then I would have to save the person in the next pond, yes? Otherwise I am deciding that the first person is better. Soon I am saving all the people in all the ponds... being *able* to do it makes it *necessary*, for you, yes? We do what we must, because we can?"

Neville had a ready answer for this, since he'd heard Hermione Granger talk about this with Harry. He shook his head, and called back, "No... you rescue as many people as you can, without ruining your own life. Doing the right thing can't mean destroying yourself."

"Can't it?" called back Bogdanova, maddeningly, and pulled her broom away. But Neville wasn't about to challenge his own conclusions just because this Russian witch was confusing contrariness for wittiness. He rolled his eyes and kicked his broom up another ten meters, pulling level with where his charm said the twins would be.

"Well, that was an unpleasant conversation," he said to the air.

"Tell me something, young man —" called George.

"— have you really never tried a fine filet of Muggle?" said Fred, smacking his lips noisily.

Bogdanova was left to fly alone the rest of the journey, while the Shichinin chatted about other ways to leverage their mission. The older woman might have meant to be nasty, but she'd brought to Neville's mind the possibility of force-multipliers. This single arms dealer could be — *should be* just the beginning of a new phase of their operations. It was widely known (widely rumoured, anyway) that Harry was engaged in all sorts of Muggle charity. Fred was friendly with a bloke who worked as an arithmancer at the Ministry, and it was apparently a pretty open secret that they were shipping out truckloads of advanced water filters, cooking stoves, and other goods. So Neville and the twins didn't think

they'd step on his toes, there. But it would be quick and easy to smash up some weapons factories, for example. There were strict regulations about subverting Muggle politics, but none of the Shichinin could think of any legal, ethical, or practical objection to making sure that arms manufacturing suffered a brisk run of bad luck.

What could be wrong with that, really?



Bogdanova brought her broom up to their level, clicking at them four times. They all dropped their Disillusionment for the time being, and came to a halt. Fred leaned over and pulled a beetle out of Neville's hair, where the thing had become trapped at some point during the past hour or so.

"Mikhaylovka," Bogdanova said, pointing ahead. It looked like just larger version of some of the uninteresting grey Muggle towns they'd passed, but a brightly-colored banner was visible strapped to a grain elevator and labeled with blocky Cyrillic lettering – it must have meant something to Bogdanova.

Crescent lakes, reservoirs, and canals marked this southern side of the town, as well as some industrial-looking buildings to the east. Squat houses with fenced-in grounds surrounded one large lake directly in front of them, continuing off to the west.

Fred took out a pair of omnioculars, and scanned the town. Train tracks bisected Mikhaylovka – if the shipment of arms they'd tracked had needed to be moved about, before being loaded on a plane and sent on to Veshenskaya, that may have been how it had been done. Wordlessly, Fred held the omnioculars to one side, where George was holding out his hand.

"Not a lot of factories, here. Some other Muggle industries, but not a lot of manufacturing on a big scale," said George, peering through the device.

"Some places working with big piles of rock and sand, other places with grain silos and those trucks... not a lot of big factories," agreed Fred.

"It has been much time since Muggle Mastery for me," said Bogdanova, leaning forward on her broom and using one finger to push her hair off of her forehead. "What do you mean?"



“They’re saying that the Muggle who shipped the guns to Africa probably wasn’t selling them directly – whoever operates from here was a middleman. Like how Potage’s doesn’t make the cauldrons they sell... they buy them from craft-shops, instead,” said Neville.

“Maybe the gun craft-shop is hidden here as something else,” said Bogdanova. She might have been trying to be helpful, or she might have just enjoyed meddling.

Neville shrugged. “Maybe. But to run a place like that, you need lots of things from other Muggle places, I think. Hard to hide... and why bother?” He shook his head. “Plus, our current theory is that the whole thing is illegal, so we’re really looking for a middleman, like Potage.”

“Nip in the train station–” said Fred.

“–and have Madame Bogdanova chat with someone who might know?” said George, lowering the omnioculars and offering them to the Russian witch. She waved them away, and Neville swung his broom around to take them, instead.

“Sounds like a plan. Madame, if you’re up for a quick chat and Confundus Charm? The airstrip here looks small, so if many heavy industrial crates, ones that may contain guns, have been trucked on out there from the train station over the past year, that’s probably our guy. There shouldn’t be that many... too expensive for most shipping,” said Neville. “We find the source, and we’ve found our arms dealer... and whoever’s stoking the flames in Ethiopia.”

“Happily I will comply. Why so easy, though? Would this person not fear Muggle authorities?” Bogdanova said. They all began lowering their altitude, to bring themselves to a rest behind a deserted-looking grain silo.

“I don’t think it’s something they worry about here–,” said George.

“–although Muggle politics are bloody insane, so who even knows,” said Fred.

“So this isn’t even a crime – selling the guns? You are happy to overrule their own leaders, and decide for them what should not be allowed, eh?” Bogdanova said, smiling and raising her eyebrows. “Makes sense to me, but it’s surprising.”

No one took the bait.

Landing on the ground, they stowed their brooms. Bogdanova didn't have Hit Wizard gear, but Fred had brought along an extra pouch for her to use as a convenience. It was actually very thoughtful of him; there were four loaner pouches in the DMLE, and he'd made sure he requisitioned the good one for her (the only one of the four that didn't stink of troll, for whatever reason). The four of them recast their disillusionment, sorted out who would lead the way with a clicker in hand, did some basic security scans to check if they were being observed, and got moving at a brisk walk.

The walk to the train station brought them almost all the way through Mikhaylovka, walking along the roads that ran next to the tracks. It seemed like the workday was winding down as the day itself waned; a scratching of cirrus clouds forming overhead helped darken the remaining daylight. Sunset proper wouldn't arrive for hours yet, but the streets were beginning to fill with people. It was only Thursday, but there were already some drinking parties audibly going on – the four wizards saw a sizeable contingent of men in overalls dusty with chalk, walking down the street with bottles in hand and enjoying the mild evening with a mellow song. Quite a nice town, really.

The train station had tall fences and some guards posted, but it was easy enough to stroll past the tollbooth and duck under the barrier arm. Bogdanova took the lead once they were up onto the rust-streaked concrete slabs of the platform, clicking three times to signal she wanted to take charge. She glanced at the signs invisibly and led them with intervals of clicks past pallets stacked with plastic sacks of concrete, forklifts, piles of rough-barked ties, and the other machinery necessary for a rural freight. Two trains were being loaded with containers of crushed rock, via slow and painstaking maneuvers with short cranes. A lot of yelling was apparently essential to the process.

Bogdanova paused in front of a red-painted door with squat green Russian words on it, and clicked four times. The four of them dispelled their Disillusionment once more, and the Shichinin followed her wordlessly into the office.

“*Confundo*. Провелка!” said the Russian witch to the pot-bellied man in grey coveralls standing in front of a cheap plastic

filing cabinet. “Мне нужны документы о доставке грузов на аэродром.”

The man blinked rapidly past a pair of thick bifocals, but eventually shook his head as though to clear it, and answered hesitantly, “Конечно. У нас всё в порядке.” He leaned down and opened the bottom drawer, drawing out a file folder and offering it to her. Its label had been scribbled out and rewritten at least five times. “Вот документы за последний месяц..”

“Были какие-нибудь большие ящики с грузом?” asked Bogdanova, accepting the folder. She spoke sharply and brusquely. Neville glanced at the twins, uneasily.

“Только от Курагина. Вы из налоговой?” said the man. Bogdanova brushed away the man’s question with a puffing of her lips.

“I believe we have – oh, *Somnium* – I believe we have the man you’re looking for. A man named Kuragin is the only contractor in town who regularly has them run such things to the airstrip.” She studied the documents in the file folder with evident distaste, as the man she’d questioned collapsed into sleep. “Lev Kuragin. Although the manifests for his shipping says that they’re all ‘machine parts,’ this is the only person who fits your bill.”

“Does it have a location there?” George asked, grunting as he dragged the man into a sitting position against one wall. Fred drew his wand and cast a quick *Oblivate* on the man’s last five minutes.

“Yes. No trouble.”

“Then you take the lead,” said Neville, and Disillusioned himself. The other three followed suit, and Bogdanova led them out, clicking at intervals.



About twenty minutes later, deep into dusk, they arrived at a prefabricated construction-site trailer resting on cinder blocks. Unfinished wood paneling and two old doors had been nailed together to extend or repair one end of the trailer, which was surrounded by weeds. A green pickup truck, bleached by the

elements, sat outside next to a shiny new motorbike. There was no sign in front of the low-roofed building, but a small hand-printed label on the mailbox outside read, “КУРАГИН ЭКСПОРТ / ИМПОРТ.” The windows were opaque with grime, but it was still evident that a light was on and that someone was inside. Bogdanova clicked twice. It must be the place.

“Let’s go around back, and go in from there,” said Fred, quietly.

“Put whoever’s inside to sleep, and quiz them a bit,” said George.

Somehow, although they were all still invisible, the Shichinin could hear Bogdanova roll her eyes. Still, they all moved quietly out behind the trailer, foregoing the clicks at this point, before removing their Disillusionment.

“*Phlogisticate*,” cast Neville on one end of the trailer, and then again on the other end. “Guns are stupid,” he whispered to Bogdanova, turning to her.

“Agreed,” replied the Russian witch.

“*Quietus*,” said Neville, laying a thin blanket of quiet around the door of the trailer. It was a spell very limited in scope, but essential for moments like this.

“Just stay here—” said George.

“—and let us take care of this,” said Fred.

“We’re professionals,” they said, in unison, looking very serious.

Bogdanova folded her arms, a light smile on her lips.

The trio of young men crept up to the trailer’s back door. Neville tried the doorknob gingerly – it turned cleanly. He stepped to one side, and Fred and George squared off in front of the doorway, wands out and ready to breach. They nodded in unison at Neville, and Neville threw the door open with a convulsive motion.

It is important to note at this point that the Extinguishing Charm has no effect whatsoever on an angry dog.

One hundred and thirty pounds of angry muscle in the form of a mottled-brown Presa lunged into Fred, snapping for his throat, and the wizard was knocked backward into his twin’s face. The two men and the dog fell into a struggling tangle. The impact and the snarling dog were all eerily silent for the first moment, then

the wizard's backpedaling and kicking as they fought to escape the blunt-nosed snapping attack of the dog brought them out of the short range of the Quieting Charm, and the snarling of the creature burst out into the night.

Neville didn't waste any time taking careful aim, and fired off a hasty Stunning Hex immediately into the tangle just as Fred succeeded in landing a well-placed kick to the dog's snout. A pained yelp was frozen in the beast's throat. The dog trembled with a red glow for a moment, then fell stiffly onto its side.

"Nice one!" said Fred.

"Bloody hell!" said George, still lying on his back. "Someone's getting away!" He scrabbled for his lost wand. Through the rear of the trailer and the open front door, he could see a bald man throwing a leg over the motorbike parked out front. The man kicked the starter, and the motorbike's engine thrummed hoarsely.

Neville lurched forward to the open door, wand raised, and fired a second Stunning Hex. "*Stupefy!*"

This time, though, luck wasn't with him. The red bolt of the stunner sizzled right over the head of the motorbike's rider, and as Neville took another step forward to fire again, his heel slid on something slick underfoot, skidding out from beneath him. He grabbed the doorway with his free hand, but still swayed in place for a moment as the motorbike jerked into motion and moved out of the narrow range of view afforded by the front door.

"Less of a nice one!" said Fred, scrambling to his feet, but Neville ignored him and sprinted forward, out into the front yard. The motorbike accelerated rapidly.

"Come on," shouted George, bursting past Neville. He threw open the door to the pale green pickup truck, climbing inside.

Fred pushed past Neville as well, running around to the other side of the cab, while George had his wand out. George squinted at the Muggle device warily, and then tapped the ignition with the tip of his wand, dubiously saying, "*Alohomora?*"

The ignition switch "unlocked," key or no, and the engine turned over and started. George looked almost criminally pleased.

"Go go go!" cried Neville, leaping into the bed of the truck with a vault. He stood up behind the cab and grabbed hold of the rear windows for hand-holds. The red light on the motorbike was receding rapidly away from them, down the road.

“Seen Dad do it a thousand times,” said George, as he yanked firmly on the gearshift and stamped hard on one of the pedals in front of him. Nothing happened.

“Easy as pie,” said Fred, turning the crank to roll down his window, in case that might help.

George took his foot off of one pedal, and slammed it down on the other. The truck’s tires spun for a moment and then the vehicle caught traction and began to move rapidly backwards. “Got it!” he said, still grinning and turning to look behind him. His view was obstructed by Neville’s crotch. “You’re in the way, Neville!”

“Stop stop stop!” shouted Neville in reply. He clutched the roof of the truck desperately as the vehicle thumped vigorously over some stray cinder blocks and the kerb, out onto the street.

“We’ll have to tell Dad about this!” called Fred, holding his wand to the dashboard in front of him and flexing his fingers for the delicate Charm of Perfect Function.

George took his foot off of the gas, and yanked on the gearshift again. The truck made a horrid squeal, sounding almost like a precisely-tooled machine being badly abused. Indeed, logic and mercy dictated that the engine should probably seize up and die, but Fred’s timely spell prevented that. The truck’s motor immediately became a throaty purr, and George stepped on the gas again.

As the car began to lurch forward, George turned the wheel rapidly, aligning the truck with the motorbike that was now turning out of sight at the end of the lane. George stamped on the gas as hard as he could, and the truck’s engine roared.

The entirely ridiculous chase was on.

The motorbike had many advantages, though – being agile and quick to accelerate – and by the time they reached the end of the lane, it had already reached the end of the next road, and was making another turn. Even with magical enhancement and the enthusiasm of the ignorant, the truck just wasn’t fast enough.

“*Stupefy!*” said Neville, and shot a glowing red bolt at the motorbike before it vanished from sight. He was far too distant to hit, but the escaping Muggle seemed to have been startled or confused by the stunner, since he swerved wildly and barely remained upright as he sped out of sight. Neville wasn’t even sure

he wanted to hit the man anyway... being stunned while going that speed stood a good risk of killing a Muggle. He pounded on the roof with his free hand to urge the truck on, but George already had the gas floored back down.

"Sure, we could have used our brooms—" said Fred, turning the knobs on the radio.

"—but what fun would that have been, honestly?" agreed George, spinning the wheel until the vehicle threatened to tilt onto one side as it went around the corner.

The motorbike zipped down the road past what appeared to be a cannery, accelerating rapidly. Neville almost tried a quick, "*Accio Muggle*," before remembering Cuthbert's Breathing Principle. He summoned the motorbike instead, and the white bike and its bald passenger visibly slowed. Encouraged, he did it again, even though it was a challenge just to stay in the truckbed, much less cast at the same time. The radio inside squealed hellishly, and Fred hastily started punching buttons on it, as the truck began to gain on the motorbike. Slowly, but gaining.

If they got close enough, Neville could pluck the man right up and off the bike. He holstered his wand and hammered on the roof again, leaning down to shout through the window in the rear of the truck's cab, "Get in close, I'll nab him off that thing! Can't stun him or he'll crack up all over the place!"

"Yes!" replied George, turning to look over his shoulder at Neville. "This is much safer!"

"At least we're putting him far away from Bogdanova," said Fred. "So he might not get eaten. Hold on, I know this song." He turned the volume knob on the radio.

♫ *Gotta, gotta*  
*Keep on holdin' on*  
*Never gonna turn you loose*  
*I can't turn you loose*  
*Gotta gotta – Keep on holdin' on* ♫

"That's on one of Dad's listening-dog discs," said George, delighted. He followed the motorbike around another turn, tires

squealing. “That Muggle device he was always cranking during hols when we were twelve.”

The motorbike’s engine revved loudly, and the rider leaned forward. Neville summoned the bike again, but the Muggle motor and magical magnetism seemed to be evenly matched. Even worse, they were heading east, out of the sparsely-populated outskirts of Mikhaylovka and towards the main body of the town. Even now, they were starting to pass cars parked on the street, and occasional people turning to stare at the high-speed chase. Empty lots and dingy warehouses were turning into shops and homes, with overgrown bushes that crowded the sidewalk and cement-block walls with iron gates. Fairly well-peopled... there was the Statute of Secrecy to think about – unless they wanted to call in about ten thousand Obliviators.

The motorbike dropped in speed, and turned sharply down a street that ran almost parallel to the one the Shichinin were on. The Muggle roared off as George hit the brakes, which shrieked in protest. They had the chance to get a good look at their target for a just a moment, as they slowed down and he sped away: a slightly overweight bald man with thick black eyebrows and a terrified look on his face.

The turn carried them away from the populated areas of town once more – that made sense, Neville realized. This guy probably was only interested in escape, not in getting caught by Muggle aurors.

The truck roared after the motorbike, and they scooted over a low bridge spanning a narrow canal, whipping past parked cars and a woman walking her dog. There was an intersection ahead, and Neville saw the bald man’s goal: there was some sort of construction going on, and most of the intersection was blocked off by orange-painted wooden barricades. Even the sidewalk was blocked with some orange barrels and cement pylons, presumably to stop overzealous motorists. A ragged-edged hole had consumed most of the asphalt within the barricades, and an official-looking van was parked nearby. The obstruction slowed the traffic of the automobiles through the intersection, and there was a line of seven cars waiting ahead to inch through. The bald man was going to take advantage of his broom-sized motorbike to zip through, leaving them in the dust.



“Unbreakable Charm!” he shouted through the window. His feet slid out from underneath him as he called in and the truck bumped wildly beneath him. Even with excellent balance and a death-grip on the window, he fell into the bed of the truck with a thump that was lost in the wind. He concentrated on holding on, so the constant bucking of the vehicle didn’t just throw him clean out.

Fred and George must have heard him and taken his meaning, or come up with his same plan (a frequent occurrence these days), since as Neville got up on his knees, he saw Fred touch his wand to the dashboard. In almost the same moment, he saw George jerk the wheel to the right, and felt a tremendous thump as they jumped the kerb onto the sidewalk. Neville almost went flying again, and only stayed with the truck by thrusting his arm through the open rear window and clutching desperately.

♫ *I can't turn you loose now*  
*I'm in love with the prettiest thing*  
*I never, never turn you loose now*  
*Because of all the sweet love she brings*  
*I can't turn you loose to nobody*  
*'Cause I love you baby, yes I do ♫*

The biker slowed only slightly as he reached the intersection, went to the left of the lined-up cars, and threaded past oncoming traffic. He made a left turn as soon as he could, vanishing from sight.

The truck followed to the right of the lined-up cars, shuddering along the uneven sidewalk, and smashed through the orange barrels and concrete pylons. The barrels turned out to be filled with water, which plumed behind them in a spray mixed with chunks of broken concrete as the Unbreakable truck, preserved by Fred’s timely charm, cannoned on through. The motorbike was back in sight in moments as the truck shrieked its way around the corner.

The Shichinin pursued their prey, leaving wreckage in their wake.

“That Charm—” said Fred.

“—won’t last long!” said George.

They glanced at each other and grinned hugely. Some Muggle devices worked perfectly well, indefinitely, when charmed. When an Unbreakable Charm or a Charm of Perfect Function wore off, you could apply another one without worry. But most Muggle machines – including any that had electronics, batteries, or the like – would endure (at most) a single application unless they were carefully prepared (replacement of a lot of the Muggle workings with magical equivalents was time-consuming and laborious). As far as they knew, no one (Harry included) had yet figured out why. Whatever the cause, though, it was certain that this particular vehicle wasn’t long for this world.

“And this truck—” said Fred.

“—is bollixed when it goes!” said George.

Neville, meanwhile, struggled to his feet in the bed of the truck, holding the back of the cab with a grip so tight his hands ached. He drew his wand again. “*Accio motorbike! Accio motorbike!*” They were almost within range of *Wingardium Leviosa*. “Come on, come on!”

The motorbike accelerated, the engine now a high-pitched whine as it strained against Neville’s magic. They were out in the south of the town now, a long lake to their left along the road, while clapboard houses and rickety fences whipped by on their right. Neville didn’t remember the layout of the town that well, but he was fairly sure that much more travel in this direction would take them clear out of Mikhaylovka entirely, back out among the fields that they saw on their aerial approach.

♣ *Give shaking mama,  
I told ya I’m in love with only you  
Gotta, do it baby why don’t ya  
I’ll give ya everything you want ♣*

The road curved to the right, and then the bald man took a sharp left turn. He almost lost control of the bike, over-correcting to the right, but he managed to wrestle it back into the straight

before he took a tumble. George took a lesson, and slowed down his fierce stamping of the gas pedal on the turn. They were less than fifty meters away now.

Neville, riding higher than the twins, saw what was ahead, and began scrambling for his pouch.

Fred and George saw a moment later. George began cranking down his window with one hand and pulling out his wand with the other. Fred's window was already down, and so he did his brother the favor of taking the wheel. The quality of their driving remained exactly the same, for better or worse.

The road ended in a muddy cul-de-sac two hundred meters ahead, and the fields beyond had been flooded. It must have been done earlier today – maybe they were going to graze bicorn here, next season. It was hard to tell, but it looked like as much as a foot of muck and water sat evenly in wide pools ahead, broken only by low rocky embankments.

♫ *Gotta gotta*  
*Keep on holdin' on*  
*Never gonna turn you loose* ♫

Fred took back the wheel with his right hand, and stuck his wand out the window with the other. George leaned out of the window, brandishing his own wand. Neville had put his away, so that he could try to find *that damn pouch* in his robes *oh no oh no why don't I keep it on my belt who cares if it doesn't look cool*.

"Nevvie, hold on!" shouted George, as loudly as he could.

And that was when Neville realized that *he'd* come up with one obvious solution but that the *twins* had come up with a completely different plan. But he had his pouch in hand now, and there was *no way their plan would work*, and so he just shrieked, "Broom!" at the pouch as hard as he could, and hoped for the best.

The motorbike buzzed off of the road and into the field ahead, sluicing through and spraying ribbons of mud and water behind him. The man barely even slowed.

"*Glacius! Glacius! Glacius! Glacius! Glacius! Glacius! Glacius!*" chanted the twins, simultaneously, wobbling the tips of

their wands over and over. A simple spell with simple wandwork, but they felt their skulls ache with the strain of so much magic.

The mud and water of the field ahead froze, a spreading triangle of muck flash-chilled into brown and grey ice, crackling and cold. It looked as though winter had come to just one section of the field, icing it over to within twenty meters of their target.

Unfortunately, it was nothing like a flat surface, thanks to the passage of the motorbike. When the truck thumped off of the road and roared out into the field, it hit the uneven surface of one frozen slope, and skidded to the right, starting to spin. The tires thudded across frozen hillocks and waves of muddy ice, and the truck danced like it was a child's toy being dragged along a washboard. The Weasleys held onto anything they could find, and hooted wildly as the truck spun and shuddered. The world whirled around them, icy and uneven and crazed.

Neville was launched like a kite into the air, pinwheeling wildly and screaming, "I hate you twoooooo!"

*♪ I can't turn you loose ♪*

The accumulated strain on the magics sustaining the truck's structure, combined with the conflict between enchantment and electronics, came to a peak. The truck's battery exploded violently, blasting open the hood, at the same instant the radio began to sizzle and shoot sparks. A hole appeared on the top of the dash, the plastic darkening and melting away, as some carefully-engineered Muggle component crackled with flames. The flaming truck spun and shook as it danced along the icy, uneven mud.

Neville was tumbling wildly, end over end, but he had presence of mind enough to clutch his broom to himself and hook his leg over it and will it to *lift*...

*♪ Gotta keep a grip on you ♪*

...and he swooped up (up? yes, up) into the air, orienting himself with the ground in seconds, laughing hysterically as he evened out and leaned forward, streaking towards the motorbike ahead of him like a giddy bolt of lightning.

The truck's spin slowed as it skidded out of the area that had been frozen, ice turning to slushy mud and slowing the destroyed vehicle's revolutions. Fred and George wasted no time, whooping and kicking open their doors to stagger out of the truck, sloshing around into the mud and staggering drunkenly away from the vehicle as best they could.

The radio burred and screeched, unnaturally riven with interfering magics gone haywire, and wailed out a final line of music before dying with a last sizzle of static.

♪ *Gotta gotta keep on holdin on* ♪

"*Wingardium Leviosa!*" Neville cast, as he dove down over the motorbike. The rider was plucked out of his seat, legs and rear end lifted up, hands still clinging to the handlebars. The motion turned the throttle on the bike, and it revved fiercely; without the bald man's weight, the entire thing upended and tore itself out of his grasp, rolling and toppling around into the mud.

"Guns are stupid!" shouted Neville, streaking by the Muggle. The young man's mackintosh flapped around him as he flew, his brown eyes wide over his aquiline nose. "*Stupefy!*"

The bald man toppled sideways into the mud, rolling on his back with a squish of bubbles. Neville brought his broom around, and held himself stationary over the man. He found himself wishing that he hadn't stunned the fellow, or that the Muggle wouldn't be Obliviated of the whole experience, since there were all kinds of things he wanted to say, like "You can't run from the sinister seven!", or "Nothing's swifter than justice!"

He settled for shouting happily at Fred and George, rising up from the broom to call, "Do you think we can fit Muggle trucks in our pouches, so we can do that again sometime?"

"Yes, it looked like quite a ride. Quite a spectacle," said the empty air above Neville, in the voice of Ilya Bogdanova. The

Russian witch materialized with a wavering in the air, sitting placidly on her broom, as she dismissed her Disillusionment. Neville started violently, his wand already pointing at her in the instinctive defense of a trained duelist before he could consciously lower his guard.

Bogdanova didn't react, only circling her broom around to face him squarely, and adding sardonically, "It has been, oh, just *delightful* following you three idiots and cleaning up the mess so that we don't start some sort of war."

"Huh," said Fred, who was flying sedately over, dripping with mud and water and delight. "The Director thought you might help with avoiding that, actually."

"Good on him," said George. "I feel bad about the tea, now."

"Eh?" said Bogdanova, shifting to face them. Her short grey hair was disheveled, and the footbars and grips on her broom had been changed out – she must have been flying hard. But she was smiling.

"He'll forgive us—" said Fred, shrugging.

"—once he gets off the loo," finished George.



The bald man, as it turns out, was none other than Lev Kuragin himself, the gentleman who had been shipping crates out of the town by air. And naughty Lev had been using temporary shell companies to buy serious weaponry from old Russian Army buddies. While he was happy to sell the resulting crates of weapons and ammunition to any buyer he could trust, he had found that the Ogaden National Liberation Front would pay a premium. Lev had found that the ONLF would even grease his palm if he shipped weapons to any other militant groups in or around Ethiopia, particularly since the 1995 Ethiopian elections that had pushed the ONLF out of power. An unstable country was to the advantage of the violent political minority, which was working to seize power once more.

Lev even knew the source of their money: vast funds fraudulently drawn from World Bank development efforts in Ethiopia, that had been intended for the area around Calub, as well as five

wealthy Cairo financiers. And he'd been extremely willing to tell them names, addresses, and specific numbers.

Veritaserum was a wonderful thing.

After the Shichinin and Bogdanova dropped Kuragin off at the edge of town, replete with new memories to account for a missing night and morning – and a few to ensure a change of heart when it came to the arms trade – they made ready to return home, Apparating back to Volgograd and the local Domovoi. They had been concerned about having a good story ready for the sleepy-looking man with the wet mustache, but he'd stamped their documents as disinterestedly as he'd given them entrance.

Fred got out the portkey back to the Ministry lobby, holding it up. It was the broken stub of a child's plastic meterstick, in keeping with the principle that a portkey should look completely uninteresting (or even unpleasant) to casual Muggle inspection.

"Well then—" he said.

"—that was fun." George said.

"I hope it was not too boring for you, Madame Bogdanova," said Neville, taking hold of the portkey as well.

"It was actually... quite amusing, I must admit, gentlemen. Quite a bit more exciting than my current post, even if the goals here are even sillier." The Russian witch smiled again, and put her hand on theirs.

George and Fred glanced at each other.

"You know, there are five Egyptians who have been spreading money to very bad places," said George.

"We'll probably be going after them, next. We'll need someone who speaks Arabic," said Fred.

"And I can see many interesting philosophical discussions, waiting to be had..." said Neville, grinning. "How about it?"

Bogdanova sighed, and shrugged. "Why not?" She put her hand on the portkey, and leaned over to look Fred dead in the eye. "After all, I know a place in Cairo that serves an excellent fillet of Muggle."

Fred opened his mouth to say something, but she snapped the portkey, and the four of them vanished.





## Chapter five

# Gholas

The Guild navigators, gifted with limited prescience, had made the fatal decision: they'd chosen always the clear, safe course that leads ever downward into stagnation.

—Frank Herbert, *Dune*

*"Innervate. Innervate."*

Lawrence Bradwian and Annabeth Dankgesang slumped onto the chairs that had been set behind them, their rigid bodies relaxing. “Just relax a moment, children,” Harry said, from where he sat at the meeting table. “You’re in the Tower, but you’re fine. You were just stunned.”

He glanced up at them, then returned his gaze to the book open before him. He turned a page, slowly, and his unoccupied fingers fiddled with the end of his ponytail, where it lay over his shoulder to curl under his chin. Auror Kwannon stood behind and to one side of the pair of students, watching them as she put away her wand.

“Feeling all right, Mr. Bradwian?” The boy nodded. He was an athletic boy, with striking features... perhaps Middle Eastern descent? Close-cut black hair clung in curls to his head, and his eyes were a mellow brown. Harry thought he remembered the boy’s mother was from the Sawad.

“And you, Miss...?” Harry said, looking to the other student. She was a small girl, with black skin and tightly-twisted, short dreadlocks. She seemed very calm.

She cleared her throat, but spoke clearly, “Annabeth Dankesang.”

“Well then, Mr. Bradwian... Ms. Dankesang... I am Dean of the Science Program here at Hogwarts, Harry Potter-Evans-Verres. I don’t believe we’ve had occasion to meet,” said Harry, glancing back down at his book. He could hear the breath catch in Lawrence’s throat at the introduction. Harry looked up again. “You brought your classmate here... Samuel Meroveni-Bowles.”

Lawrence nodded, collecting himself, and he looked concerned, pursing his lips and raising his eyebrows. “Yes, sir. He fell after Div and P, and... it was bad, sir. I didn’t think we could... well, Madame Pomfrey is wonderful, but like the song says, ‘when in doubt, stick it out.’” The boy was quoting a promotional jingle the Tower had used a few years ago. “Is Sammy all right?”

“Oh, yes,” said Harry. He watched the two children closely as he turned another page of his book, adding, “In fact, he’s already back in his own bed in Ravenclaw Tower.”

He could see the small muscles in the boy’s cheeks flex as his jaw tightened. Annabeth did better, but her eyes opened wide despite her best efforts.

“You might be wondering why I wanted to speak to you, Lawrence and Annabeth. The reason is actually a bit embarrassing... it’s been brought to my attention over the past hour that you did me quite a good turn last year, and I never thanked you. I would have done so if I’d known, of course,” Harry said. He turned his head so that his ponytail would slip off his shoulder, out of sight behind him. “I had a question, first, though.”

“Of course, sir,” said Annabeth.

“Well, then... I suppose I’ll start off by saying that I don’t believe in cruelty, so we’ll just out with it now: you’re pinched. Caught. Discovered. I have had people toy with me too often when they had some small measure of power over me, often in the form of information I needed, and so I don’t have much liking for it. So it’s best you know straightaway. I’ll give you a moment to think about that and decide if you believe me.” Harry looked back down at the book and read the page before him as the seconds passed, stretching uncomfortably. After a minute, he finally looked up again. The two students were sitting still, hands folded in their laps. Lawrence looked like was trying to swallow with a dry mouth.

“I must confess that you will feel quite stupid, very shortly. I’m sorry about that,” said Harry. “But before we get there, my

question: why in Merlin's name did you think it would be okay to badly injure – very nearly kill – your classmate, just to get what you want?" He paused, and clucked his tongue thoughtfully. "Or maybe: why did you think *I* would think that was okay? Surely you at least *considered* your plan might go wrong? Didn't you stop to think of the possible consequences?"

"I'm not sure what you mean, sir," said Lawrence. His voice warbled on the second word, and he looked worried.

*Wise not to try to appear calm, little Larry, nor indignant. But an innocent student would just be confused. Maybe it's because people worry so much about being caught for the things we've really done that we tend to be completely baffled by false accusation.*

"Auror Kwannon, how many people are stepped-down in the clinic right now, in hold?" Harry said, turning to her and leaning to rest his chin on one hand.

Kwannon reached into her pocket and pulled out a small brown abacus, identical to the one on the table. She consulted it for a moment. "Four, sir. Not too many in Receiving or being treated, either. Slow day."

Harry turned and looked steadily at the students once more. Annabeth's mouth had opened slightly and Lawrence looked nauseous, as if he'd been kicked in the stomach. Harry supplemented the effect by shoving one of the parchments in front of him towards the pair, with its decoded – and obviously false – message.

THE CUP IS NOT ENOUGH WE MUST ADD  
TO OUR COLLECTION I BELIEVE TH  
AT MANY ITEMS OF GREAT POWER AR  
E HELD IN THE TOWER PREPARE THE  
PLAN WE SPOKE ABOUT BEFORE AND  
WE WILL COMMUNICATE WITH THE ABACUS

The abacuses were used in the clinic to track the flow of patients. Harry waited a moment for the magnitude of their mistake to sink into the pair.

"You had some clever ideas. But while the tactics were clever, the strategy didn't really make much sense," Harry continued.

“You were operating at an information deficit, and you *knew that*, and still didn’t account for it.”

“But if the abacus is...” Annabeth said, brow furrowing. Harry was able to watch her as her thoughts progressed, and he wondered if this was what it had been like to deal with himself as a child... cleverness and innovation trapped inside of a fishbowl-sized world, unable to grasp the limits of their perspective and experience. When you can only see a handful of moving parts, the machine of the world looked so simple and easy to manipulate. He remembered his stumbling horror when he’d been given occasion to see the workings laid bare, in all their complexity and danger.

“Yes, you understand, I see,” said Harry. Lawrence’s pallor looked distinctly yellowish, but he still seemed more confused than horrified. Slower on the uptake. Harry addressed himself to Annabeth, who was clearly the brains of the operation (such as that might be) and the leader of the duo. “So then: it seems as though you attempted to murder young Sammy, with whom you’ve had some problems in the past. You’ve been stunned for about five hours, now, and I had a chance to speak to your victim, your Headmistress, and Director Diggory of the DMLE.”

Harry closed the book, a little more forcefully than necessary. “When I was your age, I took it as a great offense that no one did me the courtesy of dealing with me directly unless I forced the issue. So then, let me be direct: you have been idiots on a scale that you cannot yet fully appreciate. Not only was your plan unlikely to work, you thought it was wise to try to use it to frame a classmate – a boy who has been involved in some dark dealings indeed with the rest of his family, some of whom were expelled for their pains, but who didn’t do anything wrong here.”

He stood now, rising and placing both palms on the table in front of him, looking down on the two students with cold green eyes. “You are said to be ‘Silver Slytherins,’ but I wonder if that little faction of Draco’s has turned out to mean anything at all in his absence. He told me, once, that it was about the purity of truth – that he’d learned that truth was the most important thing, even when plotting, since if you didn’t know the reality of the world then you couldn’t *affect it*, no matter how brilliantly effective your plans might otherwise be. That’s why you need both instrumental

rationality – acting based on truth – and epistemic rationality – knowing what is true. They are both necessary if you want things to happen as you desire.”

Lawrence had rallied, now. Harry imagined the boy forcing down his nausea and searching for an escape. The boy forced himself upright in the chair and thrust out his chin, saying, “But that’s the very reason why we acted... we knew the truth, and wanted to act on it. The Meroveni-Bowles are *no good* and–”

“And you wanted to make your enemy pay for something, even if you couldn’t make him pay for his real crimes. What was it that he’d done, exactly, Mr. Bradwian?” said Harry, and now his voice was as cold as his eyes.

“He and his family tried to kill Turm, just because they were ashamed of what their father had done – because they were ashamed of their half-brother. They tried to *kill* him,” said Lawrence. The boy rose up slightly out of his seat as he spoke, taking strength from his indignation. “They stole potion ingredients from Hogwarts, from Professor Slughorn’s stores and the greenhouses, so that they could supply Ragged Rooncrown and his Euphoric distribution in Knockturn Alley! They tried to steal Helga Hufflepuff’s Cup from Smith Manor – and that’s wrong, even if it turns out *you* did it, sir! And Sammy tried to kill me in a duel when Annabeth and I stopped the Meroveni-Bowles! His sister and brother were expelled, but he managed to get out of all the trouble for everything, just because they took the blame!” Now he was standing, and Harry noticed that Lawrence was actually his same height, so that Harry had to stand up straight and stop leaning on the table in order to look the boy in the eyes. Maybe he should make himself taller. Auror Kwannon had moved to one side and drawn her wand, clearing her line of sight, though her wand remained casually at her side.

Lawrence was incensed now, having worked himself up into enough outrage to serve as a shield from his shock and fear. The boy’s clear young eyes were narrowed in anger. He lifted a finger and jabbed it in Harry’s direction. “And Sammy was never going to die, since I was waiting at the bottom of the stairs to catch him with *Wingardium Leviosa*. No one saw that, but veritaserum can prove it.” He lowered his hand. “I stopped him from falling so fast,

and I *saved his life*. But he needed to pay for what he's done. I wasn't doing anything but justice."

"Samuel Meroveni-Bowles comes from an unpleasant family, but he has not, to my knowledge, done anything more than get dragged along with his older brother and sister and be bullied into helping them occasionally. Questioning under veritaserum revealed a scared boy in a bad clan trying to muddle his way through... rather a different picture than you'd paint in defense of your actions. The child has not earned a brutal beating and near-death experience, even if you managed to stop yourself short of giving him an execution." Harry looked at Lawrence, coldly and with clear contempt. Annabeth had leaned forward and buried her face in her hands, and was crying quietly. "You are badly in need of a lesson on losing... a lesson I once had to learn, as it happens, but one which I have no time to teach at the moment."

Harry pushed back his chair and walked to the end of the table, where two wands were sitting. He picked up Lawrence's in one hand, then looked back at its owner. "To your great good fortune, *Prior Incantato* showed that you did help arrest the vicious fall that you caused. And to your even greater fortune, no lasting harm appears to have been done. Sammy doesn't remember anything. But you are a thuggish young pair, and stupid. You have brutalized a boy in an act of vigilantism because you were *sure* he was guilty though you had no proof – the swan song of so many thugs, who always manage to make themselves the true hero or victim."

Lawrence sagged back into his chair, his bravado evaporating like the bluff that it was. He stared ahead of himself, and Harry knew that consequences and dread were playing out in his head.

"You have been bullies – stupid ones. You have brought shame to your families and your House and to whatever the Silver Slytherins might be, these days, besides a fashionable social club. I want you to understand that, Lawrence and Annabeth. Where you're going, you will need that understanding. You will need that lesson to make you strong."

Annabeth began crying even harder, her shoulders shaking, and Lawrence slumped forward, gripping the arms of his chair spasmodically. He looked about ready to cry. Harry waited. Not

to be cruel, but because he knew from experience that it was very difficult to change who you were. They needed to sit there with bile rising in their throats, tears burning hotly in their eyes, seeing their entire futures burning around them... and they needed to know that they weren't being oppressed.

Harry knew that it was a difficult thing to realize that you'd never really been the hero, all along – to know that you were some form of lesser villain, deluded and stupid in your villainy – somehow even less than the honest evil, since you rewarded yourself with misplaced righteousness. Let them see the tears of their mothers waiting in the future, the bitter scorn of Headmistress McGonagall, the tall walls of Howard Prison.

"You will need that lesson, because you are going to help me with something," Harry said. "The world is changing quickly these days, and a great many very smart people have convinced me that my previous strategy hasn't been working.... so you are going to help me with a new one."

*"One constrains the partner's choice by constraining one's own behavior," Schelling had written in The Strategy of Conflict. "The object is to set up for one's self and communicate persuasively to the other play a mode of behavior (including conditional responses to the other's behavior) that leaves the other a simple maximization problem whose solution for him is the optimum for one's self, and to destroy the other's ability to do the same."*

In other words, strategically limit one's own courses of action to only allow for the ones you prefer, so your enemy must either allow you to move unmolested, or else move against you in one of the styles you've chosen for them – since by limiting your own available responses, you've limited their ability to provoke you to unfavorable action.

"You are going to join the Honourable, Lawrence and Anna-beth," Harry said. He dropped Lawrence's wand on the table. "It was you two who helped my people discover where the Cup of Helga Hufflepuff was being stored, secretly mewed up in Hepzibah Smith's house after her death, so I know you can be of some use. And perhaps now you understand your weaknesses in terms of strategy. And maybe in time, you might even understand the value of life and the price of pain, and why I have dedicated my existence to preserving the one and preventing the other."

"We can't be spies," Lawrence said, dully. He turned to stare at Harry. "I'm only fifteen."

"I have good reason to think that your ages will help make you *excellent* spies, in this case, Mr. Bradwian. I have a plot in mind to improve the world, or at least one small corner of it, and you are an absolutely necessary part of that," said Harry. The Dean of the Science Program returned to his seat, where the book he'd been reading lay on the table in front of him. "I will give you instructions on how to get started. We will not be meeting for a while, I'm afraid. Pip will be in touch, though." Harry picked up the book again, and opened it back to the page where he'd left off. "I'm not asking, of course. But I don't see how my little plot could work without you, and with your callous stupidity and violence you've forfeited a great deal." He looked down at the page, and resumed reading. "I think one day you'll understand, if it's any consolation. Goodbye."

Kwannon stepped forward, now, gesturing at Lawrence to get up. The boy did, as slowly and gingerly as if he were afraid of breaking something. He gently put a hand under Annabeth's elbow, and guided her to her feet, as well. She didn't stop crying, keeping her face hidden. The auror escorted the children out of the room, pausing only to collect their wands.

Harry returned to *God-Emperor of Dune*, and read quietly for some time.



## Reproduction in Miniature

The town of Ipswich often claims to be Britain's oldest town, since it is known that the community has persisted unbroken since the early seventh century. The wizarding world knows better – Diagon Alley is the oldest continuous community in Britain, surviving since the fourth century before Christ, when it began as a single cottage built by a Greek wizard, a wanderer who had abandoned his century-long journey in search of the legendary Cup of Midnight in order to create a home in this distant land of savages. In one shape or another Diagon has existed ever since, rebuilding homes and shops as needed. It is because of this antiquity that, when Merlin wrought the stone of the Wizengamot and made himself the leader of the magical world, he did so in London. He may have also been honouring the long-ago Greeks who brought wands and high magic to Britain for the first time, although he said nothing of this.

Tír inna n-Óc is older.

That fact no longer means much, truth be told. Tír inna n-Óc was woven from nightmare before *Ελαολογος* even left in pursuit of the Cup of Midnight, and by the time that Cup was broken in the tenth century – woe be upon the breaker of that precious cup! – the hellscape of Tír inna n-Óc had already been abandoned by the Tuath and the Unselie, and no creature called it home.

The realm persisted, regardless. It had been crafted from the horror-dreams of nameless beasts of the sea, creatures no longer known to man or wizard that lie still and breathe salt and do not die, and Tír inna n-Óc would endure as long as they.

In a world as inundated with possibility and conflict as our own, it is not surprising that such places exist and have been lost

or forgotten. Merlin ensured that on the day that he laid down his Interdict to shackle the ambitions of wizardkind. The essence of a spell or ritual must pass from one living mind to another, and so each generation is lessened – for while tricks and cantrips may accumulate to dry your boots and fix your glasses, only the most powerful and daring are capable of mastering the greatest of works, and they have every reason to hoard such advantages until they die and their secrets are lost. Merlin intended to limit the extent of possible disasters – he learned from the example of Atlantis, though it was but a legend even in his time. Let wands turn into sticks, in time... since at least there would still be sticks remaining.

It is as Zeira wrote in the Midrash, many years ago: “If the early scholars were like sons of angels, we are like people; if they were like people, we are like donkeys.”

But enough of these jots and tittles from the past: at this moment, Tír inna n-Óc had visitors. Three figures had come to stand on the shore of the lake of teeth, where the black hills come to an end. They were perhaps the only three people yet remaining who knew of this nightmare realm or how to access it, although the Tuath might be angered to learn that the place has become little more than a meeting-room, chosen because it transcended physicality and may be accessed from anywhere on the planet. The ritual needed nothing more than the nightmare of a sleeping child and the eye of a murdered man – both easily obtained by the unscrupulous.

The appearance of the three figures was solid and distinct, but composed entirely of genderless black shadows in continual motion. The shadows were incomprehensibly complex – were you to examine any one part of the inky smoke that roiled and twisted in black cords to define three figures, you would see smaller figures within, composed of yet smaller figures, all infinitely refracted.

The three figures spoke in a dialect of Norman French that is now entirely extinct.

“The American has failed, entirely... as I said she would,” said the first to break the silence, without greeting or preamble.

“Yes. It was, perhaps, hasty to press matters.” said the second mildly, by way of agreement.

“The fault lay not in the gambit as a whole. The problem was with the trap meant to ensure the safety of our forces – to ward them from intruders until Tineagar could find opportunity to destroy the Tower,” said the third figure, turning to retort to the first. “It was overly complicated – a windmill trap better suited for a board than a pub.”

The first figure spoke coldly, “The Zwickmühle was flawless, Nell. Each move was a discovery of a new vulnerability, but your piece must be capable of actually *finishing* the–”

“Enough of your shatranj metaphors!” snapped Nell, the third figure, in response. “Not every situation can be mapped out on a game.”

“I am not aware of any affairs that have surpassed the complexity of the game of kings. Everything fits neatly within its bounds, properly understood,” calmly replied the first figure, summoning up majesty in its voice. “And chess lays bare the mind of a lesser player. Sixty years ago, a schoolboy’s game betrayed his deepest flaws and deepest cunning, and gave us reason to give the Verbo Principis Incantatorum over to the mayfly leader of Britain. You forget such things at your peril, child.”

“Indeed, the game is very much a thing of schoolboys in this age – and a thing of Muggles, who pick it to pieces,” said Nell, tauntingly, in a manner entirely unbecoming of an ancient witch of eldritch power. But then, it is a mistake to think that the mighty never squabble. “A pity that the rook of our concern does not play, and you must solace yourself with delving into the mind of the American knight.”

“This is not helpful,” said the second figure. The other two fell silent, though they still glared at each other, expressing harsh stares to the extent that the body language of an inhuman shadow was capable.

The second figure bent over, coiled shadows writhing within the solid lines of its form, and picked up one of the teeth that rolled in gentle waves upon the shore. It studied the canine in its fingers for a long and quiet time, and no one spoke.

Finally, the second figure broke the silence to say, “Magic continues. Worse, for now it rises in strength once more – the curse of scholarship made worse by Muggle philosophies. We are

within a hair of destruction. I have no wish to walk companionless on a desolate rock for the eternities – or whatever worse fate that the future may hold.”

The other two stood uneasy at the sentiment, wondering if they heard a threat to themselves mingled in that vision of doom.

“We must choose tools,” the second figure continued. “Tineagar is no longer in position to be useful. Keep her in Paris. We must choose wisely – somehow the Tower evades our vision, unlike all others.”

“Yes,” said Nell. “We will expend her some later day. The dozen she turned to her use have already been cleansed.”

“The goblins, then?” offered the first figure. “Our coin is beyond price to them – the dream of twenty generations. We have what we need for eyes and ears, but we could purchase the loyalty of their cities wholesale like a klafter of wood.”

“There is a readymade tool, I think,” said the second figure. “Readied by the Tower himself and only waiting for our hand.”

There was a pause, as all three considered the proposal. There was no doubt as to the second figure’s meaning.

“Ah, yes,” agreed Nell. “And it is pleasingly ironic. It is well to find poetry in a plan.”

“A good move, yes,” said the first figure, giving his assent.

“We will consider proposals,” said the second figure. “Be well.”

The three figures exchanged no further words nor farewells, but simply dissipated where they stood. The shadows that had composed their forms twisted and squirmed free, slithering into their own fractal depths like midnight ouroboros.

Tír inna n-Óc endured.



Hermione Jean Granger was playing football. She was rather good, much to the amusement and astonishment of the two hundred Argentinian witches and wizards who had wished to introduce her to the game. She’d been almost as good in yesterday’s Quidditch game, although she had to admit to herself that she simply wasn’t that skilled a flier. Her hand-eye coordination, reflexes, and toughness made her an excellent Keeper, though.

*And of course, she thought, they're probably not all that interested in beating me, anyhow.*

She raced up the pitch, boots digging into the turf, and met the approaching ball with a thunderous kick whose leathern impact echoed off the opposing bleachers. It sailed high through the air, landing in one of the corners on the other end of the field. A full-back (was that right? yes) sprinted towards it, while Hermione's team pressed the attack to try to isolate him from the other defenders. He got the ball to the goalkeeper, though, who cleared it with a fast-moving kick that put it out of threat.

She'd heard cynics say that people want to see a legend die. She wasn't sure if that was true – although it might be right, if only for the same reason that people want to see a failure suddenly redeem themselves. “It's the contrast they like,” Kurt Vonnegut had once written. “The order of events doesn't make any difference to them. It's the thrill of the *fast reverse*” (page 252 in *Sirens of Titan*, her brain automatically supplied).

But even if the cynics were right, here in South America, no one was interested in destroying the mystique of the Goddess and her legend. They just seemed to want to be near her.

A midfielder was coming down the right, and Hermione ran towards him. She grinned as the small crowd called out, cheering indiscriminately. She lifted a hand in acknowledgment, even as she increased her speed.

She hadn't realized that footballers essentially just *ran* the entire time. An official with the Departamento de Deporte y Juegos Mágicos had given her a tutorial yesterday, but it had been short and conducted through a translator, and Hermione suspected that even the official had only recently learned how the game was played. The tutorial had contained little new information for a Muggleborn, but both she and the official seem to have missed some obvious bits... like the importance of endurance. After an hour, most of the players had been swapped out – they appeared to be a little loose with the rules, since she didn't think that many substitutions were allowed in Muggle games – and even the replacements looked tired.

But Hermione didn't get tired. She just ran and ran and ran.

The midfielder did some sort of trick with his feet, seeming to go one way with the ball while instead kicking it to the side, and

Hermione missed it completely, charging past him. He picked up speed to try to escape, dribbling and looking for someone to whom he could pass, but she wheeled around and chased him. The crowd shouted again, and Hermione laughed.

It turns out, sports are fun. How silly.

The game ended with a slight victory for her team, with a final score of 2-1. It was the most politic result, she thought later, toweling off in the locker room. *Preserves everyone's dignity, while still giving them a show.*

*Quite a revealing show, actually,* she considered. Was this whole "Día Muggle" nonsense really just a ploy to get her out of her robes and into the football kit's revealing shorts? She'd have to talk to Esther and Susie and get their opinions... and maybe get a look at any pictures from today, too. She had to maintain her pseudo-Elizabethan public image, which necessitated being a bit of a prude.

After folding her towel neatly on a nearby bench and putting on her underthings, Hermione stepped into one of the two outfits she usually wore on these tours. This one consisted of simple black pants and silk shirt beneath a set of leaf-green robes. It suited her complexion well, and the green brought out the colouring of "Harry's" eyes on those occasions when she was with one of his doppelgangers.

*Not that I'll be doing that again, anytime soon,* she thought. For the first time in years, she didn't have any goodwill trips scheduled. After she left here, it was back to Boston, and then... well, she supposed she'd spend some time with her parents, and then she'd spend some time working in the Advancement Agency or Extension Establishment in the Tower. She'd also need to go to Powis, and spend some time with poor Nikitas, who was only gradually adjusting.

Hermione had been worried that the change in identity was going to be too disruptive to the man, who had already been a borderline case for the past month. She hadn't thought that it would send him back into the catatonia in which he'd dwelt for the first fortnight of his freedom, but receiving a new face and surname might have been badly damaging to the fragile sense of self that he'd been developing.

To her delight, Nikitas seemed to embracing his new identity as Nikitas Phocas. He was learning English quickly, and tried a new activity every day. Several times, Tonks had told her yesterday, he had even slept through the night.

“Hermione?” Esther had stepped into the locker room. It was a huge place, designed for an entire busy team of Muggle players and their associated hangers-on; the Returned witch’s voice echoed hollowly.

“Here,” said Hermione, sitting down on a bench to pull on her stockings. “Just getting dressed.”

Esther had been standing guard outside. She approached, walking cautiously and loudly. Hermione smiled to herself as she put on her shoes; Esther wanted to be considerate in case Hermione wasn’t yet dressed. She pulled the laces of her shoes tight – awkward, pointed-toe, patent leather affairs – and came around the edge of a bank of lockers to greet the American. “Hullo. Everything all right?”

“Yes,” said Esther. “Just wanted to let you know that the dinner tonight will be some sort of special meat feast, according to the ‘Asistente Junior’ to the Minister.”

Esther looked tired. Her hair, a dirty-blond bob cut as close as a halo, looked greasy. Her eyes had always looked hollowed, but they’d accumulated dark rings beneath them that made them appear nearly sunken. Hermione felt a flush of chagrin... she should send Esther back to Powis for some rest. Left to her own devices, she would wear herself to exhaustion during these sorts of trips, remaining hypervigilant all day. Hermione had thought it would impress Alastor, actually, but the dear man had just gruffly said that Hermione was “well-worth the effort” (although, he’d also added at a later time, Hermione should be careful not to confuse dedication for effectiveness). It had been very sweet – all the more so because Alastor was disguised as a waifish teenage girl at the time.

“Thank you. Ask Susie to speak to him and figure something out, will you?” Hermione said, nodding. She stepped a few paces away and got her bubbler out of her pouch to contact her Returned compatriot. Susie would be adept at finding a solution to the meat problem without offending anyone. It wasn’t a good idea to

flaunt differences that could seem suspicious, alien, or haughty – a surprising number of people were disturbed by the revelation that the Goddess was vegetarian.

Hermione walked around to a mirror and sink, and examined herself. “Pick,” she said to her pouch, and she spent some minutes getting her hair under control. Esther reappeared after a few minutes, offering no comment. The others must have not objected to the change of shifts.

“We’re on to Boston tonight, Esther,” Hermione said, finishing with her hair. Her mane of chestnut ringlets was tamed, but as lively as always. “I think you and Charlevoix should go back to Powis and see to the Cappadocians – I’m still worried about Nikitas, especially,” Hermione said. “Hyori, Jessie, and Simon can see to security in Boston, while you, Charlevoix, and Tonks get things done back home.” Urg was off in Ireland, meeting with the city officials of Curd. If the Goddess and the Tower were going to be moving apart on the international stage, Hermione wanted to make sure she had her own lines of communication to important groups.

Esther accepted without complaint or relief, processing the request as calmly as though she’d simply been told the time of day. “Okay.” There was a beat, and then she added, hesitantly, “Actually...” She stopped, as Hermione looked over, surprised.

“What is it?” Hermione asked.

“Well... do you think Tonks could see to everything for a couple of days? Charlevoix and I wanted to go look at houses in Godric’s Hollow, if it’s all right?” Esther bit her lower lip. Both the request and the display of anxiety were unusual.

“Oh, of course!” Hermione said. She smiled hugely, despite her surprise, and stepped towards the other witch to pull her into a hug. It was returned firmly and warmly.

*They’re finding themselves... growing up and out,* she thought, and she felt nothing but pride and joy over how far the Returned had come. There would always be damage, but every turn of season brought a new reason to celebrate their rescue from hell.

Hermione knew the literature about unhealthy idealization supplanting real connections with community and relationships. This was a wonderful turn of events – a healthier and better



development than Hermione had ever expected, if she was honest. It meant that there was serious hope that – in the near future – the severely Demented might fully recover from their devastating affliction: a monstrous combination of post-traumatic stress disorder and amnesia.

Hermione pulled away, asking quizzically, “Have you been thinking about this long?”

“No,” said Esther, shaking her head and looking away at a featureless wall. She was smiling slightly, though, and evident pleasure was visible on her rosebud lips. “But... it seems time. We’ve been at Powis for years. We’re ready.”

Hermione fixed her gaze on Esther’s own, though it avoided her, and said with all the feeling she could muster, “I am so happy for you. You’ll always, always, always have a home with me... but I am so happy for you.”

The world was changing, and it was such a wonderful thing.



“...and she flushed as pink as her horrid dress,” said Harry, already breaking into laughter. He was joined in his laughter by the black box.

The box’s voice was not the dry, deep tone of dangerous Professor Quirrell, nor the shrill hiss of the vicious Lord Voldemort. Instead, it was an utterly banal and boring male voice, magically generated and fully articulated in stress and tone, but entirely without character. Harry had come to associate that voice with the new Voldemort – the Voldemort he was happily working on corrupting into accidental goodness. There wasn’t much time for it – at best, an hour every couple of days – but Harry could afford to take his time. He thought redeeming the sociopathic monster might take a century or so. There was no rush.

“She must be remembering the fellow from Material Methods that was our first honeypot for temptation,” Harry said. Though the jargon was certainly unfamiliar to Voldemort, Harry didn’t bother to explain. The colloquialism was obvious, and he could rely on Voldemort to intuit it without needing a plodding walk-through. So few people that could do that, even after all these years!

“She is not known for her insight,” said Voldemort. He sounded amused. His voice took on a more serious tone of warning as he said, “But you should not congratulate yourself on playing the game at this level, though, unless you have ensured you are winning on a higher level, as well. You can be sure that Mr. Malfoy is working to put agents that are not absurd and obvious into your organization, even as you work to infiltrate his with the same strategy. You should suspect at least three levels of deception: an obvious agent, a less obvious agent that may succeed on his own terms, and a third agent whose entrance might be effected by the discovery of the second agent. Mr. Malfoy would have learned this effective technique, and will use it, supplemented by other initiatives.”

Voldemort didn’t say anything about where Draco would have learned that, and neither did Harry. The knowledge lay between them, and it was somewhat awkward.

“Yes,” Harry agreed, lightly. “But anything he does in that regard works out all right, I think.” He didn’t offer any more details. Not to be coy or mysterious, but only because it was a matter of common sense that you never discussed any secret that was seriously important with anyone – even with a voice imprisoned in a box. Even when presented with conundrums like the mysterious Three, Harry didn’t indulge himself by asking his caged mastermind villain for advice or analysis. The risk was too great.

Instead, Harry would ask Voldemort’s opinion about lesser deceptions or simple logistics that could benefit from a creative and educated mind, such as a clever way to transport huge amounts of soil or water, or how one might improve the wizarding mail service.

*Although really, there’s probably no good reason for discussing anything at all with Voldemort... especially not at such a delicate time. He has his books on cassette for entertainment.* Harry glanced at the corner, where a dozen stacked tape players and an auto-play rig were nested on a small platform, surrounded by a thick mass of Lovegood Leaf to preserve them. Mostly history and science, at Voldemort’s request. Harry could perhaps have gotten someone to record themselves reading a book on magical theory or something else that might be more in line with what

the mandrake-bound mind would prefer, but he had thought that unwise.

Voldemort had spent years bound to a satellite amongst the stars, with only his thoughts for company, though. Harry wasn't sure anyone's mental discipline, even Voldemort's ferocious power of mind, would suffice to keep madness at bay if he was forced to experience that a second time.

"The sliceboxes have been pushed out to nearly a mile," Harry said, changing the subject. "But I'm not sure they can go much further. The process has been pushed to very nearly as far as it can go... all the materials are already absolutely pure and shaped with complete precision, thanks to the Stone, and the enchantment is running up to its limit."

"There are limits to any enchantment – they have suzerainty over their allotted span, but cannot exceed it," said Voldemort, thoughtfully. There was a pause as he considered the problem. "There are other spells discussed in legend, but none that will serve your purposes. They rely on anchors of power that may not be moved, or are themselves only reflections of a greater order to which we no longer have access. The Book of Exses describes a magical theatre that was not bound to this world, for example, and held a multitude safe from all attack or interference while war raged outside. But that knowledge has been lost." There was another pause, and Harry waited quietly, watching the shiny black box as a flicker of reddish energy washed over it. Eventually, Voldemort said, "There is a way it could be done, however. If you moved your manufactory to a place entirely free of interference from outside influence, you may discover that the enchantment could bear a still greater strain."

Harry glanced over at the Lovegood Leaf in the corner, again. "Thank you, Professor. I think I have the means to do that. It shouldn't even be difficult – and it would mean that the sliceboxes would be finished and ready to deploy before launch, if it works."

"Do not assume that your Russian hirelings will perform on schedule. In such circumstances, it is known that last-minute delays usually occur, and can only be solved by a generous payment to a figure of middling competence and no intelligence. The rocket will be short a wire or conditions will always be found to be just a

tad too wet, or the like. And they will hold your carefully-prepared satellite package in their care while they delay, so you go to no rivals to put it in orbit. And I do not think you would be willing to take the necessary actions to forestall such blackmail, which means you must either wait or swallow your dignity and pay.”

Harry shrugged, though he knew that the box couldn’t hear his gesture. “It’s just money. Well, almost money... it’s rubles. I’d pay triple to get that Cabinet where I need it.”

“And are you disappointed that you yourself will not be exiting that Cabinet, Mr. Potter? After so many years, and so much labour and annoyance?” Voldemort made no mention of the Vow that forced Harry to remain in the Tower.

“Yes,” admitted Harry. “But I think...” He trailed off, as he tried to decide what he thought. “I think,” he said, slowly, “that I never really expected I’d play so much of a part in anything like that. Not really. I always thought it would happen for humans, eventually, but for myself...”

“You were not so optimistic, because you had some modicum of wisdom,” said Voldemort.

“Yes,” said Harry. He sighed. “And anyway, the future is long. Someday.”

“That doesn’t stop you from wishing that it was you up there, going through the Van Allen belts four times a day,” said Voldemort. “Take my advice, Mr. Potter, and drop such dreams of adventurism. You have never heard or revered the name of Sarah Williams or Penelope Drizkowski, though they braved new frontiers... no, it is the name of Merlin that rests on the lips of wizardkind, and he is not known to have ever even left England.”

Harry raised his eyebrows and smiled. “Your comfort is always offered like a command, Professor. Why is that?”

“To teach you, Mr. Potter, although sometimes I despair of the endeavour. All of your aims might have been accomplished in a matter of months, if you had only made diligent use of your resources. Proper motivation sometimes requires a little blood,” said Voldemort, and somehow the neutral male voice of the black box managed to convey a frown.

In a way, the entire situation was an example of dangerously convenient wish fulfillment. He could speak and match wits with

his old beloved professor – his *intelligent* professor – and no longer had to worry about uncertainties. Voldemort was insane, badly damaged by nature, nurture, and ritual: it was an established fact. If Voldemort got free, he would slaughter all who opposed him, enslave the rest, and spend eternity amusing himself without concern for the consequences. And he *would* try to get free. But he had no magic – nor even limbs – and no other companions. So unless Harry let him out of the box, he was secure. A caged tiger.

And Harry had pre-committed not to let Voldemort out of the box, no matter what argument or suasion might present itself. He had once told Voldemort that he actually was *unable*, implying that he meant his Vow would prevent him. He wasn't sure that Voldemort believed this, but it was a credible statement since the Vow did depend on Harry's own subjective judgment. Either way, the monster in the box had not directly pressed the issue since. They just had their conversations, whenever he could spare the time or the sleep.

"I will just muddle through as best I can, unbloodied, then," Harry said. "I'm doing all right so far, I think."

"You would do better if you did not spend so many hours saving the lives of the ocean of idiots that beats a path to your little fortress, here," said Voldemort.

"I can do some good, and my shifts in the clinic often give me time to think. Sleeping patients and bored healers do not disturb my thoughts, after all," Harry said. This was not as true as he'd like... despite the rules, too many staff bothered him there as he moved from bed to bed, asking for directions or assistance or favors.

"Your scruples and soft heart do the world no favors, Mr. Potter," said Voldemort. If the box had lungs, Harry expected that this is where it would sigh. He smiled again.



Lawrence blinked as the blindfold was removed, looking nervously around. He was in a greenhouse that blazed with the sun, and the glare nearly blinded him. As sight returned, though, he could see dirty shelves and empty clay pots. There were no plants except a few withered vines that climbed the glass walls. It would have

looked abandoned, but there were no broken panes among the dozens that arched overhead, quite incongruously.

The person who had removed the blindfold walked around Lawrence with clicking heels until she was visible. She had grey hair in a long and perfect braid, tied with a black bow where it ended at the small of her back, and she was wearing magnificent formal robes. They too were black, with darker patterns of jet tracing a fine filigree along the bodice and waist. She had dark eyes and generous lips. She was looking curiously at him.

“Hello, young man. How are you feeling?” Narcissa Malfoy asked. Lawrence couldn’t say why, but though her tone was normal – even kind – and her expression was inoffensively inquisitive, he felt threatened.

“I’m fine, madame,” he said, and his voice warbled with his nerves.

“Ah, good. Even though this is just another in a series of tediously temporary places, I’m afraid that these silly precautions are still important,” she said, and smiled pleasantly. She clasped her hands together in front of herself. “I hope you don’t mind.”

“No, madame,” he said. He managed to sound a bit more confident.

She smiled, and held out a hand to gesture the way. “My son is down the hall.” He wondered where she’d put his wand. He wondered where they were. He wondered why he knew with such complete certainty that Madame Malfoy would be willing to kill him, if it became necessary. Or even convenient.

He walked forward, a bit unsteadily. Leaving the unused greenhouse, they made their way down a dusty hall, and into a well-lit chamber. It had wood paneling and thick Turkish carpets on the floors, and was dominated by an enormous desk to one side. Two men were within, sitting in wing chairs, and it looked for all the world as they they’d been having a casual chat about unimportant things. The normality of the scene was unreal, all things considered.

One of the men rose. He was tall and slim and magnificent of appearance, with short ice-blond hair and high cheekbones. He too was wearing black formal robes, although his were empty of decoration. He smiled graciously, with the air of nothing less than an emperor. “Ah, this must be our guest. A guest with an offer.”

“Yes, Draco. Mr. Lawrence Bradwian – you may remember his father was in the Wizengamot, some years ago?” said Narcissa. “A good family. And Lawrence has been a credit to them, putting up with our little game. All this, just to have a little talk.” She smiled, and walked to the desk. There was an elegant black cane with a silver head resting on it, and she picked it up.

“Hello, Lawrence,” said the blonde man. “My name is Draco Malfoy. I understand you wanted to help me with something?”

“Yes, sir,” said Lawrence. He would have gone on, but Draco was already speaking again.

“Good, good... This is Mr. Erasmus. You may have already heard of him, in fact, if you read my newsletter,” said Draco, gesturing at a strong-jawed and solidly-built man with russet-red hair, sitting in the corner with his feet up on a divan. “He wouldn’t do as he was told in the Tower, researching in one of Harry Potter’s silly alphabetical departments – he dared to question authority. And so even though he was one of the most brilliant Unspeakables, they tried to box up his research and dictate the terms of discovery.”

“I was within a hair of developing magical machines,” said Erasmus, rising from his seat. He was intimidatingly tall. “When you think about what they could have done for us... machines made of air and light! My gears were eddies of wind, my mainspring was no more than a child’s spell. But it *offended* Harry Potter, with his childish infatuation with Muggle methods, and so he confiscated all my work and tried to lock me into a different research plan. I was at the forefront of their work, elevating Muggle principles into—”

Draco made an impatient gesture, and Erasmus cut off his impassioned stream of rapid words. He bowed his head for a fraction of a second with a smile, and then raised his chin magisterially. “Yes, forgive me... I am still shocked at the my persecution and the whole series of events.”

Draco walked around to the huge desk, which was topped with intimidatingly perfect and glossy jade. He brushed some parchments aside, and picked one up, examining it. “So then, Lawrence.” He looked back over at the boy. “How exactly do you think you can help me?”

For a second time, though, the silver-haired young man didn't give Lawrence a chance to answer. He crumpled up the parchment with one hand, loudly, before straightening again and turning back to face him. Narcissa approached, the cane she'd picked up from the desk held in her hands, and offered it to her son as she came to stand next to him. Draco held it lightly in front of him, and scrutinized Lawrence with narrow eyes.

"That is to say: of what possible use can an agent of the Tower be to me?"



# Opfer Müssen Gebracht Werden

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“That is to say: of what possible use can an agent of the Tower be to me?” asked Lord Draco Malfoy of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Malfoy, infamous enemy of the ascendant Government, thorn in the side of the mighty Harry Potter, and increasingly powerful rhetorical force behind the Treaty of Independence. As he stared at the teenage boy in front of him, his eyes were narrow and his lips tight with contempt. His ice-blond hair was almost perfectly styled, but for two stray bits of hair that artfully dipped across his forehead, as though bowing. He held a silver-topped cane lightly – almost carelessly – in his hands.

His mother, the Lady Narcissa, stood at his side – herself a figure of almost as much fame since she suddenly and inexplicably reappeared in British society after more than a decade-long absence (during which she was said to be dead, murdered by former Headmaster Dumbledore). She smiled pleasantly.

Lawrence understood, very suddenly and with absolute completeness, just how stupid he and Annabeth had been to get involved with any of this. To try to frame Sammy Meroveni-Bowles, fool the Tower, and solve a mystery that was clearly *way* out of their league. To do anything other than report straight to the Headmistress about *everything*.

He tried to answer Draco's question, but somehow his mouth and throat had gone deadly dry. Just inhaling to speak tickled the back of his throat, and he shuddered with a cough for a moment, choking it back into a strangle since he was afraid to even *cough* in front of the Lord and Lady Malfoy.

The pair did nothing but watch, calmly, which was somehow even more terrifying. Mr. Erasmus, the red-haired former Tower researcher, seemed uninterested. He sipped his wine and stared off into space.

“I...” Lawrence struggled to swallow, and then forced himself to continue. “I brought information. Things that they’ve found out in the Tower.” He glanced over at Mr. Erasmus, the man who’d been introduced to him as a former Tower researcher, but Mr. Erasmus appeared more interested in the dram of whiskey that he was swirling around in a stemless glass goblet.

“My dear Lawrence,” said Narcissa, smiling. “The cause of freedom has supporters everywhere. I cannot imagine you know anything that we do not.”

“You are a... fourth year, I believe,” said Draco. He didn’t look at Lawrence, instead looking idly at the silver head on the cane in his hands. “Tell me about the astonishing coincidence or whimsical connection that brought you this information.”

“Well, sir, a few days ago one of my classmates, Sammy, was hurt. He fell. And I got a Safety Stick to help him – to get him to the Tower, sir. But my friend Annabeth was right there, and she helped me. So we all three went.” Lawrence spoke smoothly, now, feeling a little better. This had been rehearsed.

“This sounds rehearsed,” said the Lady Narcissa. Lawrence felt his flesh prickle.

“Yes, madame... I practiced in front of a mirror before I went to Whizz Hard Books to try to get in touch with the Honourable,” said Lawrence. Even though he’d been prepared for that observation, thanks to the Tower, who had anticipated it, sweat trickled down the small of his back.

“But Annabeth has been angry at the Tower, I think, sir. Well, I know she has. We don’t read your newsletter, since it doesn’t seem smart to have it delivered to Hogwarts, but we still hear things. About how all the rejuvenated people seem too perfect-looking, like dolls, and how they act differently afterwards... like new people. Like they’ve been replaced. Annabeth’s oma – er, her grandmother, sir – she was just like that. Annabeth was happy about the rejuvenation, at first, but now she feels like she’s lost her grandmother. Like it was unnatural.”

“Your friend would have preferred her grandmother died, you’re saying?” Draco seemed doubtful and amused, a slight smile playing on the edges of his lips.

“No, sir, but they could have just fixed her, without *changing* her,” said Lawrence. He continued his story. “And so anyway, Annabeth tried to mess things up a little bit when she went along with us. She had a whole bunch of doxies she’d transfigured down into a rock or something, and–”

“And when she went along with you and your injured classmate, they returned to their native Form and ran amok,” said Narcissa,

who shook her head, smiling but rueful at the foolishness of children. “More like a prank than anything serious, it seems to me. But I have had word of this; it happened.”

“Well, sir, I had this with me, when I was in there and they were questioning her, they had me sit and wait. They put me at a huge table they have there, and told me to be quiet. And the auror looked away for a minute... and I had this,” said Lawrence. He reached very, very slowly and carefully into his pocket – making it clear he wasn’t going for a wand. Neither of the three adults seemed even slightly concerned. But they did seem interested when he pulled a golden sphere from his pocket. “A Time-Turner.”

“And since Harry uses his own every day, they don’t ward the Tower against them,” said Draco. It wasn’t a new realization; he said it as if it were known information.

“So I went back an hour, and there was no one there in the past. I wanted to go look around, but there were just people *everywhere*, they’re doing so much stuff there... I ended up being stuck in that room, pretty much. The only place I could go was a little quiet room filled with doors, and even there I didn’t want to stay for more than a minute. I just... well, I just grabbed some parchments from a desk there, and ran and hid back under the big table.”

“And you waited for the auror to bring your past self into the room, and then when your past self vanished–” said Narcissa, nodding.

“–I pretended as though I was picking up a piece of parchment from the floor. He yelled at me, but he seemed nice enough for an auror, and didn’t stun me,” finished Lawrence. “So... well, here. This is everything I got.”

He reached back into his robes, and pulled out a thick wad of parchments. They had a crease across their surface, from where they’d been folded in two, earlier. He offered them to Lord Malfoy.

Draco didn’t take them, and neither did his mother. They both glanced at each other for a moment, as though in silent consultation, before the Lord Malfoy finally said, “I’m not sure they would mean much to me, if I can be appropriately humble about my own limits. Edgar?” He was smooth in tone and neutral in affect.

Mr. Erasmus cleared his throat juicily, rising to his feet. He found a spot for his glass, and approached, rubbing his hands

together. They were small and mottled with uneven red-and-white. “Certainly, certainly.” He took the documents from Lawrence, and held one corner pinched with one hand, paging through them with the other. “Some of Vernon Wells’ work, here... Advancement Agency making great strides, it seems. It’ll need some study, but they were already talking about this Muggle testing equipment when I left, and this is a Sanger sequence. They’re looking for genetic marks in Veela blood.” He paused, then puffed, “Hertability, that was it. Looking for hertability. Very technical. And we knew they were on this, really. Not interesting.”

“Oh, it’s all just slips of paper, when you get down to it,” said Draco, drily. “Anything else that might prove more helpful?”

“This says that Richard Keffo Phillips – squinty fellow, like everything’s blurry all the time, a mouse of a man – has worked out how to conjure food. Straight violation of Gamp, though, must be nonsense,” mused Mr. Erasmus.

“All right, well, look through it thoroughly, if you wouldn’t mind, and let me know,” said Draco. “Thank you.”

Mr. Erasmus returned to his chair, taking the parchments with him. He muttered quietly, “Marvelous... in such a short time? My, my...”

“Draco, dear, the boy might be telling the truth,” said Narcissa Malfoy, folding her hands in front of herself demurely. “But it seems more likely that the Tower sacrificed this information about their research – if any of it is true or useful – willingly. A price of passage. Is that so, young man?”

Lawrence didn’t trust himself to speak, and only shook his head in the negative. She turned away from her son to look at him carefully, still smiling, and he felt like he had to pee or throw up (or both). She could kill him. He knew it. She knew that he knew it – in fact, she knew it so well she didn’t even bother to appear threatening.

The saving grace was that, even if he hadn’t been trying to deceive them, he would *still* be this scared, so he didn’t have to try to hide it.

In the stories about boy heroes like Harry Potter and Reynard Goupil, children could run amok and defeat evil and charge into danger. There were always people waiting to save them if things

really went wrong – a kindly civilized centaur, or a nurturing headmaster, or someone else. But children... they weren't *ready* for this. This was... he was in over his head...

"That's true, Mother," said Draco. He lowered one end of the cane in his hands, so that he held it only by the silver snake-head. He toyed with it, rolling the handle between his palms slowly. "For you see, Mr. Bradwian, we know quite well that the Tower recruited you after your little time-turning adventure in the Records Room – if that indeed happened at all."

"He did, sir," said Lawrence, and his voice cracked on the second word. He didn't even feel embarrassed, only worried that it made him seem like he was lying, as he pressed on: "And I said yes."

Narcissa laughed, and it sounded quite beautiful and light-hearted. It was out of place, like a melodious strain of music on the floor of a slaughterhouse.

"And you propose to bear back my chosen information, then, Lawrence? Is that what you're saying?" asked the Lord Malfoy. There was a knife in his words, hidden like a slip-tip behind the soft tone.

"Yes, sir," said Lawrence, who wished he had never started playing games.

"How interesting," said Draco, who relished them like the air.



The three shining spheres, each made of polished silver and standing as tall as Harry, were sitting on simple frames of unvarnished wood. On each sphere, there were two large holes at opposite ends, with other apertures a handspan apart along different points. A single low depression, as though someone had pushed their fist gently against the cooling metal, was partway along one side, matched by a similar protrusion on the other.

Harry touched the surface of one of the silver spheres, reverently. He was wearing his gloves, but they were fingerless: he let his fingers rest lightly on the metal, which was cool to the touch.

After a time spent in contemplation, he dragged a rolling metal podium over. It bore a long, folded printout in dot-matrix on

continuous stationery. Ugly, but he hadn't been able to get the much newer and nicer inkjet printers to work correctly. Harry figured his time was too valuable; he was just going to put five engineers on retainer for the future. More delegation meant less fun, but he wouldn't miss some of the tasks... trying to fix the tables on the EEG output had been a nightmare.

After consulting the numbers and crudely-drawn graphs on the paper, Harry lifted his wand and touched it to one of the openings on a sphere. He opened a pouch on his belt, and pulled free the loose end of a thick cord of dense hemp rope – source material. Then he concentrated, using the skill that had become as natural as breath.

Diamond, borosilicate glass, and a single layer of graphite in a honeycomb pattern began to sprout from the contact. They were crystals joined into a single unit, formed in contravention of all natural processes: nearly transparent and perfect. It would be an exceptionally good window, fitting deep into wells forged all along the rim of the sphere and anchored in place to an atom's exactness.

He'd considered making the vessels entirely out of such materials (or even some of the "theoretical" materials that he and Hermione had made in their second year, while studying for their O.W.L.s). But frankly, not even the best materials that science knew could match the mystic strength of goblin-forged silver. As best he could tell, it was indestructible by all mundane methods.

There had been one prototype when making the combat gauntlets used by some of the Returned; Podrad the Artificer had turned out a lobster-looking medieval doodad, in the formal and useless style of ages past. It would have worked wonderfully for blocking Muggle crossbow bolts in the days when wizards ruled their unmagical kin by force, but it lacked the vital spots for the chargers. It was a good subject for testing, though – shear stress, compression, penetration (by CO<sub>2</sub> laser!), and even a good solid blast of neutrons. That last one had been entrusted to Luna and Cedric and a hand-picked team, and kept quiet, but the results had been marvelous... the goblin-forged silver had only become more dense, without becoming radioactive.

There was probably an outer limit to its mundane durability, but Harry hadn't yet discovered it. The humble Sickel was one

of the most amazing things the magical world had ever produced. Wizards, in their bigotry and stupidity, had spent years oppressing goblins, never knowing that staggering power was jingling in their pockets. Harry could only hope that the rapid restoration of their rights in recent years had been done with enough celerity and forthrightness that it repaired some of the damage. Goblins had long memories.

Done.

Harry stepped back to admire his work, and then stepped forward again, to make sure he'd really done it. He tapped on the glass. Nearly transparent and extraordinarily durable... even before enchantment. Once enchanted, it should be impervious.

Testing first, though.

Harry reached over to the dome-shaped depression in the surface of the sphere, and pushed his hand inside of it. He stepped back to observe as a brown band of color emerged from the slight bulge on the other side of the sphere, expanding away from the center of the bulge. It widened as it went, and it left nothing in its wake – the sphere vanished as the band passed. It looked as though the vessel were evaporating; although, when Harry stepped to the side, he could see that the vanishing flat side of the sphere was now the same brown as the enveloping band. The flat cross-section of the vessel grew larger and larger, until it passed the widest part of the sphere, and then it shrank down rapidly.

In a moment, the entire sphere had vanished in the wake of the brownish band, and the flat brown end had revealed itself to be the smooth brown outer surface of a brown leather coin-purse, which had swallowed almost the whole sphere. As the last of the sphere was placed inside of the purse, it dropped to the ground – as though, only just then, it realized that gravity applied.

“A childhood dream come true?” asked Hermione. Harry turned to see her leaning against the doorway, smiling fondly at him. Bouncy brown curls framed her face.

“This is going into *space*,” Harry said, as he leaned down and picked up the pouch. It was about the shape and weight of a grapefruit. “I am holding the future in my hand,” he marveled.

“Ron Weasley’s future, specifically,” she said, approaching him. One hand was at her neck, toying with her green-and-gold necklace.



“So I hope the testing has been rigorous. I wish I could have helped with that, but there’s been a lot to do.”

“He’ll be fine, and you’ve contributed more than anyone to this... well, to *everything* we’ve done.” Harry put the pouch in the center of the wooden frame, and gestured at it with his two hands, fingers tented together and thrusting out – as though beginning the breast-stroke. Obedient to the BSL command, the pouch began disgorging the vessel, which steadily swelled from a silver bowl back into the full sphere. The brown lip of the pouch, stretching over the surface as the ship was called forth, looked like it was extruding the sphere, as if it were some otherworldly child’s toy.

Hermione pointed at the next sphere over. “The bathysphere?”

“Well, a bathyscaphe or a submersible... but yes. It’ll get a cone-shaped front port. After testing, it will go to the ocean floor... and then, hopefully, right to the bottom of the Challenger Deep, the lowest point on the planet. No one’s been down there since the Picards in the sixties. And we’ll be able to explore far better and see more. We’ll mount viewing mirrors and adjustable spheres with the Perpetual Light Charm on them on the outside, so we’ll be able to take full-colour video, and a bunch of other things. We’ll even take samples to make portkeys, and we’ll leave a Cabinet down there. And there’s some things we need to find that were dropped there, as well.”

“Okay... but then what is this one? A second spaceship?” Hermione pinged the surface of the third sphere with a fingernail. It had a single slight difference from the first two: there was an additional small recess above the space for the front window.

“Something like that,” Harry said. He lifted a hand, and thumped the surface of the first sphere, hard. It had fully reappeared, and the extendable pouch had been swallowed back up in its own turn within the silver lump on the rear of the ship. The window he’d made seemed to be unaffected. He set his gloved palm on it for a moment. “Say, can you scratch these at all? How do you do on goblin-forged silver?”

“My nails are a nine or so on Mohs. I could probably scratch the window. But goblin silver?” Hermione put her thumbnail against the sphere, and dragged it across. There was no effect. “That’s why I have that little knife, so I can trim my nails.”

Harry gathered up a handful of printouts and some other parchments, covered in crabbed notes and designs. “Walk with me?”

They exited the room into the larger hall that held the rest of Material Methods, scooting carefully along the wall at one point to avoid a cauldron that was sitting on an extremely hot fire, the magical flames radiating waves of heat. They nodded and smiled to the goblins and wizards that were busily working in the room. Urg the Returned stopped what he was doing – annealing mother-of-pearl to the inside of a charger cartridge – and called out a greeting. The sharp-toothed goblin had been there for a couple of days, sorting out some of the finer points on the chargers.

“Going well, Urg?” asked Hermione. Harry didn’t think she knew it, but she always spoke to her Returned in an especially gentle voice. Not as though they were fragile, but as though they just held some special warmth that she was reflecting back at them: a gentle moon to the bright sun of their devotion to her.

“Yes,” Urg said, dusting fragments of shiny iridescence from his fingertips. “Hezekiah from the Extension Establishment spent some time here yesterday, and showed us how to stabilize the extended pocket space within each charger. They’ll be able to hold much more of whatever we put into them.” He had a strong Acklish accent – guttural hoarseness on the velar consonants.

Hermione picked up the charger he’d been working on, and examined it curiously. “What’s this for? Air, foam, water, tear gas, grease...?”

“Potions,” said Urg. “Cure for Common Poisons, Befuddlement Draught, and any of the others that can be breathed in.”

Harry frowned, leaning over to examine Urg’s workbench. It was at goblin height, so he had to lean quite a ways over. “I thought they kept going inert inside the charger? When we did a prototype with the Muffling Draught, it just shot out like a jet and didn’t function at all.”

“The lining,” said Hermione. “The mother-of-pearl sustains the potion?”

“And there’s a nozzle for the front, to mist it,” said Urg. He went back to the workbench, and held up a small nozzle. It looked like a copy in metal of a Muggle spray-bottle nozzle. “The only

trick was keeping the Undetectable Extension Charm stable, and I think we've solved that."

"This is wonderful, Urg," Hermione said. The goblin drew himself up very tall, and nodded, the tips of his long ears bobbing with the motion.

"Thank you," he said.

"We'll let you get back to it," said Harry. "But I wonder if you might take a moment, some day next week, to speak to the Science Program students about this? Not specifics... but just the way you approached the problem."

Urg shrugged. "Yes, if you'd like. It's just as the old proverb says..." he said, and accompanied it with a fluent line of Gobbeldook. He paused, then translated for the humans: "Make it and break it and make it until it stays made."

"I might need to have that engraved on the wall," said Harry, as he and Hermione began walking again. "Thanks."

Urg nodded again, and sat back down to his work. The Tower and the Goddess proceeded out of Material Methods and down the corridor.

"We need to change tactics when it comes to Malfoy," said Harry, as they walked side-by-side down the featureless corridors. They passed the quiet Records Room, the noisy Conjunction Conjunction, and the humid Vision Verge.

"Yes... I know about your tactics so far, Harry. And why you need to change them. It wasn't hard to guess," said Hermione, quietly... a little coldly.

Harry heard her, but was distracted for a moment. He ducked back the way they came, and called into the Vision Verge, where the two researchers of that department were concocting a clear, viscous substance, turning it over in thick folds with a large metal spoon. "Hey! It doesn't matter if that mercury is enchanted, the vapours are still toxic! First degree of caution, please!"

The chagrined researchers, who'd started in surprise at the sudden interruption and command, set the large metal spoon down and got out their wands to begin putting up the precautions. Harry nodded severely.

When he returned to her side, he said, "Yes... it's been necessary for a long time. You came to me after the bombing in Diagon

Alley with Tonks, and you both were right, then. I've been waiting because... well, the time wasn't right."

As they entered the meeting room, Hermione closed the door behind them, and glanced around. They were alone.

"No," she said, leaning against the door. "I know. I know you haven't been trying to stop Draco and Narcissa."

Harry controlled his reaction. He'd been expecting this. He limited himself to nodding, thoughtfully, as he walked over to the big table.

She crossed her arms, and went on. "I even understand the reasons behind it. But what I *don't* understand is why you wouldn't tell me. Why you'd keep it a secret."

He sighed. *I knew this was coming. Another reason to step up more obvious aggressive action... it's becoming apparent that we're not really taking on the Honourable. We move hard to advance our own interests, but barely do anything to restrain the Malfoys.*

"I wanted to control the game... I wanted *one* game, as much as could manage," Harry said. "World politics was too balkanized, with too many separate sets of interests. The States and most of the rest of the Americas are all about advancing their own power and pushing back against the 'British imperialism' that they think has been dominating the world since Merlin. I mean, not that they're wrong, but..." He shrugged. "Europe is a muddle of old feuds, like Cappadocia and Cyprus... the Sawad and Africa splinter into different factions on a regular basis... and the Ten Thousand are—well, I don't actually understand what's going on between the twelve of them."

"Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres," said Hermione, sharply, "if you dare to try to explain the basics of game theory to me, I am going to be rather cross with you. I can see *why* you did it: you wanted to create a conflict game where there are only two sides — and as close to zero-sum as you could get. I'm going to leave aside the arrogance of trying to manipulate world politics on this scale — I mean, honestly, the Cold War version of this left the world with thousands of nuclear bombs! — and just say that you *should have told me*."

Harry faced away from her for a long moment, staring at the glossy wood of the table. He leaned on it, and thought about what to say.

“It’s not that I don’t trust you. I trust you *implicitly*,” he said, still gazing at his own reflection in the table’s surface. “You’re intuitively good... I have to think through utility functions and weigh the benefits, but you... you carry goodness around like pennies in your pocket. Not that intuition is the best way to get correct utilitarian results, but... I have to admit your record on moral decisions is a lot better than mine. Results matter. So it’s not that... it’s not trust.” He paused. “But you and Draco were... close.”

He heard Hermione about to speak behind him, as she drew in a breath.

“That’s not what I mean,” he said hastily, turning around. Her eyes were bright and fixed on him, as if she could pin him to the floor and wrest out his secrets with the intensity of her scrutiny. “But you spent a lot of time together, after our first year. I know he really helped you, when you couldn’t get the— when you had trouble with the Patronus.” Her gaze stayed steady. “And you’re so open and clear to everyone... it’s why you’ve been so effective at convincing people to join the Treaty for Health and Life.”

*But you’re terrible at deception. You never had to learn it: you have always won by sheer dint of cleverness and hard work. You’ve gotten a little better at dissembling and lying as you’ve become more of a politician, but carrying on a charade where we were working our hardest to crush the Honourable threat? I couldn’t risk it. People like Reg Hig would see through you after a single conversation.*

But none of that was the right thing to say. You can’t convince someone out of their feelings like that... it ended up sounding like you were saying that their feelings were wrong or illegitimate. Even if you succeeded in reasoning someone out of all of their objections, you didn’t make them feel better or repair the breach. He’d learned, all too well, that emotions could overwhelm everything else, in the moment. *Once you get past that, and get on with it, you can get back to being rational and*

“No,” Hermione said, firmly, as though she knew exactly what he was thinking. “I am not a delicate flower, and I am not an irrational woman overcome by my past and my emotions, and I am not standing on a bloody pedestal while you take the hard

decisions on yourself. I'm not—" She paused, seeming to think of something else for a moment, then added, "I'm not a bloody pawn in your game." She walked towards him until she was only a pace away, her jaw rigid with anger. Harry became aware that he'd leaned back against the table away from her, without being conscious of it.

"But after Granville, you were... I mean, you're out there all the time, open to attack and facing the public, and—" he said, starting and restarting his explanations.

Hermione reached to the table next to him, took hold with a few fingers, and casually twisted. The beveled edge of the wood, fully an inch thick, snapped off with a loud cracking noise. She shifted the thick chunk to her palm, and ground it to splinters with a few motions of her hand. Broken pieces of the destroyed fragment of table pattered to the floor like rain.

"And I'm too fragile?" She opened her hand, releasing a scattering of dust. Her voice was bitter, arch contempt underlying every syllable. "You didn't tell me about your proposed plan because you didn't think I'd be able to handle it... because you thought I'd be in a conference in France or Germany or America, and someone would ask why we weren't cracking down on the Honourable, and I'd muff it. Because you don't think of me as a full equal. I'm your equal only on very specific terms... spellcraft and tactics and combat and ethics. But when it comes to the big decisions on strategy? You only trust your own judgment, even after everything. That's the only real reason for this. You're the Dumbledore, *watching over me*, and I'm the child."

"I- I'm... I'm sorry, I-" He felt overwhelmed, and wanted to protest, *No, no, that's not true... we're full partners*, but he was too well-trained in the art of avoiding avoidance, and so he was already critically assessing his own thought processes, and wondering if she was right about all of that, and he had the sickening suspicion that she was. If someone is your full partner, you don't use a grand strategy that leaves them in the dark. That's what you do with subordinates. Which was how he'd been treating her... in this, anyway.

"I'm going to stop Draco from dragging any more people into his nasty little Treaty of Let People Die, don't worry about that,"

Hermione said, as she jabbed a finger into his chest. She was being gentle, he knew, since it didn't hurt him. Even as she felt betrayed, she was gentle with him. He felt like an unbelievable jackass.

She stalked out of the room, pausing only to say one last thing.

"Voldemort didn't think he had any equals, either."



*NOTE: I am aware that graphene wasn't yet produced in a real way until years after 1999, but it was observed and studied for many decades before that, and scientists began trying to synthesize it in the seventies.*

*What do you want from me  
you who walk towards me over the long floor*

*your arms outstretched, your heart  
luminous through the ribs*

*around your head a crown  
of shining blood*

*This is your castle, this is your metal door,  
these are your stairs, your*

*bones, you twist all possible  
dimensions into your own*

—Margaret Atwood



# Press Pass

*For all that the decorating was ostentatious and the explanation of the menu was inane, however, I must admit that the food was a revelation of flavor and texture. Even when I didn't understand it, I enjoyed it. I tried a chutney that was complex and rich, but balanced perfectly with quail eggs in a bed of a squash paste. I found that it was...*

— Excerpted from “New ‘Muggle Restaurant’  
Opens Its Doors in Britain,”  
by Sylvia de Kamp in *American Mage*.



Margaret Bulstrode pushed open the door to Billie’s Bobbing Bubbies with some distaste. Just touching the greenish metal handle made her feel dirty, and the scene inside didn’t make her feel much better. A corpulent man with pointed ears was standing at the front counter, paging through the thick catalogue of the memories on offer, while the balding woman who was working there was digging under her fingernails with the pointed tip of a decorative glass stopper from a nearby phial. A very pale man with lank grey hair completed the scene, sitting at one of the small tables in the waiting area and eating from a ludicrously large bowl of apples ’n onions – the smell of which was filling the room with cloying sweetness. Everything seemed like it was covered with a thin film of filth.

Yuck.

Margaret didn’t say anything to any of the three people, but only continued on straight to the little bobbing rooms. Three of them had closed doors, indicating that they were occupied, but a fourth had a crude sign fixed to it: OUT OF ORDER. She opened it anyway, and closed it behind her.

As promised, there was no Pensieve inside, only a swoop-armed Art Nouveau chair with a threadbare cushion, and an empty metal rack where the magical device had once stood. Margaret gathered up the folds of her robe – it was a nice once, too, all fresh with sharp folds – and gingerly sat down on the chair.

She waited almost a full minute. The Goddess was in Knock-turn Alley, and Margaret needed to be careful of her. She wasn’t doing anything *wrong*, necessarily, but... one could never tell. In fact, Margaret had seen the glamorous villainess herself just ten minutes ago when she was on her way to Billie’s: Hermione Granger had been with her gang of thugs, harassing some poor shopkeeper. The sighting had so rattled Margaret that she’d been stumbling over her feet the entire rest of the walk here, and very

nearly went tumbling in an undignified fashion after tripping on some hidden edge of the road a few minutes later.

But no one else entered the establishment, so it appeared she hadn't been followed.

"Freedom from tyrants, the strength of individuality, and the traditions of wizardkind," she said. She spoke quietly, as though to the air, and braced herself.

The chair trembled underneath her, and then with a violent jerk it flipped itself backwards. It pivoted as though fixed in the air, and her legs flew up and she tumbled over, and she gasped in alarm (every time!). But rather than being deposited on the floor just behind the chair, Margaret was sliding back into a space that hadn't been there before, and in a trice she was dropped gently onto a wooden platform at the end of a long hallway.

She caught her breath and fixed her robes and hair. For some reason the process had a tendency to lodge the back edge of your robe inside the waistband of your pants or knickers, so it paid to take a moment and collect yourself. Margaret suspected that was a subtlety of Draco's devising. He called the password to enter (freedom, strength, traditions) a "priming process," saying that it was good to remind yourself of your goals every time you set to work, and she couldn't help but imagine that it suited his inscrutable purposes to discomfit every visitor by disarranging their clothing, as well, to prime them for being embarrassed.

Once she was ready, Margaret took a deep breath and walked to the end of the hall, making her face bold and her step even bolder. Confidence could carry you far. She pushed through the door, and stopped just within. Not quite striking a pose, but just an entrance moment.

She needn't have bothered. No Draco, no Narcissa, no Shackbolt. Just that wretched Muggle-lover Edgar Erasmus, the insufferably priggish auror Gregor Nimue, that American writer whose name Margaret couldn't remember, and some boy she'd never met. No one she really needed to impress...

*No, no... that's Stupid Slytherin thinking. A Silver Slytherin doesn't turn up her nose at any chance to cultivate power, no matter what "sort" of person is their potential ally,* she thought, admonishing herself. It was a weird way of thinking, almost

unnatural: an entirely different level. Beyond dominating or controlling people, even beyond fooling them... searching for the utility of each person, regardless of their inferiorities. A pure Slytherin, a true Slytherin in the tradition of the old heirs of that house, they knew that the important thing was to *win*. Everything else was a hobby.

“Hullo,” Margaret said to the room.

Nimue didn’t bother to rise from his chair, but only glanced up at her and nodded. He was sitting at the long and narrow table that dominated the room, and had seven parchments arrayed in front of him, neatly, so that they were all visible.

Erasmus, who was sitting next to Nimue, was a little more polite. He rose to his feet and inclined his head to her. “Margaret.”

The writer – Sylvia de Kamp! that was her name! – was sitting with the boy at the other end of the table, and didn’t appear to notice her entrance, keeping her eyes fixed on the young man. The boy had his back to Margaret, and he turned just enough so that she could see his face (handsome, with beautiful skin and a look of misery) before returning his attention to Sylvia. She was a beautiful but cold-looking woman, with no charm to her tight blonde bun or sharp cheekbones.

Margaret glanced around the room. A Floo chimney was along one wall, installed illegally and at great expense on a private network. A stuffed owl resided on the mantle above, next to a jar of Floo Powder. A sofa and a pair of chairs sat before it, all upholstered in the most luxuriously soft bicorn leather. A narrow hole was visible in the ceiling above the chairs, where a simple covered pipe up to the roof could admit owls. All along another wall, to her left and right, were stacked wooden boxes. They must contain the latest edition of *Unbreakable Honour*, waiting for Narcissa to arrange the shipping.

“Edgar,” said Margaret, approaching the big, red-haired man. She straightened her posture slightly, putting her shoulders back as she folded her hands into her sleeves. “Is Kingsley here? I brought two more Time-Turners, but I’m only supposed to give them to him.”

Erasmus settled back into his seat, shaking his head as he did so. He was in sleeveless potioneer robes. “No, he’s not. Two of my

people are in the laboratory, and Gem is making Euphoric down the hall.” He gestured at the door to the hall, on the other side of the room. “I’m glad he’s not here, he’d just be bothering me. Leave the Turners with... oh, with Gregor, or someone.” He nodded his head to indicate the Tower auror sitting beside him. “No, he is assisting me... just give those here, then.” He held out a large florid hand.

Erasmus was well-built and supposedly brilliant, but couldn’t really sort out where he stood on a lot of important things... Muggles, most of all. He talked a good game about the natural order, but he was also always neck-deep into some Muggle book or other (or sometimes two or three books, Muggle and magical both, while he muttered and made notes). Draco might also use science, but you didn’t have to worry about *his* loyalties. Erasmus... well, he just only seemed to care about the bastardized magical research he did with science in his little crypto-alchemical laboratory here.

“No, sorry. I can’t do that. No reflection on you, of course, Edgar, but orders are orders,” Margaret said, smiling apologetically.

Draco didn’t tolerate that sort of rank stupidity. Not that he’d do anything really terrible to her, but he wouldn’t ever trust her again if she was so cavalier about such things. And his anger could be terrible... she’d heard rumors of punishments to traitors. The Windowpain Curse, for example. A victim who looked at the black square of a window at night – any window, any night – would be cursed to always see an apparition looking back at him: a pale, wide-eyed face with large and sharp teeth, staring back at him from the darkness. Nothing more... but always that. She couldn’t imagine who’d come up with that... what sort of person would even think that way. Just *hearing* about that one had made her afraid to open the curtains at night.

Erasmus shrugged and placed his hand back on the table. Nimue just glanced up and smirked, then returned his gaze to the parchments. Margaret stepped over behind the two, to look between them at the subject of their interest. “Research, Edgar?”

“Looking for a pattern in seeming miscellanea,” said Erasmus. “Trying to... verify, shall we say.” He glanced over at the miserable-looking boy. The boy didn’t look over.

Report from the Office of the Tower Ombudsman

*Our office has determined that by far the largest vulnerability, flaw, or weakness in the Tower continues to be the reliance on a single figurehead and leader, Harry Potter-Evans-Verres. While his prestige and reputation remain one of the driving forces behind the popularity of Tower programs and initiatives, in addition to their own dramatic results and merits, he represents what Security Director Alastor Moody said in an interview was a “single point of failure.”*

*We also have...*

Margaret, surprised to see an internal memo rather than some obscure line of research, looked to another parchment.

Memorandum from Councilor Regulus Hig of the Mystical and Benevolent Council of Westphalia

Mr. Potter:

*Hope you are well. Have checked on your question re number of wizards with certain groups here. Numbers attached. Please note they bear out my argument. Many generations of wizards have moved to Britain over past centuries, draining blood and talent from elsewhere. Must be effect, not the other way around, given last years immigration numbers (attached, next sheet). Seems clear that my reasoning stands; in final agreement, Tower will endow chairs at RI and SWI. Partial compensation for generations of drain. Yes? Please reply.*

*Re representative: not sure who to trust with proxy these days. Limpel had maybe dozen in her org, or more. A dozen total now have turned up with minds wiped. Would suggest distance collaboration, but understand Tower protocol prevents communication. Will think on it.*

— Be well Reg

The string of numbers that followed was rather beyond her curiosity's scope. She'd never been forced to take Arithmancy, thank Merlin, since she graduated the year before it became mandatory. Millicent wouldn't stop complaining about it, a few years ago.

She glanced over at the next parchment, frowning. What was all this?

*Harry:*

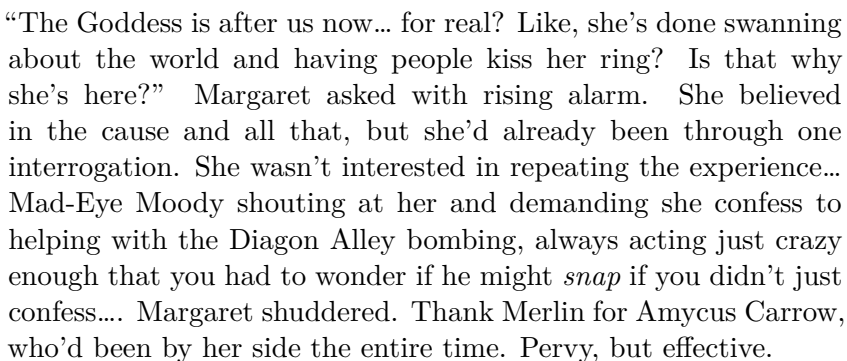
*Quick note on where we are.*

*No good results from Hopkirk. She says it's not a problem of obscurity, but that there's just too many results. Three is a number of power. There were three witches who were famous Scottish seers in the sixteenth century, there were three Peverell brothers and three Deathly Hallows, the Greek Lord Herpo found three ways to hide from murder, there were three towers of Atlantis in legend... Too many threes. Hopkirk will keep looking, but says it could mean anything. I don't think you should rely on much insight until we have more details.*

*Some descriptions of the transportation magic described by Hermione. Väinämöinen wrote about a horse of flame was used to bear brave warriors to the battlefield. Not sure if any wards can be devised without more details and experimentation. Right now, Tineagar or whoever could pop right into Howard or Hogwarts or Whitehall.*

*I'll work more on this, and get back to Tuesday. This feels unfair, though... piled on top of Malfoy and his stupid Honourable. Hope Hermione knocks them off their high horse.*

— Cedric



“She’s here in *Knockturn*,” said Margaret. “She was—”

Erasmus gathered all the parchments up into a bundle, knocking the table violently as he stood up. “Gregor, why didn’t you *know* about this?!” He opened his robes, but before he could stuff the parchments inside, Nimue snatched them away.

“My research!” cried Erasmus, bustling over to the door to the hall and disappearing. A clatter of beakers soon sounded from that direction, as the worried researcher rushed to save his work.

“What other bloody reason would the Goddess have for coming to Knockturn but to look for *us*?” demanded Nimue. “It’s not even a question – can’t believe *you’re* even allowed *in here*, what is Draco *thinking*?” He turned to Sylvia. “Get going! Take Lawrence and finish the damn interview later!”



The American writer was already pulling the boy towards the hearth, almost dragging him by wrist. She whispered her destination, but had time enough to shoot Margaret a look of contempt before the pair were gone in a burst of green flame.

"But I think you're over-reacting," said Margaret helplessly. "How would she even—"

"I was at Azkaban when Hermione Granger broke it like a child's toy!" snapped Nimue, darting over to one of the crates along the wall and snatching up a satchel that was sitting on it. "She has *died and come back* and she is *not human*. Do you know the *stories* they tell in the DMLE? One of the Weasley idiots saw her put that author fellow – Lockhart – saw her put him through a wall with her bare hands, after she found out some nastiness he'd been up to. A *Hogwarts* wall!"

"Gilderoy Lockhart? But he's not in any trouble... he just published—" stammered Margaret.

"Why am I even wasting time with you! Stay and risk your neck, it's..." Nimue trailed off as he saw the stuffed owl on the chimney mantle start to flap its wings and hoot. Without another word, the Tower auror leapt to the hearth, and was gone in his own flash of green flame.

"Edgar!" called out Margaret. "The owl!" She didn't wait for a reply, but just concentrated on the three Ds. Let the idiot and those stupid Euphoric-makers fend for themselves.

*Godric's Hollow*, she thought, clearly and with force. Then she tapped herself on the head with the curious wiggle motion of Apparition.

Nothing.

*Oh, Merlin, there's wards. They've locked it down with an Anti-Disapparition Jinx.* She turned to the chimney. That was the way out, no matter what wards... that was it's whole purpose. "Edgar!" she shrieked, running over to the chimney. "She's really *here!*" She snatched a handful of Floo Powder from the jar on the mantel, and threw it into the fire, which turned emerald.

"Borgin and Burkes," she said, and stepped into the flames. She'd go to the other hide-out and escape from there.

Nothing.

"They cut us off!" said Erasmus from behind her. "Oh... oh... what... oh..." he stammered. She turned to see the big wizard

charging across the room, awkwardly bundling three big boxes as he went. A fourth box followed him, floating along by flapping transparent silvery wings. “We’ll have to use the owl-bolt,” he said, peering up at the narrow passage. She stepped out of the flames.

Three other men burst into the room from the same door Erasmus had used. She recognized Geoffrey Gem and his two cronies: the suppliers of local Euphorics. Gem was a rail-thin man with terrible teeth – all snaggly and yellow – and thinning hair. Each of the three potioners had a smock on and was carrying a clinking crate of phials. “Hold up, Eggy!” called Gem.

Erasmus put down his boxes and pointed his wand at the narrow hole meant for owls. “We’re going, Geoff,” he said.

There was a loud booming sound, as though someone up in Billie’s Bobbing Bubbies had knocked over a heavy piece of furniture.

“Just need to take down the wards, then we can punch out through the roof,” said Erasmus, concentrating. His already reddish complexion turned downright scarlet as he worked, and sweat was visible on his brow.

There was another heavy boom from upstairs. Margaret found that she was clutching her wand so tightly that her fingers ached, and forced herself to relax. “Hurry, Edgar!”

“These aren’t *supposed* to be easy to take down,” he snapped, but he gritted his teeth and squinted as he worked even harder.

“They can’t get in here for hours... hours of magic to stop them from burning in,” mewled Gem. Margaret almost laughed in his face.

There was a third boom, and this one not only echoed in the room with an accompanying shattering sound as something broke, but the furniture actually shifted. Margaret turned to face the entry door. “That sounded like—”

The center of the door cracked as something hit it from the other side, the wood splitting from top to bottom. One of Gem’s assistants dropped a crate, and it hit the ground with a crash of breaking glass. “Oh Merlin,” the man said, swaying in place. The rich and sweet smell of shrivelfig filled the room.

There was another crashing sound, and a golden fist appeared, spearing out through the door and sending chips of wood into the

air. It opened and seized one side of the broken door, and then thick golden fingers pulled until Margaret heard the metal of hinges squeal and give way. The remains of the door fell apart and open, and the Goddess stepped through. She wore a golden gauntlet on her left hand, and wielded her wand in her right. The metal of the gauntlet glinted brightly, like it was forged from sunlight. It looked very dangerous. She was flanked by a scowling, short witch and a buxom, taller one, both of whom were also wearing golden gauntlets, and a spectacled man who looked a bit scared. A floating Quotes Quill followed the man.

“Edgar,” said the Goddess. “We need to talk.”



# Watchers

[scattered applause]

[scattered applause]

*HUGHES: Sir—*

※ 137 ※

*HUGHES: Sir, please let Mr. Potter finish speaking.*

*CARROW: You cannot—*

*HUGHES: Sir, please let—*

*CARROW: Yes, yes.*

*POTTER: I do have an answer. But before I give it, let me also point out that two points of data, two numbers, do not make a trend. There might have been unusually few divorces in 1989, for example. Or maybe the divorce rate was even higher in 1979. It's hard to compare anything unless you have more numbers. But that's not—*

*CARROW: The pleading of a child!*

*POTTER: But that's not the only flaw in your thinking, Mr. Carrow. There's a hoary old phrase to use at this point: correlation is—*

*CARROW: Yes, ply us with—*

*POTTER: Correlation—*

*CARROW: —your condescension, Mr. Potter.*

*HUGHES: Sir, I must ask you—*

*POTTER: Correlation—*

*HUGHES: Mr. Carrow—*

*POTTER: —is not causation. That means that there are many sorts of reasons why the divorce rate might have risen over a whole decade. Not every change in the world can be laid at my feet, and—*

*CARROW: All of this complicated jargon, but the words you need are so simple. Apologies have the virtue of brevity, as well.*

*HUGHES: Mr. Carrow, sir, I need to ask you to let Mr. Potter speak. Remember your name and the honour of your house, sir. We are here for a civil discussion.*

*CARROW: Yes.*

*HUGHES: Mr.—*

CARROW: *My honour and that of my house is unbroken, Mr. Hughes.*

HUGHES: *Mr. Potter, please continue.*

POTTER: *Then let me just say this, then, Mr. Carrow: the largest flaw – no, the biggest mistake you’re making is that you haven’t even stopped to ask yourself whether or not this is a bad thing. If it is true, and if it is truly my fault, neither of which points I am willing to concede on the basis of two fiddly numbers out of context–*

CARROW: *You–*

POTTER: *–then it is almost certainly the result of money.*

CARROW: *Money?!*

POTTER: *Gringott’s began issuing loans near the end of 1993, Mr. Carrow, and by 1995 the economy of magical Britain was twice as large.*

CARROW: *Money is only worth what it can be – and it cannot buy tradition, or happiness, or a family life. If we have made the trade you suggest, then I would say it is a bad bargain... and so much the worse for the shopkeep!*

POTTER: *You don’t understand. The money has given people freedom. Even a small sum of money – the possibility of taking on the responsibility of debt – can be enough to allow someone to change their job or start a new business or even just change their situation. The freedom of money leads to a lot of other disruptive freedoms. Including the freedom to leave their spouse. People who might otherwise have felt trapped–*

CARROW: *You mudblood piece of–*

HUGHES: *Mr. Carrow! Mr. Carrow!*

POTTER: *Mr. Carrow, you seem–*

HUGHES: *Mr. Carrow, this is–*

CARROW: *She never–*

HUGHES: *Mr. Carrow!*

CARROW: *[unintelligible]*

— Partial excerpt from the unedited transcript of the second of the Tower Debates on the Future of Magical Britain, as recorded by a certified-impartial Quotes Quill.



“I know it’s a bit unfair,” Hermione Granger said, staring at the five Honourable, “but it certainly does seem that we tend to find you lot in skeezy little places, doing skeezy little things.” She glanced pointedly down at the floor, where trickles of golden potion were slowly spreading around under the feet of Margaret Bulstrode, Edgar Erasmus, Geoffrey Gem, and his two assistants. She could smell the shrivelfig. Euphoria Elixir.

“Auror Kwannon?” Hermione called over her shoulder, past where Hyori was standing at the door. The Returned witch stepped aside to admit the auror, without ever taking her eyes or wand or glower off of the captured wizards and witches. Kwannon also had to edge past the gentleman she’d brought with her from the DMLE, Gerald. He was some sort of recorder, taking notes of raids like this one. An ineffectual attempt at holding aurors accountable, Hermione thought. Kwannon looked irritated at the whole production.

*The aurors feel like they should be running the show, first through the door. But there’s just no reason to let them take those kind of risks, not when I’m here,* she thought. She glanced over at the auror again. Kwannon was relatively tall, considering her Japanese heritage, with a round face, a scattering of light freckles, and a flat nose. She was one of Alastor’s, and was usually in the Tower. For the time being, though, she was here on Harry’s behalf, along with four more aurors from the DMLE. Harry had needed someone here, after all – needed some eyes and ears on her Honourable hunt... what would he do with himself otherwise, locked up in that Tower and buried in healing and research, if he couldn’t divert himself with some crude manipulations of everyone around him?

Not that manipulation, per se, was her complaint. It was just... Harry never *learned*. After their first year, including the trial and the troll and that terrible time at the end, he never really changed.



He just became more... well, Harry-like. He hadn't learned the real lesson she thought he'd take away: if you try to use secret knowledge to manipulate complex situations about which you have incomplete information, then things will get very bad, very quickly. It was very hard for any person to be smart enough to manage that – and it was stupid to try when you had *friends*. It was “nihil supernum,” after all, not “nihil par.”

*But the stubborn man hadn't learned then, and so Walpurgisnacht had happened, and he still hasn't learned,* she thought, bitterly. *Even after the price we paid.* Hermione almost lifted her hand to touch her neck, but stopped as she realized what she was doing. No time for this sort of dithering.

She brought her thoughts back to the present situation. *Time for me to butt out a bit. I'll make myself her asset, rather than her superior. She's probably better at this than I, anyway.*

“Auror Kwannon, this isn't really my sort of thing,” she said, turning and smiling at the auror, slightly lifting her shoulders to indicate her ignorance about the next proper thing to do. “You were kind enough to let me pop through here quickly, to keep the miscreants here... maybe you could take the lead from here?”

“Yes, well...” said the auror, looking around the room before focusing back in on the five Honourable. “This is some trouble, here.”

Gem noticeably shrank back into himself, seeming almost to fold his thin body over. The witch and wizard that were his assistants took things a little bit more in stride – as though stunned and out of place, with confused expressions. Hermione was fairly sure they were still riding down a dose of Euphoria.

Erasmus, on the other hand, puffed up his chest. He was red in the face, and with the colouring of his hair, he looked humorously similar to a large carrot. “There's no crime in printing and distributing a newsletter, or in conducting private researches, I think. Even in today's Britain!”

Kwannon turned her sharp attention to the researcher. “Mr. Erasmus, you are correct. However, it is illegal to operate a private Floo network, it is illegal to conduct dangerous research within one hundred meters of a residence, and it is extremely illegal to sell Euphoric Elixir without a license.”

“All unjust prohibitions!” said Erasmus. He had brilliant blue eyes that were narrowed in indignation. To emphasize his point, he thumped his fist down on the stack of boxes he’d been carrying when Hermione had torn up the entrance hatch and knocked down their door. “Who is the Government to say what I do with a Floo, where I can do my research, or what potions I brew, eh? My research is my research!”

“I recall your research, sir,” said Kwannon, her mouth tight.

The former Tower researcher had been studying the construction of magical machines, Hermione recalled, before he had been fired, his research confiscated, and key memories Obliviated. Erasmus had ignored safety concerns entirely, and had insisted on just bullying through and continuing to build his wind-machines. They used fluid dynamics: tight swirls of air spinning as gears, fed by small warming columns of heat from below; flywheels of pressurized zones to store and transfer energy; and shifts between small turbulent flows and laminar flows as switches.

The machines had been brilliant – Erasmus was brilliant – but they had also been maddeningly dangerous. One *Ventus* could power them for days, and the *very first* thing they were designed to do was consume waste matter of *any type* and incinerate it for more power. If Erasmus had moved his investigations of Muggle science out of engineering and aerodynamics, and into something like computer programming... the danger had been unbelievable, even by magical standards. He was almost a cartoonish figure: the mad scientist with no concern for consequences. Harry had not only been apoplectic, he’d been outright offended.

Hermione supposed that the setbacks they’d given Erasmus, including the changes to his memory, were probably enough to ensure everyone’s safety. But to see him right back at it, only now without any supervision... they’d need to do something, somehow. It needed thought. For now, at least, it looked like Erasmus wouldn’t be a danger for a while.

“In the States, anyone can set up a Floo. It’s not right that there’s only one Floo Network in Britain,” offered Margaret Bulstrode. She was a beautiful young woman, but clearly quite out of her depth. Hermione knew Margaret, slightly – she’d been several years ahead at Hogwarts, and the aurors in charge of investigating

the Diagon bombing had brought her before the Wizengamot for examination on the basis of an informant's accusations. Nothing had come of it.

"I wouldn't know about that, I'm afraid," said Kwannon, her voice hard. "But I do know it's illegal here, just like Faux Floo is illegal. Is that the genuine two-Sickles-a-scoop on your mantel?"

"Yes," said Erasmus, puffing out his cheeks.

"Mm," said Kwannon, noncommittally. She walked around the room, looking sharply into corners and at everything around. "What else you have here, eh? Come on, Gerald." She headed through the other door, into a hallway or another room. Gerald followed her with his floating parchment and Quotes Quill, looking nervous.

"This is a private facility," called out the weasely Gem, hugging himself. He'd put down the crate he'd been holding. "You have no call to go snooping..." He trailed off, uneasily. His fear of the Goddess and Hermione's supernatural air of innocence were probably confusing him. That sometimes happened.

"She's an auror," said Hermione. "The Tower and I have proper search warrants and *habeas corpus* and seizure rules planned out, but we haven't gotten there yet. For now, you're stuck with the traditional system, as we found it. Seems to mostly date back to the eighteenth century, with some modern bits like Hit Wizards stuck on. But tradition is best, after all... isn't that right?"

*Need to taunt as a distraction... best not take it too far, though.* Susie seemed to think it was funny, though, smirking as she walked to the crates of copies of *Unbreakable Honour* and sat on one. "'Good for thee, but not for me,' as the saying goes, love." said the Returned.

Erasmus huffed again. "Under any system of justice, Muggle or magical, this is out of order."

Hermione approached him. "How so? I'd be interested to hear you defend this, Edgar." She gestured at the crate of broken potion, and clasped her hands in front of herself. "Did your research ever lead you to encounter the notion of 'wireheading,' I wonder?"

"You were famous for fighting bullies, back when you were at Hogwarts," said Margaret, suddenly and loudly. "S.P.H.E.W and all that. But now you *are* a bully."

*Ah, that'll do nicely.* Hermione smiled again, and turned to face Bulstrode. She approached very close, and stared at the woman. She was a little taller than Margaret, and she knew she was quite intimidating. She let the smile fade from her face, and lifted a finger. She poked it into Margaret's chest, and said – coldly, now – “Don't hide behind loose categorizations. Say what you mean. You're being persecuted, are you?” She plucked at Margaret's robe at the shoulder, and then again at one of the pockets, contemptuously and dismissively... as though the woman were a bit of lint. “You and all of Draco's loathsome death-worshippers, piling all your prejudices and ignorance up into a single lot.” She walked around Margaret as she spoke, and took the opportunity to surreptitiously drop a button – one she'd removed from Margaret's pocket, and palmed – into her own robes.

“I'll say what I mean, all right,” replied Margaret. Her voice barely shook. “You lot have taken over. And you've done a lot of good things. But there's a natural order to the world, and you've broken it. You've... you've done some of the darkest of rituals. It's the only way things even make sense. And you're eating up all the rest of the world, state by state. If you keep going, the world won't even be recognizable... no traditions left, no people thinking their own thoughts in their own ways... you want everyone to be the same, like the porcelain dolls that come out of the Tower. ‘Rejuvenation’... it's just control and replacement!”

“Draco has always had a silver tongue,” said Hermione, scornfully. *She's just parroting back what she hears. This was the danger of letting things go this way, Harry... they're cementing in these ideas. It's hard enough to get people on our side, but to win over those who actually hate us this much?*

*You knew I'd never agree with this plan. That I'd point out it was extravagant and risky and impractical. The slow victory is better than the fast loss, Harry.*

But Harry wasn't here, and there was no point venting now. Bend before the storm, and surprise her.

“You might be right in some ways, Ms. Bulstrode,” she said, walking away. She saw Hyori raise an eyebrow from her position by the entrance, and flashed a quick smile at the Returned. Hermione turned back around to face the Honourable. “It's dangerous to

discard a lot of traditions. Many of them survive from century to century because they serve an important purpose. Memetic survival: mutation, variation, and evolution. ‘Unconscious memes have ensured their own survival by virtue of the same qualities of ruthlessness that successful genes display,’ “ she quoted. (*The Selfish Gene* by Richard Dawkins, page 198, her brain automatically supplied). “It’s something we should be more careful about, and we want to avoid when we can. Was there any specific tradition that you are unhappy about losing?”

Margaret was silent for a long moment. Hermione folded her arms, and waited patiently. It wasn’t even an act: she was honestly interested to hear the answer.

“How about Quidditch?” said Margaret, after a while. “The Tower wants to get rid of that.”

“Well, he did want to change it, yes,” Hermione said. “Not get rid of it. Harry isn’t much for sports in general, I’m afraid, and I don’t think he ever quite understood it – especially the snitch. Muggles have a similar sort of thing called test cricket, but I doubt Harry has ever played or even watched it.”

“They sacked all the Quidditch regulators!” said Margaret in reply, strength coming into her voice. “Closed down the whole games section of the Ministry!”

“That wasn’t the Tower, that was a decision by Minister Fudge,” said Hermione. But when Margaret and Erasmus gave her a look, she smiled slightly. “But yes, he supported it. As I recall, though, Quidditch is doing just fine... better than ever, in fact, now that it’s being run privately. Most of the same people working for it, I think.”

Kwannon returned at that moment, Gerald in tow, shaking her head. “Fairly plain about the research being done here, and the Euphoria being brewed. We’ll get some people in here to collect all this, but I think you should all try to think of a good solicitor, if you know one.” She headed up to the entrance, and waved in the aurors who were standing idle in the corridor. “Come on through. Back rooms there... bag up the lot. Leave the experiments inside the circles until we can have someone bring them out with precautions.”

“I imagine they know some people who can help,” said Susie.

“Malfoy,” said Hyori from behind Hermione, scornfully.

“Be careful with my research,” said Erasmus, urgently. He was turning red again with anxiety. “I’m within a hair of a working Zimara machine!”

*Perpetual motion? Maybe I can stay and take a look,* thought Hermione.

“Any way we can help, Hedley?” she asked, hopefully. “We can stick around if you would like some assistance?”

“Thank you, but I think we have it in hand,” said Kwannon. Hermione probably should have let her go first; there would have been relatively little danger. Lesson learned.

“Then I suppose we do have things we can get up to. Thank you,” said Hermione. She nodded at her Returned, and they all headed for the exit.

It was true, after all. They had some parchments to read. As they made their way out, Hermione reached into her robe and picked up the Everlasting Eye. When she’d seen Bulstrode out on the streets of Knockturn Alley, it had been easy enough to step aside, slip on the Cloak of Invisibility, and sprint on around ahead of her. She’d dropped the listening device into Margaret’s pocket after tripping her with an invisible foot.

“Let’s find out who escaped our raid, shall we?” she asked the two Returned witches. Susie smiled.



*We are faced, right from the beginning, with a difficult task. It is a task so immense that most wizards never even notice it, any more than they notice their eyelids. Indeed, when I began this chapter, I sought out dozens of the most learned wizards in Britain, only to discover that no more than one or two had ever given any thought to the problem. Madame Hopkirk of the Department of Mysteries herself was able only to point me to three or four dusty volumes of consideration – none of which I could read (the obstacle was the same one previously encountered, dear reader, when I attempted to research the history of Hogwarts: no consideration is given to those for whom the Interdict is a forever-insuperable obstacle).*

*Subsequent conversations will allow us to piece together some basic ideas, if they must be rudimentary of necessity. So then: what*

*is magic? The physical realization of an inner spirit? The action of a daemon working on one's behalf? A demand made on some hidden set of rules to the universe? We set our education and wits to the task of explaining many things we might see in magic:*

- *A large proportion of magical effects conform, depend, or otherwise interact with the emotions, expectations, wishes, or willpower of the caster.*
- *Magic seems to operate almost entirely on a human scale, even including wholly subjective aspects of modern life.*
- *The linguistic components of spells are all well-suited to the human tongue, and most even seem to derive from Latin or Greek roots. The history of magic begins in Greece, as Madame Bagshot has instructed us, but was that necessity or coincidence?*
- *Magically-created matter is mundane matter in most respects.*
- *Magic interferes with Muggle machines in some unknown way, yet to be discovered or classified, and thus seems inherently inimical to machinery in a spiritual sense.*
- *The ability of humans to do magic varies, with most people unable to do any magic at all, others having only the very tiny magic of a Squib, and some having enough magic to cast spells. Many plants and animals also possess magic where others do not.*
- *Magic is hereditary, and so must be a trait like hair color or height that is passed from parent to child.*
- *It is widely known that magic has been decreasing over time, which means that it must be going somewhere.*

*When these phenomena are fully internalized and realized, we may thus see that the daemon theory of which we spoke earlier must be the correct one. t explains all of the above conditions, as the daemons consume magic to live, make war on rival machines, live within the body to touch upon the mind, and are passed from parent to child like a Sallowfax infection.*

— excerpted from Chapter Three of  
*A Squib's-Eye View*, by A. F. Leiding



*It is abundantly clear that Mr. Leiding is not only a Squib, but also a fool. We may pity him for his limitations in magic, but we should pity him even more for his limitations in reasoning.*

*It is impossible to understand the true nature of magic. Atlantis' fall put the source of that knowledge out of time and out of our reach. This may be the ultimate tragedy of this book: left with no purpose, what else is Mr. Leiding to do, but construct fantasies and try to know the unknowable?*

—excerpted from *American Mage's* review of  
*A Squib's-Eye View*



## Interlude

# Digitizations

*NOTE: Here are some looks at the stories-that-might-have-been... if you took the offstage, ignored, or unsung aspects... and let them run the show.*

*Spoilers ahead for:*

- Toy Story
- Ron Hubbards Battlefield Earth
- Lois Lowry's The Giver
- The Incredibles
- Astrid Lindgren's Pippi Longstocking
- Brian Jacques' Redwall
- Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman's Dragonlance
- Star Wars
- Eliezer Yudkowsky's Harry Potter and the Methods of Rationality

### TOY STORY

Sid spent three months in the seclusion ward of the hospital. Even after he was released, he had to go speak to Mr. Berndham twice a week in the counselor's office at school, and his social worker dropped by at least once a month. Everyone was keeping an eye on him... even his mom. She'd only ever actually talked to him about it once. "Sid, honey," she'd said to him abruptly one night, as he chewed on a slice of Pizza Planet double-cheese. "Do you want to tell me... about anything? About what you... saw?"

He'd chewed on his pizza for so long that it was churned into spit-soaked mush, and hadn't said a word. He knew better, now.

Hannah had smiled at him vacantly, not really understanding. She was little; almost a baby, really.

He knew so many things. He knew about the toys. He knew about adults. And he knew about the importance of silence.

He chewed and chewed and said nothing, and eventually she'd gone to join Dad on the couch with some beers. Hannah said something brightly and toddled off, as well. Sid swallowed, and it went down like a lump of iron. Funny, that you could chew on something for so long and still have it hurt on the way down.

Sid waited. He waited month after month, doing everything he was asked to do. He even knew enough to keep on going to the skateboard park once a week or so. Mom would go with him and sit nearby, and he'd push himself around and do half-hearted grinds on low edges.

Eventually, he was allowed to close his bedroom door again. It took almost a year. It was a grim room, these days... the paint was scorched in one corner where a cherry bomb had just sizzled and burned instead of exploding. There was a melted patch of carpet there, too. And all his shelves were bare, scuffed wood. No toys.

No toys but one.

It was a bright yellow squeeze ball, with a face on it and simple nubs for arms. When you crushed it in your hand, the eyes bulged out comically. He wedged it under a drawer when he wasn't playing with it.

Here is how he played:

"Your name is Boo-boo. Your name is Boo-boo. You are my special friend. You are my special friend. You are my only friend. You are my only friend," he crooned. He spoke to it softly, even though his eyes were hard. "It's just you and me. You and me. You and me."

"I know," he whispered, so quietly that only Boo-boo could hear. "I know you're alive. I know toys are alive. I know you're alive. I am the only one who knows. The only one in the whole world. I'm the only one."

Every night, until he fell asleep, he cradled the toy and whispered to it. Endlessly. Constantly. Forever. Until finally, one night just like any other night, Boo-boo moved in his hand. Just a little, but Sid was sure. It hadn't been another false hope or trick of his mind.

He redoubled his efforts. It took nearly a year, and there were nights when he would spend an hour in the bathroom, sobbing and hitting himself in the head with a balled-up fist... but he always kept going. And finally, almost a year later, Boo-boo started talking back.

The toy had a squeaky little voice, but it repeated back what Sid said. It talked to him. He told it about his problems, and about the world that it had never seen. About how he was special, and the only one who could hear the toys. He told Boo-boo about the world to come.

And then Sid got other toys. They let him, and they let him stop going to see Mr. Berndham and the social worker stopped coming by and Mom started to get more worried about the way Hannah was dressing than anything Sid did anymore.

"Boo-boo is your leader. He is in charge. Boo-boo is your leader. He is special. I am special. You are special. We are special."

They were mostly action figures with a lot of moveable joints. Hard plastic, with hands that could hold things. Toys that could do things. Move things. Hurt things.

"Boo-boo is your leader. We are special. We will change things. We will change the world. You are special. I am special. We are special."

Toys don't sleep, he'd figured out. They don't eat or drink. They don't breathe. They didn't get tired. When Boo-boo put the figures through drills, they were whatever he wanted them to be. And he wanted them to be perfect.

"Boo-boo is your leader. He speaks my words. I am special. I am the only one. You are special, because you are here. We are special. I love you. I love you. I love you."

A hundred. A thousand. So many that he stored them in crates in the closet. They didn't mind. They would do things for him. Boo-boo was his eyes and ears while he slept or went to school. They got things. Scissors. Knives. Even better things.

"Boo-boo is your leader. We will change things. We will change the world. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. Do you love me?"

"Do you love me?" he asked, in a hushed and solemn voice, and a plastic legion whispered back, "We love you."

“Then go, then,” said Sid, and threw open the door. “Find more. Teach them my words. Teach them as I have taught you. Go then. I love you. Go then. I love you.”

“Conquer in my name,” said Sid, and his eyes flashed balefully.

## BATTLEFIELD EARTH

“MacTyler, we’re being played for fools,” said Angus. He scrutinized the breathe-gas bottle and frowned. “Think about the scenario... think about how everything comes to a point here. Improbably so.”

Johnnie Goodboy Tyler did stop and think, for he was a man of inquiry as well as a man of action. “The Psychlos have a death-grip on the entire galaxy, as the only ones with teleportation. They possess the single most valuable technology. At the same time, they’re cartoonishly evil... they have the sort of sadism that would make you think they’d all been purposefully brain-damaged, or something just as silly. But they’re also incredibly vulnerable, since the gas that they breathe seems to explode violently when exposed to any form of particle radiation,” he said, working it through. “That means that if you subvert any knowledgeable Psychlo – even by sheer luck, getting it right only *once* – you could seize control of the most powerful technological advantage in existence, annihilating them in the process by teleporting in simple uranium-based bombs. And you wouldn’t even have to feel bad about it, since they’re all evil.”

Angus pointed at the breathe-gas container. “But we have little evidence for any of that. All we’ve really seen is a handful of Psychlos and these Chinko record discs – and again, aren’t *those* convenient?” His Scottish accent was thickened by alarm and suspicion.

“You’re right, Angus,” said Johnnie. Almost by instinct, his kill-club swung up in his hand, and he hefted the reassuring weight of the kenning in his grip. “We’re being set up... trained with propaganda and supplied with everything we’d need to start a war. All these machines with fantastic capabilities – dispersing single molecule sprays or hovering while mining drills are deployed – and all of them easily converted to military use.”

Johnnie turned to face the horizon. “We’ve been groomed to be weapons, and taught about a convenient and evil target, and given every resource. We’re being set up to take someone out.”

“But then... who is behind this? Who is trying to turn mankind – och, the handful of us that exist! – into a weapon against the Psychlos... or whoever’s really on the other end of these coordinates?” Angus looked up, nervously, as though they were being watched.

Around the corner, out of sight, Chrissie scowled and narrowed her eyes. These two would have to go. A shame about the wasted time, but once Johnnie and Angus were disposed of, she’d just set up the “Psychlo” mining site again. If she and the Chinkos wanted to take control, they needed a patsy to lead the human attacks... she’d thought Johnnie would be perfect. He trusted her, never even wondering what she did during the long periods he would be away from the village – when she had met her allies and planned to harness the happy violence of what remained of her species. But there were plenty of bold and reckless young men in the world, willing to wage war without ever stopping to think. She could replace him.

### THE GIVER

“So wait... our community’s Elders make our decisions, guided by your wisdom?”

“Yes, Jonas. The wisdom from the memories,” said the Giver. The aged man seemed burdened by the weight of the entire community, which rested on his hunched shoulders. “Once, the Committee of Elders sought my advice about the rate of births. Some citizens had petitioned to ask for each family to be allowed a third child. They wanted each Birthmother to be assigned four births instead of three, so the population would increase and more Labourers would be available.”

“That sounds fun,” said Jonas. “And it makes sense. So you used your memories?”

“Yes,” said the Giver. “And the strongest memory that came to me was one of hunger. It came from many generations back. *Centuries* back. The population had gotten so big that hunger was everywhere. Excruciating hunger and starvation. It was followed by warfare.”

“I see,” said the young Receiver. He paused. “So you told them to first assess whether or not current food stores were sufficient, and to determine whether or not the Farmers could expand operations to accommodate more people?”

“They don’t want to hear about details of numbers or that sort of thing. They just seek the advice. I simply advised them against increasing the population.”

“Oh.” This time, an even longer pause. Then Jonas asked, in a small voice that was almost a whisper: “I’m allowed to be rude, right?”

“Yes, Jonas,” said the kindly old man. “There can be no rudeness between us, and no apologies.”

“Then sir, I have to say that it doesn’t seem as though you’re using your power very wisely. I mean, you’ve told me about how important it is that we not try to advance our society that much, but my friend Benjamin was praised for inventing new scientific equipment for the Rehabilitation Center. Surely you must have some memories from someone who worked in medicine, back in the old days. We don’t have to copy the way they do things a lot, but why don’t we—”

“Jonas,” said the Giver, his hoarse voice sharper than usual. “There are limits to what we can do to change our world. We must accept our place.”

But the boy hadn’t even heard him, but had plunged on, describing gaps in their knowledge that memories from the past might be able to fill... describing the ways lives could be saved or improved by details and specifics... describing all the ways that the memories could be used.

Finally, the Giver spoke again, interrupting Jonas, his voice kind once more. “You might be right, Jonas. We’ll try those things... all of them and more. But first, I think there’s something important you need to do... I think you need to save Gabriel. Yes, that’s it. You must take him and go away. Far away. Into the woods.”

“But, sir—”

“Here, take this food.. Okay now, off with you.”

## THE INCREDIBLES

Mr. Incredible moaned, angrily. Bitterly, he demanded of the hovering little man, "You mean you killed off real heroes so that you could *pretend* to be one?"

Syndrome smirked, and his pompadour bobbed with the slight motion of his head. It was visible even in the darkness. "Oh, I'm real. Real enough to defeat you! And I did it without your precious gifts, your oh-so-special powers." His voice was mocking. "I'll give them heroics. I'll give them the most spectacular heroics the world has ever seen! And when I'm old and I've had my fun, I'll sell my inventions so that *everyone* can have powers." His voice rose in excitement. "*Everyone* can be super!" He turned again, to face the red-garbed hero, and spoke his last words in a portentous tone.

"And when everyone's super... no one will be."

"Oh, okay then. That sounds good. Wait, let me think," said Mr. Incredible. He'd always been creative but never... well, never intellectual. So it took him a moment. Syndrome stood, surprised, his mouth half-open as a ready retort was smothered by this unexpected turn of events.

Elastigirl was even more surprised, but her reply was lost when Dash just outright yelped, "What?! Dad?! Don't give up!"

Mr. Incredible turned his head to his son, and snapped, "Dash! Quiet!" He paused. "Please!" he added, glancing apologetically at his wife.

Everyone was silent for a few beats, and the only sound was the buzzing of the bracelets that had trapped the Incredibles with "zero-point energy." Finally, just as Elastigirl and Violet were both clearing their throats insistently, Mr. Incredible heaved a sigh and addressed Syndrome again. "That sounds good, but we're going to want something in return."

Syndrome, Elastigirl, Violet, and Dash all simultaneously replied in a confusion of demands and replies and simple shrieks.

"Quiet!" bellowed Mr. Incredible, putting a super-powered diaphragm and unbreachably strong lungs to use. In the heavy silence that followed, he spoke to Syndrome. "I have a deal for you."

Syndrome whirled around, then looked up, then looked down. He flipped open a control panel on his wrist and paged through

menus, looking at sensors and read-outs. Finally, he looked up again. "I don't... *see* any attack about to happen."

"No, this isn't one of those things... I don't have a plan or anything. Well, I do, but it's just to let you win," said Mr. Incredible. He could feel Elastigirl's anger from here. "Listen... this kind of power could change the world. It could... if everyone could fly, and we could generate that kind of energy, and... I mean, I'm not a scientist. Helen, Vi... think about what it would do for the world. Think of just what we could do with the power sources. It takes a ton of energy to float people around like that, and it's coming from his tiny little batteries. Think about what it will mean for industry and- and- and space travel!"

The silence held, and he knew they were thinking it through, now. It made sense that he had been the one to see it. He was a tactician and leader... he was creative. Not the quickest in the room, usually, but he could think around the blind corners.

"You know how this goes," said Mr. Incredible, and now he locked his eyes on Syndrome's. His eyes had the grim intensity of a hero. It wasn't an expression you could learn or imitate. It was forged in battle and quenched in the blood of friends fallen in noble causes. He held the villain's eyes.

"You know that we are the heroes. We're the *family* of heroes, and you're off to do your insane plan. A way-too-complicated plan, by the way. You have all these powers... why build the unstoppable robot? Just go be a hero... go do the thing you always wanted to do." He cut off any reply by raising his voice slightly. "But if you give up your inventions to the world... in a way that I can know it will really happen, and you won't change your mind... I'll agree. I'll die for that."

He raised his voice again. "*Not* my family. Not them. You need them. They won't spoil our deal and tell the world, since they know what I'd be dying for. They won't risk losing that technology. But you send a locked archive of that information to the New York City D.A.'s office right now, and you can have my life... and you'll get a rogue's gallery, to boot. Brilliant and bendable, quick and brave, insightful and powerful."

Syndrome tilted his head back. The surprise on his face had been overtaken by a mocking smile, which had in turn been replaced by frank uncertainty. "But if-



Mr. Incredible didn't give him the chance to continue, as he lunged forward. He wrenched his right arm forward, straining against the energy. He strained it forward, and every inch was twice as impossible as the next, but he doubled his effort and doubled it again, and forced his bound fist forward. Because it wasn't for him, and it wasn't for his wife, and it wasn't even for his whole family, but it was for *the world*, and he *pushed* until his arm was straight out and he felt something tear in his shoulder and his gut, and all he could see was red, but he strained out the words through his clenched teeth: "That's. What. You. Get."

And there was another pause, and then Bob Parr shoved his hand forward an impossible inch more, an *incredible* inch more, and his arm burst free of its restraints with an electric sizzle, and there was blood in his mouth and he hurt everywhere but he snarled anyway – snarled the words, "*Or else.*"

Mr. Incredible couldn't hear anything over the roaring in his ears, black galaxies were swirling in front of his eyes... but he could still see Syndrome back away, face pale, stammering his agreement.

### PIPPY LONGSTOCKING

"It all became clear to me after speaking to Mr. Nilsson," said Pippi. Her long braids, stiffened with bear grease until they jutted from her head, bobbed like the grand diadem of an empress. She gestured at the monkey chained to the porch of Villa Villekulla. It was mangy and red-eyed with disease, and the fez that had been lashed to its skull was little more than a lump of reddish rags by now. The policemen obediently looked at the "talking monkey," but it only hissed at them.

"He explained to me," The nine-year-old continued, "that the authorities would never stop trying to take me away to that lousy orphanage. If I wanted to be left in peace, there was really no alternative but to take over. If you wildly extrapolate the small set of facts with which we began, then really it makes sense."

"Pippi!" called out the cheerful singsong of Tommy Settigren, as he appeared around the corner. His short blonde hair was matted with filth almost as thickly as the hatchet in his hand was thick with gore. He'd stopped bathing months ago, in obedience to the *frigörelse* theology of the Longstocking. "We caught that dratted mayor, Pippi!"

The redheaded titan turned and grinned. “Well done, Tommy! Here you go!” She threw a Spanish doubloon to the other child, who snatched it out of the air. He bit it – not really because he doubted its authenticity, but because that’s what the Longstocking had taught was the proper thing. “Bring him around,” commanded Pippi.

Tommy disappeared, but soon returned at the head of a gang of other children, mostly the liberated orphans. His sister Annika was with him, and she and the other children all helped drag the bound form of the mayor. Pippi yelped in glee, and leapt down to meet them. The policemen, dispirited at the abrupt change of regime, slumped away from the sudden movement in animal fear.

The mayor mewed weakly in fear as she hoisted him into the air. Pippilotta Delicatessa Windowshade Mackrelmind Ephraim’s Daughter Longstocking lifted him with one hand effortlessly, and told him with a wide grin, “I told you that the oppression of the masses could not continue forever. I’ll always come out on top.”

She threw him aside, and pointed a bold finger down the street. “Onward!”

## REDWALL

“Patience, you young scalliwag,” chided the ancient mouse Methuselah. “We have found this riddle, and I believe it to be the key to locating the fabled sword of Martin the Warrior.”

“A riddle!” said Matthias, finishing the wedge of cheese he’d been enjoying. He drank a long draught of October ale, swiping his whiskers on his sleeve. “If we solve it, then we can find the sword and chase off Cluny and his horde!”

“Indeed,” said Methuselah, twitching his nose from the library’s dust. The old abbey recorder settled down to read the scroll./

*Who says that I am dead Knows naught at all You who seek my blade To find within Redwall/*

*Should not ponder riddles Instead, heed my call: Launch flanking attacks from outside of the wall*

The two mice sat in silence for a minute. After a while, Matthias said, “That does make rather a lot of sense, doesn’t it?”

Methuselah nodded slowly.

“Well, we do know that there’s a lot of shrews in Mossflower. We can probably offer them some pasties and pies and things, and they’ll fight for us. After all, we’re a settled agrarian group, with the stability to offer them things that a nomadic rat horde never could,” continued the young mouse.

Methuselah nodded again, but lifted the scroll again to squint at it, hopefully.

“Anyway,” said Matthias, “I’m off. Going to sneak out tonight. Pretty poor guards those rats are, shouldn’t be hard. I’ll see if the shrews will make a deal. You can finish the last of the cheese.”

Matthias got up, finished his ale with a gulp, and walked off to get supplies, affectionately patting Methuselah on the shoulder as he went.

The old mouse sat there for a long while, staring off into space. Finally, he looked over at the remaining cheese that Matthias had left him, and asked quietly, as though speaking only to himself, “I wonder where they keep the tiny, tiny cows.”

## DRAGONLANCE

“Okay, Lord Ariakas and the Dragonarmies are inside that complex at the Temple of Neraka. They’re dug in and well-armed, protected by the power of Takthesis. They have hundreds of clerics and mages,” said Laurana. The Golden General pointed at the map, stabbing a finger at the spot where the forces of darkness were encamped. She looked up at her war council. “We need to defeat them... a defeat so crushing that they don’t recover. We must end this war *now*.”

One of the Knights of Solamnia spoke up, saying, “Then we must strike with our full force. All of our knights and the army of Palanthas will draw them out, and then the good dragons and gryphons can strike them from their flanks.

“No,” said Laurana, shaking her head. “That won’t be enough. Verminaard and his army of draconians are there, and they are monstrous and fierce combatants. We’d suffer too much damage. We need overwhelming force.”

“We must ask Raistlin for help, then,” said Caramon, though it pained him to mention his brother. The book of Fistandantilus had left the wizard... changed. “He will be able to draw many mages to him, and they can assist our forces in the initial attack.”

“That would still not be enough,” said the Golden General, clenching her fist. “We need someone of unstoppable might... an attacker who cannot be resisted, no matter what defenses are raised. We need the most powerful weapon we have.”

“You don’t mean... Fizban?!” said Tika, the barmaid who was increasingly uncertain of her exact role. “But will he assist us? I know that he’s obviously an incarnation of Paladine and has the power of a deity, but he really seems to want some of us to die before he helps out.”

“No,” said Laurana, quietly. “More powerful than even he.”

She turned to look at the corner of the command tent, where a small figure was sitting and quietly playing marbles with five Dragon Orbs he’d happened to find by purest luck. He looked up, confused; he hadn’t been paying attention.

“Sorry, I wasn’t listening,” said Tasslehoff Burrfoot. “What was it you needed?”

## STAR WARS

“You’re right, Chewie, it doesn’t make sense,” said Luke. “The Empire went to a moon this far away from their other bases and reinforcements to rebuild the Death Star? It was a ploy to lure us here, sure, but it’s just like Uncle Owen always used to say: put your traps where the air is wet.”

He knelt on the forest floor and scooped up a handful of loam, rolling it thoughtfully between his fingers. Chewbacca, who sometimes felt that no one really listened, nodded sagely from where he stood at the edge of the clearing.

“But, Master Luke, the Emperor had a plan to destroy the Rebellion when they attacked. A large contingent of Imperial ships were waiting,” said C-3PO.

“If I’m building the Death Star again – this time with more turrets in the canals – then I’m not using it and *myself* as bait for the entire enemy fleet. I’ll build it and set traps *other places*. The whole point of the Death Star was to eliminate the rebel threat by obliterating all planets that offered them material support. If I’m the Emperor and I’ve already won on Hoth a few years ago, I know that I’m not in any danger of losing a war of attrition. I started with an advantage of at least twenty to one, and things

only kept going my way.” Luke stood up again, tossing away the handful of loam and putting his hands on his hips. He squinted off into the trees.

R2-D2 made a warning buzz and whistle, but C3-PO only turned to admonish him, “The Ewoks are our friends, remember? They worship me as a god.” The smaller droid buzzed disconsolately.

“No, it doesn’t make sense,” Luke said, shaking his head. “When you’re already winning the war, you don’t use your half-finished ultimate weapon to lure the enemy into a fight. The Emperor was a brilliant politician and strategist... he wouldn’t do that.” He turned to Chewie. “There must be something else here. Some valuable resource or tool...”

R2-D2 beeped and buzzed, rocking from side to side. Luke frowned at him, and knelt down. “What’s wrong, R2?” He looked at C3-PO for a translation.

“He says there are many Ewoks nearby, Master Luke. I don’t know why he’s on about it, though, really I don’t,” huffed the golden droid. “They wiped out almost all of the Stormtroopers during the battle... they’re on our side.”

“That does seem strange, too, now that I think about it,” mused Luke. “What do you think, Chewie? Chewie?” The Wookiee was gone. Luke rose swiftly to his feet and took a few steps towards where Chewbacca had been. “Chewie? Where did he... R2, I want you to scan for him and see where he went.” Luke turned back around, only to find that the droids had vanished in just the same way. Silently, as though they’d never been there.

Luke reached slowly and carefully into his robes and pulled out his lightsaber. He turned it on, and the comforting buzz and warm green glow filled the clearing.

In the trees, the Ewoks smiled toothily.

## **HARRY POTTER AND THE METHODS OF RATIONALITY**

“No, Mr. Potter, we don’t have anything to discuss. Now go back to Ravenclaw Tower and do your homework, please. Good day.” Minerva McGonagall sighed, sitting back down at the chair in front of Albus’ desk, while the Boy Who Lives went away to

spend most of his time offstage. “Silly boy should go get some air – go running out among the rye or something.”

“Indeed,” said Dumbledore, in a fond wheeze. “Yet I suspect he has much to teach us. If only there were some sort of clue as to his behavior. Compared to other students he is... very odd... laughably demanding... eh, more obviously rascally, though.”

“Yes, I quite concur,” said McGonagall. “ ‘Puusepa naine tõlvata, sepa naine kirveta.’ ”

Dumbledore chuckled indulgently at the obscure Estonian proverb. “Now then... I have made some remarkable discoveries in Transfiguration, but before I can discuss them, we must have a very long discussion about international politics.”

“And tariffs too, I hope,” said McGonagall, looking hopefully over the tops of her glasses.

“Tariffs, too,” said the kindly old man, reassuringly.

# Parabolas

*There is much unrest here. Much same in Ackle. I was admitted to Urgod Ur and spoke with most Urs, but feel I did not get whole picture. Many Urs, even the Jurg Hod, old allies of my line, speak only in surfaces. There is some hidden group, gathering together. Malfou? Others?*

Worried. I am told there is a weapon stockpile by artificers, but hear denials when asking for curiosity. Traveling to Ackle tomorrow. Will owl from there. — Urg

Once upon a time, Professor Sinistra had told Pip that he was a “poor student and a disappointment.” Coming from the notoriously quiet professor, it had been a pretty nasty insult. Pip had still Hufflepuffed away in Astronomy after that, but those words were probably why he’d never even considered advancing to an Astronomy N.E.W.T.

Truth be told, he probably wouldn't have stood much of a proper chance, anyway. Even though he'd never had a problem understanding the ideas involved, the whole ruddy subject just never worked properly for him. It was like there was a chunk missing from his head, and that chunk was the particular part that would have helped him sort out the difference between a Ganymede-shaped blotchy shadow on the surface of Jupiter or a Callisto-shaped blotchy shadow on the surface of Jupiter. They always just looked like... well, roundish blotches.

It was funny, then, that Pip was a personal witness to the launch of the Tower's space programme. There were many witnesses, of course: a few other aurors, most of the staff of Material

Methods, a few researchers from the Extension Establishment, scattered people from six other departments, most of the Muggle researchers of the Tower, three Unspeakables, two journalists, and some observers from the Uagadou School of Magic and the Russell Institute.

But *not* that snooty Professor Sinistra.

“Philip Pirrip,” the history books would say, “was present at many events of enormous importance and expense in his capacity as Tower Auror. Known to be a personal friend and confidante of the Tower himself, Pirrip played an important role during key historical times. Although the handsome wizard would eventually lead the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, assisted by his predecessor and husband Cedric Diggory, and although he would go on receive the Order of Merlin for his work in forcing all the centaurs to speak in proper English, Pirrip would often describe his days working side-by-side with Harry Potter as some of his proudest moments. Professor Auror Sinistra, on the other hand, was just very good at counting the rings of Saturn.”

Something like that, anyway.

Kwannon was glaring at him. *Bugger. Need to stop daydreaming.*

Pip stood just a little bit straighter, and plastered a grim look of attentive threat on his face. He scanned the crowd, looking for threats, and was relieved to see in his peripheral vision that Kwannon had turned her attention elsewhere.

“Today,” said the Tower, “is rather an important day. The *Monroe*’s launch vehicle will reach the altitude of the intended Clarke orbit in less than twenty minutes, and then the satellite will kick free – putting wizards in space for the first time in history.” There was a small smattering of applause at this last line, and Mr. Potter paused to smile for a moment. He was wearing the old-style robes of a Hogwart’s educator, formal black and complete with a string tie. Even his ponytail was tied back with a silk ribbon. “We have also learned that final testing is nearly complete on the Extension Establishment’s great masterpiece, as the latest version of their sliceboxes has proven to be twice as powerful and entirely stable. As we stand here today, they are undergoing final testing in the Remote Cautionary Platform of the Department of



Mysteries, to which Madame Hopkirk has graciously granted us access for safety's sake." Mr. Potter gestured at the Venerable Unspeakable graciously, and she nodded in acknowledgement.

"In fact, I think we'll have..." Mr. Potter paused a moment, glancing to someone in the crowd – Percy Weasley, it looked like – before continuing. "Yes, we'll have a view of the sliceboxes in use. For some of you, this will be the fulfillment of years of work. For others, this will be where you finally learn what we've spent so much time and sweat doing. It's... no, I better not spoil it, or Luna will be unhappy with me." Mr. Potter shook his head in mock rue, still smiling. Ms. Lovegood, who was standing to the rear of the small crowd, looked up in surprise. She hadn't been paying attention, and her narrow face looked a bit alarmed. But she smiled almost immediately after she sorted through the situation, as though it had just taken her a moment to get caught up to everyone else.

"Auror Kraeme, if you please?" said Mr. Potter, gesturing at the wall to his right. "We'll take a look – a Byrd's eye view, so to speak – at what they have ready for us way down south at the RCP. Madame Umbridge you'll... yes, thanks." Madame Umbridge had a bubbler in front of her face, and she nodded impatiently at the Tower's words. As best as Pip could gather, that foul lump of a woman was monitoring the proceedings in Russia, so they'd know when to watch the launch of the *Monroe*. She was wearing the white coat she'd been affecting lately, with a long pink scarf draped around her neck in folds.

As prompted, Kraeme cast the Twoview Charm, tapping her wand on the wall indicated by Mr. Potter. The surface shivered at the touch, and the small gaps and cracks between the fitted stones appeared to melt into each other, subsiding and smoothing until the wall – part of the main Material Methods manufactory room – was a slick surface of wet-gleaming liquid stone. Almost immediately, shapes began to bubble up from within the stone, resolving into a sharp-edged grey image, while the rest of the enchanted wall seemed to recede away from the crowd.

The features of Harry Madagascar were the first thing visible. The Tower Auror's face swelled out of the wall, six feet high, bearded and serious. He said something, and the image wobbled

up and down, as the sender on the other end of the spell nodded. “It’ll just be a moment, everyone,” said Mr. Potter, smiling wryly at the display. The sender moved, and Madagascar slipped out of sight. A grey-toned view of the Tower entrance slid up and out of the stone in his place. “Security protocols here are pretty strict, as you may know,” added Mr. Potter, and there were a few chuckles from the small crowd.

Other colors were starting to billow up from within the stone, grainy reds, veined white, mottled yellow, and cobalt blue. They leeches into the Twoview image irregularly, coloring the golden arch of the Tower entrance before silvering the security hatch. The peach-colored tubes of a pair of Extendable Ears were just barely visible running along the floor, although the image wasn’t quite clear enough to make out that detail unless you already knew what they were (as Pip did). After a moment, the view shifted forward as the sender stepped up to the entrance. There was another wall of stone erected just within the Receiving Room, and it swelled to fill the view until all edges and lumps were out of sight: the Material Methods wall looked almost like it had before the spell, as it accurately reproduced the features of another wall at the other end of the Tower. One Twoview, then, was showing the audience an image of that wall, on which a second Twoview would produce an image – a physical and slightly awkward way of bridging the powerful enchantments that locked the Tower facility away from scrying and spying.

“Luna? You want to take us through this?” asked Mr. Potter. When the blonde witch nodded and began to walk around the perimeter of the room towards him, the Tower smiled. “I’ll give everyone a break from listening to me; Ms. Lovegood here will tell you about the slicebox worlds, and explain how they work.”

The scientific prodigy Luna Lovegood, who was a year younger than Mr. Potter but had risen through sheer creative brilliance to become the leader of Tower projects in multiple departments, always had a sort of vague air about her. She was rumoured to be a seer, although that story might just have come from her long and famous involvement with her father’s newspaper. Pip thought that there was just a lot going on behind those big grey eyes, distracting her from the rest of the world – sometimes to the point where she absent-mindedly walked into ruddy walls.

“I entered into the slicebox project at the request of Nemeniah Salieri, who I worked with on-” she hesitated, “-another effort.” Ms. Lovegood stepped in front of the Twoview wall, and gestured up at an oblong swelling that was starting to appear across the whole of the view. It looked rather like a pocked Quaffle, deflated enough to look squashed at one end, or like an insect’s cocoon.

“This is a model of what we have created by nesting our most powerful sliceboxes together. It takes advantage of the Elastic Law of Elasticity – an extended space within another extended space loses some small and variable amount of its own capacity to extend space.” Ms. Lovegood sounded dreamy as she spoke, as if she were describing something other than the most boring bloody thing that Professor Flitwick ever put on an exam downstairs.

The view behind the witch moved away, as the sender (some poor bloke had been condemned to that icy waste of a research station for this test) stepped away from the model. The Material Methods wall sank rapidly away from the audience until it reached the Twoview spell’s maximum few meters in apparent depth, but nothing came into sight – the sender wasn’t looking at anything with enough detail to register on the spell. For a moment nothing was visible on the smooth grey stone.

Then the sender turned again, and a broad dais snapped up into view. Resting in the middle was a brown satchel (or maybe burgundy – the stained-stone colour was unclear), rather like one of the fancier dragonhide overnight bags. “And here we have it. A great deal of work, and one of the Tower’s first and most important projects. Just a prototype, of course.”

Ms. Lovegood smiled airily, and turned away from the image to look out on the crowd. No one was reacting, except for a smiling Mr. Potter and a few of the obviously gleeful Extension Establishment researchers, who actually appeared to already be rather tipsy. A few of the other researchers were whispering among themselves, and the journalists, Unspeakables, and visitors looked baffled.

“It’s a... oh, bother. Just a moment. He’ll be going inside in a moment.”

“Surely it’s not... Madame Lovegood, am I missing something, here?” said the professor from the Russell Institute, a serious-looking fellow with a floppy brown hat. According to Pip’s briefing,

he was an expert in their broomstick program, and one of the researchers for Varápidos Brooms.

Ms. Lovegood didn't answer, turning back to look at the wall behind her. The image jostled, stone shifting and sliding fluidly, as the sender approached the bag and opened it. He turned it on its side, and then the image dropped sickeningly as the sender lowered himself. The mouth of the bag lurched out of the wall, yawning wide enough to engulf a Welsh Green, and then the image fell entirely flat and grey once more.

"Just wait..." said Ms. Lovegood, quietly. "And see what we did."

Inside the satchel was a whole bloody world.

The Material Methods wall looked like a volcano had bloomed from the wall, as a hollow cone reached several meters forward. Within the cone, the sides fell away and out, stretching and diminishing until they were lost to the Twoview's poor sight. The scale was hard to make out, but the satchel's extended space had to be immense. Pip tore himself away from his surprise long enough to scan the crowd closely for threats, but soon found his eyes dragged back to the wall. There were all manner of extended spaces: handbags that had the capacity of a closet, and even tents the size of a small house. But this was... bigger.

"One thousand, six hundred, and fifty-five sliceboxes, half-nesting within each other, like overlapping barnacles, each one with a kilometer-wide curved mouth" said Ms. Lovegood. "In some sense, that satchel contains some of a wooden box, which contains some of another wooden box, which contains some of another box, and so on... one thousand, six hundred, and fifty-five times. We lose a few percentage points of capacity each time, mostly from the height and width dimensions, but each box supplies a bit more volume to the total space as they overlap. Imagine... imagine a suit of goblin mail. Each scale overlaps the next, sheltering a larger area beneath. Each bubble of extended space adds on to the compounding space within the pocket." She paused, and added, "The internal dimensions of the space – of the pocket – are about the size of Diagon Alley."

That last comment drew more of a response than anything, with some of those in the audience gasping.

“And we’re not done,” said the Tower, from his position to the left of the wall and Ms. Lovegood. “Right now, our prototype pocket world is the size of a small town. We’re working on layering together even more of the sliceboxes and pushing the boundaries out enough to contain entire biomes. Place the exterior slicebox – or bag, or whatever – in a protective shell, and you have portable, self-contained worlds.”

“A prison,” said one of the journalists – an American witch, the one who’d written about the integration facility, Siegfried’s, and the profile on Amycus Carrow when he had returned from his hideout on Cyprus (where he’d fled after his sister and her husband had been murdered by his former master, You-Know-Who). *Uncertain loyalties*, Pip thought, and this line of thought proved it. The journalist’s face was a pinched frown, and she added, “The perfect prison. That’s what you’ve built.”

“What?” said the Tower, and the smile faded from his face. He turned cold green eyes on the interlocutor. “No. And it is a sad thing to see something so wonderful and seek out the darkest use for it.”

“But it could be used that way, unless I’m wrong?” said the journalist. “The prisoners could even keep their wands, since they would pose no threat to anyone outside their prison, and if they destroyed it from within, they’d be killed in the process.”

“That is a possibility... but it’s one of the least interesting ones,” said Mr. Potter. “These worlds will represent an end to nearly *all* existential risk. They will be places of nearly perfect, nearly unbreachable safety and security. They will be... *planets*.”

“Acromantulas, cockatrices, erklings, tebos... there are many creatures that we spend much time restraining and preserving. No more. They can have their own escape-proof, Muggle-free world. Once we improve them to be large enough to have plants and animals that sustain themselves, we’ll no longer have to choose between periodic rampages and genocide,” suggested Ms. Lovegood, in a dreamy tone out of keeping with her words.

“And right now we’re looking at an image from Antarctica, for safety’s sake. Imagine having a laboratory the size of a city, where you didn’t need to worry about degrees of caution for anyone but yourself!” added Mr. Potter, the smile appearing back on his face.

“A lot of good wizards and witches will lose their positions, it sounds like, and only the wealthiest will be able to afford this,” ventured the American. “Will this have an impact on your economy?”

“Yes, in the same way that the coffin-makers have suffered as the death rate has dropped,” said the Tower, and his sarcasm was cutting enough that some of the onlookers chuckled. “Gaspard Shingleton might have put a lot of professional stirrers out of work with his self-stirring cauldron, but that doesn’t mean his invention wasn’t wonderful... as anyone who struggled through first-year Potions can attest!” There was open laughter now, and the American fell silent.

Ms. Umbridge chose this moment to look up from her bubbler and begin waving vigorously at the Tower, who turned to her, smiling. “Thank you, Madame Umbridge.” He raised his hands and addressed the crowd again. “Everyone, Madame Umbridge has signaled me to let me know that we are close to the launch – our main event, don’t forget! Thank you, Ms. Lovegood.” The blonde witch nodded vaguely, and stepped quietly away, to return to her original spot. The Tower turned his attention to the Twoview wall, and crossed his arms expectantly. The RCP image – that enormous cone – slumped out of existence, and the surface of the wall was smoothly quiescent again.

“All right, there we go. The launch will be soon,” said Mr. Potter. “We have a witch on-site in Kazakhstan, and so we’ll have an image up in a moment.”

Someone in the audience raised their hand. That Vision Verge lady, Jeannette Lorge, Pip thought. Mr. Potter nodded at the woman.

“Sir, for the launch... I thought that we were using a Russian rocket? It doesn’t really matter, but that’s what my team was told when we were working on this.”

“Well, yes,” agreed the Tower, glancing to his right as he spoke. The wall was beginning to melt and shift again, and most of it was receding back away from the crowd. “The Muggles in Russia run their program out of a facility in Kazakhstan, though – odd byproduct of a long-running political conflict in the Muggle world.”

One of the other journalists in the crowd spoke up. “Excuse me, sir... isn’t that right between the Caucasus and the Ten

Thousand? Depending on whether or not the Ten Thousand join the Independents... will the Ministry – er, the Tower, that is – will you continue to try to use that site in the future?”

“I do not anticipate the need for very many other launches, so this shouldn’t be an ongoing concern. Or, wait...” Mr. Potter frowned for a moment as he paused to think. To his right, the view was colouring again with chromatic streaks, and an object like a sausage swelled out of the wall, flanked by thin lattices. The lattices seemed to be bracing up the sausage – the rocket, it must be, Pip realized. Their delicate strands looked like nothing so much as an unnaturally regular pair of stone spiderwebs.

“No, I think I can safely say that there shouldn’t be any appreciable security concerns before too long,” finished the Tower. He turned to look at the image himself, and a grin began to spread on his face. It looked boyish, like a child tucking into his first Chocolate Frog. The entire exchange with the American journalist looked like it had been wiped away, leaving only delight in its place. “Madame Umbridge?”

The squat Unspeakable – or was she now a Tower researcher? – still holding her bubbler in front of her, stepped up next to the Tower. She held the bubbler closer to her ear, so that she could hear what was being relayed to it (via Extendable Ear and a second pair of bubblers) from the sender at the launch site. “The launch will be taking place within the minute,” she said, her voice chirpy and bright. “The *Monroe* will be put into the space outside of the air around our planet, and it will stay there, flying overhead at a fixed rate.”

Pip still couldn’t really picture it. He understood everything about it – the Tower Aurors had all gotten a briefing from Umbridge and endured a question-and-answer session in which Gregor Nimue had asked all manner of mocking and sarcastic questions, and Umbridge had answered him with a murderous sweetness. But there’s a difference between grasping something Ravenclaw-style, and really understanding it well enough to use that knowledge. It was the difference between something for which you planned and something you could use *in* a plan. Professor Slughorn had called those the “knowables” and “useables,” in his puffed-up way.

The sender approached closer to the launch vehicle, and the shape of the off-white rocket grew until the entire thing was just

visible on the wall. “Madame Bogdanova of the Shichinin has kindly agreed to track the rocket as far as her Nimbus can go. Proper pictures will also be made available to the press, and more updates will follow... including pictures of the *Monroe* and our sfaironaut.”

“ ‘Astronaut,’ ” interrupted Mr. Potter, turning to her and frowning. “He’s an astronaut.”

“Sir, I spoke with several of our Muggle researchers and Madame Bogdonova about this, after our discussions about the launch site, and they agreed that we didn’t want to endorse one Muggle sphere of influence over another. So rather than ‘astronaut’ or ‘cosmonaut,’ we settled on a new term for a magical explorer of the celestial spheres.”

“But-” said the Tower.

“The parchments are already all printed up,” said Umbridge, smiling toadily. “Sorry if there was any confusion, Harry.”

“Sfaironaut...” muttered Mr. Potter, crossing his arms.

“The *Monroe* will represent our finest melding of magic and machine so far, with a built-to-order Muggle device providing the platform, monitored by a team of professionals in the Americas, but with the bulk of the satellite consisting of several devices... most particularly a custom-made Vanishing Cabinet. Further building, more satellites, and even the insertion of our sfaironaut and his ship will be the simplest of matters, thanks to the connected Cabinet down at the RCP.” She paused, glancing down at her bubbler. “We’ll count down when the Zenit is about to launch... feel free to join in on the count, everyone!” announced Umbridge, more loudly.

One of the lattices supporting the rocket was moving away, slowly. The Tower and his audience all fixed their attention on the shape of the launch vehicle, crafted by the liquid stone of the Twoview spell and stained into colour by the natural tints of underlying rock.

Pip wondered what sort of security was on site at Baikonur. There must be Muggle people with guns, of course, but there were probably any number of aurors stationed on guard. For operational security, that sort of thing was kept secret even from other aurors, but Pip suspected Moody, at least, must be in



Kazakhstan. Moody was in the Tower only a few hours a day to test for security and read reports, and that had been the case for years.

“Ten... nine... eight... seven... six...” began Umbridge, and half of the room join her, including Ms. Lovegood, Mr. Potter, and every single one of the Muggle and goblin researchers. Some of the more dignified witches and wizards, such as Madame Hopkirk, only smiled pleasantly instead.

The stone at the bottom of the image of the rocket began to bubble and fizz, roiling out from the bottom of the rocket in clouds. Pip held his breath.

“Five... four... three...”

There was a sharp surge of reddish stone from within the thick grey clouds, as fire began to spray all around the base of the rocket. The Muggle technology seemed to be based around cramming an enormous load of the fire into the body of the rocket, Pip thought, and then shooting it out the bottom.

“Two... one... lift-up!”

The rocket lifted up. It moved surprisingly slowly. Pip would have thought it'd streak out of sight almost immediately, but it seemed as though it were struggling its way up, blasting curtains of fire along the way. It was amazing the thing was going anywhere, really; he should be impressed with what the Muggles had done with their limited circumstances. The whole thing was like a blastbomb just waiting to explode, but instead it was climbing into the sky and beyond.

The even ground and whatever were those supporting lattices vanished a moment later, as the sender – Ilya Bogdanova, Pip thought Umbridge had mentioned – began flying upward to follow the rocket's path. She must have already been on her broom, with whatever Charms she'd need (Warming Charm, Bubblehead Charm... others?).

The image on the Material Methods wall was now an unsteady view of the white rocket, a flare of red and billowing column of smoke underneath, like a strangely tubular dragon on the attack. Pip glanced around, and saw Mr. Potter's hands were clasped in front of him, tight, and his face looked as though he were having some higher experience.

For almost five minutes, by Pip's estimation, the sender followed the rocket as it got smaller and smaller. Eventually, the only thing in view was the thick bubbles of the wall's stone that represented the column of smoke, drifting gently. The Twoview spell ended, and Kraeme took her wand off the wall. She stood up straight and stretched, working her wand arm stiffly in a circle.

Everyone stared at Umbridge, who was on her bubbler again, her free hand plucking nervously at the folds of her scarf. After the passage of a tense minute, during which one of the journalists began to speak before being hushed urgently by a researcher, Umbridge looked up, smiling broadly. "Success! All stages complete, fairing jettisoned, and Sunnyvale reports good signal. They're starting maneuvers."

Mr. Potter lowered his head, and heaved a heavy sigh, a smile still on his face. He turned to the crowd.

"The Earth is a very small stage in a vast cosmic arena," he said, intoning the word solemnly, as though quoting a sacred text. "Think of the endless cruelties visited by the inhabitants of one corner of this pixel on the scarcely distinguishable inhabitants of some other corner, how frequent their misunderstandings, how eager they are to kill one another, how fervent their hatreds. Think of the rivers of blood spilled by all those generals and emperors so that, in glory and triumph, they could become the momentary masters of a fraction of a dot."

He folded his arms in front of him, and Pip could see something distant in his gaze; as though he were looking out on a vista unseen by everyone else. "For many generations, wizards have worried about the loss of magic, as the Interdict slowly erodes the most powerful lore wizardkind has mastered. Every passing century has seen the loss of some artifact. The Cup of Midnight, which could bind the world, was broken by the last partaker. Satomi's Dogs, which gave life, were destroyed to break Grindelwald's power. The Resurrection Stone, which could penetrate any world, was hidden by Voldemort. But even more worrying is the fact that everything is at risk, for there is just our one little world. Vengeful madmen, careless geniuses, and virulent mistakes... they put not just our lives at risk, but the existence of... of our very species.

"Today marks the first step in changing that. Wizardkind – humankind itself – will no longer be bound to one earthly rock.

And more than anything else I've ever done, I'm proud of my part in that. That may be hard for some people to understand but... I... I could die happily, if I had to. I've... done something. After all, 'I have accomplished in life what I have intended and under what circumstances may one better die?'"

There was some murmuring at this, and Pip flashed Kwannon a worried glance. She gave him a look in return, communicating with narrowed eyes, *Keep your mind on your business.*

"It's a new day, and great things are happening," concluded the Tower. He turned to look at the blank wall, now mundane.

"Thank you, everyone!" called out Senior Undersecretary Percy Weasley, as he stepped up out of the crowd, waving cheerily. "If everyone will just follow Auror Kraeme down the hall, we have some refreshments and fact-parchments available for you on the great table in the Conjunction Conjunction. Nothing conjured, despite the name, though – don't worry, ha ha!"

The crowd began to filter out. Most of the aurors went with them, with the threat. Pip did, as well, leaving Kwannon alone with Mr. Potter. The Tower still stared at the wall, and seemed so very sad. It was a strange contrast with his earlier delight.

The young auror sighed, and turned his attention to keeping an eye on the trickier and more unusual visitors. Couldn't have a journalist go sneaking off.



*Sometimes when I think about everything that's happened in my life, and everything I've done, and everything I am, and just how much of it began on a single night in 1981... I see everything in my life as a sort of arc – or maybe arcs – these long trends bending all the way through in unbroken curves.* He thought back to his first meeting with Draco, and the way they'd immediately fallen into a pattern of simultaneous alliance and competition, leashed together by Harry's own cleverness. He thought back to the his first interactions with Hermione, asking her to be his research assistant as though that were some kind of reward, even as she gently but consistently outshone him. And he thought about his ambition to sort the world into neat columns and sum them up into a single figure, an arrangement of digits that shunned death

and pain, encompassed the stars, and reached towards knowledge with the joyous inevitability of a determined child learning to walk.

And he thought about the single arc that undergirded them all, a tremendous single stroke of a line, bright-black and shiny and dark, that Voldemort had rooted in his flesh. A madman in his mind, shaping his thoughts and expectations and feelings.

He'd had a loving home and wonderful parents. He'd had all the values and virtues of the Enlightenment. He'd mastered his dark side, suborned it to his use and subsumed it into his mind.

But nonetheless, the night of the 31st of October had been – would always be – the black line that slashed through and behind everything. The arc that defined him.

Somehow, he'd never altered the curve of any of these patterns. Draco, Hermione, optimization... even as he grew and matured and learned, everything kept taking the same shape.

That black line... where would it end? Where would that dark parabola finally fall to earth?

He'd bullied so many people over the years, forcing confrontations with Minerva and Dumbledore and Hermione and Draco and Kingsley and Moody and so many others. Forcing his way forward, because he saw the need. Even though he knew there would be a reckoning. Like a sword over his head, he could feel it waiting.

Now he was doing great things, wonderful things. Things that would leave a mark on the world. When he'd been a child, he'd worried that he might never live up to his potential. Now, by any measure, he had done things to be proud of. Even up to the standards he should reach, he could be proud. But at this peak... he had to remember. He had to remember that black arc that cut through him – that dark underpinning to his world and mind. That dark line, curving and waiting to plunge down to the earth.

When would he pay the price that he'd forestalled for so long, with tricks and gambits and sheer ingenuity?

Would his work be complete?

Would it hurt?

*Avis, jasmīn varṇā na ā ast, dadarka akvams, tam,  
vāgham  
garum vaghantam, tam, bhāram magham, tam,  
manum āku  
bharantam. Avis akvabhjams ā vavakat: kard  
aghnutai mai  
vidanti manum akvams agantam.  
Akvāsas ā vavakant: krodhi avai, kard aghnutai  
vividvant-svas:  
manus patis varṇām avisāms karnauti svabhjam  
gharmam  
vastram avibhjams ka varṇā na asti.  
Tat kukruvants avis agram ā bhugat.*

*A sheep that had no wool saw horses, one of them  
pulling a  
heavy wagon, one carrying a big load, and one  
carrying a man  
quickly. The sheep said to the horses: "My heart  
pains me, seeing  
a man driving horses."  
The horses said: "Listen, sheep, our hearts pain us  
when we see  
this: a man, the master, makes the wool of the  
sheep into a warm  
garment for himself. And the sheep has no wool."  
Having heard this, the sheep fled into the plain.*

—August Schleicher



## ❖❖❖❖❖❖❖❖❖ Chapter Eleven ❖❖❖❖❖❖❖❖❖

# Purchasing Power

SIBERIAN SMASH: GODDESS STRIKES DOWN “RUSSIAN AZKABAN”

— *Daily Prophet* headline for April 21st, 1999

WAR? THUNDERER THREATENS THRASHING

— *Daily Prophet* headline for April 22nd, 1999

MUGGLE MAGIC AS TOWER LAUNCHES SPACE

— *Daily Prophet* headline for April 23rd, 1999

# GODDESS GOES WINDOW SHOPPING AT B&B

— *Daily Prophet* headline for April 24th, 1999

“MONSTROUS”: NEW PICTURES FROM ZEMLYA

— *Daily Prophet* headline for April 25th, 1999

CONFLICT BREWING: THUNDERER CALLS CONCLAVE  
OF DOMOVOI

— *Daily Prophet* headline for April 26th, 1999

INDEPENDENTS UNITE BEHIND RUSSIA

— *Daily Prophet* headline for April 27th, 1999

*Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Ministry of Magic  
April 28th, 1999*

“No,” said Hortense Hood, frowning. “You really can’t be in there. Sorry.” She didn’t sound sorry. She sounded like a long-serving auror whose career had been in a nasty slump for years, and who blamed the Goddess for that, and who was enjoying the opportunity to get some revenge – even if it was in the most petty way imaginable.

Hermione didn’t allow herself to sigh, and kept a pleasant smile on her face. She’d been planning on sitting at the table across from some of the people they’d taken in last week’s raid. She’d even dressed for the occasion – a soft-looking old robe, homely and brown, that helped turn her aura of innocence into the maternal and welcoming look of a confidante. But Hood was in charge of the investigation, and Hood was saying no.

*Harry forced vote after vote on the Wizengamot, and argued and pleaded and bribed to try to get a majority on his side. We were within three votes of closing that hellhole, and everyone knew which way it was going. You volunteered there, anyway – you were commander! – in exchange for quadruple the typical salary for an executive auror. You and all the rest of them should have been sacked.* Hermione shook her head, putting a slight rueful twist on her smile. *There will be no satisfaction for you on this from me, not even the slightest bit. You volunteered to torture people for money.* Mild disappointment, nothing more, as she crossed her arms and looked at the powerfully-built woman before her. The middle-aged auror’s hair was a storm of black frizz, forced back into a tight bun, and she had a pleased light in her dark-lashed eyes.

“You’re in charge, of course, Auror Hood. I suppose it is slightly unusual, but I’ve done it many times before – and I was there when the raid took place, with some of the beat aurors and some of those stationed at the Tower. And of course, I went to school for a year with Margaret, and know her sister. It might help, is all,” Hermione said. Light, nice, and nonconfrontational. *We’re not fighting, we’re friends, I just want to help, la dee da.*

“Yes... and what exactly was your role, there? In what capacity are you going around capturing full-blooded wizards and witches,



like they were stray Kneazles?” asked Hood, coolly. “Maybe that’s something we should talk about... what do you think?”

The stupidity on display was frustrating, and Hermione frankly couldn’t understand it. How did you rise to auror executive level – even if you never found another command position, anywhere, after the demise of Azkaban – with this level of situational blindness? Auror admission standards were notoriously high. They’d been relaxed during the increase of the force in the past few years, of course, but they were still supposed to keep out anyone who acted like a child... and anyway, Hood had been an auror for decades.

Hermione knew other immature-seeming aurores (like that one with great expectations and little sense that she’d met at the Tower). No screening or training program was perfect, after all. But didn’t Hood know – couldn’t she have figured out – that it wasn’t a smart idea to taunt the prison-smashing, Dementor-destroying world leader who had a private militia, whom the Chief Auror had been pestering for a date, and who was best friends with the most powerful wizard on the planet?

*On the other hand,* thought Hermione, *if she had been the smart sort, she wouldn’t have been in command of Azkaban to begin with, once the winds started to blow the other way. I hope you like being a beat auror, Hortense, because I don’t think a promotion will be coming your way for a while. And why? Just pettiness. You’d think the example of Umbridge would have taught people that you don’t have to stay stuck to your mistakes. You can change your mind.*

Should Hermione just swallow her pride and give Hood a victory? It might end the grudge, or at least blunt it... and if there was a next time, that might help. No one was around, and it cost Hermione nothing.

*No. She’s not going to ever forget that I ended her career – or decide that the blame is her own. And she’d enjoy it too much if I “begged” her not to raise a fuss. It’d probably encourage more of this. Frustrating. Why don’t you know that I care about you and want to help you, too, Madame Hood?*

A beat had passed, and the question hung in the air. Hermione just kept smiling pleasantly, and shrugged in answer. Just like rolling your shoulder away from a punch; there was no gift of impact.

Hood said nothing, waiting expectantly for an answer, trying to use the awkward silence against Hermione. Eventually, she broke the tension, saying in a brittle tone, “Well. I suppose we’ll have to see if anything comes of that. But you’ll not be going in on the interrogations.”

“All right,” Hermione said, brightly. The auror tried to stare her down for a moment longer, then, satisfied she’d made her point, Hood opened the door to the antechamber of TT-1 (Thief-Taker Room #1, what a Muggle might call an interrogation or interview room) and disappeared inside, closing the door sharply behind herself.

*Well, we’re in the DMLE already – it’ll be easy to report that someone’s career was just murdered,* she thought, glancing down the corridor to where a trio of office workers were pretending to be obliviously sipping tea. *Way too many people will hear about this and try to curry favor by going after my “enemy.”*

Hermione shook her head, ruefully. She’d need to try harder to reach people like that. She knew that some people prided themselves on their enemies: Godric Gryffindor himself had claimed that “The Tally of mine Virtue shall be the List of my Foes.” Harry had repeated it on occasion, approvingly. But that was wrong, truly, and Hermione thought that some of the bullies of Hogwarts had been influenced by that false sentiment. It was important to fight evil, yes, and defeat it. But it was far, far better to take evil by the hand, listen to its point of view, patiently and kindly discuss things, and finally walk away, hand-in-hand. Hood wasn’t her enemy – she was just a friend, waiting to be made.

*I wonder if there’s anything I can do for her that wouldn’t be seen as an insult or bribe. I’d better put Susie on it. She’s good at that. Or Esther.*

*Not her,* Hermione remembered. *Esther and Char are in Godric’s Hollow, getting their new place set up.* She’d almost forgotten. How strange it was, to imagine a world without Esther by her side. Hermione had almost given up hope that her Returned could ever really heal; maybe some of them never would. Hyori seemed to become more grim every year, not less. But there was hope again.

“Happy thoughts, Ms. Granger? You look far away in some wonderful place,” came a familiar American voice.

“Councilor Hig!” said Hermione, turning around and smiling. Reg Hig was walking down the corridor towards her, stepping around the office workers. Two of them weren’t very circumspect in eyeing his plum nose or deep-set eyes as the squat wizard passed; the third muttered something to them – probably along the lines of “Oy, stop your staring, that bloke is just about in charge of America.” They averted their gazes, and spied somewhat more discreetly.

“How are you, my dear? We have missed you in Tidewater – you and your Returned, kicking in doors and righting wrongs – but the papers tell me you’ve taken that performance on tour, here and in Russia.” She offered him her hand, still grinning, and he bent slightly to plant a firm kiss on the back of it. She’d been back in Boston twice since her first visit, when she’d exposed Tineagar in the midst of investigating Malfoy’s misdeeds, and they’d become friendly – if not that close. “Would you have lunch with me... if you have time? There’s a cafeteria here, right?”

“Yes, there’s a canteen for Ministry staff. But let’s go to Siegfried’s, instead,” said Hermione. “You will enjoy it rather more, I promise. Unless you need to be here for a meeting...?”  
*Hint, hint: why are you here?*

“If you don’t mind me bringing along a friend, that will be my sincere pleasure, Ms. Granger,” said Hig. “I have just been here to chat with a few friends. Something to do with you, actually. But there’s a lot to talk about.”

“Hermione, please,” prompted the Goddess – she must have insisted on this at least four or five times, over the past few months. *To do with me, and a lot to talk about... obvious enough. So you’re here about the Independents and Russia, and maybe also looking for another way to put the pressure on Harry for better terms. And I wonder how long it took you to track me down, so you could “accidentally” bump into me?* She wasn’t being cynical: Hig had the reputation of a careful and methodical man, if an orator of considerable passion, and every time she’d ever spoken with him, he’d been ruthlessly charming and charmingly ruthless with his hidden agendas.

Hig looked up at her and smiled broadly. “Hermione, then. I’ll meet you at Diagon Alley’s Safety Pole?”

“Certainly,” she said. As Hig bowed slightly and walked away once more, she watched the three office workers scurry away. She was willing to wager they were off to beg for a long lunch – so that they could go trot off to Siegfried’s, too.

*Nosy parkers*, she thought fondly, and grinned again.



The Diagon Alley Safety Pole had become something of a hospital complex of itself. What had formerly been a white canvas tent when the Safety Pole was set up three years ago had been replaced by a baroque building of veined Swedish Green marble. After she took a moment to bubble Hyori and tell her where she was going, Hermione Apparated in. She lighted on the cobblestones, and stared up at the facade. *Beautiful. And not a streak of discolouration at all.* She wondered if Diagon Alley had localized weather. She’d never actually thought about it.

She had only a moment to herself to admire the building and think deep thoughts, however, before someone recognized her and a small crowd gathered. She hoped that she wouldn’t have to wait long, since she wasn’t exactly dressed to the nines. She should have popped home to change.

*Not that they care*, she thought, clasping a young man’s hand. He’d been rejuvenated last year, and just wanted to tell her how much he supported her and the Tower. She inclined her head graciously, and told him that she hoped he was doing something exciting with his new youth. He tried to reply, but he was beginning to weep with emotion.

Hyori and Susie arrived a few minutes later. Hermione was extremely grateful, and shot them a look of appreciation – crowds were always a job for more than one person. Hyori took up position a short distance away, watchful, while Susie helped take the arm of the weeping man from Hermione, soothing him as she walked him a short distance away. “Cor,” Hermione heard her say to the man, “she’s something, isn’t she.” Hermione smiled, and turned to the next people who wanted to speak to her: a little boy and his mother.

“My name is Hosea,” squeaked the little boy, looking up at her. He had his mother’s robes bunched up in one hand, and he kept

trying to lift them to hide his face, despite his mother's efforts to stop him. "Hosea Hussey." He was a cute little thing, with apple cheeks and enormous buck teeth that reminded Hermione of herself when she was a child.

Hermione leaned down. "You didn't happen to write to me ever, did you, Hosea?"

The child's eyes grew as large as hen's eggs. He nodded, slowly.

She reached into her pouch and called up a copy of her Chocolate Frog card. "Was this yours?"

It wasn't, of course. But she'd remembered this child's letter, and she had the card, so why not?

Hosea nodded again, and his mouth opened slightly. He didn't say anything else. Hermione looked up at his mother, smiling. She looked shocked, too.

"Maybe I could sign this, and give it back to you, Hosea. If that's all right with your mum?"

"That would be lovely," said the woman. "We... oh..." She was flustered.

Hermione retrieved a biro from her robes and slashed her signature across the card. She bent down and offered it to the child with both hands and a big smile. "Here you go."

By the time the woman had thanked Hermione on behalf of her stunned child four or five times, Susie was there to guide them away with a kind word. Hermione put away the biro, and noticed that Hig had arrived. He had another wizard with him – a bald man with spectacles, a goatee, and a wide belly: Per Aavik-Söderlundh-Ellingsen, a leading bureaucrat with the Norden's Magidepartementet. She knew Per in a vague way, but not much beyond a casual chat.

"Hello, Reg. And Master Aavik! A pleasure to see you again. I hope you're joining us?" she said, approaching them. Hermione had to gently move through the small crowd of people, and she paused for a moment to give an older woman a hug.

"Ms. Granger," said Per, pleasantly in his warm, unaccented basso profundo. "Hello. Yes, I would like that."

"We're just over here, then," said Hermione. Unasked, Susie had already walked ahead of them to arrange a table, moving briskly enough to make her chest bounce and a few heads turn.

Hyori, on the other hand, was nowhere to be seen – probably warding Hermione from some vantage point. Sometimes Hermione felt a little silly at that whole thing, to be honest.

“You have very attentive servants,” remarked Per, noticing as they walked alongside each other along the cobblestone lane. A few people followed them at a discreet distance, but most of the crowd just watched them go.

Hermione opened her mouth to explain, but Hig smoothly cut in. “She does, yes. Ms. Granger’s beauty might have much to do with it, but also she’s simply that kind of witch. It’s a thing out of legend.” He gave a slight shake of his head when she glanced at him from behind Per’s back, and she let it go.

The three of them had barely stepped inside of Siegfried’s bronze-filigreed door before the maître d’ had appeared, silently guiding them to their table in the dining room. He was professional and polite, and had the insuperable gift of seeming to know just what you wanted before you’d even asked. Hermione had eaten here last week, and now she suspected the man was a seer. It was the only explanation, even though it seemed vanishingly unlikely in a restaurant specifically dedicated to the wonders of Muggle luxuries. Siegfried’s was decorated with buttery mahogany, comfortably warm lighting, and linens so crisply fresh that a house elf would approve.

“A pint of bitter for sir,” said the maître d’, nodding to Per, “and two glasses of water, is that right?” It was unprompted and yet exactly correct. The server vanished without another word, pausing only to leave a slip of cardboard with each of them, on which the menu was printed.

“More than just kidneys and thick beef?” asked the Nordenman, lifting his menu. “Did I perhaps accidentally leave Britain?”

“And end up somewhere with a decent bite?” said Hig, smiling a stubble-faced smile. “Nor was there any antique plaster food in a window display, like a real pub. I think we were side-alonged out to a different country at some point.”

“I would reply in kind with comments about your own national cuisines, gentlemen, but I am flummoxed by the wealth of possibilities,” said Hermione, with comical primness. She glanced the menu over.

“You will need something bracing, Ms. Granger. Taking charge over matters... we have read about it! The *Kalmaposten* often describes your exploits,” said Per. He resettled himself in his chair, scuffing it back and forth until he was situated. “Very exciting.”

Hermione looked up from the menu, and saw Hig was looking at her directly, his lips pursed slightly in warning. *Servants and “taking charge”... Hig has told this man that I am a hidden ruler of Britain, in some fashion – more than influential, but an old-style strongman leader. To what purpose?*

“You must mean the raids on Billie’s and Borgin & Burkes? Well, it’s necessary. The things that were going on...” Hermione shook her head, unhappily.

“And where is it ending up? Everyone off to Howard?” asked Hig, arranging his napkin in his lap.

A waiter arrived with their drinks, and Per eagerly took a long pull of his beer. He smacked small lips, appreciatively.

“There are charges going around. Not sure where it will end up, but at Billie’s there were illicit Time-Turners, a violation of the Responsible Research Act of 1959, and unlicensed production of a controlled substance. Also one of Geoffrey Gem’s assistants – sorry, Gem was the one brewing Euphoric – one of his assistants had an outstanding charge of duel-fixing.” Hermione sipped her water. “And we found out other things, as well.” *Such as Gregor Nimue’s treachery. I wonder if it would be unethical to begin planting Everlasting Ears on more people. There’s no legal mechanism for that, but no law against it, either, in the feudal-style policing of Magical Britain. Mmm.... no, definitely wrong.*

They hadn’t managed to uncover much new, or find any ongoing crimes, in the more uneventful raid at Borgin & Burkes. *The Prophet* had needed to run a picture of the broken picture window out front in order to hype up the affair... even though the window had been broken earlier that day by an unidentified vandal.

“This is what I say,” said Per, nodding approvingly. “Yes, yes... Sorry, Ms. Granger, but in the Norden there is discussion about treaties, these days. Our neighbor Russia is Independent, and we have close ties with them... their leaders are all Durmstrangen, you see. ‘Hogwarts of the North,’ yes?”

*And the thing that keeps you advocating for us is that you think there's strength here... that's what you value, more than the Safety Poles in Lübeck, Kanalenmark, Slottet, and Reykjavik. She understood what Hig had been doing, earlier. Clever man. Okay, let's sell it.*

"Russia will soon learn their folly," said Hermione, in a harsh tone. She paused, and put one hand to her chest, delicately, and smiled again. "I hope they will see the error of joining an international group that exists for the sole purpose of perpetuating infirmity and death." *Oh my goodness what a slip, fear the great rage that dwells within the angry Goddess.*

Hig smiled broadly, and his dark eyes were bright with appreciation. "The Council is almost to the point of agreement, I must say. I believe that we will recommend adoption of the Treaty for Health and Life very soon, in fact, if we can sort out a few last disagreements." *Well, that was direct. Show me your value, then name your price. And by having this discussion in front of Per, you also emphasize that I'm a power.*

"Oh? What disagreements are there? We here in Britain are quite proud of everything the Tower's done for us and for everyone else in the Treaty," she said, with a small nod towards Per, who nodded his head in agreement as he lifted his pint to his lips again.

There had been a time when she'd be getting upset at this point, thinking things like, *Why are we arguing about tariffs and subsidies when there are people dying?* But she was wiser, now. Politics was a tool to an end, and it made no sense to get angry at the shovel.

"Speaking with Mr. Potter, he has agreed that there will be an end to the restrictions on free trade, and also that Britain will compensate the Americas for the advantage it has derived over the years from Merlin's misdeeds. He's agreed to endow new programs at the Russell Institute and Salem, indefinitely... including arithmancers, to help us achieve some small part of Britain's recent prosperity. And Britain will stop propping up Cyprus, at least for a time. It's unjust. Now, if we can just meet in the middle on two other things, I think my colleagues will be happy to join with me. Councilor Strongbound won't have a leg to stand on, and we'll sweep the vote. Just a few things, and we've won."



Hermione nodded, setting down her menu and sipping her water. “Go on.”

“Goblins can’t have wands, first of all. It’s ugly, but true. Our American goblins aren’t as civilized as your British ones... if we gave them wands, there’d be bloodshed. They’ve never even *had* wands, historically, so it’s not as though they’re missing out. And the other issue is that we can’t open our borders to hags, vampires, or werewolves. That’s not a matter of prejudice, it’s a matter of public health. Even the reformed hags, like your Nutcombe hags, are a danger waiting to happen.” Hig shrugged. “I have fought for goblin rights, as well as Muggle rights, for many years, so you know I’m not a blood-purist or supremacist. But there’s such a thing as going too far.”

“Are we ready to order?” asked a waiter, a slender young man with a neat uniform. She could see the maître d’ in one corner of the dining room, where he’d dispatched the waiter. It was eerily good timing, just when she needed a moment to think. If she hadn’t been an Occlumens and he hadn’t been a Muggle, she’d be fairly sure he was reading her mind.

“The asparagus salad,” she ordered. “There’s no meat in the dressing?”

“No, Madame. I will make sure. And for sirs?”

“This cut of beef – is it like a Chateaubriand?” asked Hig, setting down his menu.

“Yes, sir.”

“I’ll have that, then.”

“How would sir like it cooked?”

“What?”

“May I recommend rare, sir?”

“A rare what? Oh, yes. Thank you.”

“And sir?”

“The same as Councilor Hig, I think,” said Per. “Although I should have a salad, I cannot bring myself to do so.”

“All right. We’ll have that right out. Please tell me if there’s anything else I can get for you,” said the waiter, and flowed away with the unobtrusive liquid grace of a professional.

“A very nice place,” said Hig. “I’ve eaten at Muggle places before, of course – it’s more common in the Americas than back here – but this is a very nice place, indeed.”

“Isn’t it a bother to go to a Muggle place, though? Not this one, it’s very easy and it’s proper, you know?” said Per, turning in his chair to look around. “But you must plod all over the place like a goat, or else spend an hour wiping their heads – er, minds. A bother.”

“What is your favorite Muggle place, Reg?” asked Hermione. She knew it was obvious she was stalling a bit, but she needed a moment more to think. She couldn’t commit in haste. That was another cleverness of Hig’s: bringing impressionable Per along made her feel pressured to decide where she stood, right on the spot. The Nordenman was related to half the influential families of the Norden, and his wife was related to the other half. His opinions would go far, and he looked to be easily swayed. She needed to appear decisive and strong. Norden couldn’t be allowed to waver, or given the impression that the Council of Westphalia was going to go Independent.

“The Blue Benn, I think,” said Hig. She’d wager he was exaggerating about how often he’d gone to Muggle establishments, since Tidewater had actually seemed as insular as most magical communities, but she was still impressed he could name it off the top of his head. “A diner a couple of hours west from Tidewater.” He scratched at his chin. “After your first eventful visit, we spent some time trying to track down the origins of some redcaps out in the Berkshire Mountains, and had occasion to dine there. Charming place. Wonderful dough-nuts.”

Per drained the rest of his beer, hiccuping when he’d finished it. “Quite good, quite good.”

“Served warm, I bet,” said Hig, frowning. He shook his head. “Anyway, Hermione... with regards to the goblins being given wands, and open borders... the Tower will give dispensations, right? I know you’re not nominally in command of it, but you are a force here. I’m sure that Mr. Potter fears no *poudre de succession*, but I believe that if you gave me your word, it wou-”

“No,” said Hermione, firmly.

Hig stopped, and gave her a pointed look. His lips were tight with surprise and displeasure.

*I am capable of taking a hint, little man... but that doesn’t mean you always get to lead me around to your intended destination.*

“First of all, I’m not at all sure that the Wizengamot and other legislatures would agree to either these changes in the Treaty or to a special exemption. The behavior of our Ministry of Magic – and it *is ours*, make no mistake – is something we can control, Councilor. But despite the idiotic propaganda of the Independents, that gaggle of squawking thugs who are just unhappy that the world is slipping out of their bloody grasp, we do not control the rest of the Treaty nations, as Per can tell you.” Hermione said. She was firm, but still kind.

Per seemed uncertain at the sudden change in tone of the conversation, but he was experienced enough to simply nod.

“Secondly, American goblins will get wands, one way or another. If the Council were to recommend against the Treaty, and then American nations were to follow that recommendation – a safe bet – then I think you would find that wands would show up in New Mexico, anyway.” She paused for a moment for effect. “Not on our behalf, but surely you know that this is happening *already*. The goblin nations have close ties, and Curd and Ackle are already taking wands to hand.” As it happened, she did *not* know that the American goblins were getting wands from their British and Irish counterparts... but it was a safe bet. And Hig couldn’t know differently.

“I think that the Magical Congress can keep tabs fairly well on our magical creatures, Hermione,” said Hig. His expression was mild again. “And all of the British tariff enforcement officials will soon have time on their hands... they would be able to keep an eye on your goblins.”

“But they won’t,” assured Hermione, again with firmness. “I’m sorry, Reg. I believe the terms are more than generous already. The most we can do is increase the research stipend.”

*“Always leave a way for the opponent to achieve a small victory... so long as they know it’s a victory you grant them.”* Draco had said that, quoting his father. Good political advice.

“The stipend should already be increased, anyway, since it’s so drastically insufficient,” said Hig, clapping his hands in front of him on the table. “If we must swallow the world’s hags and vampires at their pleasure, the monies should be triple the current value, and pegged to the cost of wheat.”

“We’ll increase it by twenty-five percent, but we’re not going to increase it every year to keep up with inflation... and especially not when the measurement of inflation is a good with a sale price that could be manipulated.”

Per watched the exchange, mouth open.

“If you won’t even raise it to an equitable level, and it will be reduced to a pittance in my lifetime, then it becomes an insult, not a gift,” said Hig, shaking his head. “Double-and-twoscore would be possible, I suppose. And we could use a basket of wholesale good prices as a measurement of ‘inflation.’” He pronounced the last word as though it were amusing. She knew that he read Muggle news... but maybe he’d never grasped the finer points of finance. It was funny how much of an advantage reading the *Financial Times* gave one.

“Fifty percent, and you can work out the terms of a price index with the Tower.”

“Done,” said Hig, with some satisfaction.

“Your lunch, sirs and madame,” said the waiter. He lowered his tray, and began setting plates before them.

“Thank you,” said Hermione. “I’m famished.” She met Hig’s eye, and smiled.

“Three pints of bitter, as well, I think,” said Hig, smiling back. “We must drink to an agreement.” But even as he spoke, the maître d’ was stepping up behind the waiter. He set the three drinks down on the table.

“Cheers,” said Per. He was red-faced, and seemed altogether more anxious about what he’d just witnessed than the two principals had been.

“Cheers,” said Hermione and Hig. They clinked their glasses.



Hermione Apparated directly back to the Ministry. She still needed to pick up her mail from her P.A., and she wanted to find out if there had been any results from interrogations in the past couple of hours – even if she would have to ask someone other than the troublesome Hortense Hood. But she had barely walked into the high-ceilinged lobby before she saw Hood herself. The

auror was obviously waiting for her, and she approached with a brisk step. Hood's wand was in her hand, and she had a tense and sharp look on her face.

Hermione glanced down at it, then looked back up. *Wand out?*

"Ms. Granger, you'll need to come with me," said Hood. She spoke commandingly, but a touch too loudly. *Nervous. Trying to goad me into overreaction, but probably aware that I could break her arm and put her through the wall. She's heard the stories: Azkaban, Lockhart, Macadam, Göreme, ... and now Siberia, although the Prophet's making rather more out of that than they should, considering there wasn't even a fight.*

Three people rescued and six Dementors destroyed – no casualties, but the media had been making it out to be a full-scale war with Russia, hyping up the conflict. Harry's doing, although she couldn't imagine why he wanted *more* tension with them.

So what did Hood want?

"Certainly, Auror Hood," she answered. *A trap? She's certainly in Malfoy's target demographics. He collects the bigoted, the aggrieved, and the libertarian – and Hood has a grudge. Hm. No. I think that game's fairly blown, and Draco must know it. No point in trying to trap me. Maybe the Three? Heck, Hood could be one of the Three... if they even really exist, and it wasn't some ruse of Tineagar's.*

Even if it was a trap, it had to be admitted that the auror posed only a small threat. Really, Hermione should be so lucky... an attempt to trap or assassinate her would be one of the best ways to get new information. And it was likely to backfire – who knows how many people were swayed over to their side by the attempting bombing in Diagon Alley?

Hermione turned slightly to Hyori and Susie, who had accompanied her. "They'll be coming with me," she said to Hood. Hyori had her arms folded in front of her, one hand in her sleeve where she was concealing her own drawn wand, while Susie had her bubbler in hand.

"Fine. This way," said Hood, gesturing to the elevator. "DMLE's TT-8."

"The very height of politeness, isn't it?" muttered Susie, as Hermione and the Returned walked as directed.

Upon arriving at the claustrophobically low-ceilinged room, however, Hermione found only a familiar-looking older witch with thinning hair and a dark-skinned wizard with a sheaf of parchments sitting at a table. Hood walked in behind Hermione, and closed the door behind them.

Hermione sat at the table across from the witch and wizard, and Susie and Hyori sat on either side of her. Hood chose not to sit next to either them, nor across from them, but instead at a third side of the table. She settled into her seat, and cleared her throat.

“Ms. Granger, this is-”

The door to the room opened, and a second auror entered. Hermione didn’t recognize this wizard, who was extremely short and had slightly pointed ears – goblin blood, somewhere down the line. “Sorry, sorry,” he said, moving quickly to sit next to Hood and settling his own pile of parchment in front of him.

“Ms. Granger, this is Wilhelmina Lazenby, the proprietor of Billie’s Bobbing Bubbies. She’s complained about the damages you did to her establishment, and we thought we’d ask you in here as a courtesy,” said Hood, indicating the woman across from Hermione. Lazenby had an unhappy look on her face, and stared down at the table sullenly.

“I’m sure you could have told me as much, and I’d have been happy to come along, Auror Hood,” said Hermione, lightly. She smiled, despite her irritation. Hood had perhaps been hoping Hermione would refuse.

“Hortense, knock it off,” said the other auror. “Mukwooru’s toe, this is Hermione Granger!” He shook his head. He had shaggy brown hair and a nice smile. “I’m Auror Gerald Podrut, Ms. Granger.”

“If you’re quite done, there are things to settle. Under what authority was Ms. Granger acting when she broke into the basement of my client’s business, doing severe damage to property in the meantime?” interrupted the wizard to Lazenby’s right.

“I was invited by the DMLE because of my special skill-set,” said Hermione. “The DMLE’s charter permits it to request or hire the services of outside consultants, as necessary.”

“That is intended for exorcists, herbologists, and other experts – not a one-witch wrecking crew!” objected the lawyer. She couldn’t tell if he was really outraged, or if it was calculated.

“Even if you were right,” said Gerald, with a voice slightly higher than normal, “I think we can be realistic and say that the Wizengamot would happily pass any law Ms. Granger needed to continue to help the aurors... I understand she’s been invaluable. Or so Mr. Diggory has said.”

“Ridiculous,” muttered the lawyer. Hood said nothing.

“Are you going to file claims, Madame Lazenby?” asked Gerald.

Her lawyer answered for his silent client, snapping, “Of course we’ll file claims! My client’s business has been ruined – half the floor is torn apart!”

“And the Goddess has a deep vault, you figure, eh?” said Gerald. He glanced over at Hermione. “Er, sorry.”

“Quite all right, you lovely bloke,” said Susie, smiling.

“Indeed it is,” agreed Hermione. “But I don’t think there’s any need for a hearing before a low court.”

“Or an appeal to the Wizengamot,” said Susie, pointedly. She leaned back in her chair, and smiled.

“We can certainly come to terms,” said Hermione. She glanced over at Hood, and thought for a long moment. There was an opportunity, here.

*Just a friend, waiting to be made.*

“Could we speak for a moment, Auror Hood? Nothing terrible, just have a quick question?”

Hood frowned. The muscular auror rose from her chair, though, and jerked her head to indicate the hallway. “Fine.”

Stepping out after her, Hermione closed the door behind them. “Auror Hood, let us be frank. Your career has gone nowhere for quite a while... ever since Azkaban. Am I right?”

Hood didn’t reply immediately. She crossed her arms and stared intently at Hermione. Hermione could see that Hood was trying to figure out Hermione’s motives: if it was genuine or a trick... or even just cruelty for its own sake. But slowly, the auror replied, “It’s been slow.”

“May I help you here, then? Am I right in thinking that you’d like to track down the rest of Geoffrey Gem’s suppliers and vendors? I know the DMLE made good inroads into that Euphoric Ring last month, but I bet you didn’t get half of the crooks, and you know it.”

Hood raised an eyebrow. “ ‘Crooks?’ We got a good many of them, don’t worry, and the rest will follow.”

“If I give you a way to track down most of the people who have been supplying and selling those phials of potion, will that help you?” asked Hermione.

The response was measured again, but less hostile. “We’ve already tried the Substantiation Charm on his ingredients, and got little we could use.”

“I have a special Muggle method,” said Hermione, smiling genuinely now. “Don’t roll your eyes – it’ll work.”

“You do that, and we roll up the rest of that ring...” said Hood, considering. “Why? You have friends enough, and there’s no favor I could do you that would matter.”

“Auror Hood, believe me when I say that what matters most to me is doing the right thing. I know that sounds... well, phoney or hackneyed, or something.” Hermione shrugged. “But it’s true.”

When you had a magical unicorn aura of innocence, you could get away with a lot of naive sentiments.

“All right,” said Hood, carefully. She cocked her head to the side, uncertain.

“Then let me tell you about something called ‘fingerprints,’ “ said Hermione, “and we can call in another expert to help you and the DMLE out.”



*NOTE: Yes, I know that Novaya Zemlya is not in Siberia. Sloppy reporting, really.*



**Chapter Twelve**

$$\Delta \tilde{V} \text{ Over } \Delta \tau$$

*John Snow Center for Medicine and Tower School of Doubt  
(TheTower)*

*April 29th, 1999*

11:39 a.m.

Harry had spent years nurturing the Honourable, building them as the only credible opposition with careful restraint of government forces and strategic deployment of his resources. Even the propaganda had required considerable planning, as they staged high-profile debates to legitimize their opponents – though they were also rigged for the Tower’s success, to preserve his own prestige – even as he resisted applying a more general rhetorical pressure. Agents and double agents and triple agents infiltrated both groups, under the guidance of a respective spymaster (Amycus Carrow and Mad-Eye Moody). It reminded him of the old battles with Chaos Legion, in a way.

Even when the focus turned outward to other states, Harry was confident he'd been in control, guiding the pell-mell chaos of a thousand disparate interests towards his intended goals. It had been difficult, briefly, when he'd worried that the Council of Westphalia would be too irrational – when there was a moment that the relentless drumbeat of Draco's pamphleteering and scheming might unite a coalition of serious strength. But that didn't happen. The Americas would join the Treaty for Health and Life, to which half of Africa and most of Europe already belonged, while a handful of bad actors – Cappadocia, Caucasus, Russia, and the Sawad states – remained his useful idiots. They were the international analogue of the Malfoys and the Honourable: prestigious and loud enough to appear a threat, without ever actually posing a challenge.

It was years of indirect work, crafting his own enemy with an invisible hand, until the Honourable were the voice of an international coalition on the brink of war.

And Hermione Jean Granger had carved a bloody deity-shaped swath through the whole delicate operation. In a week and a half. Because she actually cared and thought it was worth doing, and he had turned her loose to preserve his facade.

Harry had known it would happen. But so *fast*...

He sighed, and shoved aside the papers and parchments in front of him. The little reading room, X, was scattered with them. More were tacked to cork strips on the stone walls, and still others were simply gathered into heaps on any available surface, including the golden dodecahedrons and slowly-spinning clocks and all the other alarms. The papers were charts and diagrams and lists and notes and memos and everything else, and most all of it was covered with dust and broken bits of mechanical pencil lead. And all of it, at the moment, was useless.

He rubbed his eyes. There had been a moment, long ago, when he'd realized just how poor his skills as a rationalist really were. Human beings were force multipliers, and so one of the most powerful abilities for any human – or at least one who was trying to achieve something ambitious – was being able to predict how other humans would act. That had been the secret of Voldemort's power, more than any other bit of cleverness. The ancient lore of Salazar Slytherin, the consummate planning, the inhuman skill on the field of battle – they all ultimately paled in comparison with Voldemort's skill at predicting the behavior of others. And Harry... well, Harry was doing his best, but he was worried it just wasn't good enough.

So much depended on the behavior of one woman.

Harry stood up, and went to the standing wardrobe. He pulled on the comfortable terrycloth robe from within, and spent a few moments considering how he wanted to face the afternoon. Wizard's robes, he supposed. Muggle clothing increasingly felt like he was... putting on a costume, or something. He put his wand to the robe and began to change it.

*Or maybe it's just that picking out my own Muggle clothing reminds me of Mum and Dad, and when I first started insisting*

*on making my own clothing choices. I was five, and I picked a pair of coveralls, and I wore them everywhere for two weeks. It had seemed to make sense, he remembered. "Mum, see? I don't have to try to match or put on new things to go to school or to Grandma's. It's smarter."*

He grinned at the thought, but it was followed almost as quickly by a pang of regret. The changing robe in his hand blurred for an instant, but he blinked rapidly, and finished the transfiguration. Plain and formal black robes, suitable for meeting important people. Harry cleared his throat, and put his gloved right hand to the garment. He held the Stone of Permanency until he felt it make a subtle shift, and then he got dressed.

*Need to get my head on straight,* he thought. *At least clinic duty this morning was easy enough... grateful patients, competent healers, and every auror in their place.* It left him in a good frame of mind for the afternoon. First, he was meeting Hermione and some of her eerie hollow-eyed Returned. That would be awkward, but he was actually looking forward to it. It had been two weeks since their argument and her agreement to go after the Honourable in earnest, when she'd told him that she'd figured out his game. He almost grinned again, at that thought, despite himself. She was an important part of his life, and it was painful to be without her counsel.

After that, he'd be seeing Reg Hig. The American had struck a deal with Hermione for her support on new final terms for a Council endorsement of the Treaty for Health and Life, setting her up as Harry's proxy. It had been a *very* good deal for the Tower, considering that it had cost Harry nothing from his policy preferences. Hermione had done well – probably better than he could have, considering Hig's lingering suspicion and her own bargaining skills, keen thinking, supernatural innocence, and natural beauty. He'd been happy to agree to it, regardless of the astronomically higher sum of money it would cost the Tower. Money meant little.

Actually, the ill-favoured little American was probably already here, snooping around and trying to plant a listening device in every vase, drawer, and shoe. That was going to be a problem, really. An ethical problem. Just how many rules and civil liberties

could Harry discard in the name of his end goals? But on the other hand, it was hard to explain milquetoast ethical hesitancy to the accumulated corpses of those unfortunate dead who were just missing out on their chance at immortality (did that make them the unluckiest generation?). Warrants and privacy were important, but try telling that to a mourning child.

*What I really need*, he thought, and not for the first time, *is psychohistory. A statistical science to predict the movements of multitudes.* He supposed he was already trying to be Hari Seldon, in his own clumsy way.

Harry straightened his robes, and sighed again. *Time for a difficult conversation. "Great job with crushing my enemies, Hermione! Hey, I wonder if you would be willing to do a worse job for a while, so I can provoke the world to the brink of war and finish polarizing the international scene, in preparation for a final decisive confrontation? I know you have the acting ability of a tangerine, but you can do that, right?"*



When Harry walked in, he saw that he was the last one to arrive. Moody, Bones, Hermione, and two of her Returned were all already there with tea and a tray of sandwiches. They were all laughing about something Moody had said. The chuckles died down as Harry entered, although Hermione still smiled broadly.

The goblin Urg was gathering up pieces of a broken teacup with careful fingers, his face solemn as he made them into a neat pile on one side of the tray. He also worked in Material Methods, but Harry had noticed that he wasn't sociable with the other goblins. His two-year stay in Azkaban had scarred him, even though so much time had passed and even though he was probably lucky to still be alive. As Harry remembered, he'd once gotten into a fight with a witch with whom he was suspected of having a romantic involvement; given the shape of the Wizengamot and its broad sensibilities about purity, Urg only barely escaped a sentence of the Kiss.

Odette Charlevoix, the French witch, was sitting quietly with her hands in her lap. He knew that her fingers were still covered in angry-looking red scars – Hermione had warned him not to

ask her if she wanted that fixed – but she wasn’t usually self-conscious about it. On the other hand, she’d always seemed more emotional than the rest of Hermione’s group, who tended to be a bit deadened by their time in hell, and Moody had told him that she was actually moving out of the Powis settlement where the rest of the Returned lived in their extendable-space tents. She and the American Esther were going to be living together. Harry wasn’t sure if it was platonic or more intimate, but it was promising that they felt ready to take such steps. It meant there might be hope for all of them, even the more damaged-seeming Simon or Urg, in the fullness of time.

The Chief Warlock and Supreme Mugwump, Amelia Bones, was leaning back in her chair and looking intently at Harry as he entered. She didn’t look angry, only alert, with a raptor’s sharp gaze fixed on him. He wondered how much she knew... and how much more she’d guessed. Bones was cunning and clever when it came to politics, but the scope of her attentions was always limited. She’d been one of Dumbledore’s lieutenants, and she was most comfortable in that role – even though the scale of that lieutenancy encompassed manipulating national and global politics of surprising complexity.

Harry had already seen Moody that day, since it was an even-numbered day. He’d put the former auror in the body of a heavy-shouldered and whiskered older man for the intrusion attempt, leaving a hollow space in the body’s stomach for Moody to try to smuggle in a Time-Turner wrapped in Lovegood Leaf. It hadn’t worked, and he’d confirmed Moody’s identity in the clinic an hour later when they brought in his stunned form. Now the Security Chief was sipping on tea, looking at Hermione in a fond way.

And Hermione. She was wearing a long red dress and a small jacket and her green-and-gold necklace, and she looked radiantly beautiful. Even without her magical nature, she would have been stunning. Harry had spent an excessive amount of time worrying about the consequences of the rituals that had sealed the magical natures of a unicorn and a mountain troll into her flesh, but it seemed as though it had yielded nothing but positive results. It was similar, he supposed, to the difference between modern humans and those of a few centuries ago. Good nutrition

and medicine meant that the modern person's body grew closer to its genetic potential and needed to spend fewer resources on fighting disease; Hermione had simply received a supercharged version of the effect. Just as she was hitting her growth spurt and growing into the person she would become, her metabolism had been literally perfected. She never experienced a moment of nutrient deficiency or illness, either, so she grew to be tall and well-proportioned. She was the new human... the archetype whose abilities they were working on making accessible to all, over in the Advancement Agency.

She was still smiling as she turned to look at him, and he felt the tension melt from his shoulders. She wasn't still angry. He'd better apologize as soon as he could, anyway.

He stood there for a moment, quiet, and her smile gradually faded into an uncertain frown. Finally, he spoke up.

"What was Billie's like? Wait, did you leave any of it standing?"

She smiled again, and a small part of him was relieved at the change from smile to frown to smile, and he knew it was because she cared about him. *Did she ever end up going out with Cedric?*

"I punched through the door. It actually wasn't anything like you'd expect, because the door got stuck on my arm, and I felt rather less than dignified as I tried to shake it off for a minute. But I don't think anyone but Hedley noticed," she said, and her eyes sparkled.

*Hedley... ah, Kwannon. How does she get on a first-name basis with people like that in the span of ten minutes?* It was the aura, he decided.

"Sharp one, her," said Moody. His voice sounded phlegmy and strange – Harry had needed to move the organs around some, and both lungs in the transfigured body had needed to be the same size to fit in the smuggled device. The alteration had an unexpected effect on the sound of the man's voice. "There was a time when she and I were out at the ruins of Sontag, and James the Merciless had laid a trap for us with a portkey in the shape of a golden box. 'Don't touch that,' she said. I wasn't so stupid, of course, but few enough would have had wits enough to warn me."

" 'James the Merciless'?" said Bones, turning to stare at Moody. "You made that up."

“Records are sealed. Can’t help you,” said Moody, gruffly. He turned his chair deliberately away, and Hermione, Harry, and Bones broke into laughter.

Harry slid into his seat. That had been an awkward moment avoided. “Sorry, I’m late, everyone. Someone’s always late, though, and it means the people on time get to spend a few moments joking and making up stories about imaginary Dark Wizards.”

“Not making it up,” said Moody, turning up his nose again and looking away, as though pouting. Hermione snorted.

Urg and Charlevoix watched, quietly. The goblin finished assembling the broken pieces of teacup and settled back into his seat. Charlevoix just watched everyone with her soft brown eyes.

“To business, though?” said Harry. He didn’t have an agenda for this one, but there were some things they needed to get through. There was always time pressure – in an hour he needed to be back in the clinic, to finalize the afternoon healings. Every healer stuck waiting around, sustaining their transfigurations, was a healer not busy on a new patient. *Now that I think about it, I should remember to schedule a new training course on triage. We’ve learned to lean too heavily on transfiguration... no one should be spending three hours sustaining a transfiguration for some broken bones, when a standard healing charm would have done for them.* He called a notepad and mechanical pencil from his ever-present pouch, and made a note.

“We should, I believe, offer congratulations to Ms. Granger,” said Bones. “She has done in days what we have been trying to do for years.” Her comment had an ironic tint, and Moody made an audible huff. “Two-dozen people in custody over the Euphoric Elixir distribution alone, and something like half of the Honourable taken off the street. We’ll have to let most of them go, of course, but they’re marked with that, now.”

“No,” Harry said. “Keep everyone associated with the Euphoria, but of the rest, only file against Erasmus. He needs to learn a lesson, since this is the fifth time he’s come close to making a tragic mistake. But no one else should suffer just for their differences of opinion. That’s not how you build a free society.”

Bones stiffened at the last comment. Harry thought about what he’d said, but before he could correct himself, Moody replied,

“There hasn’t been a truly free vote in the Wizengamot for centuries, and we’ve not changed that. Be realistic, Harry, and keep Draco’s people for at least a few months. Or release them with those American gadgets stuffed inside of a cuff somewhere.”

“Everlasting Eyes,” offered Urg in a guttural croak.

“Aye, them. But remember your goals... remember that this is a game of lives, Harry,” said Moody. All levity had faded. Harry knew that Alastor Moody didn’t think scruples had much of a place in planning of this level, and had little patience for idealists who were naive enough to think they could win without getting their hands dirty.

“Dumbledore showed us that we don’t need to sacrifice ourselves in the rush to win, like Voldemort did,” said Harry. “That’s why Narcissa is alive.”

Moody shot back, almost without a pause, “And Narcissa is why Russia joined the Independents, so maybe Albus would be rethinking his decision right about now. It was you who told me that we would regret every day that we let pass without bringing more people into the Tower, since that was another day that people would die.”

“ ‘Shut up and do the math’ is the expression, I think,” added Bones. She was quoting Harry. The atmosphere of the room had changed, suddenly.

*They’ve been stewing over this and dropping hints for a long time. It’s probably best they speak their piece now.*

“I know you have a plan for two neat groups, and then there’s just one decisive conflict, and all is well, Harry. But need we forget: the Honourable and their Treaty of Independence are not our only concern. Remember the Three. We still don’t know what they want or who they are, except that they were cultivating that American and her little army of Westphalians for some secret purpose,” continued Bones. Hermione’s smile was gone, now, and she looked sad. No... she looked *disappointed*. “You have spent years on your plan for Malfoy and her son. And maybe it was the best way. Certainly, no one expected Amycus Carrow to have survived Voldemort’s return, and Carrow’s surprising return could have led him to form his own group of pureblood idiots, rather than joining the Malfoys. And there would have been others. But it



might have taken us less time to crush them out, one by one, than we have spent in raising up the Honourable.”

“I’m not worried about Carrow,” said Moody, “but she’s right. We could roll up their whole organization in one month. Maybe two. I could do it *alone*. Hermione has done half the work in a week.”

“It’s not just the Three,” said Hermione, breaking in. “I mean, yes, I’m worried about them... Tineagar had spells I’ve never seen before or since. Mafalda told me that the last time that flaming chariot spell was reported – the one that whisked Tineagar right out from among Anti-Disapparation Jinxes – was seven hundred years ago. But there’s also... well, sorry, Urg? Could you?”

“Ackle and Curd are rising,” said the goblin, simply. “I have been in both the Urgod Ur and the Burgod Bur these past weeks, and there are weapons to be found. A stockpile forged at the Jurg Hod in Ackle, all in a rush over a month, and Curd’s Hingrabst is under guard where there have never been guards. Doors are closed to me.”

“Is it serious?” asked Moody. He blinked his body’s heavy-lidded eyes, as though trying to make himself more alert. He’d been burning the candle at both ends for too long, Harry thought. Hopefully he’d soon be able to take a good rest.

“Doors are closed to me,” repeated Urg. “We will-workers are close, and have been so for a thousand years.”

*At least he holds less of a grudge than Haddad. That one would be creating some awkward analogy designed to remind us that wizards were the ones who healed the breach between Curd and Ackle with the Edict of Hortensius.*

“But you...” Bones began, then paused. She gave a slight twist of her mouth, then simply forged ahead. “But you are not like the rest of your people... hasn’t there been some distrust since you got out of Azkaban?”

“Ever since he was *broken out* of Azkaban,” Hermione said, her voice quiet but insistent, “Urg has been as much a part of his people as he ever was.”

“He was our eyes and ears when we were working out the alteration in the Treatment in the Environs,” said Harry. It was true. Without Urg, Harry would have been much more hesitant

to give goblins a seat in the Wizengamot in the new positions of “Tribune,” and it might have been years before they felt confident in giving them access to wands once again. The parallels to Muggle history were uncomfortable, but a few more years of injustice would have been an acceptable price if a gradual emancipation were necessary for the sake of safety. It now appeared that their confidence in the goblin might have been misplaced.

“Is this a move by Malfoy?” asked Bones. She answered herself almost in the same instant, and she and Moody said, “No,” in unison. “He makes unlikely friends these days, but the goblins would sooner cut off their ear-tips than ally with him,” she added. “Not him. But that’s a serious threat.” She didn’t add any more. They all knew their history. *This* Urg was named for the warlord Urg the Unclean, who’d led the goblin army that wiped out Sontag.

*Then it really is time for this cold war to end. They’re right about the Three, and their unknown threat – if they do pose a threat at all – and now the goblins... no. It’s time.*

“Then we should move quickly,” said Harry. “We’ve pushed the Free States and Nigeria and the Americas to a decision, and that should carry us through the rest of Africa and the Ten Thousand.” Bones seemed doubtful, but she didn’t disagree. “You’ve all pushed me to act – for *years* telling me that I should crack down and move hard on the Honourable. Well, let’s do it. Hermione, we’re going to put twenty – no, forty aurors under your command. Or your Returned, or whoever you want.”

“Tonks said she was thinking about going back to being an auror,” said Hermione. “It will be more official and look better if she has charge of that.” Her face was calm, but Harry paused for a moment and shot her a questioning look. *Are you all right about that?* Tonks was one of the people closest to Hermione, and one of the few members of her group that she could really talk to.

Hermione just gave a tiny shake of her head, and he dropped it for the moment.

“Fine. But pile the pressure on. Bring some Tower aurors and any other of our staff you need, and use all the things we’ve kept our own. I heard you taught the DMLE about fingerprinting – bring in every trick you can think of, and get ahold of every last Honourable you can manage in the next twelve hours,” Harry said.

He could hear the hardness in his own voice, and he couldn't deny that there was a cathartic pleasure to ordering these long-delayed actions.

He turned to Bones. "Russia's Thunderer called a conclave of the Domovoi. They're angry about Hermione's strike in Siberia and the loss of their Dementors. That's not enough. Make Cappadocia and the Caucasus angry. Let slip that the Seyhan fellow isn't really dead, and supply them some proof, if you have to. And send a special delegation to Cyprus and make a speech about our close national ties." He thought for a second, then went on. "We need more security at the RCP and at all Poles. Call in everyone off duty or on leave that we can get. Get Percy to help. Triple pay for the duty, or whatever we need to pay."

Moody whistled, low and impressed. "Not half measures."

"If we're going to do this, then it needs to be over in as short a time as possible," Harry said. "What day is it?" He thought for a moment. "April 29th, okay." The date gave him pause, and he and Hermione exchanged looks, but he forged on. "Okay, I want the first strikes to hit them tonight, Hermione. And get that speech and the Seyhan leak out there within a few hours, Amelia." Bones nodded, visibly surprised. "Where's Hig? Is he here already, Moody?"

The former auror barked a fleshy laugh. "He is! Probably trying to recruit our people and smuggle them out in his pocket."

"Get him in here, he can help with this. They have aurors and portkeys – get them on to help with reinforcing our people at non-vital weak spots. And get Kraeme to arrange double the usual bubblers and Extendable Ears – I want free and open communications, all day. And get some owls to the Receiving Room and ready to go. Then I expect you'll have your own business to manage, and that's almost as important." The ideas and orders were coming in a rush now, and Harry felt exhilarated – almost breathless. "I want this done by evening – I want to hit them so hard that they realize just how much we've been holding back. If we're going to do this, then it has to be so spectacular that we never have to do it again. When the sun rises tomorrow, I want the Honourable wiped out and the Independents so thoroughly cowed that this is ended completely."

*Their fear must be stronger than their hate.*

“But what are we doing?” asked Charlevoix, who had been sitting silently. Her soft lilt interrupted the rising tide of energy, and everyone turned to her. “What is it you want?”

“War,” said Harry. “Make a war.”

## Interlude

# Harry and the Centaurs Argue Philosophy

*Salor Sprig, The Forbidden Forest, Scotland  
September 10th, 1995  
Four years before the present*

When a centaur is young, he immerses himself in knowledge and study. The centaurs have an ancient culture, unified between the world's seven great herds and stretching back in an unbroken chain into the distant past. It has survived to this day only because it is a combination of one rigid precept and a yielding openness to new ideas. There is no debate over the Unforked Path – but that is the *only* thing not open to discussion. Everything else – life and death and everything in between – is open to dispute and change.

The Unforked Path includes a strong education in all the gathered wisdom of centaurs from the ages, gleaned from the stars and the wizards and the Muggles, but each centaur eventually tends to find a framework that suits them best. For practical purposes, in fact, each herd is often said to be divided into different *na nilkaadi*. This Muggle word, which has been appropriated and exported to centaurs all over the world, actually means “herd” as well, confusingly enough. The centaurs use it to describe particular schools of thought.

The Kachina herd, now gone, popularized the term when they first struggled to articulate what they considered wholesale errors in the fundamental worldview of their Muggle enemies, the Navajo. But that is a sad tale for another time.

The young Harry Potter-Evans-Verres, only a few years into his power and stinging from the fresh defeat of the International

Statute for Health and Life on the floor of the Confederation, has come to visit the Salor Sprig in the Forbidden Forest. He has an important request.



“I need help,” said Harry. The teenager had shaggy hair that he kept pushed to the side, and green eyes that were attentive and thoughtful, lingering on details. Their contemplative care reflected the rapid workings of the mind behind them.

“You are unfair,” said Roonwit. “You speak within a context which is extremely vast, old, firmly established, rooted in a network of conventions – a clear statement that places demands on us by virtue of that context. To speak of ‘need’ and ‘help’ – we cannot separate such things from their primal origin, and it is unfair to rely on that privileging – on that binary. It makes demands on us separate from the merits of your arguments, by using language with deep implications from the usual context for those spoken words.”

Roonwit was a young centaur, and accounted small among his kind, yet he towered over Harry and every emphatic thump of his hoof reminded the wizard of the pure physical power of the creature. It was an uncomfortable reminder of a past tragedy – a tragedy he’d remedied, to be sure, but one with a lingering sting.

“Language has context like everything has context,” Harry replied, after taking a moment to parse the complicated accusation. “I think trying to avoid a direct request would be a mistake, and only further rely on that unavoidable ‘primal’ context.” He thought for a moment longer. “It’s an appropriate context, anyway – we *are* talking about life and death.”

*I recognize some of this language... this is Muggle philosophy.* Harry glanced at the bark shacks that were set up in the clearing – the only things here, in fact, beyond the sacred sapling in the center. *Where do they get Muggle books? Do they have some sort of magic or artifacts that enable them to disguise themselves, or do they have intermediaries?* This must be known to someone in Magical Creatures, but Harry hadn’t known to ask. He’d have to find out. He wished he could spend the time to learn those things for himself, but just this single meeting had been

difficult. To make it happen, he'd needed to rely on some of the contacts Dumbledore had left him, as well as an outstanding blood debt. He was fascinated: they seemed like an entire civilization of philosophers. On the other hand, this conversation was proving that some strands of thought were a trifle too dense for pleasurable discourse.

"Roonwit holds you to an account that is perhaps overstated in terms of intention, but your intentions are irrelevant. State your needs and ply your arguments, and let us make our choices," rumbled Aosta. The dark bay's skin color was almost the same as her coat, which made her unusually unified in a crowd of centaurs (who were usually two-toned). It suited the elder's temperament, which was singularly calm.

Glenstorm, standing next to Aosta, nodded his agreement. He had his worry beads in one hand, and had been idly rubbing them with a broad thumb since the beginning of the conversation.

"My needs..." Harry rubbed his forehead in frustration, then remembered himself. He cleared his throat. "I need your assistance in locating some items of power that are hidden from all scrying or location, but not – I think – from divination and the implications of prophecy. It's the only way to keep the Dark Lord Voldemort imprisoned, and the world safe."

"When something has an origin, its destruction is ordained at that moment, wizardling," said Glenstorm. "Even if the stars did not promise a coming recompense when the debt of creation is fulfilled, this would be true. In the primal chaos, infinite worlds have been created and destroyed. So it will continue to be. But you should know better than to come before us in such a way: you are here only on the sufferance of Firenze and in acknowledgement of his own debt... to you. Otherwise, we could not ignore that you are the one who will bring this about. The stars scream at the future, and no centaur can ignore it." The centaur's voice was mild, but there were brittle depths beneath it.

"Yes," said Roonwit, glancing over at the two elders, and then back at Harry, nodding. "We cannot deny you a hearing, not after learning of that shame or of your own nobility. But destruction is not an exterior force. The ending of a system predicated on inexactness, as with our world where idea and reality are eternally

at odds, necessitates that destruction lies in an eccentric center of all things, in a corner whose eccentricity assures the solid concentration of the system, participating in the construction of what it, at the same time, threatens to deconstruct.” The centaur’s tail flicked back and forth, thoughtfully. He added, almost as an afterthought, “One might then be inclined to reach this conclusion: deconstruction is not an operation that supervenes afterwards, from the outside, one fine day. It is always already at work in a thing.”

“Muggles have discovered a similar sort of idea... a rule that nature seems to follow, called the Second Law of Thermodynamics,” said Harry. “It states that any closed system tends towards chaos, eventually. But,” and here he held up a finger, “outside influence can sustain it. Consider yourselves that outside influence, and sustain the world.”

Harry felt a moment’s unsettledness for abusing a scientific principle so badly as to twist it into metaphor. It made him feel like he needed a bath. *But this isn’t real discussion of reality... this is argument by analogy and rhetoric, and we’re all secretly agreed on that. Otherwise we’d be discussing facts, not... whatever you’d call this. Framing, I suppose. I think I can engage on these terms.* He took a moment to consider if that was a Voldemort thought, but decided it wasn’t. They set the terms of debate, after all, so it was no evil to abide by them.

Aosta shook her head. Her hair was in a beautiful, long ponytail tied back with jute twine, strikingly similar (certainly intentionally so?) to her tail. Harry kept his eyes on it and on her face, which was difficult – considering her height and the fact that centaurs go unclothed. “We are not blind to the world, and it is plain enough that there is suffering everywhere. We could not act to bring about that final chaos, especially not if it would yield a void for a time. The lack of pain is preferable.”

*Utilitarianism, sort of? Some sort of consequentialism, anyway.* Harry felt like he had been dropped unprepared into a pit of rabid Philosophy 101 undergrads. *Okay, so how do I prove that there is more pleasure than pain in the world, making saving it a net good and ethical imperative? Will they accept statistics?*

“It would not even be the worst of fates,” agreed Roonwit. “The worst violence occurs when the *other*,” he said, leaning on



the word, “to which one is related is completely appropriated to or completely in oneself. It is this complete exclusion that makes this violence the worst violence – there is no limit to it, since it makes reality and idea entirely subsumed in the other in sovereign unity.”

“You can’t mean that the world would be better destroyed. If you did, and also thought helping me might hurry up that end, well... then you’d be obligated to help me for that reason, instead,” Harry said, adapting as best he could to the different strains of argument. No, it was more than that... the outright different strains of *language*. Different worldviews. They didn’t agree with each other on fundamental principles – virtue ethics or consequentialism – so how could he convince them of anything?

“No, I don’t mean that,” said Roonwit. “To take a direct hand in assisting you... we could not do that. But the shape of civil society, the shape of the law, is always rooted in violence. To help you would be to participate in that violence, or worse, be a motivating force behind it. It is bad enough that we inhabit the decision and its context. Neither do we oppose you, or endorse Firenze’s error. We are obligated to assist or oppose you, but it is...”

“Undecidable?” Harry offered, hoping he was guessing wrong.

“Yes,” said Roonwit, smiling. He clopped a hoof down, nodding.

*Okay, time to try the other two. It’s really more like trying to guess a code than making an argument.*

Really, this was a good reminder of why policy debates in Parliament tended towards appeals to emotion, attacks on the messenger, and other fallacies.

“Would you agree, then,” he said to Glenstorm, “that the world is better off destroyed? And that a virtuous being is the sort who would let that happen?”

“There is no real destruction,” replied the blue roan. His worry beads clicked in one hand as he lowered them to his side. “There are undoubtedly an infinite number of worlds, and we have a union with all of them. But I will not hide in the Athenian solution. No, it would not be a good thing, and the virtuous would oppose it. But we return to the same issue, of which you have argued both

sides like a confused coiner: assisting you would hasten stardeath and world-end, not prevent it. Your kind has access to visions of the future, in your crude way – do not your own people tell you this?”

*No prophecies, not anymore.* Harry had entered the Hall of Prophecy, three years ago, only to find it ruined – a chaos of shattered crystal, splintered shelves, and a thick haze of magically-suspended dust. Dumbledore had been true to his word, and at some unknown point he had eradicated the facility... and had worked to hide that fact, ever since. One of the greatest works of magic in the world had been undone, and the prophecies of Britain could no longer be hoarded and studied. It had been one of the powers that made Britain dominant in the magical world for centuries, for no other nation had its like. Its loss was a national tragedy. Only the old works survived, locked in their special vault of obdurate slade from the Urist Quarry in Hungary: the hundred-odd prophecies that had been individually preserved by independent means. Most of them were shockingly ancient, said to date back before Merlin’s era, but there were also some dozens of more modern imported prophecies, and a few British ones that had been doubly preserved, for whatever reason. *Scorpion and archer, locked beyond return...*

“In a way. But that makes it all the more important that the magical items I need be found, so that the ‘world-end’ can be of a qualitatively different sort,” said Harry. “The world might end in many ways... one of them is by growing into something bigger and better.”

“There is something of everything in everything else, and so there is never any motion, and never any change,” said Glenstorm, shaking his head. “Withall, a good creature must prevent suffering... but it is wisdom to remember that failure is no one’s fault. Indeed, in the event that failure is certain – and the stars speak only of what *will* happen, and give no conditions – a good creature must vouchsafe his own virtue. Firenze has rightly said that we cannot interfere with the philosopher-kings of wizardkind or else it will sully our own hooves.” The centaur paused, shaking his head, and added, “Although he is late-come to this advice, as you know.”

*I don't even know whether or not that's ingratitude. "He's a Platonic-style dictator I failed to murder and who brought me back to life with a fantastic cover story and who plans to defeat war, pain, and death, so maybe let's not get in his way... but definitely don't help him or anything."*

Harry glanced at Aosta and Roonwit, to see if they agreed. If they had a common position in this outcome of their independent strains of reasoning – that non-interference was ethically necessary to keep their hands clean from an inevitable evil – then he could stop talking in circles and tackle that single idea.

"I agree with Elder Glenstorm," said Roonwit. "But I think that we should not fool ourselves, Elder, into thinking that the decision not to interfere is not itself a form of interference. It will send signals, and it will cause consequences. We make the decision within the structures of society – world society, not wizarding – that we are forced to inhabit. We must do so, or else any decision is not possible or effective, nor can they take accurate aim, except by inhabiting those structures. Inhabiting them in a *certain way*, an aware way. We strive for goodness by stepping back, but the very act of deciding makes us involved... there is an eternal gap that follows us. The important thing is to know. One always inhabits, and all the more when one does not suspect it."

Aosta began to look mildly impatient by the end of this diatribe, but she was certainly used to it, and neither elder centaur looked inclined to interrupt their younger kinsman. Debate is sacred. Once he finished, though, she gave her own perspective with more practiced concision, restraining her kind's natural garulousness.

"The end of this world is certain, as Glenstorm says," she said. "We have good evidence for this. I am unconvinced whether or not this is a good thing, or whether there can be a qualitative difference in that end, as you say, wizardling. I do not know about 'undecidable,' but I know that there is no compelling reason to dedicate effort to the cause if it would reduce our appreciation of the time we have left."

Harry felt like his brain was growing physically warm with exertion as he tried to track three independently-derived philosophical traditions and answer all of their objections simultaneously. If

he had still been articulating interior voices, this would be the moment when he promised his brain a cookie.

“So, if I understand correctly, then,” he finally said, rubbing his forehead again. “You, sir,” he indicated Glenstorm with a gesture, “think that assisting me is wrong because the action wouldn’t be the sort of thing a good person does. But may I suggest that this is simply displacing the real moment of assessment – restating it? The virtuous person is someone who does virtuous things. Choosing not to do something that will improve the world – make people happier, healthier, wealthier – is not the act of a virtuous person.”

Glenstorm shook his head. “Except to the extent that the stars speak, we can’t know the future. That means that virtue must come from within, not from what occurs. If I were to rescue a child from the tar, and then that child went on to commit murder later that day, I have still found virtue.”

“So then the pivotal question is whether or not your own knowledge would lead you to believe that it is a virtuous action?” The centaur nodded, looking amused.

“Hold that thought,” said Harry. He turned to Roonwit. “And you, sir. You believe that we can evaluate the world and decide on the ethical course of action, but that every action incorporates and stains us with the guilt of participating in systemic injustice. You think it’s undecidable – but you do make ethical decisions on some things, and the way you do that is by determining the most ethical course, yes? If you agree that we’re always inhabiting the inherent injustice of the world, even if we do nothing, then you want to either help or not, *depending on* whether it’s the course that will improve the world? Do you agree?”

Roonwit said, “Yes, that is so, although I would challenge your use of this broad binary of ‘agree.’ It’s a corruption of thought by language, since it commits one to the entire endorsement of an idea and eliminates all shade of question or doubt or uncertainty.”

“But there’s no way around the inherent injustice of language, including its privileged binaries, so at least we’re aware of it,” said Harry, hurriedly. “Okay, so in both cases we’re at the question of fact.”

He turned to Aosta. “You, madame. You-”

"The question of fact is the important thing," she said, interrupting him with a smile. "Does the action improve the world... that is the question."

*May you live to be queen and rule them all*, Harry thought, gratefully. He smiled back at her. *Well, not queen... whatever the equivalent would be*. As he recalled, they'd adopted the Russian model of regional representatives with a figurehead military leader. Hopefully Aosta's *na nilkaadí* would gain disproportionate influence... that would be for the best. He wondered if there was any way he could help that happen. He made a mental note for later.

"Then we all agree," Harry said, stepping back a pace so that he didn't have to crane his neck so far, "that we're at the question of whether or not helping me locate these items of power is the most important thing. If it will improve the world, then you and yours should do it. Otherwise, you should not." He had to resist the urge to be rigorous and suggest they define "improve" and "important" and the other vague words they were using. That couldn't conceivably help him make his case.

The three centaurs glanced at each other, and then all three nodded in agreement.

"Okay," said Harry. He smiled. "Then I will explain. There are three things I need to locate. The Cup of Midnight, which can bind anyone who does not give the Cup their name, and which according to legend may actually already be broken. I need to confirm that or not. And the Cup of Dawn, also known as the Goblet of Fire, which can bind anyone whose name is cast within it. And the Resurrection Stone, one of the Deathly Hollows of the three Peverell brothers, which can transcend any barrier. The Goblet and the Stone were both in the possession of Lord Voldemort, and we haven't been able to locate them. They are very powerful, and too important to be left to chance."

"We know of all three devices," said Aosta. She glanced at Roonwit for confirmation, and the centaur nodded.

"I will tell you my intentions, and we will settle the question of fact, if you are willing?" Harry said. He marshalled his knowledge and his arguments and his wits. *A lot is riding on this. If I fail, I'll have to approach someone like Aosta more privately. And if*

*that fails... well, I'll just have to try something else.* The thought of compulsion occurred to him, but he quashed it. That was a dark road to go down, and he wouldn't begin planning last resorts until he'd run out of every other idea.

Glenstorm's worry beads clicked. Aosta folded her arms in front of her chest, stern but receptive. And Roonwit listened eagerly.

"Well, then," Harry said. He cleared his throat, and checked the abacus in his pocket. Seventeen of the beads had moved, one per minute of this conversation. The hidden aurors ensuring the secrecy and privacy of this conversation were still on task and unmolested. "Here is my plan – or as much as I can tell you about it, anyway."

## Chapter Thirteen

# Zero Sum

*John Snow Center for Medicine and Tower School of Doubt  
(The Tower)*

*April 29th, 1999*

2:00 pm

After some deliberation, Hermione had arranged herself in the Material Methods annex that had previously been used for the crowd watching the satellite launch. She'd been tempted to go to Powis, but it was too inconvenient for everyone else. Going to Powis would also have meant a risky move of Nikitas Seyhan – who would be a target today – to some other location. Better to let Simon look after Nikitas and the others in secrecy and safety while the rest of the Returned marshalled at the Tower: Tonks, Urg, Hyori, Susie, Esther, and Charlevoix.

Cedric Diggory, Alastor Moody, and their immediate staff joined her and the Returned a half-hour later, and at some point – midway through sticking personnel lists on the wall with a wad of blue-tac – she'd suddenly realized that this had become the war room of the Tower and the Government. They were all prepared with ideas and plans; she, Cedric, and Alastor had spent months and years urging stronger action, even as the Malfoys' informal organization became the more structured Honourable and eventually began pushing their Treaty of Independence. Now she, Cedric, and Alastor had thrown themselves into an across-the-board assault on every aspect of the opposition, hoping to move with such speed that a bloodless war could be finished before the enemy even knew it had begun. Her task of coordinating forty aurors had turned into helping organize *everyone* in these hours –

before she took the field herself, and left everything in the hands of Cedric and Alastor. Even with her help, they would have an incredibly complex task.

The war room was a welter of parchments and people, with runners sprinting in and out at irregular intervals. A massive table, swiftly transfigured into existence, had been joined by stools, chairs, desks, and anything else necessary for the moment.

Aurors had been called to duty from wherever they were with hasty Howlers and Patronus messages, and even a dozen retired aurors had been re-activated. The Hit Wizard squads were all recalled, the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol was called up, the Witch Watchers were put on alert and restationed, and every other department of the Ministry of Magic and the Tower were notified. Everyone useful and reliable was being urged into service, in a way not seen since Grindelwald's War.

*Not all we could have wished for, though*, Hermione thought, as she mounted an updated list of the missing or unavailable on the wall. It was sorted by department, and it showed some serious gaps in their forces. Very nearly all the aurors and Hit Wizards were sorted and on duty, but a third of the Patrol hadn't answered their summons, and more than half the Witch Watchers weren't willing or able to report.

"Alastor," she said, turning around. "Have you seen this?" Moody looked up from the enormous table where he was working. He had a scowl on the face he was wearing, but neither his oft-changing features nor his customary glower could hide his rough-edged pleasure in the situation.

"Yes, I've seen it. Not a bit of it surprising, and only half-complete," he said.

*Half-complete? It's been almost an hour, there aren't going to be many more stragglers. No, he means only half the work is done.*

"You mean Malfoy agents in our ranks," she said, frowning. "You're right."

Hermione glanced at the other side of the room, where assignments were being sorted out. "We need three fake stations. Two obvious, and one subtle. Susie, Esther, and Ernst," she said, naming two of her Returned and one of Cedric's aides. The two witches and the hirsute young Ernst responded immediately,



approaching with movements informed by urgency. “Get names from Alastor and pick two dummy assignments. Malfoy Manor and... oh, somewhere else pointless. Put the most obvious spies or people with weak knees at those places, except for one or two. Put those one or two on regular assignment at one of the priority locations, but assign someone trustworthy to stick to them, and tell someone *else* trustworthy about that.”

Glancing over at Alastor, she saw his scowl deepen. She smiled and held up a chiding finger. “I’m not done, Alastor!”

*Levels and levels.*

She turned back to the three assistants. “Put the rest of the suspicious lot in a third dummy location, and then tell half of them to watch the other half, and *then* a random third of them to watch the other half watching the first half. And tell one last one of them that he’s the only trustworthy one, and he needs to catch the rest of them. Then come up with something stressful for them... I don’t know, see if Luna can spare any of her critters.”

Ernst froze in confusion, but the other two were already in motion again. Susie dragged Ernst away with them by the sleeve, and began explaining matters to him in a whisper.

“Let’s see Carrow figure that out,” she said, turning back to Alastor. “Hard to plan a response or your own attack when you don’t know who is your ally, who was a fair-weather friend, and who is taking this opportunity to switch sides.”

He huffed. “Wouldn’t hold up in a real war – it would collapse under the weight of all the logistics. More likely someone will slip up and a real mess will result than that you’d catch some real traitors.”

“Tactics aren’t strategy,” Hermione replied, lightly, turning back to the list of the absent and raising a pencil to make notes. “It doesn’t need to confuse the enemy for a year, just for a day.” Despite everything, she was enjoying herself. If all went well, thousands more lives could be saved. For that matter, there was a good chance they’d look back on tonight as the night when the entire project of defeating death took a giant step forward.

She turned on her toe with a twirl and stepped over to the table. “So then, we’ll need response squads. I’m not so worried about the Honourable, but Harry, Reg, and Amelia are tweaking

the nose of every Independent, and Russia was already talking about war.” Those three and their own team of go-betweens and assistants were managing the unbelievably complicated political fallout from the day’s actions. There was some danger, of course, but far more opportunity. Hig was pushing to have the Council officially endorse the Treaty for Health and Life that afternoon, which probably necessitated arranging that Councilor Strongbound and his allies be unavoidably detained for a few hours. This opened up an opportunity to make threats and promises to other key states around the world. If everything went well, the American agreement could snowball to a dozen other countries. After that, they’d be within striking distance of a majority of the Confederation – and a second try at an International Statute for Health and Life.

She went on. “The Returned and I will be out the door within the hour, which will leave you and Cedric to coordinate here.” She gestured over at the handsome Head of the DMLE, who was scribbling parchment notes furiously, handing them to an aide with curt instructions, listening to her all the while. “I thought we’d best do with the four Hit Wizard teams, and then put together an irregular group of some of the aurors – we’ll ask Cedric who’ll be best, maybe the old Advance Guard, and then whichever squads Reg can send over. I think he’s calling in the Brahmins and some of the Russell Institute faculty. You can–”

Alastor held up a hand to still her. “I won’t be here. I’ll be out in the field, too.”

*You can’t possibly be this vainglorious, Alastor,* Hermione thought, as she trailed off. She raised her eyebrows and gave him a frank look.

“There are things to do, missy,” he said, turning away. His body was heavy shouldered and bulky, fairly similar to his original body, but he still moved with swift assurance. His body language was clear: *I’m more experienced than you. And more importantly, I don’t bloody answer to you.*

“I hope they’re important things,” she said, and left it at that. She turned and scanned the room. “Tonks! You’re tapped to work with Cedric and coordinate responses!” Tonks looked over from the corner, where she’d been handing a stack of messages to a runner. Her hair reddened in surprise.

“Are you sure? You don’t want me with you, out there?”

Hermione shook her head. “Not this time. We need you here.”

Tonks shoved parchments into the runner’s hands and moved to Hermione in a half-run, half-walk. She took Hermione’s hands in her own. “When I said I thought I might want to go back to the aurors... you know that—”

“Don’t be stupid,” Hermione said. She leaned in and pecked Tonks on the cheek. “I just need a friend here, to keep an eye on Cedric Lockhart and make sure he doesn’t take a break to check his mascara.”

“I *can* hear you,” said Cedric, irritably. He frowned for a moment, then returned his attention to scribbling the latest order.

“Break that silver-haired bollocks over your knee,” said Tonks with a grin, and turned back to the table.



*Tallow and Hemp Toxic Tapers, Knockturn Alley, London*

*4:00 pm*

Tallow Enser burst through the shop door like a rampaging bull. He whirled about and slammed it shut with one big hand, throwing the bolt and bar with the other. His partner, “Hemp” Lock, stared at him, her chubby face incredulous. “Wotcher, Tallie!”

“Word’s out on more raids, and the streetses is crawling with reevies!” said Tallow. He dashed to the shop-window, yanked down the rattling wooden screen to cover it, and pulled out his wand. “*Colloshoo! Colloportus!*” He turned to the shop door. “*Colloportus!*” Hemp could see that the back and underarms of his robes were soaked with sweat, dark Vs staining the unclean fabric.

“They’ve gotten Bigby and Mord,” said Tallow, whirling around and looking for other possible entrances. His face was shiny with perspiration, and his bulging eyes were even more protuberant than usual. “I hear they said they’re sending all they get right to Howie, Wiz-pull or no!”

Hemp stuck her thumb into the hole at the bottom of the till, and the drawer sprang open. She snatched up a hempen bag from

under the counter, and began scooping handfuls of coins into it. “Right then, we better get the week’s take and meet up somewhere safe. My uncle’s got a place in Kent, lots of Muggles around. Good place to lay by for a bit. We’ll go there.”

Tallow scoffed, dipping his head so he could swipe at his brow with one sleeve. “You’re barking! Want to try to dance past half the Patrol!? There’s *aurors* out there! Stick tight and we’ll find someplace to hide here – we’ll just put up a wall in one corner, they’re not going to *Finite* every last board.”

“Do what you want, mate,” said Hemp, calmly, as she lashed the bag in her hand shut with a length of twine. She pulled her wand from her pocket, and touched it to the bag. “*Silencio*.”

“Well, you’re not taking the lot, if you’re going! I was in all Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday, and we haven’t done the split!” Tallow turned to face her, putting his hands on his hips, indignantly. His wand was still in his hand, Hemp noticed. She decided not to put her own away, either.

“No time,” she said. “I’ll make accounts first thing – hell, I’ll take a bloody picture, you’ll know just to the Knut what’s your cut.”

“My left gobstone, not bloody likely!” Tallow objected.

“I can’t leave it here, it’ll just get nicked if we’re hiding out or slapped in Howie, Tallie!” said Hemp, her tone rising.

“It’s as good as nicked if you take it!”

“I’m going!”

“You thieving bint!”

“Leggo!”

“My arm! Getoffit!”

“Fat fool, let me go or I’ll–”

“Ow! Ow! Stop!”

“Pbhet me ger!”

“Stop! Stop, I’m bleeding!”

“Leggo! Merlin, don’t you wash? Ugh!”

The aurors must have been quiet when they tried the door, or else the squabbling pair had simply missed the sound of the knob or the *Alohomora*. Either way, Tallow and Hemp only noticed they had company when Auror Michael Li blew the door apart with a concussive explosion. The two corpulent business partners froze in

their position on the floor, where they were tangled and fighting over the moneybag.

“Laura Lock and Tallow Enser, you are under arrest for the unlicensed distribution of a controlled substance. You’ll be coming with us.”

Tallow collapsed flat on the floor, clutching his face with his hands, and bumbled something unintelligible. Hemp rolled away, sighing, and heaved herself to her feet. “Your bloody fault, Tallie.”

Two other aurors marched inside with Li. He stood at the door, shaking his head. “Stop your blubbering, Tallow. Don’t worry, you’ll have plenty of company.”



*Office of the Thunderer, Boyar Duma, Moscow, Russia*  
*Very nearly the same time*

“—and so it comes to this, Your Excellency,” said Special Envoy of the Wizengamot Alexander Alexandrovitch, drawing himself up to his full considerable height and trying to reveal nothing of his sickening anxiety. “There is no natural right for the domovoi to subvert the will of Magical Russia, and the gathered nations of the world will not permit it. Life and Health or Independent, no one can countenance a mob turning the shaft of the cart whichever way they please, no matter what innocents suffer in the meantime. We will accept nothing less than a fair and independent plebiscite... although let me also assure you that we will abide by its outcome.”

The Thunderer of the Conclave of the Domovoi turned his head and spat into the fire, deliberately and with great feeling. He answered the message in Russian, though his English was excellent, and his words were thick with anger. “Нашлѣ косѣ на кѣмень. Теперь... пошел вон.”

Even had Alexandrovitch not been fluent in Russian, the answer would be clear. As he bowed his way out of the Thunderer’s office, he felt his stomach turn over in distress. There was a small acid belch rising like a hot bubble of acid in his belly, and he hurried even more so that he might be able to make it out of the building before he vomited. This was reckless and unwise, and

there would be immediate consequences. The domovoi would be called again, and would vote in favor of a violent response. Their pride would admit nothing less.



*The Court of Rubies, Hangzhou, China*  
*Simultaneously*

It was just after midnight, but none of the assembled Notables had raised a word of complaint. For while their system of government was modeled in large part on the British Wizengamot and Ministry of Magic – a cause for considerable complaint in many circles, considering the cultural coercion that many called the cause of British dominance – their own cultural heritage informed their attitude. They were serious wizards and witches, educated and experienced and ambitious, and time had no meaning in the pursuit of duty.

The formal request had been phrased in the most courteous but urgent language that Supreme Mugwump Bones could devise, and had been delivered to He Jin by her personal Patronus. He had considered the implications of her urgency and the irregularity of the request for a meeting of the Court at this hour. The conclusions he might draw are his own affair, however, since He Jin kept his own counsel on the matter as he took the necessary steps to summon the other Notables.

They all sat in respectful silence as they listened to the Special Envoy from the Wizengamot. Sunny Chow was someone they all knew well, since she was very diligent and had often lunched with them individually to discuss issues of the day. She spoke at considerable length, making a plain case for her government and for the Tower's proposal. They wanted to be fair, she said. They had word that the Council of Westphalia had endorsed the Treaty for Health and Life. They had agreed with the Council on special and generous entrance terms for the American states that acted on this endorsement, and wished to extend the same offer to other states. This would only be a temporary circumstance, however.

Chow began to lay out anew the case for the Treaty – the end of illness and disability, the promise of immortality, the possibility

of new wealth from their arithmancers, and other benefits. After some time, He Jin rose from his seat among the Notables, and Chow fell respectfully silent. He Jin didn't think they needed to hear the same arguments for the hundredth time, although he only offered his polite thanks for her efforts and grace. He said that they appreciated her elegant words in service of a good cause, and had nothing but the deepest regret that they could not accommodate her. Nothing had changed, he said, for they still could not submit to a program that shipped their people across the world and brought them back changed in profound ways. For all the benefits, he said, she must understand that they had been taught to be cautious of such things. This was not something on which they could give way, he said, for if they were in error, it would likely be the last error the Court of Rubies could ever make.

But unlike at previous times, Chow now hesitated. Would the wise He Jin accept something only just short of his preference? She deeply regretted that they could neither duplicate the Tower facility nor place it under Chinese control, but she had been newly-authorized to offer a compromise: a Chinese facility segregated within the Tower, and a Chinese Receiving Room that would feed patients directly to it. She had to admit that these new facilities might eventually become simply for the use of all the Ten Thousand, as they joined the Treaty, and that Chinese aurors and healers might thus be assuming quite a responsibility if they agreed to this proposal, but this was the best possibility she could offer their great nation.

He Jin sat back down. He said only that the Notables appreciated her courtesy and willingness to listen to different points of view, and that they would give her generous offer their fullest consideration.

Chow apologized once more for the lateness of the hour, praised them for their wisdom and courtesy, and thanked them for listening to her poor presentation.

She left.

The Notables conferred.



*John Snow Center for Medicine and Tower School of Doubt  
(The Tower)*

One of the most sacred values of the Council of Westphalia was free and open debate, even to the point of officially considering whoever was holding the floor during proceedings to be literally sacrosanct. But in the span of the last hour, Harry had seen Hig arrange to have twelve councilors detained so that they would miss an important floor vote, strong-arm elected representatives of the Magical Congress into holding an impromptu session that evening, and give specific and uncompromising orders about using some of the vast amount of illicitly-obtained letters and conversations held by Council spies.

*How is it that they have embraced the Enlightenment value of free discourse so completely, but don't give democracy or privacy a second thought? Harry wondered. I need to set a date to talk about this with him... it's too useful for us, and it's only going to get more tempting as we start working more closely together. There will always be some pressing reason not to bring it up right that moment.* Harry looked over at the ill-favoured American with grease-licked hair and small eyes, and frowned. *Like now, for example. I could step over there now and tell him not to use any of that to help us.*

He looked to the other end of the room, where Amelia Bones was standing calmly, giving almost ceaseless direction to a pack of seven youthful wizards and witches, each of whom seemed to wordlessly know exactly who had which task. Most of them had the distinctive, subtle look of rejuvenation: regular features, no blemishes, and unusually healthy skin. Amelia was known to favour people who got the treatment; she said they were more energetic. Rejuvenation had made her more vibrant, certainly... but nonetheless she was still ruthless. She'd call him stupid for even considering giving up the advantages offered by Hig's lack of scruples.

He sighed, and shook his head. Another night. Not tonight. Too much depended on tonight, and he was really only feeling guilty because he and his cause were directly benefiting from the Westphalian abuse of their own people, and because he was paying



particularly close attention to them. They'd been reading half of Europe's and America's correspondence yesterday, too, and the day before that. Today wasn't special, except that now that wrongdoing was particularly useful to the cause. He was being stupid and short-sighted.

*Need to get back on track and out of my head. Okay... Amelia is handling allies and new propositions.* She looked to have it well in hand, and would ask if she needed guidance or help. He'd already authorized contingent terms that envoys would be permitted to offer, if necessary. Absurdly generous terms, in some instances. The amounts offered to "subsidize research" in Magical New Zealand was more than their usual annual government budget. He'd wager some eyes would be popping out of heads when that particular message was announced at the Octagon in Dunedin.

Harry himself had handled the more aggressive gestures, trying to be rude enough for a *causus belli* without outright taunting or stepping over the line. They needed dramatic and decisive confrontations today, while the Independent states might still be feeling strong and united enough to push back on them. Hig had called it the "Caesar model of management": aggravate the enemy into precipitous action, then be outlandishly kind and merciful in the aftermath. He'd had a strange look on his face when he'd said it.

Harry glanced over at Hig now. *He's working on the Americas as best he can, to try to set up the snowball effect we're seeking. The States now, Canada next, and then... Brazil?* He'd best stay out of that, as well. So far, Hig had needed nothing from him, but he was sure the Westphalian would feel comfortable making any requests necessary to move things along. The American seemed entirely invested in their alliance at this point. *We were going to have him appoint an envoy, but maybe that's not even necessary. With portkeys, it's not as though it would be much more inconvenient to have him work with us in person.* That sort of thing would need a mask of convenience – "Office of the Special Liaison" or something – but might make more sense.

*I should go check on Cedric, and see how the security arrangements are coming.*

"Mr. To– Mr. Potter, sir, a message," came a voice at his elbow. Harry turned to find a runner waiting, message in her outthrust

hand. She was a student – looked to be sixth or seventh year. He took it wordlessly, and the runner left at a jog, heading out the door in the direction of Material Methods. Relying on actual “runners” seemed asinine, but Moody had insisted; it was too easy for one spy to anonymously fake dozens of false Self-Delivering Memos, the more customary paper-airplane delivery method.

Almost at the same time, another runner appeared at the door with messages for Harry and Hig.

Harry opened up the messages. The first one was marked as a dispatch from the Ministry of Magic from Auror Bahry. Harry didn’t know the man, but he’d heard the name.

ATTACK ON MINISTRY.  
CAPPADOCIANS.  
ESTIMATE 40.  
10 CASUALTIES ALREADY.  
REINFORCEMENTS NEEDED.

The second message was marked as an American dispatch. Harry didn’t recognize the name of the sender – Alain McCaffrey – but he supposed it was a local auror commander.

COUNCIL UNDER SIEGE  
BY RUSSIAN AND CAUCASUS FORCES.  
DRAGONS RELEASED. ALL IS WELL.

Hig’s must be about the same incident, since Harry could see a slight smile on the Westphalian’s face. No time to dwell on it, though.

Harry rushed out the door, striding with quick steps towards Material Methods. They needed a response team at the Ministry – two of the Hit Wizard squads, perhaps. By the time he got there, they’d probably already be deployed, but Harry could compose his diplomatic messages – his own part in responding to these sorts of incidents – while he walked, and it would reassure him to check up on it.

He hoped they sent someone effective.



*The Ministry of Magic, Whitehall, London*

“Take the east, sun at your backs! Hyori, come with me!” shouted Hermione over the wind, straightening up in her seat on the broom and pointing down to the east end of the building. The Returned split up: Susie, Urg, Esther, and Charlevoix went swooping off where she directed, while Hyori settled in tight on Hermione’s right as the Goddess directed herself to the west.

Pillars of air blasted upward around them almost immediately, as the forces of the Exarchate of Cappadocia caught sight of them from the ground below. Hermione kicked up her broom and then dropped it down in a sharp curve, and the attacks went far astray. From the corner of her eye, she could see Hyori was still with her, unharmed.

There were fifteen Cappadocians outside the Ministry, clumped together in groups of three. Two of the groups had turned their attentions to Hyori and herself, but Hermione could see that the rest were still exchanging curses with two aurors who had taken shelter within a recessed brick entryway on the side of the building. They were out of sight and obscured by dust and sparks, but she could see the occasional arm and wand pop out as they tried to fight off their nine attackers. Two Cappadocians were down, but she didn’t see any British casualties; their Safety Sticks must have already sent them on to the Tower when they fell.

*Or there was nothing left, she thought grimly. How serious are these attacks? Are they meant to assert “independence” and strength, or is this the first step in an attempt at armed regime change?*

It had been about two seconds – her opponents would be casting again. “Break!” Hermione shouted, and leaned hard to the left. Hyori swept her own broomstick to the right, and another pillar of air and four red-flickering curses ripped through the space between them.

Hermione swooped low immediately, using the roof of the city buildings surrounding the Ministry to block the line of sight of her opponents. Their angle was poor from their position on the

ground. On the other hand, she couldn't see them, either. She'd have to move quickly, otherwise they'd be able to concentrate their fire on the two aurors, and they'd be inside. She glanced down at the building below her – an HSBC building, where she had her own Muggle accounts, and slowed her broom. Then, with a liquid leap, she pushed herself off her broomstick.

The fall was only twenty feet, but she still made sure to bend her knees in the air. Otherwise, she might go right through the roof like an arrow. She'd learned that the hard way. Landing on her knees would mean much more surface area would absorb her impact, so she'd be less likely to punch right through.

There was a moment of weightlessness as the roof rushed up at her, and then she smashed into the roof. But she didn't land quite right, despite her natural grace. She'd misjudged the angle or something, she couldn't be sure, and the impact made her whip forward – she smashed her face right into the slates of the roof. She felt them crackle around her head like loose stones.

"Nngh!" she heard herself grunt, as she wrenched herself back upright. She couldn't see properly out of her left eye – her vision from that eye was swerving sickeningly, and she had the uncomfortable thought that it might have come free from the socket – and her face sizzled with pain. But she was up and moving again in a second, running to the edge of the roof.

"*Bullesco!*" she cast, and she felt the Bubblehead Charm swell from one nostril – broken bone crackled with its passage. Her pace didn't even slow as she approached the roof's edge and raised her wand, sweeping it in a short arc in front of her. "*Reducto! Reducto! Reducto!*"

*This is probably not very considerate to the Obliviators...*

The roof-edge exploded in a shower of slates, stone, and cement dust, erupting out over the street. She leapt straight into it.

*...and it must be ruining my boots.*

She hit the asphalt on the street below flawlessly, letting the impact rock through her and dropping into a crouch. It was *loud*, too – she could hear the boom echo off of the buildings around her. She could hear shouting in Greek, and someone was coughing and choking. Not everyone had reacted in time, it seemed.

The pain in Hermione's face was fading, and her vision swam back into synchronicity as she healed. She felt her blood sing with

excitement in her veins, and found herself – just for a moment, just for a fleeting moment that barely stung, now – missing Granville.

Above her, she heard Hyori shout, “*Stupefy! Stupefy!*” The Returned had landed on the same roof, and was providing covering fire. Hermione didn’t know if Hyori had hit anything, but it would force the Cappadocians to split their attention three ways. Hermione holstered her wand, and took off at a run for the sound of the coughing, charging into the billowing white concrete dust that was drifting around them.

She found the person coughing in a moment – a Cappadocian witch. She was on the ground, and another one of the enemy was holding his wand to her chest – casting *Anapneo*, no doubt. A third Cappadocian wizard had his wand up and was standing in a duelist’s stance.

Hermione was only a few paces away from the trio before she saw their dark forms through the thick cloud of dust. She didn’t bother with her wand, and didn’t slow down, bursting in on them from out of the drifting concrete powder.

“Ha!” she grunted, lashing out at the duelist with a fist. He jerked back in surprise as she appeared, and her punch missed. Hermione followed it with a second to his ribs, however, and that one cracked home. She felt his side cave in beneath her clenched fist, and was already moving on to his companions before he had time to crumple to the ground. The cougher was still wracked with spasms on the ground, but the second Cappadocian was wheeling around to aim at her with his wand. She bent at the waist and pushed off with her right foot, bringing it spinning around even as she heard a barked curse and felt the numbing sizzle of a just-missing stunner flicker over the flesh on her bent back. Her whirling foot lifted in a kick as she spun in a full circle, and crashed into the man’s shoulders. He was lifted bodily, thrown to the side by the sheer force of the blow.

She called up her coin-changer from her pouch, taking a moment to thump the side of her breathing-bubble with a palm and clear away the drifting dust that was beginning to settle on it. *Ker-chak. Ker-chak. Ker-chak.* She sent the three Cappadocians on their way, replaced the coin-changer, and dropped into a crouch again as she assessed the situation.

“*Stupefy! Stupefy! Stupefy!*” she heard Hyori shout from above. Some of the enemy began to return fire, casting back their own curses. She could see the flickering red and green lights, a dozen feet away. Hermione grinned, and reached for her pouch again. “Gauntlet,” she said to it.

Pulling her gleaming gauntlet of gold onto her right hand, the Goddess leapt into motion.



*John Snow Center for Medicine and Tower School of Doubt  
(The Tower)  
6:00 pm*

The Ministry. Boston. Nurmengard. Howard Prison. Diagon Alley. There were small conflicts breaking out all over. And every single one seemed to be in control. Harry frowned.

He'd asked Luna to clear out a section of the Vision Verge for him, so he could have a quiet corner to himself – just for a few minutes, at least. It hadn't worked very well, since he'd had seven visitors in the past ten minutes, but it was less distracting. He could focus. He could think.

*If I were Draco trying to react to this, and trying to predict what Harry would do to such a reaction, and knowing that Harry was in turn trying to predict that counter-reaction, what would I do? Even that's not really enough levels, given the situation, but for this purpose, it will do.*

*Harry will try to perceive a pattern in the attacks and use that pattern to deduce the missing information... either where I am directing a redundant attack, or launching a hidden attack, or trying to co-opt a strong position during the confusion, or trying to draw attention away. My goals are probably to protect my own position and that of my mother, and to make this day appear to be a mixed result, allowing me to claim victory against an overwhelming force. I want to cast doubt on the Treaty for Health and Life. I want to persuade more states to join the Independents.*

“I activate my agents in the Tower, and strike at the source. Nothing else matters if I cast doubt on the center of my enemy's power,” Harry said to himself, slowly.

*I have been waiting for this, since I could see the writing on the wall as well as Harry. I know he's been going easy on me. I have several of his agents on hand, including some double agents, and I know about some triple agents.*

There was someone behind him. Another runner. He held up a hand in a "wait" motion – he needed to finish this train of thought. Then Harry clasped his hands behind his back, and devoted every fibre of his mind to thought.

*I know Harry Potter very well, and I know a bit about how he thinks. If I launch a pair of frontal and hidden attacks on the Tower, he'll deal with the frontal and plan for the hidden. He's cautious. He's also prepared – any simple attack is likely to fail. I don't want to just destroy the place, since otherwise I'd be using Safety Sticks to send in different kinds of bombs until I succeeded, but I do want to disrupt or co-opt it.*

The person behind him impatiently shifted their feet, but Harry kept his mind on the task at hand. Everything might depend on this. This was something about which he'd often thought, but this new situation... he had to reconsider his prior conclusions.

*I worshipped my father, and quote him often, including oft-repeated Malfoy family advice about the complexity of plans. And I know Harry knows this, but that doesn't make it any less true. So the best way to circumvent the world's best security and the world's most devious spymaster is probably to simply take advantage of a known weakness, rather than try a complicated plan that attacks strength. I will find the simplicity appealing, especially since I can imagine Harry Potter running in circles to try to invent fantastical chains of logic and predict my attack.*

"Excuse me."

*Harry Potter's weaknesses are his interpersonal skills (not as bad as before, but still not great), his arrogance, his ambition, and his sentimentality. Possible avenues of attack at these weaknesses include using a triple agent and turning them again with more ruthless leverage than Harry will exert or drawing him into making himself vulnerable by giving him an opportunity to prove his own cleverness to himself. On a night like tonight, I will use any and all contingencies, so maybe I will attack on both lines.*

"I said, excuse me."

*Knowing my own weaknesses, I will also try to compensate for them in a manner that cannot be countered. Maybe an element of randomness in my planning... using dice or—*

“Turn around.” The words were a growl, and Harry was startled out of his train of thought, and he finally processed the voice.

“What is it?” he asked, turning around. He kept his hands clasped behind his back, lifting the right one enough to reach the wand in the dueling holster of his sleeve.

“Hello there, Mr. Potter,” said Amycus Carrow. Lawrence Bradwian and Annabeth Dakesang stood in front of him. Lawrence’s eyes were rimmed with red, and Annabeth was shivering.

“Ah. Yes,” said Harry. “Hello.”



*Remote Cautionary Platform, Antarctica*

*7:00 pm*

“You’re in service to the *new* Dark Lord... only this one will see all of our wands broken in our hands, and the Muggles in charge!” spat Scarlett Meroveni-Bowles. Her hair was usually frizzy, but the air here was so dry that it had begun to look like a furry helmet. It made her rhetoric less impressive than it might have been otherwise. She gave the silver sphere of a spaceship a savage kick, trying to dislodge it, but it had no more effect than her curses had produced.

“My hovercraft is full of eels!” called back Neville Longbottom, helpfully, from his position behind a metal cabinet. The cabinet was scorched, and much of the Lovegood Leaf draped on it to protect the equipment on its shelves had been burnt away.

“What does that *mean*?!” shrieked the witch. She leapt out from behind the spaceship and spat a curse, obliterating the top of the cabinet with a geyser of silvery fire.

“*Expelliarmus*.” said a voice from nowhere behind Scarlett, and the witch’s wand leapt from her hand into the air. “It means he is very, very annoying,” said the voice in a Russian accent. “*Stupefy*.”



Scarlett toppled over, and the youthful figure of Ilya Bogdanova appeared, as though she were stepping from behind a curtain. She walked to where Scarlett's wand had fallen, and picked it up.

"You'll hurt my feelings one day, Ilya," said Neville, stepping gingerly out from behind the smoking ruins of the cabinet.

"Why are we here?" said the Russian witch, ignoring him. "No, why are *they* here?"

"This is where they have the Vanishing Cabinet for the *Monroe*, and this spaceship, and the prototype pocket world," said Neville. The pair headed for the door out of Chamber 1 to the hall, wands raised and eyes alert as they spoke. "It's all really valuable, and it would be embarrassing if someone else got ahold of it."

"Do not be stupid, Neville," said Ilya, brusquely. "I mean that it is foolish to attack here. It is much easier for us to bring people here, and we have much greater resources. Unless they were to bring dozens and overwhelm the defence immediately, then they only guarantee their loss. Instead, ten British Honourable and four or five idiot Russians who never stepped toe in Durmstrang. It is easy for us to come and defeat them. So: why?"

"Maybe something got lost in translation," said Neville, and Ilya sighed heavily.

They walked down the hall, footsteps ringing on the metal floor, Neville in the lead. The Remote Cautionary Platform was a vast facility, and crude as wizards accounted it. There were no extended spaces or other tricks: it was simply a series of connected metal boxes, transported by mundane means and sealed together by VeriWeld. Heating and other comforts were left to the occupants during their stay, and only in recent weeks had more permanent facilities been set up. The purposes of the Tower had required more complex instruments than the vast circles drawn to the thickness of a child's hair that were incised into the floors of the Platform's chambers. Shooting radiation at things was a complicated and equipment-heavy business, after all.

There was a deafening clang of impact, and Neville and Ilya almost lost their footing on the icy metal beneath their feet. Something had struck the corridor a terrific blow from outside, leaving a dent in the wall ahead of them the size of a Bludger.

Ilya wasted no time in scooping out her invisibility cloak and throwing it over herself, while Neville backpedaled and reached for the bubbler in the front pocket of his trousers.

He pulled it open. "Fred Weasley."

There was a moment's delay while the bubbler alerted Fred, and Neville waited. He backed up a few more paces, and almost slipped again when another deafening clang smashed into the corridor from above. The entire roof was buckling.

"Hullo," said Fred cheerily from the mirror in Neville's hand.

"Problem down by one, Fred," whispered Neville, creeping backwards away from the points of impact.

"There sure is," agreed the red-haired man, just as cheerily.

"You're out there, aren't you?"

"We sure are," said Fred, and the connection broke. Neville shoved it in his pocket and turned to face the wall.

"I'll be out to the right," said Ilya from behind him.

That meant she would get clear and flank the enemy. While a competent fighter, Ilya preferred indirect confrontation.

"Bouncy bouncy," said Neville, happily. "*Confringo!*"

A wad of fire spat from his wand and hit the metal of the wall, flaring wide as it impacted. It ate through the metal, which reddened and sagged and vanished under the punishment, but the immediate blast of arctic air – Neville immediately felt his flesh burning with cold, even with his Warming Charms – soon stole away the heat.

Not as dramatic as he would have liked. He shook his head and raised his wand.

A third immense blow struck the corridor, followed by an angry roar so powerful that it made the metal beneath them vibrate. Neville's eyes widened.

"Oh, bugger."

"What?" said the invisible Ilya.

"Hebridean Black."

"Of the House of Black?"

"No, of the time to run away."

There was another roar, and with a shriek of tearing metal four claws, like silvered spear-tips, ripped through the roof above them.

“*Confringo!*” said Neville, and the resulting fire burned away the remainder of the corridor. He leapt out through the smoking hole. A dragon regarded him with eyes like angry purple embers.

The Hebridean Black can grow up to thirty feet in length, with a mass of up to eight tons. It is covered in layers of dark-gleaming scales, and an adult is typically heavily muscled. They are aggressive, and grown males engage in frequent combat displays to show dominance. Their breath is fire. Their temper is short. Their appetite is huge.

Fred and George were mounted on their brooms, fighting the thick snow and howling winds that eternally scoured the ice of this Antarctic plain. George shouted something, but the words were torn away from him.

“*Stupefy!*” cast Neville, once he’d overcome the shock of being confronted with one of the most magnificently lethal creatures on the planet. “*Stupefy! Stupefy!*” The spell stood no chance of working, but the dragon did react, rearing back from him and shaking its head rapidly. It was probably more annoyance than anything else, but Neville didn’t have any better ideas.

Stunners wouldn’t work, fire wouldn’t work, suffocation wouldn’t work... even the more directly damaging hexes just wouldn’t have much of a result on something of this size – and that was assuming they didn’t simply bounce off.

He took off at a run. He’d need to Disillusion himself, at least, to stay safe while he—

Neville lost track of his plan as he was scooped up neatly from the ground by a flying Weasley. George had simply flown right into him, directing his broom right between Neville’s legs. And there was a dragon attacking and a blizzard going on. He’d owe George a pint. Maybe two.

“Thanks!” he shouted, turning slightly in his seat and clutching the broomstick with his free hand.

George shouted something, but his words were lost again. Neville shook his head – or tried to, since George banked hard to the right, and Neville had to concentrate on holding on as a wash of flame blew past them. The dragon roared again. Wait, how had it gotten ahead of them?

George leaned forward as they straightened out, and shouted right into Neville’s ear. “*There’s two of them!*”

*“That’s just silly!”* shouted back Neville.

The other dragon was in flight, and Neville could see it as a great dark shape ahead of them. It was as big as a house, only a house that could fly and wanted to eat you.

*“You’re silly!”* shouted Neville, at the dragon now. It roared so loudly that his teeth hurt, and the broom swerved momentarily as George reacted.

Looking behind him, Neville could see the other dragon was chasing Fred. The other twin was pulling tight turns at a high speed, trying to out-maneuver the creature, but it was too agile. It was only a matter of time before it landed a lucky swipe of its claws or hit the wizard with a blast of flames. Seeming to sense this, Fred pulled an abrupt loop, and then brought his broom down and shot through the hole Neville had burned in the wall of the Platform corridor.

George and Neville’s own dragon beat heavy wings and swooped down at them, and George leaned forward and pulled his own tight turn, seemingly unaware that this hadn’t worked for his brother and certainly wouldn’t work for a broom with twice as much weight on it. Neville yelled something that even he knew was incoherent, and jabbed a hand at the hole into the Platform, looking back at George. The Weasley nodded, and they shot towards the hole, banking right and left as flames erupted past and over them.

Their entrance was at too high of a speed to stop inside, and they hit the interior and opposite wall of the corridor with a heavy thud. Neville lost his grip on the broom beneath him and went pinwheeling away, hitting the floor and sliding along the ice-rimed surface for a few feet. George was more fortunate, and when he bounced off of the wall, he fell into the pile of snow that had been accumulating in the minute or so that the hole had been open.

Neville was just barely getting his wits about him when the corridor shuddered under impact, claws stabbing through the roof repeatedly as the dragon tried to find its footing on the roof. Fred appeared from somewhere, and was dragging Neville to his feet.

“What do you do with that? Does anyone remember? Is this the one you use acid on?” said Fred as he hauled Neville upright by one arm.

“No, that’s the Chinese one,” said George.

“Is there any *reason* we need to fight them?” asked Neville. “If there are no wizards around, then won’t they just... fly away? They’re not going to steal anything important. Let’s just—”

The roof folded and tore as the dragon ripped at it, and a great tear appeared in the metal. The dragon’s head appeared in the gap. It roared, and opened its mouth, eyes glowing a hellish purple.

“*Avada Kedavra*,” said Ilya. A bolt of green shot from her invisible wand and hit the dragon in the face. The light of its eyes died in that instant, and the creature’s face vanished from view. There was a screech of metal and a tremendous thud as it fell to the ground outside.

The three wizards were silent, huddled together for a moment. Then they separated, dusting snow off of themselves.

“Yes, well—” said George

“—we could have done that,” finished Fred.

“And there’s another one,” added Neville.

“It will soon be,” said the invisible Ilya primly, “pining for the fjords.” She stepped outside. A few seconds later, they heard another thud, even over the roar of the wind.



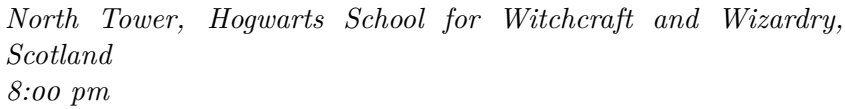
*The Ministry of Magic, Whitehall, London*

*Ker-chak. Ker-chak. Ker-chak.*

Hermione stepped over a burning tire, and put the coin-changer away. She knew she should be tired – at least emotionally, if not physically – but things had gone too well. There were at least thirty prisoners, and Tonks had bubbled her that things had been going equally well everywhere else, too. Today might be a clean sweep without a single loss, as hard as that was to believe.

She heard a bubbling sound in her head, and smiled. She pulled out the bubbler again. “I was just thinking of you,” she said to Tonks.

Tonks’ hair had gone all black. “You need to come back. There’s been a change. There’s been a truce.”



No, wait... better switch to one of the other decks. He had Trelawney's letter around here, somewhere, and he was sure it said something about "aura contamination." He didn't remember that from the Divination N.E.W.T., but in fairness, that had been years ago. He slid the first deck to one side, and pulled out a fresh one from next to it.

Twenty trials: time to switch methodology by one factor. It was a quick and dirty way to investigate, but time was pressing... it wouldn't be too long before other diviners began adopting the new methods, especially since Pierre had been asked to work up a prospective introductory course of study for the Salem Witches Institute.

He shuffled again, lay the deck down, and closed his eyes. He placed his fingertips on the deck, and concentrated. Face, name, and identity... face, name, and identity... face, name and identity.

When he was ready, he opened his eyes again, and shuffled a third time. Then he lay out the ten cards.

The Ace of Wands. The Moon. The Hanged Man. The Ten of Swords. The Ace of Wands. Death. The Five of Cups. The Tower. The Tower. The Tower.

He frowned. Oh, Merlin's beard... he'd accidentally mixed his decks together at some point. Stupid and sloppy, and it cast all of his trials into doubt. He'd have to sort them all out again and start all over.

Professor Placela shook his head, sighed, and swept the layout into a heap.

The noble horse with courage in his eye,  
clean in the bone, looks up at a shellburst:  
away fly the images of the shires  
but he puts the pipe back in his mouth.  
Peter was unfortunately killed by an 88;  
it took his leg away, he died in the ambulance.  
I saw him crawling on the sand, he said  
It's most unfair, they've shot my foot off.  
How can I live among this gentle  
obsolescent breed of heroes, and not weep?  
Unicorns, almost,  
for they are fading into two legends  
in which their stupidity and chivalry  
are celebrated. Each, fool and hero, will be an  
immortal.  
These plains were their cricket pitch  
and in the mountains the tremendous drop fences  
brought down some of the runners. Here then  
under the stones and earth they dispose them-  
selves,  
I think with their famous unconcern.  
It is not gunfire I hear, but a hunting horn.

—Keith Douglas



# Sudden But Inevitable Betrayal

—Bathilda Bagshot, *The Shape of Societies*

*Pei came in attendaunce to him and sat before him in the stone towre of his will, and he seiden, "The land of Atlas bore not up, and though they did their will upon all men and now men of will*

*are not one hundredth part of a hundredth part, still there is dome.  
I will tell you the shape of it."*

—Harry Lowe, *The Transmygracioun*, passus octavus



"Hullo, Lawrence, Annabeth," Mr. Potter said, nodding to Lawrence and Annabeth. "And Mr. Carrow, hullo. It's nice to see you all."

Lawrence could see how terrified Annabeth was, and knew he must look about the same. Her dark brown skin had gone grey, and she stank of acrid sweat and fear. There was a black scorch mark all along the left side of her Hogwarts robes, and she was trembling.

Carrow, on the other hand, was calm – even amused. He had thick clots of black blood caked on him in different spots, that a hasty *Scourgify* had failed to clean away. "We thought we'd come visit you, on the direction of Lord and Lady Malfoy, Mr. Potter."

Harry didn't reply, but only turned to regard Lawrence. "You have been gone from school for – what, a couple of weeks? How has it been for you?"

Lawrence couldn't make himself say anything. He tried, but just choked: his tongue felt too big for his mouth, and his throat was dry.

His life had become a nightmare... a whirlwind series of horrors and subterfuges. After he and Annabeth were caught, he'd spent a miserable night lying in his bed in the Slytherin dungeons, staring up at the ceiling and torturing himself with regret. It had almost been a relief when he received a message from a glowering Auror Pirrip, the next morning. But that relief had curdled almost immediately, as he read about his instructions and the ones he was supposed to pass on to Annabeth. He was given background information about their "new beliefs," supporting details about specific phrases to use around others to show his turn of heart ("I never thought I'd say this, but the Honourable are on to something... I can't believe what I saw in that place"), a packet of "stolen parchments," and complicated instructions on how he was to proceed with the spying.

He'd been escorted out of Hogwarts by Pip, later that day, and left to his own devices in Diagon Alley. Once there, he was supposed to go to Whizz Hard Books... but he couldn't make himself do it without his stomach clenching up like a cramp. He'd bought a butterbeer at a corner shop, but he couldn't even drink it: there was something wrong with it and it tasted so sickly sweet that it made him feel even worse. Before he could screw up the courage to go to Whizz Hard Books and ask Buzzy Liefat how he could "uphold tradition," he'd needed to spend fifteen minutes in the public toilet, sitting in a stall and staring blankly at the wall and hoping something would happen to just fix everything.

They'd been very accommodating at Whizz Hard – Buzzy was a kind man – and sent him on to Tallow and Hemp in Knockturn. When he'd gotten there, though, the two fat proprietors pretended not to know what he was talking about. They wouldn't help him, but wouldn't let him leave, either. "Sit down over there and shut up," Mr. Enser told him.

Eventually, a scraggly little man had shown up to take him somewhere and cast a million spells he didn't know, and then someone *else* showed up to blindfold him, and then he was taken to meet the Malfoys, deadly and elegant, where he'd followed all his memorized instructions and told them all the lies he was supposed to. And all the while he was terrified. *Terrified*. And Mr. Carrow had taken him aside and told him that he was in deeper waters than he knew, and it was a dark and dangerous thing to betray people, and that they owned him now, body and soul, and that if he ever caught even a hint that Lawrence was being anything other than straight with them in his promise to be a double-agent for the Honourable, then Mr. Carrow would see him punished so thoroughly that mothers would shudder and hold their children close when they heard the tale.

And then they hadn't let him go. They'd insisted that he give an interview to Sylvia de Kamp, an American journalist, about how much he opposed the Tower and his reasons. They told him how much he opposed the Tower and what his reasons were. They'd asked him about the papers and how he got them, and then asked him again, and then again. They asked him everything he could remember about the Tower and the people. They asked him

about his trick with Annabeth. They had him write her, and told him what to write.

They were friendly and deadly, kind and killers, always just a heartbeat away from cold anger or warm reassurance. He whipsawed back and forth and didn't sleep at night, when he was put into a small room with a cot in the back of one or another dingy shop. He was so scared all the time that he actually become *exhausted* with the effort of being terrified for such a long time.

They asked him if a student could get to the Tower. They asked what it would take to get there.

They started sending Annabeth things. Carrow had a plan, and was waiting for a chance to do it. Today might be the day, he would say. Today might be the day we go in. You'll go in. You're with us now. You've said things and written things and helped. You're Honourable.

*How had it been for him?*

"It's been... I don't know, sir," he finally managed to say. "I wish I'd... I wish none of this... I wish..."

He couldn't say anymore. A sob came out, instead.

"You wish that you could take it all back. Go back and fix it. Make it so that no one got hurt."

He nodded, and everything went skewed as tears filled his eyes.

"You're free, though. Despite what you did to Sammy Meroveni-Bowles. You should be in Howard Prison, Mr. Bradwian. But you're not, and you'll stay free. Because there was a time when you came up with a plot that hurt someone very, very badly – almost killing them. And it wasn't just stupid – and it *was* stupid to meddle in things you don't understand, on this level – but it was *wrong*. What you did to that boy was wrong. You know that, don't you?"

And Lawrence *did* know that. It wasn't that he'd gotten caught and probably should have just been turned over to the aurors. It wasn't even everything he'd been doing up until now – the long nightmare. It wasn't even the fact that he had just helped betray a great man – the Tower, the greatest healer the world had ever known, who was now at the mercy of Mr. Carrow.

All of those things were terrible, of course. But... he had done *evil*. When he hurt Sammy, he had done an evil thing for

stupid ambition and selfish plots. That was crazy, since evil wasn't a thing that he did. He wasn't the sort of person who did evil. But at some point during the past weeks, he'd figured it out. You are your actions.

It was crazy that even though he finally really understood that, he couldn't articulate, even to himself, just what had changed in his understanding. He'd done wrong, and someone had suffered. That was wrong. But everyone knew that. You learned that at your mother's knee and from Beedle the Bard and all that... even from the stories they told of Harry Potter, in fact. Harry Potter, who was standing in front of a murderous enemy and *still taking the time to teach him*.

"You battered a boy nearly to death with your actions. We fixed him, but that's not something he'll ever forget. It's not something he *should* ever forget. Those seconds of confusion, the horror of understanding, and the moment of pain... that's part of Sammy, now. Forever. What do you think about that? What have you learned?" Mr. Potter's voice was soft.

Anything he said would have seemed silly, so he just said the simplest true answer he knew. He said all of his simple true answers, all in a rush.

"Sammy was hurt because I used him in my plan," he said, the words tearing out of him, "and I only did that because other people used him in theirs, and he was part of that family, and even if he'd been willing to help, he was still just a boy. And I'm just a boy, and I can't really... I don't know what's going on, not really. And until I understood him and everything else, I shouldn't have tried to change it. Until I knew what people thought and why."

" 'Theory of mind.' You've acquired an improved theory of mind, Mr. Bradwian. You got there late, but you have it now. And some people never do. Well done." Mr. Potter's voice was cool. "Human beings come up with different ways of understanding other people's points of view. Very young children can't do it at all. It's something that can be tested – whether or not a child has a theory of other people's mind. If you—" He paused for a moment, then went on. "You show a young child a Quidditch-ball box filled with Chocolate Frogs, and then close it up. Then you ask them what a stranger might think was in the box. The youngest children will

say that a stranger would think there were Chocolate Frogs in the box, since they don't understand that other people's minds work independently of their own. They can't simulate that separation – that they know something but that someone else wouldn't know it. But older children will say that a stranger would think the box had a Snitch and Quaffle and Bludgers inside, since they can guess another person's point of view."

Lawrence didn't understand. It wasn't fair to expect him to understand – not with a wand at his back and the past couple of weeks and the unimaginable terror of today. He opened his mouth, but he was a blank. "I... but I knew that. Before."

"That wasn't very clear, was it?" said Mr. Potter, frowning. He thought for a moment, and Lawrence had time to feel a sense of unreality about the entire situation. Even though he was here and this was happening, it was insane. If he'd ever thought he understood the world around him – this world, this dangerous world of these dangerous people – standing here in front of Mr. Potter, listening to him give a lesson as calmly as though he were Professor Sprout in the greenhouse, while a former Death Eater stood and patiently waited with a mocking look on his face – well, that would have ended his belief in a world that made sense.

"Listen, then, Mr. Bradwian," continued the Tower.

"All too often, older children and adults – people who pass that test with the Quidditch-ball box – never move past that point. They can understand that other people have a perspective, and that it informs their beliefs and behavior, but they can't move past that single additional level. They're trapped in themselves. When you discuss something with them, they can follow your reasoning and arguments, perhaps even well enough to understand or refute them – but they can't simulate your thought process. At best, they will know what you think and why you think it... but not *how* you think it. Or what you're likely to think *next*.

"It's the difference between... well, you know Wizard's Chess: it's the difference between thinking about other people as pieces, and thinking of them as *other players*. And while that seems obvious, and almost everyone would claim to be that sort of person, they're usually wrong. Most people come up with a mental set of rules or checklists that they use to *categorize* people, rather than

actually understand them. Then they treat people according to their category.”

Mr. Potter shrugged. “And that works, most of the time and for most things. It’s an adequate algorithm... but it’s not the best. You’ve learned – or started to learn, anyway, since I think you might still be at the stage of learning genuine empathy rather than reflexive empathy – what it’s like to be a piece in someone else’s game. The danger there, and the helplessness, and the fear. And now you can’t ignore how you made Sammy feel. Now you’re getting an improved theory of mind.”

Lawrence nodded, mutely. He understood... *some* of that, anyway. Mr. Carrow still stood silently behind him, and Lawrence could still feel the tip of a wand in his back.

“And you, Annabeth? I understand you never left Hogwarts, but they surely didn’t ignore an asset like yourself. You were passing notes or receiving packages or something, I expect. Not as dangerous, but still pretty frightening... given the consequences. What did you learn? What have you learned about ambition... ‘Silver Slytherin?’ ”

Annabeth was staring down at her feet, weeping. She was silent and trembling, and couldn’t seem to be able to bring herself to say anything. Mr. Potter let his question hang in the air for nearly a full minute, until finally seeming to relent.

“You may go, Lawrence and Annabeth,” said Mr. Potter. “If we see each other again, I hope that I will find that you will have not only kept your lessons close to your heart, but also lent your new wisdom to your House.”

Lawrence didn’t move a muscle until he felt the wand-point leave his back, and even then he only turned his head slightly to look at Mr. Carrow. Annabeth didn’t dare even that much, transfixed with terror as tears leaked over her cheeks.

Mr. Carrow nodded slowly. He spoke, low and dangerous and threatening, as though the wand-point had never moved... as though he were talking to a pet that threatened to misbehave. “Yes, it is time for you both to go. Say nothing to anyone about what you have seen. You will regret doing otherwise.”

Lawrence looked back at Mr. Potter, eyes wide. He tried to send a message with his mind or his face: *What should I do? Do I*

*get help?* There were aurors everywhere. From the time they left the Receiving Room and entered the Tower through the entrance – so heavily enchanted that it seemed more real and motionless than anything around it, and guarded by a heavy shield of goblin silver waiting to be locked into place on the inside – and snuck through the Tower corridors to this room, they’d passed seven or eight aurors and more than twenty other people.

He could do it.

Somewhere in him, Lawrence knew that. He knew it instinctively, the way you know you’re thirsty. And even as he thought about it, and stared into Mr. Potter’s eyes, he knew that he could be brave.

“Go,” said Mr. Carrow. “*Now.*”

Even now, Lawrence could be brave. Even after the terror of the past weeks, even after being thrown into a deadly conspiracy of deception and constant threat of death, even after coming to the realization that he’d been a stupid *stupid* little boy who had played with the lives of others and meddled in things far beyond his ken... even after that, he could be brave. Maybe *because* of that. Courage wasn’t born in ignorance. Courage was knowing and *comprehending* the situation and danger, and acting anyway.

*I can do it, Mr. Potter. I can save you. Let me save you.*

*I can do it.*

“Do as he says, Mr. Bradwian. You will be tempted to disobey,” said Mr. Potter, and his green eyes were as kind as the warm sea, “but remember your lessons. Remember the damage that can be done, when you do something on limited information. It’s a hard thing to learn, but... so important. And I think...” Mr. Potter hesitated, and appeared to stop for a moment to consider his words – maybe to consider whether he should go on. But he nodded, almost imperceptibly to himself, and said, “I think that for some people, that sort of thing must be learned the hard way.”

He gave a small, sad smile. “It’s no crime to reach beyond your grasp, but only if you can see where you’re reaching.” His voice was distant and soft, but sharpened as he focused back on Lawrence and Annabeth. “Go now, and say nothing to anyone. Just go straightaway to bed. You’ll understand in the morning.”

Lawrence reached out to Annabeth, and took her hand. She didn’t resist as he pulled her away. There were people running and



shouting in the halls. One healer grabbed Annabeth's shoulder for a moment to stop them – seeing her scorched clothing – but saw she was uninjured, and sent them on their way.

They didn't go down to the Slytherin dungeons. They went to the North Tower instead, and huddled into the alcove just at the bottom of the stairs, and held each other. They waited for the new day. After some time, they fell asleep.



“You shouldn't be standing here by yourself, even with guards at the door,” said Carrow. The tall and gaunt man's tone was amused and harsh at the same time, like a scornful teacher.

Harry raised his eyebrows. “I needed time to think quietly. I wanted to think about possible reactions to today's events.” *Not that it worked, since runners kept showing up and then a trio of intruders. How did he finally manage this?*

Carrow chuckled. “Shouldn't you have spent some time doing that before now... before the evening was half-over, and those events were in motion?”

“Well, I thought my excellent Chief of Security had managed to arrange things so that I could spend a minute alone, sorting out a good narrative,” said Harry, shaking his head ruefully. “All right, I'm dying to know... how did you get in here?”

“I wore a troll.”

*Damn it. Clever.*

*And so the stunning effect of the Safety Stick only affected the troll outside, absorbing the effect. Clever, especially since trolls might even be immune to the effect. Have we ever tested that? Surely we have. Either way, though, he'd be awake and alert in the Receiving Room, able to act. But he'd still be inside of a troll, even if he wasn't stunned. He'd need to get free of the troll, get past the guards and through the door, and pull on an invisibility cloak... all without being seen. He needn't worry about the Dark Detectors or chizpurples, I suppose, thanks to the troll providing plenty of interference and distraction... Still, though, even with a troll and hundreds of incoming casualties of war and all the chaos, that's a tall order.*

He thought for a moment, and Carrow stood silent and waiting, a mocking half-smile on his face.

“And the children got you out of the troll, after the aurors took it down,” Harry said, finally, as one possibility dawned. It was an obvious possibility and not one they’d overlooked, considering the Tower’s location. Students were not normally able to find their way to the Receiving Room, for the entrance to the Tower was at the end of a frequently-changing and byzantine series of corridors that snaked throughout Hogwarts. Even when students needed to visit the Tower, the simplest way remained the Safety Sticks or the Safety Pole in the Great Hall.

But today they’d used student runners, who’d gotten guidance on how to reach the Receiving Room. Tomorrow it would be different, as the school shifted and moved, but for today, dozens of students knew the way.

“I suspect you have an invisibility cloak to sneak around and get to me, right? Something to evade our Anti-Disillusionment Charm, anyway,” said Harry, working through possibilities in his head.

Carrow nodded, patting one side of the vest he wore under his robes. He reached into another pocket and pulled out a black cylinder that fit comfortably into his hand. There was a flange on the side, and a metal ring on top. “And the children brought these to help me get through the Receiving Room. ‘M84 Stun Grenade,’ from the States. Strangely easy to acquire.”

“So a troll showed up in the Receiving Room,” said Harry. “And—”

“*Ten* trolls,” interrupted Carrow.

“So ten trolls showed up in the Receiving Room,” said Harry. “And while they might ordinarily lock it down for that, today everyone’s prepared for something like a mass werewolf or half-giant attack. So after they – what, used the Killing Curse on the trolls? – they open things back up, that way all the defeated enemies don’t start to accumulate and pose a security risk of their own. Then... well, I expect Lawrence came back to school today, and he met up with Annabeth, who had probably been getting packages by owl with grenades in them, and they followed a runner or just found out the path from a runner, and they were waiting to throw them...”

He shook his head. "This was a silly and complicated plan. Didn't Draco ever tell you about how many steps any good plan should have? You needed Annabeth to hide the grenades, Lawrence and her to find their way to the Receiving Room, and then everything depended on them successfully using the grenades." He paused. "Did you paint the trolls different colors, so they'd know which one you were in?"

"Different sorts of armor. Less suspicious." Carrow smiled. "And not so complicated. If the children had failed at any step, I had grenades of my own. I'd cut my way out in a second and throw one, and then be on my way. The only difficult parts were capturing and restraining ten trolls – as well as cutting one open and climbing inside before the hole closed. I already knew my way around."

"Ah, yes, from the debates," said Harry. "Such dedication in Malfoy's service." He thought for another moment. "But the decision to attack today... that was a surprise to everyone. I know that my people had plans and ideas, but I decided to move today without any warning. It's impossible to put Unbreakable Vows of loyalty on our staff without unacceptable risks, and despite the best efforts of our indefatigable Chief of Security, there are spies. Even if we didn't have any turncoats, there are the healers and aurors from other countries who are sent here as price and payment for their states' being a part of this." He rubbed his forehead, frowning. "In retrospect, that may have been hasty, and I wish someone had said, 'Stop, let's do this tomorrow' when only five people were in the room."

He shook his head, and eyed Amycus Carrow, spymaster and lieutenant of Draco Malfoy, and a leading figure in the Honourable. "I *thought* it was low risk, though... just to spend a moment thinking quietly to myself."

Carrow looked around the empty corner of the research room, raising his eyebrows.

"I thought this was some last-minute Muggle research... but it's not. You're sorting through action and reaction now... when the evening's half-done and everything is playing out?" asked Carrow, disapprovingly.

Harry sighed. "I was trying to work out a plausible story... we need a good series of believable events to explain our crushing

success. It will be suspicious if we win every conflict. I didn't actually think it would be that hard, but we need two levels... an easy lie for the masses, and a clever lie for everyone else."

"No casualties on our side?" asked Carrow. He picked a thick lump of congealed blood from one sleeve, and dropped it, disdainfully.

"Some, but nothing we couldn't handle, according to the healers," said Harry. "Last I heard, anyway. That might have changed, since I understand someone dropped ten trolls and a bunch of grenades into the Receiving Room about ten minutes ago."

"Couldn't be helped. Have to kill off Carrow again, anyway. And no one was hurt. Everyone should have been on alert anyway, particularly there and on a day like this," said Carrow, shrugging gruffly.

"It's an odd-numbered day, though," pointed out Harry. "And rather a lot is going on. Prisoners and casualties popping in all day, plus the usual number of regular people needing healing. Almost every reliable person on staff has been working for hours without a break."

"I got in, Harry. No matter what day it is or how I did it, I got in. Remember that. It can be done. And if there's one way it can be done, there are other ways. We need another layer of security." Carrow shook his head. "Bah. Let's just decide on the story, so I can get back to Material Methods and check up on how things are going."

"I actually thought it might be time to offer Draco a truce – to offer him terms. To bring the whole thing to an end, finally," said Harry. "All right, then, anyway... how did Amycus Carrow die, when he snuck in and attacked me? We need a properly heroic turn of events."

"He died from boredom, when you gave him a twenty-minute lecture," said Carrow. "Everyone will sympathize."

Harry grinned. "Just help me figure it out, will you, Moody? Or I'll stick you back in the troll – or in the body *of* a troll."

我兵法を学ばんと思ふ人は、道を行ふ法あり。

第一に、よこしまなき事を思ふ所

第二に、道の鍛 ■ する所

第三に、諸芸にさはる所

第四に、諸職の道を知る事

第五に、物 ■ の損得をわきまゆる事

第六に、諸事目利を仕 ■ ゆる事

第七に、目に見えぬ所をさとつてしる事

第八に、僅かなる事にも ■ を付くる事

第九に、役にたたぬ事をせざる事

— 五輪書, ■ 本 武 ■

*This is the Way for men who want to learn my strategy:*

*First, do not think dishonestly.*

*Second, the Way is in training.*

*Third, become acquainted with every art.*

*Fourth, know the Ways of all professions.*

*Fifth, distinguish between gain and loss in worldly matters.*

*Sixth, develop intuitive judgment and understanding for everything.*

*Seventh, perceive those things which cannot be seen.*

*Eighth, pay attention even to trifles.*

*Ninth, do nothing which is of no use.*

— *The Book of Five Rings*, Miyamoto Musashi



## Chapter fifteen

# Intent

*Dear Mum and Dad,*

*I'm sorry. Let me say that straight off. I know that I promised I'd never let magic come between us, but I was wrong. I can't come home.*

*That's the bad bit, and I'm so so so sorry. There's so much I have to tell you, and so much more I can't tell you, but I didn't want you to wonder what the bad news would be as you read this whole letter. That's the bad news I needed to tell you, and it hurts me so much to write it. I love you both. I love you Mum. I love you Dad. I love our house and our life and our trips and everything. I love you so much. This has nothing to do with any of that, and you need to know that if I had any choice, any choice at all, I would come home right now.*

*But I can't. And it's not because of some powerful wizard, and it's not because it wouldn't be safe for you. It's because it wouldn't be safe for me.*

*SECOND WIZARDING WAR?: HONOURABLE SORTIES DEFEATED; AMYCUS CARROW DEAD; PEACE SUMMIT ANNOUNCED*

—by Simone Sprout

*Open warfare erupted on a global scale yesterday afternoon, as several signatories to the Treaty of Independence and their British allies attacked allies of the Treaty for Health and Life around the world. The fighting occurred on multiple fronts, including strikes*

*directly on the Ministry of Magic; the Safety Poles of Diagon Alley, Godric's Hollow, Paris, and Tidewater; the Department of Mysteries' Remote Cautionary Platform; the Cypriot Hold; and the Alping of the Council of Westphalia in the Americas. The attacking forces were comprised variously of forces of the Exarchate of Cappadocia, Magical Russia, the Emirati of the Ether, the Emirati of the Sky, Magical Anatolia, Magical Nakhchivan, and other Sawadi and Caucasian states. In almost every case, the attacks were turned back through armed intervention by British forces and their allies, with few serious casualties but considerable damage to the Ministry of Magic, the Parisian États-Généraux, and the Remote Cautionary Platform. While the outcomes of individual events have been difficult to verify, at this time the Ministry of Magic has reported that they have 650 prisoners of war. Magical Russia has claimed to have taken more than 40 prisoners of war, but the Ministry of Magic disputes this figure.*

*By the end of yesterday evening, hostilities had ceased. In most areas, conflicts had already been resolved, but news of a truce offered by the Ministry of Magic brought an end to an ongoing battle in Paris and at the Cypriot Hold. The truce was refused by the Cappadocian soldiers still attacking in Cyprus, who were eventually subdued by the American Brahmins, but all other states agreed to a cessation of the fighting.*

*The attacks also included an assault on the Tower by members of the militants known as the Honourable, leading to the violent death of Amycus Carrow, one of the most prominent leaders of the group. While the assault disrupted healing activities at the John Snow Center, Owen Wilifred, a spokesperson for the Tower, stated that there had been no deaths among patients as a result. "The Tower is proud to say that even these tragic and unfortunate events did not result in any permanent consequences, thanks to the courage and diligence of our aurors and healers. We have never lost a patient who was remanded to our care. We are even proud to say that we were able to save the lives of even the most gravely wounded among those who attacked our Safety Pole facilities around the world. The Tower will remain devoted to preserving life and health for everyone."*

*Carrow was notable for his role as an Honourable spokesperson, frequently representing the group at public debates and meetings,*



as well as his suspected involvement in the Honourable's military actions. While he consistently denied any role in such affairs as the Diagon or Alping blastbombings, Carrow had previously served as a skilled lieutenant for Lord Voldemort's Death Eaters, two decades ago – a role he claims was forced on him by the Imperius Curse – and was widely believed to be a guiding hand behind the Honourable's actions. His reputation was considerable among the group, and he was particularly known for his cunning. Carrow was by far the most prominent Death Eater to escape the events of Lord Voldemort's return on June 13th of 1992, avoiding the fate of his compatriots by substituting a death doll with an improvised Dark Mark.

The Tower was unwilling to comment on the assault in detail, saying through their spokesperson that they “didn't comment on security procedures, as a rule,” but The Prophet has been able to independently discover that Carrow's attack involved brutalizing and coercing two students into helping him gain access to the facility, employing a series of small blastbombs and an attack by twenty trolls in the process. Carrow then attempted to assassinate Harry Potter-Evans-Verres, the Dean of the Tower School of Doubt and chief of the John Snow Center for Medicine, but was defeated when he proved unable to control his own Fiendfyre in the face of Potter-Evans-Verres' defense. Much of the success experienced by the Life and Health forces throughout the evening may, in fact, have come from the incident; at least one auror was willing to state under condition of anonymity that Carrow survived for a short time after the attack, during which time his Occlumency barriers were down. This would flatly contravene Tower policy on healing, and was vigorously denied by Tower spokespeople.

As events are ongoing, a later edition of The Prophet will contain updated reports about yesterday's events and continuing developments.



*On the shores of the lake of teeth, where the black hills end, Tír  
inna n-Óc*

*April 30th, 1999*

Three figures of shadow stood facing each other, their bodies taut coils of animated darkness. The weather in Tír inna n-Óc was foul this morning/day/evening/night, and a storm was approaching. A preamble of thick yellow fog was tonguing the three visitors. Soon, milks would fall thick and white on the black hills.

The three figures conferred in a dialect of Norman French now entirely extinct.

"You have acted," said the first figure. "You sent in our bishop."

"She did, yes," affirmed the second figure.

"Events were moving without us," said the third figure. "If I had waited even another hour, it would have been too late. All was ready – the wolf has done its work. It was time."

"You were right to do so, and I would have done no differently," said the first figure, approvingly. "I have accused you of haste in the past, but not now. But I must ask – by what method will our piece breach the Tower defenses? All our lore has not succeeded. Even the Lens has failed."

"Lens? The Lens of Kasreyn is sand and dust, broken long ago," said the third figure, putting shadowy hands on shadowy hips.

"It survives, though it was damaged in the fight when Gellert Grindelwald fell. But even it cannot see through to the Tower. That stronghold must draw upon the northern ley that feeds the school, for nothing less could erect such mighty barriers," said the first figure.

The third figure crossed its arms, and said nothing for a time. The others waited patiently. Finally, the third figure spoke again, guardedly. "The stonemight succeed in penetrating their guards – although perhaps not. I had not known that the Lens survived and that it too was unable to see within the Tower. That information would have been helpful."

All three were quiet and reflective, and stood thoughtfully as the yellow fog rubbed its miasmic muzzle against them. It was growing thicker and colder as the storm approached.

“Not everything can be shared, even at these times. There is always some crisis that approaches, looming large in the moment,” said the second figure, after a while. A peace offering and a scolding, neatly tucked within a few harmless words.

“Regardless,” said the third figure, seemingly resigned, “there are alternate approaches if the stone fails. Our piece is prepared, and will succeed.”

“In which case, I must note that it may be too late to return to the previous *status quo* that has existed since the Confederation took charge. The order of the world is in disarray, and I doubt we could simply return everyone to their row,” said the first figure, moving on. “I propose we abandon our opposition. Matters are too far along for any coup or division to stop the consolidation of the magical world.”

“That is a matter for another time, I think, Meldh,” said the second figure mildly. “It is enough, for now, that we clear away the danger at the Tower’s top. We shall judge our next move later... after all the stones have stopped their tumbling.”

Tír inna n-Óc endured.



Lord Draco Malfoy of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Malfoy was blood relation to fifteen families of the Sacred Twenty-Eight, speaker and leader of the Honourable, counselor to the nations of the Treaty of Independence, defender of three millennia of Magical British tradition, and master of both ancient lores and new sciences. He rejected the Tower’s offer of a Safety Stick for travel, and scorned in sharp language the suggestion that he fly to the peace summit by broomstick. His dignity would not bear either insult.

Lord Malfoy and his mother traveled by fortress instead.

*The Declaration of Intent* was dominated by a single tower, three stories high, made of fitted wedge-shaped blocks of smooth tan stone. Mullioned windows ascended around the tower in a

spiral, each featuring a depiction in stained glass of a notable act of a notable Malfoy. In addition to the tower, there were two broad platforms and a gate of black metal. All four of these points – tower, platforms, and gate – were linked by spikes of thick curtain wall that jutted out into the space beyond, protected by battlements.

The fortress moved slowly and grandly, no more quickly than a learner's broom, and so it took a full ten hours for *The Declaration of Intent* to bear the Lord and Lady Malfoy from Malfoy Manor in Wiltshire up to Hogwarts in Scotland. Lord Abraxus Malfoy, Draco's grandfather, had not built the structure to speed along like a twittering sparrow. *The Declaration of Intent* was built for intimidation and war.

(When he was a boy, Draco's father, Lucius, had once told *his* father that the *Declaration* was a "Muggle-mimicking boondoggle of unspeakable proportions," and was generally unwilling to even admit that the thing existed, hulking in the distance on their estate and never once used. The fortress had been built around the Aa-Khem of the Shafiq family: the bronze scarab statues, capable of independent flight, had been purchased from one of the impoverished Shafiq heirs only at staggering expense. Abraxas had punished Lucius for his insolence, lashing the whipping boy nearly to death, but it must be admitted that the flying fortress had rather severe limitations when it came to combat.)

*The Declaration of Intent* arrived at Hogwarts early on the morning of the April 30th, gliding high above the Scottish countryside. The Malfoys hadn't bothered with any of the complicated and difficult glamours that might have hidden the fortress from sight, and only the diligent work of the exhausted Obliviators and Professor Sinistra's conjured cloud kept the Muggles from fussing. The *Declaration* hung in the air like a black star, Hogwarts far below.

The students of Hogwarts, already disrupted by yesterday's events, were now further restricted in their movements. No one was allowed into the North Tower for Divination and Probability, no one was allowed into the greenhouses for Herbology, no one was allowed to play Quidditch or practice flying, and no one was allowed out to the stables or the Forbidden Forest for Care of

Magical Creatures. Some classes were canceled, although this was discouraged since it only meant chasing more gawking children away from windows.

At noon, a hue and cry spread from Gryffindor tower throughout the school as *The Declaration of Intent* began to move, once again. Some faculty seized the opportunity for a teachable moment – the Science Program first-years were required to calculate its velocity – but all hope of an orderly learning environment ended when the Malfoy fortress gradually descended down onto the Hogwarts grounds. *The Declaration of Intent* majestically subsided, moving in a tight spiral, until it settled down on the broad meadow outside the Hufflepuff greenhouses, along the path to Hogsmeade. It alighted with delicate slowness. Students from every house shoved and elbowed each other at every window on the south side of the school, fighting for a look. An enterprising few had thought to bring their Omnioculars, renting them at a sickle a minute.

Only a few minutes later, the toothy black gate jerked and rattled upwards, and a hare that had been trapped inside *The Declaration's* new courtyard bolted free. And Lord Draco Malfoy and Lady Narcissa Malfoy, his mother, emerged. A small, solemn, and grand retinue followed: Fila Zabini and her son Blaise; Gregory Goyle and his wife Sara; the Lady Gertrude Greengrass and the Lord Teddy Greengrass and their two daughters. Kingsley Shacklebolt brought up the rear, his head held proudly high and a smile on his face.

The group had only walked for a short time before another group of people became visible below, walking out to meet them: Minister for Magic Carmel N'goma, Chief Warlock and Supreme Mugwump Amelia Bones, Headmistress Minerva McGonagall, Dean of the Science Program Harry Potter, and Hermione Granger.

The Honourable paused as the Government delegation approached, and the two sides faced each other at a distance of a dozen paces. Words were exchanged, and Lord Malfoy nodded in response, gesturing behind him at *The Declaration* and then over at several of his companions. One Slytherin, face glued to his Omnioculars, claimed to be able to read lips; he reported that

the Lord Malfoy was making introductions, since several of the visitors had never met each other.

After a time, the two parties joined together into one group, and moved *en masse* back towards the rear of Hogwarts. Grumbling children were pulled away from the windows, scolded for being chancers, and directed back to class.



Harry sat in the discharge ward of the clinic in an unused enclosure, sitting on a cot and waiting. He heard the quiet murmurs of the healers and aurors, interrupted at long intervals by someone's rapid steps as a patient was moved. Somewhere, Draco and his mother and some dozens of eminent persons were meeting and exchanging pleasantries. Tonks was playing the role of Harry, under instructions to be warm in demeanour but quiet. They'd make their way through Hogwarts to the Tower gradually, and eventually would enter the Extension Establishment, which was already stuffed with still more figures of worldwide fame and power. There were representatives from the States, Canada, Russia, China, Korea, New Zealand, Italy, France, Norden, Spain, Germany... the list went on for pages, including a dozen fiddly magical city-states like Nakhchivan (which was, he had found out, within the Muggle state of Azerbaijan).

And at some point in the next hour, hopefully Nymphadora Tonks would find an opportunity and excuse to slip out to the clinic for a few minutes, and let the real Harry get to work.

It would be much more convenient if he could just temporarily change his face.

Harry's Vow had no sense of degrees to it. The possibility for action was a binary state: either he could do something, or it might destroy the world and so he couldn't even consider doing it. There was some threshold of permission, governed by his own unalloyed best judgment – he wasn't held hostage by extremely unlikely possible outcomes – but there was never any partial obstruction. He was capable of deciding to create a cubic millimeter of antimatter, since it wouldn't destroy the world, and probably incapable of creating a cubic meter of antimatter, since it might (even assuming the logistics could be managed). At

some point between the two points, there was a decision point: an amount of antimatter that was *just* big enough to endanger the world.

It said a great deal about the power of the human mind and the possibilities behind the Unbreakable Vow that Harry couldn't investigate these things in detail. It might be interesting to figure out how his brain made the decision about the threshold of acceptable danger, if he could work out how to measure it (would his Vow stop him from pretending to decide to do something dangerous?)

For that matter, there were a lot of good reasons why you might want to have someone take an Unbreakable Vow to improve their rationality – “I will assess my beliefs with epistemic investigation,” or the like – but Harry had found himself unable to start that course of research, as well. That made sense, of course. It was incredibly dangerous to drastically alter one aspect of any person's mind, when that person had access to magic.

Unfortunately, it was also dangerous for Harry to alter his own body with transfiguration and the Stone. He could, and did, regularly check himself over for any new medical problems. And when he'd found that that he had mild brachial plexus neurapraxia, he'd been able to fix that in just a few minutes (chalking it up to years of stress keeping his shoulders tense).

But changing his face just for an hour's subterfuge?

It couldn't be done. There were accidents when transfiguring, and misjudgments, and all sorts of things that could go wrong. There'd been times when a healer had needed to spend an hour on a transfiguration that had gone wrong on some deep level – when the thick-spread magics around the Tower interfered with a delicate moment, or their concentration slipped, or a dozen other things.

So he sat, and waited.

“Oy, Harry,” said Tonks, slipping past the curtain into the little enclosure. She was already half-changed back to her more typical appearance, shifting slightly in height as she redistributed her flesh. “You ready?” she asked, as her hair shortened, darkened, and tipped itself with bright turquoise. Her face was the last to change, giving him an uncomfortable view of exactly what it would

look like if he grew breasts, changed his hair, and lost two inches of height.

“Absolutely,” he said, standing up. He tugged on either side of his robes, to settle them more lightly on his shoulders, and adjusted his ponytail. It was bound a little more loosely than usual, so that the front would droop just enough to hide some of his scar. It would be less distracting to some people, a message of prestige to others, and a signal that he knew how to play the game to a select few who were canny enough to understand.

“The Malfoys knew it wasn’t you, but I’m not sure anyone else of that lot noticed,” said Tonks, adjusting her own robes. “Best assume they’ve communicated, though. I saw a bucket-load of meaningful stares into each other’s eyes.”

“Anything to report on the walk-through? How did Minerva handle the intrusion?” Harry asked. He fished in his pocket for his left glove, and pulled it on. It appeared identical to the right glove – fingerless brown leather – but the small extensible space on the palm held a different ancient relic of eldritch power than the Stone of Permanence. Or a fragment of that relic, anyway. The Cup of Midnight had long since been broken when they’d found its hiding place.

Tonks shrugged. She reached inside her robes, shoving her arm up to her elbow deep into a small satchel that hung at her side. “The Lord and Lady Greengrass were a bit smarmy about things, turning up their noses and talking about the reputation of Hogwarts and how it’d gone from being a school to being the government.”

“Not far off,” said Harry, frowning. “I have sometimes regretted not setting up the new Tower somewhere in the Ministry building. At the time, I thought it would help avoid any appearance of... influence.”

“Ol’ Kingsley put it right, anyway. Took McGonagall’s arm and said something smooth about how the government could have no better caretaker. Not that the Headmistress needed the help. She’s unflappable. Cannot be flapped.” Tonks extricated herself from her pocket, retrieving a golden gauntlet in the process. She pulled it on, working the fingers back and forth until the gleaming piece of armor was comfortably situated. The gauntlet seemed



to have no angles, except for a sharp ridge along the knuckles where the chargers fit. The fitted pieces of metal moved and slid flawlessly around each other as the witch waggled her fingers.

“Anything else I need to know?” Tonks shook her head. “All right, then. See you out there,” said Harry. She nodded at him, then returned her attention to her gauntlet, squinting at one of the chargers studding the top. Harry left her and pushed through the curtain.

Six of the enclosures had their green flags up, so Harry spent a handful more minutes ducking in each and finalizing the healing as quickly as he could. Only one of the patients – a man named Ymir, whom Harry vaguely remembered – had been brought conscious, so there was little need to chat.

Then he was out of excuses and delays and conversations, and so he squared himself off with the door and walked briskly out of the discharge ward, down the hall past the Conjunction Conjunction, and into the Extension Establishment. Like all of the largest departments, the Establishment was to the rear of the Tower. They needed the space. It would be time to reorganize soon, actually... the Advancement Agency and Ypsilanti Yard needed more space, and there was no room to expand near their current position adjacent to the clinic’s special ward. Although maybe he was being silly, thinking in such limited terms... why not just install some of the first stable pocket worlds here? There’s no reason for all of them to be put in orbit.

Harry brushed past the pair of aurors at the door of the Establishment, and paused.

There were easily a hundred guests in the room – diplomats, journalists, and leaders – packed in the space with half again as many aurors. They’d moved out every last piece of equipment and scrap of furniture to accommodate everyone, and even so, the room was uncomfortably crowded. The fact that the crowd had divided itself into factions made things even worse: the Independents and Honourable had segregated themselves in one corner, Hermione was surrounded by all of her Returned in the center of the room, and everyone else had formed a thick-packed horseshoe of murmurs in the rest of the available space. Five of the aurors had been pressed into service as waitstaff, and were carrying

silver trays around the room with studiously neutral expressions, serving drinks brought in from the Conjunction Conjunction, next door. He could smell mint; they'd cast Fresh-Air Charms to make the cramped quarters more comfortable.

As Harry appeared in the doorway, the conversations all rose in volume for an instant, then died away. He smiled as pleasantly as he could, and reached to his left, where Norden's Per Aavik-Söderlundh-Ellingsen was offering his hand and a smile of his own. "Per, good to see you," said Harry, with the rote warmth that came easily to him, these days. "Thank you for coming."

"You have a third of the Confederation in here," said Per in his impressively deep voice, plucking at his goatee with his free hand. "And much good news, I think. You will wish to speak to the representative of the Court of Rubies, I think. Perhaps before you make any other deals – your hand will be stronger."

*We have China?* The possibility was exciting. China had leather lungs among the Ten Thousand, and if they were signing on to the Treaty for Health and Life, then they'd want to press their advantage and bring in the rest of their neighbors on terms that continued their regional dominance.

"Thank you for the good word, Per," said Harry.

"We remain as committed as ever, Harry... no light between Britain and Norden, yes?" said the bureaucrat, patting Harry's shoulder. Harry smiled and nodded, and moved on. Another hand was already waiting: someone else eager to pass a bit of advice or a whispered secret or something else that might win them favor.

The Tower was ascendant.

He made his way around the room, moving through the close-packed witches and wizards with slow progress. Aurors moved through the crowd with him – Kraeme and Kwannon were on duty for him personally, and he could see them gently push between people to remain close at hand. He had time to exchange no more than a few words with anyone, shaking each person's hand and murmuring something blandly pleasant, speaking about his appreciation for their advice or compliment.

Harry did take the time to confer with three people for some minutes, pausing as he reached each of them and taking the time to have a more substantial conversation: Councilor Hig, the visitor from China, and Minister N'Goma.

Hig was all smiles, his delight almost physically palpable. Harry was fairly sure that he'd walked out of the room having secured ten favours and twenty alliances, particularly since recent events had shown how much influence the Council of Westphalia – and Hig personally – wielded with the Tower. The American had few specific things to say beyond warm congratulations and some cutting comments about Fila Zabini's formal robes. Harry couldn't evade the trap, and said something noncommittal. Hig's grin widened, now that Harry had confirmed his suspicions about a body double, and Harry could only keep smiling and move on with a few evasive last words.

He Jin was quiet, and spoke approvingly of the quality of the firewhiskey that an auror had brought him. He and Harry talked of firewhiskey generally, saying almost nothing pertinent to the current situation. Harry didn't know much about the topic, and asked some polite questions about the qualities of superior liquor. At some point, He Jin mentioned that the Notables had become willing to consider the Tower's proposal. Harry nodded and moved on with the conversation, and after some time, he parted from the Chinese with a final expression of gratitude, knowing that the Court of Rubies had agreed to sign the Treaty on the offered terms. It was a triumph.

N'Goma was a more awkward conversation. Carmel N'Goma owed her office to him, and she knew it, and he was sure she resented it. But the proud and insightful politician was always willing to listen to him, and seldom interfered with Percy Weasley, her "aide," in any significant way. There wasn't much cause for complaint, especially when compared to her more antagonistic predecessors, such as Junius Simplewort Smith, but it was still uncomfortable when they spoke. She discussed He Jin and the progress the Obliviators had made with cleaning up yesterday's conflicts. Harry was polite, but moved on as soon as it seemed like he'd given her enough respectful attention. There were more important people to see.

Hermione met him as he walked towards the Honourable, stepping in alongside him. Harry nodded to her, and she returned the nod. The expression on her face was ambiguous – he wasn't sure if the twist to her mouth was anxiety or amusement. Esther

walked in Hermione's wake, golden gauntlet on one hand and a wary look on her face.

The crowd murmured. Gathered people parted. Harry stiffened.

Draco.

One hand rested on the silver snake-head of his father's cane. His mother held his other arm, her face wearing a fixed smile of obvious falsity. She was looking elsewhere, pointedly. Draco, on the other hand, was staring right at Harry. He looked noble – or rather like one would hope from nobility, although Harry had found that reality usually fell short. The head of House Malfoy wore a black Muggle suit with a sharply-colored tie like a vertical slash of serpentine green. The clothing wasn't only ironic, but it also served to accentuate his trim athleticism. He was watching Harry with a smirk on his face.

"If you have seen to your patients, Mr. Potter-Evans-Verres," said Draco, "shall we speak of recent events?"

The voice brought back a flood of memories.

*"Hello. Hogwarts, too?"*

*"Father once missed a Wizengamot vote for me. I was on a broom and I fell off and broke a lot of ribs. It really hurt. I'd never hurt that much before and I thought I was going to die. So Father missed this really important vote, because he was there by my bed at St. Mungo's, holding my hands and promising me that I was going to be okay."*

*"So. Science. You're going to tell me about blood."*

*"You call that a warning? You call that a warning? When we're doing a ritual that calls for a permanent sacrifice?"*

*"Allies?" "Allies."*

*"I'll help you fix the problem with Slytherin House hating Muggleborns. And I'll say it was sad that Lily Potter died."*

*"But let's get one part of it straight. You wronged me. And you owe me."*

*"You should die. You should die for having killed Father."*

*"If you can give me that, I will do anything. I will do anything. I will break the world, if I have to. But if you fail to hold up your end, I will break you, instead. Do you understand me, Potter?"*

*“Granger can’t handle this, Potter. She can’t cast it. And she’s killing herself with trying.”*

*“Harry... no... Oh, Harry... what will we do? What can we do?”*

*“I am the knife. And it will be a grand thing... to cut.”*

Harry blinked rapidly, but could feel tears running down his cheeks, anyway. That was okay. Maybe even desirable, he thought distantly. It would humanize him, and it would be a story, and it really didn’t matter worth a damn anyway since he couldn’t have stopped crying, even if he’d wanted to.

“Yes, Lord Malfoy. We can speak in the meeting room?” Harry said. His throat felt like it was closing up with emotion, but his voice sounded weirdly normal. “We can agree on some basic things, I think, before we are joined by the many people who deserve to speak their piece.”

“Agreed,” said Draco calmly.

Harry stepped back a pace and raised one arm to indicate the door, bowing his head slightly in high style. It was a dramatic gesture, and put everyone’s eyes on Draco again for a moment, while Harry pulled himself together.

*Theatre for the masses.*

Draco nodded. He turned to kiss his mother’s cheek, gave his friend Gregory Goyle his own reassuring nod, and walked towards the door. Harry and Hermione followed. Draco’s cane tapped loudly on the stone underfoot as they left, cutting through the renewed whispers of the representatives of the world’s great powers.



*Somewhere*

*One month ago*

Fenrir Greyback was a ruin of scars and blood. Werewolves must have prey. The call of the moon induces a blood-madness among the cursed. If they have no prey, then they worry at their own flesh.

There are ways to mitigate the suffering, of course.

The most brutal method is for the werewolf to simply arrange prey to hunt during the full moon. The savage wolf will not turn on

itself so long as it can savour the richness of human flesh. In the old times, certain warlords of India were known to indulge themselves in this manner, believing that the lives their beast-selves consumed would perpetuate their own. More than one legend hints that this was the very origin of lycanthropy, born from the desperate efforts of a mad mage to preserve his youth.

More humane lycanthropes were forced to try to restrain their animal selves, designing and constructing pit traps or bonds that would hold the raging wolf. While the wolf could tear steel like soft cheese, willing goblins would sell so-called “crinos chains” that were impervious to tooth and muscle. Unfortunately, this led to an easy way for the wizarding authorities to trace and hunt down the lycanthrope purchaser, so far too many werewolves chose not to run the risk. Many more innocents were maimed or killed as a result.

The miracles of modern potionering, however, have allowed the lycanthropes of today to consume the Wolfsbane Potion. This amazing elixir can't prevent the change, but it does stop the transformed wolf from being driven into a rage. For twenty years, werewolves have been able to stop the excesses of their beast-selves.

Soon enough, however, the knowledge of that potion may pass from memory, for there has been a cure for lycanthropy for nearly five years. The brilliant wizards of the Tower discovered it, and the story passed in whispers from sufferer to sufferer.

Not everyone sought the cure at first, fearing that it was a trick. Such ploys had been tried before by wizard governments, and those accursed with the greatest hope often paid the greatest price. But when one friend after another returned, wiped clean of their moon-taint, even the most cynical of lycanthropes let themselves be persuaded to take the trip to the Tower. They were not disappointed. Very nearly every one of them had gone.

Not Fenrir Greyback.

Fenrir was a werewolf at war. He had sworn eternal opposition to the government, to the uncursed, to Muggles, and to anyone and everyone else. His resentment was as unreasoning and savage as the beast he became each month.

It has been said that no one is ugly from the inside. But Fenrir had nothing but hatred in him, burning him up like a hot coal of

spite. It burned in his belly and distorted his mind. Was he insane? Was he sick? Was he evil?

Semantics.

Fenrir was a werewolf at war, and let that be enough for now.

There was no end to the war, even now, as he wept with anger and beat at the bars of his cage. Chains shackled him to the wall, bolted there with spikes of metal as thick as his human wrist.

An elf would come and feed him, sometimes. He didn't know how long it was between the meals – hours? days? – when the sneering elf in a ragged belt would throw him thick chunks of meat. And sometimes he would wake up with blood in his mouth. That was how he kept track of the months. That was how he knew he was being used.





# Ekkyklema

There are potentially more than 170 billion galaxies in the observable universe. Some, called dwarf galaxies, are very small with about 10 million stars, while others are huge containing an estimated 100 trillion stars.

*Buddha told a parable in sutra:*

*A man traveling across a field encountered a tiger. He fled, the tiger after him. Coming to a precipice, he caught hold of the root of a wild vine and swung himself down over the edge. The tiger sniffed at him from above. Trembling, the man looked down to where, far below, another tiger was waiting to eat him. Only the vine sustained him.*

*Two mice, one white and one black, little by little started to gnaw away the vine. The man saw a luscious strawberry near him. Grasping the vine with one hand, he plucked the strawberry with the other. How sweet it tasted!*

Harry, Hermione, and Draco sat at the meeting table. Harry and Hermione sat on one side, and Draco on the other. The aurors left. The three were alone.

It was quiet for a long time, as they looked at each other. Each of them scrutinized the others, openly and calmly. It seemed to Harry like it lasted for minutes on end. There was time to notice everything, even in this familiar room. The texture of the stones. The smooth wood of the table. Even the slight angles to the walls which made it into a gentle trapezoid, to suit the triangular shape of the Tower itself.

Draco Malfoy: cold and elegant, managing deception with an ironic smirk on his face. Hermione Granger: beautiful and powerful, so fiercely passionate and intelligent that her strength seemed almost superfluous. And Harry himself, who did his best to follow the truth wherever it led.

They looked at each other, old enemies and old friends. A wordless...*something* hung in the air. Not tension, but a heaviness, as though the very air were weary.

Finally, Hermione got out of her seat, her chair scraping the floor. She walked over to the wall of the room, and placed both hands on it. Gently, she leaned her head forward until it rested against the stone. She stood motionless for a moment, then turned her head until her cheek lay against the wall and Harry could see her eyes once more. She stared distantly at nothing – at memories.

“I’m not sure what to do. Or what to feel,” she said. Her voice was so quiet that Harry could barely hear her. “It’s not your fault – either of you. You can’t help it, and you can’t really be blamed. It doesn’t seem *fair* to blame you.”

“Granger,” said Draco, softly.

“I’ve really tried, though. I gave Harry the opportunity to tell me. I mean, my god, it’s been a *week*, only a *week* since he admitted about going easy on you, Draco. He admitted to exactly as much as he thought he needed to admit, and nothing else. He didn’t say anything about working with you or Alastor – oh, Merlin, *Alastor*! He never said anything, either. Another person who didn’t think I could handle it.” She rocked her head in place, shaking it, and closed her eyes. Then she barked a short, bitter laugh. “Ha! And to think, he and I had a conversation last year about what we’d do if someone *Imperiused* you, Harry – what we’d do if you’d actually *already* been turned by someone in Draco’s group. Alastor said, ‘I think I’d know.’” She laughed

again, and it was an ugly sound. “How little you three must think of me!” She opened her eyes again, and pushed away from the wall, turning back around to face Harry and Draco once more. “Or are there more?” she asked. “How big is this confederacy of dunces?”

Harry glanced over at Draco, eyebrows raised. Draco nodded. Harry turned back to Hermione, and said with an even voice, “Four people. Four people thought of this plan.”

“How did—” said Draco, but Hermione interrupted him.

“How did I figure out that you two were working together from the start? That the break between you was a hoax – a trick you were playing on all the *dupes*?” she asked, her voice harsh.

Draco nodded. He’d grown into his features over the years, and the sharp lines of his face had resolved into the lean masculine edge of maturity, Harry noticed. It gave him a solemn air, well beyond his years, as he watched Hermione with a calm and steady gaze.

“Boston,” she snapped. “The body of Tarleton Gest – and by the way, Draco, ‘Tarleton’ and ‘Kemp?’ Why would you advertise that your spies were actors? It was blind luck that no one else with a decent education noticed that.”

Draco set both palms on the head of his cane, setting it between his legs and examining it with detachment. “Tarleton is not an uncommon name, and there are remarkably few walking encyclopedias on staff at the Council of Westphalia. And anyway, Django and Terrence were first-level spies. If no one ever figures out you’re spying, after all, then you aren’t any sort of threat. We needed to get them out of there, and we needed some blood for credibility.”

Hermione leaned back against the wall, and closed her eyes again. “I just wish... I don’t even know *what* I wish. It looks like your plan *worked*. There’s a room full of people out there, and a world of wizards beyond, who have been fooled. Most of them think you two have been enemies. Some of them will probably figure out that Harry deliberately permitted the Honourable to centralize his opposition, and they’ll think they’re the clever ones who see the real truth. A small few might put two and two together and deduce that Alastor was Amycus Carrow from the start – or whatever other fallback deception you’ve arranged for them, to preserve the ultimate secret. Maybe I’m missing one... maybe

there are more levels beyond that. There was redundancy upon redundancy, and it all worked.”

*Sacrifices need to be made, sometimes,* thought Harry. *Sometimes we must sacrifice precious things, like our trust in our friends.*

“There was another one beyond that, in case Draco or I or both of us were taken out of the picture,” said Harry. “A last failsafe.”

Hermione laughed again. It was soft and sad. “You figured out every little thing. And the world will be better for it. People will be saved. It doesn’t matter that you didn’t trust me, either of you.” She opened her eyes again, and looked at Harry. “And that’s what you’re thinking, right? You’re thinking that my feelings don’t matter even a tiny little bit, not when compared to anyone’s life – not when compared to the lives of entire nations. And you’re right about that, too.”

That wasn’t what Harry was thinking.

“You’re not selfish, Hermione,” he said. “You’re... you’ve... you’ve given more to the world than any of us. You’ve sacrificed...” *Your phoenix. Your life. More.*

She paused at that, and her mouth tightened. “I don’t know. Life isn’t a play, and it’s not fair. I’m just hurt, but what does it matter when such big things are going around? I just thought... to be honest, I just thought I was *right*.” She looked from Harry to Draco, her eyes wet and her mouth sharp with self-disgust. “When Voldemort almost returned, a lot of pain and loss happened because Harry didn’t trust Headmaster Dumbledore. Your father, Draco, and so many other people.” Draco flinched a bit at that, breaking his cool demeanour for a moment, but she was already staring at Harry again. “I might not have died, if you’d trusted the Headmaster more. Or trusted *me* more.” Despite her words, her voice was quiet and calm. “And I thought you’d learned from that. Learned from Azkaban, when you let me go. Let me *try*.”

“I did,” said Harry, plaintively. “And–”

“But all you learned was that you had to be more clever. Had to think harder and prepare more and be more creative. So when it came time to create a plan to save the world, you left me out of it. I’m not a good actress, or some other perfectly reasonable thing, right? I just... I don’t know why I feel this way, all confused.

I'm fine with it and outraged at the same time, and it's just..." She sighed, and sank down, back sliding down the stone.

"Hermione," said Draco, rising to his feet. He walked over to her with three quick strides. His cane fell to the floor behind him, silver head clanging against the stone, but he ignored it. In a moment, he was on his knees beside her, pulling her to him in a tight hug. "*Stop.*" He darted a quick look at Harry, and his face was a command. "Do it, Harry."

But Harry already had his wand out. "You're right, Hermione. I *did* learn to be more clever," he said. "And I learned trusting you is the clever thing to do. *Eunoe.*"



*The doorway was mostly blocked by the remains of the Thief's Downfall trough, which had been broken free of its pins on one side. The large brass tray had swung down at an angle, and was currently pouring out its contents in a never-ending torrent on the floor. The enchanted liquid soaked Harry's shoes and socks as he edged past.*

*Once inside, he took a good look around and sighed. The Tower was a ruin. All the windows were broken, two walls had been melted into thick pools of cooled slag, and half of the roof had caved in. The golems had been smashed until barely anything remained; Harry could see the palm of a scorched clay hand, clipped of fingers and dismembered from its wrist, flopping in an aimless and pathetic circle. It was breezy and fresh. The open air had swept away most of the stink of fire.*

*Draco and Hermione were already there. They had their wands out, and the clear area around them revealed that they were cleaning up some of the mess. Or had been, anyway.*

*"I don't know the spell, and wouldn't cast it if I did," Hermione was saying. "It's a dark curse and it requires a permanent sacrifice. I just... I'm not about to start boiling off my blood, okay?"*

*"Granger," said Draco, shaking his head and rolling his eyes, "we don't even know if you'd really lose that blood. You'll probably just regenerate it. And if you did, you have plenty to spare. You'll be fine."*

*"I'm not going to do it, so you can forget it," the young witch replied.*

*"What's the matter?" asked Harry. Draco just glanced over, but Hermione started violently at the sudden noise. "Sorry," said Harry, frowning at his own lack of consideration. She was... delicate since she'd come back this second time, and he needed to be more careful.*

*"The walls are all melted here from the Fiendfyre, and we can't clean it up. Most spells don't affect the stone of Hogwarts, thanks to the doughty enchantments of Salazar Slytherin," said Draco, gesturing at a knee-high piece of stone that sat in a twisted, smooth lump along one of the edges of the room. "That seems to be true even after the stuff has already been melted."*

*"Just... let's not worry about it for now," Harry said. He felt exhausted, and his mouth tasted foul. That was from the adrenaline, he knew. That bitter taste that had tingled his tongue at the moment of crisis, when fire fought fire, and which left a nasty tang long after it had passed.*

*He walked over to the lump of stone and stared at it for a long moment, and then sat down on it, gingerly. "So we're not going to rebuild. Not like the way it was before. Not without safeguards on an entirely different scale."*

*Hermione touched her wand to a half-burnt piece of wood – the remains of a table, perhaps – and it slid fluidly into the form of a new and shiny metal stool. She sat on it.*

*Draco did not sit. He stared at the ragged remains of one wall which studded the edge of the room with ruined blobs of stone like rotten teeth.*

*They all thought for five minutes.*

*"Artifacts of power are the key, I think," said Draco. "Father once spent a full year trying to bribe his way to the last of Satomi's Dogs – the one Grindelwald didn't get, that they have in Cyprus."*

*"It's probably not really in Cyprus," Harry reflected. "Madame Bones says that Cyprus and Cappadocia go to war every hour, on the hour. And it does seem like they're always bristling at one insult or another, and threatening to attack. You'd think they'd have learned after the sixth or seventh war that they were wasting time, money, and lives, but... nope. Politics is insane and is never going to make any sense to me."*

*“Some sort of device, though,” said Hermione. “There are legends about things like the Arch of Ulak Unconquered, or that goblet that they used to use for the Triwizard Tournament, back when they still did that. Or there was another goblet that was even more powerful, I think. I’ll have to check Undoubted Redoubtables.” Harry gave her a worried glance at this – she seldom needed to double-check her recollections, was this a problem with her new body? – but she was already moving on. “With the Interdict ensuring that uncommon or powerful spells are gradually lost over time, any old device is usually going to be pretty impressive in our eyes – able to beat out any modern wizard’s best efforts. If we got our hands on the Arch, then we wouldn’t even need to worry. Those sorts of devices are... elemental forces.”*

*“Even the greatest artifact can be defeated by a counter-artifact that is lesser, but specialized,” said Harry, echoing Voldemort’s words from last year. “Not that you’re wrong about any of that, of course – and there is one thing we particularly need, I think, if we’re ever going to rescue the Headmaster – but it’s not sufficient. We need to try to ensure that we control everything... not just every aspect of security, but every aspect of our attackers, too.”*

*“You’re talking about putting someone out there to take charge of the opposition,” said Hermione, looking over at him and frowning. “That way we’d really be in charge of attacks like...” She trailed off, looking back at the blasted remains of the Tower.*

*Draco scuffed the toe of his boot along the stone near his foot, where the heat had rendered it into glassy ripples. It made a scraping sound. He said nothing.*

*“It would mean that we wouldn’t need to worry so much. We could concentrate on the real villains – the people who want to hurt others. Not the people who...” He paused. He needed to talk around the fate of Draco’s father. He hadn’t yet fulfilled that promise to Draco, and he knew the topic would still be raw. Maybe for years, it would be raw. “Not the decent but misguided people,” he finished lamely.*

*“So we tame a bad guy, hope we have him under control, and let his organization grow? I’m not so sure about this mujahadeen you’re planning,” Hermione said, still frowning. “What about epistemic closure? We’re already planning on taking control of the government–”*

*"And fixing the problems of representation!" interrupted Harry, raising a finger in objection to her summary.*

*"Yes, I know, and I accept the necessity of it, since it would be willful blindness to ignore the realities of the political puppet show and pretend the system works, but that doesn't mean I'm really comfortable with our little First Triumvirate, Gaius Julius Potter," retorted Hermione. She shook her head. "But the actual competition of ideas is important in a country. If we're running things, and we're also running the main opposition, then how are we ever going to recognize when we're making serious mistakes? And that's just assuming this won't backfire on us... we could wind up empowering a real threat."*

*"Only we will know about it," said Harry. "It won't be a fake opposition movement. It'll be a real opposition movement... but just one that we control. Ideas will still be exchanged, compete, and evolve. We won't get in the way of—"*

*"I read The Selfish Gene, don't explain it to me. Hush," said Hermione. She looked up at Draco. "You know what we're all thinking, Draco. What Harry—" and she shot him a look "—isn't actually asking, since he's waiting for you to volunteer."*

*"I am the obvious choice to lead the opposition," said Draco, quietly. He scuffed at the stone underfoot again. "Son of a blood purist and last scion of a great house. Son of a Death Eater. The 'Silver Slytherin' who uses both science and magic. A Slytherin raised by one of the greatest leaders in wizarding history... whose widow hates the Tower and writes scathing letters to The Prophet." He turned to Hermione and shook his head. "This isn't fair. It's so... I mean, it's obvious. It's like..." He hesitated. "I feel like I've been shaped for this, honestly. Made for this. But I don't know if that's... good. Or right."*

*"You never saw yourself as the opposition," said Harry. "No one ever does. Everyone is the hero of their own story." He sighed. "But people will believe it. They'll believe that story without blinking an eye. It's hard to go too over the top with these sorts of things, I've heard."*

*"No, that's not what I mean," said Draco. "It's that... Imagine that you were a piece of metal, and someone used the Simpleshape Charm to make you into a knife. And you always thought you were*



*going to be used to cut something. You thought you needed to cut... that it was the only thing to do. That you owed it to your family. You're a knife. You cut. But then, somewhere along the line, you realize that a knife can do a lot of things. You can pry a cork out of a bottle, or scrape a bicorn hide, or..." He gestured vaguely. "Or... whatever."*

*Hermione reached out with her foot, and kicked lightly against the side of his boot. A small gesture. I'm here, it's okay, it said.*

*Draco went on after a moment. "So if after all that, one day you decided to go ahead and cut..." He shrugged. "It feels... like I wouldn't be doing the right thing. Somehow."*

*"Then we don't do it," said Harry. "We'll figure something else out."*

*"As simple as that?" asked Hermione, raising her eyebrows and looking back over at him.*

*"As simple as that," he said, shrugging. And he meant it. It had taken a long time, but at some point he'd realized that it wasn't a good idea to use your friends without their knowledge or full consent. Or, at least, that Harry just wasn't smart enough to do that, even if it could be twisted into seeming ethical. It was hard enough to figure out anyone's real preferences, much less ignore them in favor of their hypothetical future preferences.*

*"No," said Draco. "It's a good idea. And if it's done properly, it will be an idea worthy of any Malfoy. Leading half the country... no, leading half the world..." He sounded thoughtful, and Harry could already hear the possibilities tumbling through the blond boy's head.*

*(And despite everything he'd vowed to himself over and over, Harry realized that he'd been as persuasive as possible in this conversation, even choosing the right moment to back off and let Draco have the room to feel comfortable asserting his own choice, almost subconsciously using his estimates of Draco's thought processes to influence the results of his friend's decision, even taking into account that Draco was a clever plotter on par with anyone living and that he had pride in that fact, and he wondered if it was okay to use a tool of the dark arts of rationality to make someone change their mind if it was for the greater good, and Harry felt his stomach sink as he seized the thought and crushed it with a fierce rejection, deciding to himself that this was a Voldemort thought and that he*

*wasn't going to do that sort of thing because it was stupid and that his dark side was the transfer of the mental habits of a very clever fully-grown sociopath and he had no particular need for an evil black box inside of his head and he was done with it and that was that. So there.)*

*"Wait, Draco," he said, quickly. "Think it through. You were right... you can do anything you want. You can keep putting together the Science Program. You can go into the Wizengamot and take your father's seat. You can do – literally – anything you want to do."*

*"No," said Draco. And a small smile touched his lips. "I am the knife. And it will be a grand thing... to cut." He turned and took a quick step to the edge of the room, and stood there, staring off into the distance. The sunlight cut him into a profile against the sky, and there was enough breeze to gently stir the single strand of hair artfully brushing his brow.*

*Hermione snorted with laughter.*

*"You are absurd," she said. "I am going to deliberately erase the last thirty seconds of my memory, because I cannot possibly reward this level of grandstanding." She threw a splinter of wood at him, and he batted it away with his palm. "Actually," she added, "that's not a bad idea."*



"Well," Hermione said. "I feel like an ass."

"A perfectly reasonable reaction," agreed Harry, cheerfully, as he put away his wand.

"On the other hand, you are *also* an ass, and so is Draco, for letting me embarrass myself," mused Hermione. "So there's that." She paused. "This is... wow, this is terrible. I don't know how I feel about anything." She grimaced, and clenched her eyes shut, leaning forward slightly from her position at the foot of the wall. Draco, who still had his arms around her, settled back and let her go. He pushed himself back off of his knees, sitting down next to her, but giving her a little space.

"Hermione..." said Harry, acutely aware that they had the gathered magical powers of the whole world waiting on the results

of this conference in a room that was too small, didn't have much room for chairs, and was just generally making a bad impression.

Draco gave him a short, sharp shake of the head. Taking the hint, Harry quieted. This *was* a lot to understand. Locked memories couldn't be accessed in any way, but that didn't mean that they didn't happen. The events that occurred left an impression on the person who experienced them, and that impression wasn't affected. And that person's life didn't stop... new memories and impressions accumulated and continued to shape their personality and their internal idea of themselves. To suddenly reach deep into that person's memory and unleash the hidden past... well, they would have to try to reprocess everything that had happened.

"All right," she said, after a while. She put a hand on Draco's shoulder and squeezed, and pushed herself to her feet. "So how is this going to work? You two are going to come to a tentative and difficult agreement on ending the conflict, and consolidate everyone behind you? I guess Draco will go to Russia and Cappadocia and the lot, and say that he needs them to commit to supporting any deal, so he can 'bargain' with a stronger hand?" She sounded remarkably steady, all things considering, and if she was angry at either of them, it looked like she had set it aside for the moment.

"Yes," said Harry, quietly. Hermione walked back to the table, and Draco followed. They sat back down. They looked at each other, old enemies and old friends.

"We'll decide how to spook them, and get them to agree," continued Harry. "They'll help us out in that regard... they want to appear strong to the world and save face, so anything we do to frighten them is something they'll work to keep quiet. On another level, we'll do some clumsy bribery of a few reliably corrupt politicians... these bribes won't work since those sorts of folks won't stay 'bought' – but both things working together should be enough to put Draco in solid command."

"Levels and levels," said Hermione. "And so... what will eventually happen, as this detente is sorted? Will you two just be in charge of the Tower together... power sharing? Or will Draco take over the government, to have another pole of power? We haven't talked about it, but I just assume that you have some sort of convoluted plan, worked out to the nth degree, where Draco and you continue to 'fight' each other with minor intrigues?"

Draco picked his cane up from the ground. He stared down at the head of it – a silver snake. “Do we even want to do that? Shouldn’t we be trying to change things... with more ambition?”

“That’s up to you two, really,” said Harry, “and it’s not something we have to decide today. We have weeks of peace negotiations to plan that out.” He smiled weakly. “I haven’t decided what I want to do, yet. I wasn’t sure at all how this would go, today. Honestly, I thought that we would have missed something.” He rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands, sighing. “And you were right in a lot of ways, last week, Hermione. When you yelled at me and broke my table. I should have told you before now... I shouldn’t have stuck to the plan and waited until now.”

*If someone is your full partner, you don’t use a grand strategy that leaves them in the dark. That’s what you do with subordinates.*

*“Our office has determined that by far the largest vulnerability, flaw, or weakness in the Tower continues to be the reliance on a single figurehead and leader, Harry Potter-Evans-Verres.”*

*Somehow, he’d never altered the curve of any of these patterns. Draco, Hermione, optimization... even as he grew and matured and learned, everything kept taking the same shape.*

“I don’t think I should be in charge anymore,” he said, and his voice was even quieter. “I think – whatever we do – we should bring in more people. Bones, Moody, or maybe Luna.” Glancing at Draco, he added, “Or Shackbolt or Goyle... I know they’ve done well and true over these past few years. It was a fine line to walk – being the bad guys without being bad – but they never seemed to stumble.”

“A conspiracy. We’ll need menacing hoods,” said Draco. He said it calmly and seriously, and it brought back such memories that Harry had to blink hard to keep the tears from his eyes. “But you were right before, Harry. We don’t need to decide anything now. We probably *shouldn’t*. There will be enough planning just to work out the peace process so that we can bring everyone together into one organization.”

“Well,” said Harry, smiling now even though his eyes were burning. “I guess I agree.”

*So many years now of being in charge of everything, and working with Hermione while never letting her get at the deepest*

*levels of planning, and not being able to ask either of them about things... all those years gone by, and now maybe it will be like it was. You can never go back again – not really – but there’s no reason we can’t find that same... rhythm. That same pattern of working together.*

There was a time when nothing hurt and everything was possible. When the dark shape of that black arc that cut through his life seemed like it was fading under the twin lights of a bright sun and brilliant moon. When Harry and Hermione and Draco had been determined to forge a new world together, and all the darkness and madness seemed to have faded away.

He wasn’t sure exactly when he knew it wasn’t going to be so simple. Maybe he’d always known it, from the moment he’d sat with shocked adults in the Headmaster’s office and read a pair of letters written by the wisest man he’d ever known. It’s easy to make big plans, especially when it seems like you’ve got your finger on the pulse of the world, but it just takes one errant element to bring the whole machine to a crashing halt.

But that long game of balancing was over. It had been...

*Oh.*

Harry remembered what he and Hermione had noticed yesterday. He smiled again, and now the tears were running down his cheeks. “Hermione, it’s Walpurgisnacht. The whole damn thing is going to be finished, and it’s been almost exactly six years. The world will be... we’ve done it. We’ve done it. In six years, we’ve done it. That’s...”

“Poetic,” said Draco. “Like a play.”

“Life isn’t like a play,” said Harry.

“Sometimes it is,” said Hermione.

*Sometimes it is.*



Security at Hogwarts and at the Tower was at a higher alert than it had ever been. There were seven layers of security and no fewer than three groups overseeing them. Leaders or adjutants of some of the most powerful countries and organizations in the magical world were here, representing a gathering of power unmatched since the

Sontag Summit of 1939. Yet by unspoken agreement, there were few intrigues. Everyone – from neonate healer to veteran counselor – knew that too much hung in the balance. The Honourable and the Tower were meeting for the first time in years, and if anything disturbed their efforts at peace... well, the entire globe could pay in years of blood.

The powerful of the world stood and chatted and hoped. Some handful prayed.

But despite all the tension and all the security – or maybe because of it – when the enemy began arriving in the Receiving Room, shrugging off the stunning effects of Safety Pole and Safety Stick, no one was ready. Haggard and vicious men appeared, clad in rags of black, and began to kill. Anyone. Everyone.

No one was ready for the wild woman who arrived by some unknown spell of staggering puissance – a chariot of fire, that erupted into being in the center of the room. She shrieked with hellish laughter as she began casting her curses.

She wielded her wand with an arm and hand of polished ebony. Her eyes were ablaze with madness and hatred.

“I’m here, my Lord!” she screamed, as her followers rushed the entrance and butchered the guards. The lunatic men, covered in scars, flooded into the Receiving Room by the dozens. More arrived with every passing minute, every passing *second*. They were poor combatants and weak duelists, but they overwhelmed the aurors by sheer weight of numbers. You cannot duel an army.

The attackers threw themselves in the path of the shield of goblin silver, blocking it. They smashed Dark Detectors and annihilated the chizpurples with waves of flame. They drowned defenders in their very blood, crushed them with their weight. Fire and blood poured across the stone.

“I’m here! I’m here I’m here I’m here I’m here!” chanted the madwoman: their leader, their deity.

Bellatrix Black was come to the Tower.

# Esse Quam Videri

*Dum spiro spero.*

*PERILOUS PEACE PROCESS PROCEEDS* by Simone Sprout

*Delegations from more than thirty magical states will meet to-day at the Tower at Hogwarts for the start of important peace talks related to the recent unrest around the world, along with influential representatives to the Confederation and key Wizengamot members. The different groups will meet with Minister for Magic N'Goma and her deputies, and the Minister has requested that Dean Harry Potter advise and assist the peace process. The summit will focus on resolving the issues dividing the signatory states of the Treaty for Health and Life and the more recent Treaty of Independence, including aspects of the Tower's rejuvenation process that have come into question, the intrusiveness of Safety Poles and their associated facilities, and questions about representation of Beings in local governments.*

*Yesterday's conflicts, which sprang up between Health states and Independent states, brought violence to places as far-flung as Antarctica, the United States, Paris, and Cyprus, and as nearby as Diagon Alley, Godric's Hollow, and the Ministry of Magic. The skirmishes have led a general sense of fear and hundreds of wounded or captured wizards on both sides, although at press time it had become apparent that Russian claims about their prisoners were greatly exaggerated; fewer than a dozen British or allied aurors had been confirmed missing.*

*In a statement sent to several news organizations, the leader of the group informally known as the “Honourable,” Lord Draco*

*Malfoy, announced that he would also be present at the summit, speaking on behalf of the Treaty of Independence and the interests of a conservative faction in the Wizengamot. While his seat has been suspended for the past three years, Lord Malfoy is widely known to be one of the most influential figures behind both the Independents and the British Honourable.*

*“We will address all of the issues that have forced the wizards of Britain and the world to rise up against this oppressive force,” wrote Lord Malfoy to The Prophet. “To name just one, the use of Muggle methods of arithmancy might have put more Galleons in everyone’s pocket, but they’ve also driven up the prices of even the most basic of goods. Since last year, Floo powder has been three Sickles a scoop. It’s a process known as ‘inflation,’ and the reckless abandon with which this Government and the Tower have been managing Britain must come to an end, before every house is forced to begin mortgaging their cauldrons to goblins just to pay for Floo powder! At minimum, more wizards must be trained in Muggle arithmancy, so that they can protect magic and the magical from the wandless hordes.”*

*A spokesperson for the Tower refused comment on Lord Malfoy’s accusations, saying only that “the Tower recognizes the legitimate concerns of many in Magical Britain and the world, and will act at the behest of Minister for Magic N’Goma to address these issues.”*



*Office of Harry Potter-Evans-Verres, Hogwarts, Scotland  
November 20th, 1992 8:23 am Seven years ago*

“Over there,” said Draco, pointing at one side of Harry’s office. “Just eight beds – no, ten of them. They should be appropriately simple in style, but of good quality wood. And keep quiet about it, would you?”

The house elf frowned, ducking his head down and shaking it from side to side briskly, like a cat worrying a mouse. “I’m most sorry, my lord, most sorry, but we cannot. Students are not permitted to order furniture, unless a prefect issues the request. I know you were allowed to order furniture by Professor Quirrell’s



orders, sir, but he is no longer employed here. I am most sorry, my lord, but perhaps I could go check with your prefect?"

"Please just take care of it, Kuttle," said Harry as he walked in through the door. His wand was out, and he was walking backwards, carefully maneuvering an enormous box of dull grey metal that was floating along behind him. "And treat all those sorts of requests from Draco just the same as if they came from me, please." He paused and looked over his shoulder at Draco, who was glaring at him. "Sorry about that, Draco, they don't—"

"Mr. Potter, sir, I'm sorry, but you can not order furniture either. Unless I check with one of your prefects, or a professor? I am most sorry, sirs," said the elf. He lifted his hands up to his ears and clutched them, nervously. "I have no choice, you see..."

Draco was smirking. "So the legend-in-his-own-time *Harry Potter* still isn't allowed to order furniture, either? He hasn't been made Secret Headmaster or Professor of Self-Importance or anything like that? He still needs to trot off and check up with, ah, Robert Hilliard or another prefect before he gets a new chair?"

"Yes, my lord," said Kuttle, twisting his ears in his hands. He was a bundle of busy energy, and he was holding one foot slightly off of the ground. It trembled as he stood there. It wasn't clear if this situation was making him uncomfortable or if he just found it intolerable to stand still.

"Well, it's just—" started Harry. He floated the metal box over to a corner and let it come to a gentle rest, releasing his spell.

"What about curtains? Can he order curtains?" asked Draco, and now his voice was saccharine sweet.

"No, my lord," said Kuttle.

"I just—" said Harry, turning around indignantly.

"How about a goblet with his initials on it? Wait, sorry, I'm being silly. There wouldn't be enough room on a goblet. How about a bucket?" said Draco, folding his arms in front of him. There was a look of tremendous delight on his face.

"No, my lord," said Kuttle, vibrating in place with anxiety.

"You're bothering him!" said Harry, frowning. There was no sense causing the strange creatures any discomfort. They had enough problems. He turned to the elf. "Please just speak to the Deputy Headmaster about it. I'm sure he'll give you instructions."

“Yes, sir!” said Kuttle eagerly, letting go of his ears with obvious relief. He snapped his fingers, and vanished, leaving only a nervous quiver in the air as he departed.

“It’s important to know the rules,” said Draco with a grin, walking over to Harry. “I was using the Socratic method to discover the exact—”

“Listen, my melanin-challenged friend,” said Harry, “if you tease them, you’re going to end up with hardtack for your tea.”

“I have my own elf, anyway,” Draco said. He waved a hand dismissively, his sleeve swaying. The boy was wearing his Slytherin robes, even though he wasn’t technically a student anymore. In fact, by the laws of Magical Britain, he wasn’t even a *child* anymore. He was nobility and he’d achieved at least five O.W.L.s (seven, in fact), so he was an adult in the eyes of the government.

He pointed at the metal box, which was nearly as tall as Harry. “What’s that?”

“A Muggle computer and some car batteries,” said Harry, brightening. “I know that it’s hard to get electronics to work around magic, but this is a half-inch of lead. I’m going to put a larger cube of lead around it with a sliding cover, and only then open up this one. If this doesn’t work, I’m going to try using plates of goblin-forged silver – there are some big platters on a shelf near the Hufflepuff greenhouse that look pretty fancy, and I bet they’ll work. My hypothesis is that stray spells are to blame – probably a particular sort of spell, too. Charms like Verdimillious or the like.”

“Muggleborns have been trying to get electronics to work – mostly televisions – in Hogwarts for fifty years,” said Draco, shaking his head. “You’re wasting your time, Potter. Think in terms of... think in terms of opportunity costs. You could be doing more useful things. We need some propaganda, for example. You’re terrible at it. And we need to sow some false leads about how we’re doing the healing – the fake metamorphmagus research I mentioned.”

“I know, I know... I’m trying to get all of those things in motion, too. We’re going to optimize the world, and that means trying to coordinate a thousand different things and manage the million different consequences. Even the transition to a post-scarcity

society, someday, is something we have to think about now – whether or not we even want to do it.” Harry shrugged. “But I still need some time to myself. I’m not sure how long I could keep it up if I locked myself in a box and spent every waking minute devoted to other people. So... computer!” He smiled. “And I know other investigators have worked on this, but I bet those other investigators weren’t using the scientific method. Whatever the problem, we’ll probably end up just needing some sort of shielding. If nothing else, we can just keep transfiguring different sorts of insulation. In somewhere between a month to a year, we’ll be compiling code.” He rapped his knuckles against the lead box, smiling. The green gem on his ring clicked against the metal.

Draco nodded, but turned away, uninterested. He walked over to one side of the office and tapped his foot. “Ten beds here. And we’ll station some patrol-wizards over here and over there. Four in here, four at the entrance, and two down the hall. Ten more patrol-wizards to manage the journey here puts the security staff at twenty at any one time. A total of maybe sixty or so.”

“Moody agreed to this plan?” asked Harry, raising his eyebrows. “Bringing in the MPLE?”

“MLEP,” corrected Draco, and Harry made a face. “And no, he hasn’t yet. But he will. He wants to close Azkaban, ever since he and Hermione went on that trip to Wales. And more staff will help.” Draco paused, as if considering his words, then spoke.

“Forty-seven members of the Wizengamot. Five seats are just out of our reach on any vote – Lestrangle, Crabbe, Nott, Knop, and Carrow. Their *comes ad litem* are all old family retainers or allies, and they were all picked specifically to be beyond influence. McGonagall and Bones made a mistake with Jugson’s *ad litem*, since they picked Clancy, and he’s a closet Euphoric. Still out of our reach, but we need to keep an eye on him in case someone else picks him up.”

Harry raised a finger to interrupt, and Draco paused. “We might be able to fix that. I have plans for advancing the human body, and fixing the mesolimbic pathway is one of them. And you said ‘Nott’ twice.”

“Knop,” said Draco. “New blood, from the nineteenth century.” He moved on. “My mother is exercising my own seat still, and that

will continue. Same with Goyle's, held by his uncle. Those are in reserve. Our independence is assumed, and the fact that we're working together is still quiet. Even if it becomes known, everyone will draw the wrong conclusions. And Mother is certainly helping with every cutting comment she makes in public."

Harry nodded. Narcissa Malfoy was one of the leading agitators in the Wizengamot, decrying the "cruel tricks and nasty games of a corrupt government." She'd rallied a contingent that had been thoroughly cowed, and given them confidence. She was beginning to be a political problem.

It was an uncomfortable thing, and Harry didn't want to dwell on it, so he remained silent. But he wondered about what had passed between Narcissa and the son with whom she was becoming acquainted. She, too, had lost Lucius, but she didn't have the hopes that Draco had been given. She didn't know about the possibilities of the future... about the world that might be, someday. A centaur had been proof of concept for Draco, but Narcissa didn't have that.

Perhaps Draco had made her other promises. The dark magics of legend held similar – if less palatable – possibilities. A Malfoy ascendant, unrestrained, could make many things happen. Was that what Narcissa held, in lieu of Draco's pure hopes? Or was Draco disconnected from her after ten years, and comfortable just leaving her in the darkness with her anger?

"Of the remaining thirty-nine seats," continued the Slytherin, and Harry returned his attention to his friend, "there are eighteen more held *suo jure*. No, that's not... ah, sorry, the Noble House of Granger – hoary with age – is nineteen. You have six of them by loyalty, including your own. You have five more by conviction or self-interest. Greengrass is changeable, but she goes the way the strong wind blows, and pulls Brooks with her. That means that we need twelve seats of the remaining twenty-eight members: eight members *suo jure* and twenty of the Ministry's members *ex officio*. And we only have five of those twelve."

Harry was already there. "But two of the *ex officio* members have connections to the DMLE. Nguyễn, whose wife is an auror at Azkaban, and Brandenburg." So if they gave those members of the Wizengamot a reason to believe that their little fiefdom would grow, rather than shrink, that might win them over. "Okay, sold."

“Moody will say something about how grizzled and experienced and paranoid he is, and then insist on full aurors instead of patrol-wizards,” said Draco. “And that will be the debate in the Wizengamot, too.”

“And you’ll steer that, then? Bones is ours, and she’s a realist, but I think she should stay out of keeping the terms of debate where we want them. Secret support for expanding the DMLE would bring a backlash against her,” said Harry, thoughtfully.

“It would? Why, yes, Potter, I suppose it would,” said Draco, his face agast in pretend astonishment. “My goodness, what if everyone involved in the vote has ulterior motives? How dreadful!”

“You are annoying, and so is our system of government. We’re basically Muggle Indonesia.”

“ ‘Everyone wants the Feverbreak, no one wants the flobberworm,’ ” said Draco, rolling his eyes. “It’s just how things are done.”

“Not for long,” said Harry. “Hermione and I have plans.”

At the sound of Hermione’s name, Draco’s face darkened. “You shouldn’t bother her with things like that – she doesn’t need any more pressure.”

Harry walked away from the metal box, over to his desk. “I’m not going to... exclude her, not with those sorts of plans. She wants to be involved. She *needs* to be involved.” He settled into the chair behind the desk, and sighed. “She’ll find her Patronus. We both know what kind of person she is.”

“Granger can’t handle this, Potter. She can’t cast it. And she’s killing herself with trying.” Draco said, moving to one of the chairs in front of the desk and sitting down.

“I’m not encouraging her... I want her to rest, too. I think part of the reason she can’t do it is that she’s just exhausted. But... I’m not going to kick her out when she comes to me with plans. Or tell her to leave a discussion. When Lesath disappeared last week, she searched for hours – and came to me even later with a plan for searching the Forbidden Forest. How do I tell her to stay out of it?”

Harry remembered the look of the young girl when she brought him her notes about the relative merits of a spiral search, grid search, or strip search, asking for his input before she organized

the aerial search. The search needed to not only be efficient (in case Lesath was in danger and lost in the Forest), but also provide for the possibility that his mother might be involved. But she'd looked like she was paper-thin with weariness, nervously plucking at the green-and-gold necklace that Draco had given her for her birthday two months ago. He'd told her that she needed to take a break... but he'd known that she wouldn't and that he shouldn't force her to.

Draco scowled. "It'll be on your head if anything happens to her," he said, with a note of warning in his voice.

"No, it won't," Harry replied, heavily. "And that's the point. Sometimes things get bad for someone. Sometimes they get *really* bad. But that doesn't mean you take away their choices. Because..." He gestured at the air, searching for words. "Because... sometimes you don't know what a person's made of. What they can be."



*John Snow Center for Medicine and Tower School of Doubt (The Tower)*

*April 30th, 1999*

*5:12 pm*

*Now*

"Seal the hall!" shouted Pip, shoving wildly at the broken corpse that was slumped across his chest. He pushed it up and back enough to kick himself free, scooting out from under the body of the attacker. "Seal it! Hit the wailers, set up a perimeter!"

Fernández didn't reply, but complied. He slammed the steel-bound door, and the air crackled as he engaged the seals, cutting the general ward and the rest of the clinic off from the north corridor with a shield of goblin silver and a dozen readied enchantments. Pip put a hand on the wall and hauled himself to his feet, jamming his fingers into a ragged scar on the stone for a hand-hold. His wand was already raised and pointing down the corridor again, although he didn't even remember picking it back up.

He gathered his will, and put up a Prismatic Shield, pushing it out so that it intersected with the walls and blocked off the corridor

entirely. Once it was stable, he began putting up the Umbrella Barrier Bauble Charm, the logical next step. J.C. Kraeme pushed him to the side with her shoulder as she stepped up next to him and began preparing second-step wards for when his Shield went down. He spared her just enough of a glance to see that she'd healed most of her face. The skin was shiny and red; she'd rushed through the job so that she could get back into the fight.

Pip didn't even know how they got into this situation.

One minute everything was as quiet as a Gryffindor brainstorming session: he was on post outside of the clinic in the north corridor, trying to think of something intelligent to say to the Norden auror stationed with him. Tilma Kulgora was extremely beautiful and tall, and he was fairly sure they actually knew each other from when he'd been at Nurmengard.

The next minute, the response abacus began clacking loudly and the attackers had already streamed out of the Receiving Room, charging down the corridor.

Their enemies were all men, covered in red scars and howling in between curses. They favored the Hontheim Curse, Hippo's Fire, and other nasty dark curses, but they didn't bother with tactics or shielding... or even the Killing Curse. They seemed entirely mad, raving with anger, eyes wide and mouths stretching in screams that were so fervent that the muscles of their neck stood out from their flesh.

Kulgora followed protocol, and spun her time-turner while Pip began to stun and *Incarcerous* the attackers. Fernández and Kraeme joined him from within the clinic moments later, after ensuring that the pair of aurors in the discharge wing were ready for action. But even as the three defenders began taking down their opponents, there was an explosion of golden particles as Kulgora screamed and began to dissolve. Pip had just enough time to look over and see her time-turner malfunctioning, spitting bright motes of light that were eating away Kulgora's flesh like bloody basilisk venom. Then she was gone in a final swirl of fragmented light, although her scream lingered, sounding like it was calling from some great distance before fading away. The burst of gold that accompanied Kulgora's death sprayed out on the others – it took off Kraeme's face like a peeler and ate an irregular pattern

into the stone of the walls. Kraeme collapsed behind Pip, blood pouring from her face, screaming.

Even as Pip fumbled with his free hand for his bubbler, he could hear a voice shout out of the resonator inside the clinic, yelling in the device's quavery metal voice not to use time-turners, that there was a new spell, that there was an attack, that everyone should adopt Protocol Apple.

*It must be Russia, it's always Russia*, he had time to think. And then there was no more time for thinking at all.

It was hard to know exactly how long he'd already been fighting when Kraeme got back to her feet, but it was long enough that the corridor in front of them had been piled with bodies, two or three deep, and at least one *Incendio* had scorched Pip's left arm and the side of his neck. He understood, now, how they'd gotten through the Receiving Room. There were so many of them that they must simply have swarmed the aurors. They were fighting like Muggles – using brute force and superior numbers to overwhelm. Even the most skilled fighter, they had warned Pip in training, couldn't reliably win in close-quarters combat with more than three people. Madame Bones had put it bluntly: "You only have one wand and two hands."

Pip felt the Umbrella Barrier Bauble Charm set into place, although it was too noisy to hear the quiet tinkle of bells that accompanied the ward. Their attackers had closed the distance to Pip and Kraeme, now that Pip had stopped cursing, and they were already hammering on his Prismatic Shield. He pulled it out of suspension before it could be lost, and put his will behind it once more. Six attackers – seven, no, *eight*, with more arriving every moment – were firing curse after curse into the shield. Three more were simply smashing the rainbow shimmer with their fists, squeezing into the corridor so that they could beat themselves bloody on it.

Pip felt a tap on his shoulder from Kraeme, and he released the Shield. The eleven attackers who'd forced themselves into the space fell forward into the Bauble Charm. There was a heavy thump to the air, so powerful that Pip felt his entire body shudder from the proximity of it, and the Charm triggered. An invisible wave of air expanded down the corridor with crushing force. In the



narrow confines, all of its strength was concentrated. Most of their attackers were pulped against the stone walls, which themselves cracked and shifted under the pressure, while the rest were forced back to the entrance of the Tower, where the north and south corridors split off from each other.

There was no time to rest; Kraeme had her own Baubles already cast, and they both moved forward a few steps, to give themselves a place to retreat if necessary. They could hear the low-pitched sound of the wailers in the clinic behind them, charged and ready, in case Pip and Kraeme fell and the seals were broken. Defense in depth.

The enemy surged forward, screaming and howling and cursing, some of them slipping on the blood and viscera that was thick on the floor. But Kraeme was with him, and they could handle this. Pip grinned, and drove them back, firing off rapid *Depulsos*. Easy to cast, and it gave Kraeme a chance to lace into the packed mob with a Severing Charm, surgically placed.

They'd keep up the teamwork until they had a chance to create another breathing space – a moment to move forward and push back against the attack. If they could force back these lunatics to the Receiving Room, they could use the first door-shield. It didn't matter if there was an army being sent in against them, not with that shield. They could lock it in place and wait for the rest of the DMLE to relieve them. Or even better – leave it just enough ajar that they could flood the Receiving Room with something called “halothane.” Pip didn't know exactly how it worked, but he'd been told its name and a rough idea of what it did, and that was enough to transfigure it. They'd put everyone to sleep. And if that didn't work, if the madmen had presence of mind enough to counter such a simple attack, there were other things that could be done. They'd not only hold the clinic: they'd push these bloody bastards right out of the Tower.

Someone at the summit had betrayed them all, but they hadn't reckoned on Tally Pirrip's son.

There was someone new at the end of the corridor, not just another raver. A woman in black. She kicked a shrieking man out of her way as she stepped into sight. She was calling something, but it couldn't be heard over the tumult. The woman had a shield

up, and it turned aside Pip's first few sallies. Through unspoken agreement, he turned to fighting the lunatics, instead, driving them back with a flurry of curses delivered with such speed that he felt his magic strain. Kraeme engaged the woman.

It was over in a moment, and Pip didn't get a chance to say anything. He only heard the words, clearly this time: "*Avada Kedavra!*" Kraeme fell to the ground beside him, lifeless and limp. The woman turned and stalked out of sight, away from the north corridor. She was going elsewhere.

Pip was alone.

The madmen howled and attacked.



It was Moody's plan, at its heart.

*"A well-designed security system must plan for the harmless, the foolish, the stupid, and the insane... and yet still defeat your most clever enemy. Herpo the Foul, creator of the Horcrux spell and one-time master of Greece, is said to have put it this way: 'Your trap must be a windmill, engaging the intruder with each new blade and forcing them to react.' Not that it did him much good, since he tangled with one auror too many in the sixteenth century. There's a lesson, there, too: don't brag in public."*

The south corridor led to many of the smaller research stations and to the meeting room. Past those, there was Material Methods and the Survey Station and all of their incredibly valuable projects – sfaironautical equipment, new weapons, and the lot. Plus the Extension Establishment was in the rear, and at the moment it was filled with a crowd of worthies and valuable hostages.

It was possible to access all of those from the north corridor, by going through the general ward and discharge ward of the clinic, but the clinic was heavily defended. Goblin silver and intricate seals, the best that could be devised, had been set in place to seal it off in case of attack. This was both to guard any patients *and* out of the assumption that many attacks might originate from within the clinic.

The south corridor, on the other hand, was not designed to seal itself away and wait for help. It was designed to disable or kill any attacker who managed to get that far.

Draco had reacted with surprise and alarm when the abacuses began to clatter their alarm, and even Harry – who had been expecting this for days – jumped a little. He sprang to his feet.

“This is it. This has to be it,” he said. “She’s here. She’s brought it,”

Harry had been dropping hints in a subtle way for a long while, but had recently dropped the final plum before the press... and had made sure it was published. The artifact that he needed. The artifact that humanity needed. The artifact that was hidden beyond the reach of every divination he’d been able to discover in recent years. The artifact that Voldemort had woven into his Horcrux network. The artifact to which his chief lieutenant must have access.

*Bellatrix Black. You have some part of the lore and power he gained as the Heir of Slytherin, evading the Interdict of Merlin, and you have things that I need. But all you need – all you could ever need – is Tom Morfin Riddle. And you know that we have him.*

It must have seemed inconceivable to her – that Voldemort could be held prisoner by a stripling like Harry, and that the Tower could be impenetrable to every attempt to magical intrusion or scrying. It should have been impossible for Harry to do either, even with the assistance of the world’s mightiest wizards. And yet it was true. Interdicted knowledge and dark rituals wouldn’t help her. Voldemort was beyond her reach.

Lesath had been the clue – or reminder, perhaps, that there was an outside threat that they could never hope to control. A fallback plan for Voldemort, who would have had plans within plans within plans.

Poor, poor Lesath.\* What had he been doing, these seven years? What information had been stripped from him by his mad mother? Had he been forced to help her search for her Dark Lord? Did he still bear his misguided allegiance to Harry? Had he suffered?

“*The Resurrection Stone, which could pierce any world,*” he had mentioned at the launch of the *Monroe*. A small, careless mistake among other such small, careless mistakes.

*I have barriers you cannot break, Bellatrix. I hold Voldemort within them, your love and lord, Bellatrix. Come to me, Bellatrix.*

*Bring me the Spirit Stone. And bring me yourself, and I will give you rest.*

Harry turned to Hermione. “We need the Resurrection Stone. She will have it with her. She *must* have it with her.”

“You should go to the Extension Establishment,” she replied, getting to her feet. “It will be safe. The Brahmins and the Siberians – the Rakshasa – are both there, along with the Returned. Send Tonks here.”

Harry shook his head. “I need to be here.”

“Don’t you *have* to go... no, the Vow won’t make you... hell, this is not the time to argue,” said Hermione, gritting her teeth. “Like a play, indeed,” she muttered, as she turned to Draco. “He’s being an idiot. Go get Tonks and Hyori, and keep an eye on all those fancy people. And make sure no one over-reacts.”

Draco walked to the table and picked up his cane. “Use your mirrors and tell that American to sort everyone out. He can get on a stepladder, he’ll do just fine. I’m not going anywhere.”

“This is *embarrassing* and you’re both idiots,” said Hermione, snatching her bubbler out of her robes.

The resonator in one corner began vibrating. It was a fairly simple device – a low-tech, low-magic way to communicate to the whole Tower in an emergency. The Protean Charm made any change to the source item occur in all linked items. This included vibration, such as the vibrations that produced sound. “Time-turners are compromised,” warbled the resonator, erring on the side of loudness instead of clarity. The mechanics had been difficult to work out. “Unknown magics from attackers. Protocol Apple. We are under attack and the Terminus is down. Protocol Apple. Protocol Apple. Protocol Apple.”

Time-turners were compromised? But the enchantment to block time-turning took months to set in place... was this some of Voldemort’s interdicted lore, or...?

Harry touched his wand to the table, and thin seams appeared on its surface. He pulled up on one, and a mirror slid up and out of a recess. It showed the north corridor – a view from the clinic door. There were aurors there, and they were fighting. He couldn’t make out the identity of the defenders from their backs, but he could see the attackers: screaming men in ragged clothes. Low skills,

but there were dozens of them. Thankfully, the defenders seemed to be making short work of each one as they appeared, entangling and rending them apart with fire. There should be three aurors there, though... ah, and the missing one had probably tried to use a time-turner.

He opened a second display. The south corridor was similarly defended – two aurors fighting a holding action. They were standing at the corner where the corridor turned; behind them was one wall of the Vision Verge. Doors to other departments were all visible – Advancement Agency, Ypsilanti Yard, the Survey Station – although the attackers seemed to have no interest in any of them. They were charging down the hall, pell-mell.

He could hear Hermione on her bubbler, calling in Tonks and Hyori, putting Reg in charge, asking if everything was okay. But his attention was on the image in front of him. He wished a view of the Receiving Room was possible. How many were dead there, already?

One of the aurors in the south corridor conjured strong blasts of wind, forcing back their attackers for a moment, while the other knelt and touched his wand to the floor. The auror whispered the command word, and the traps engaged.

With a series of tiny explosions, so quick they sounded simultaneous, pitons blew out of the walls as pneumatic pressure was released. Fifty metallic projectiles erupted from one wall into the opposing one, burying themselves into the stone at odd angles. Only one enemy was struck by the attack: a hooting man with long hair and half his face raked with red scars fell to the ground, screaming, as a metal bolt passed through his shoulder. The others only paused for a half-second, then leapt to the attack, screaming derision and madness.

The one in the lead whipped his wand forward, shouting a curse, but his voice broke into an inchoate scream. He staggered to the side as blood began pouring from his chest, and an invisible blade cut further into his flesh, sectioning out a wedge of meat and bone. He fell backwards, gurgling, and a second carbon nanotube bisected him. He died with bared teeth.

The other madmen screamed and twitched as they met the edges of invisible razors, cutting themselves as they tried to move forward or duck or jump. They fell all to pieces.

New attackers appeared at the end of the hall, and the aurors brandished their wands, leveling them over the gore-strewn ruin. Beads of blood and gobbets of flesh were suspended in the air, but they went unnoticed, and the shrieking men, covered with scars, gave themselves terrible wounds on the first few razor-wires. The aurors assisted with the confusion, one of them putting up wards while the other – it was Auror Kwannon, Harry could see now – laid waste with Cutting Curses.

The illusion didn't last long. One of the scarred men obliterated his neighbor with a wash of fire, and then snarled something and jabbed a finger at the corridor. Kwannon took him down during the pause, lashing him with wide wounds that brought the attacker to his knees, but the damage was done. Five other attackers – as many as could wield their wands abreast in the corridor – began to fire curses at the walls and aurors from afar. Those behind them howled and gibbered, climbing on each other to gain a narrow window through which to fling a curse at Kwannon and the other auror.

The pitons were easy to break free from the wall, and most of the attackers had no trouble blowing apart the anchoring on one side or another with *Deprimo* or other blasting curses. They suffered Kwannon's attacks in the meantime, falling wounded or dead until the floor at their end of the corridor was slippery with blood and viscera. She was using more gusts of air, as well, to knock them off-balance.

Despite this, they still had the weight of seemingly unlimited numbers. More than a hundred attackers had already poured into the north and south corridors, forcing their way through the golden entrance of the Tower. There were simply too many, and they managed to disable a dozen of the razor-wires before the gas reached them.

Individually, the tanks of cyanogen chloride were not very large. When Moody and two unnamed and grim-faced aurors had installed them within the walls, behind the firing nozzles of the razor-wire pitons, they'd wanted to work with small quantities. The gas caused choking, a burning sensation on any affected skin, blindness, and – quite rapidly – death. It didn't need to be inhaled: any contact with the skin would burn and bite and

sicken. Even with transfiguration protocols in place, they'd been worried about an accident going out of control. Harry hadn't been able to be within sight, much less close enough to help... it was just *that* dangerous.

Immediately, the madmen began choking and spluttering, clutching their faces. All of their exposed skin was probably being affected, but mucous membranes were the most sensitive.

Harry leaned forward, squinting at the image. Was Bellatrix in that mess of thrashing and howling bodies? He glanced over at the other image. No, there she was, laughing and staring with wide eyes down the north corridor at the clinic. She must have gathered at least a little information about the Tower – she must know there was nothing for her down that path. She had no reason to –

He shut his eyes, in spite of himself, as Bellatrix whipped her wand forward and sent a bolt of green coruscating down the corridor. It struck Kraeme, and she fell to the floor. And then she was gone, moving towards the south corridor. Heading for him.

Harry glanced over his shoulder to see Tonks and Hyori arrive at the meeting room. Tonks was just beginning to make the change to Harry's appearance. She looked pale, but determined. Hyori looked as blankly belligerent as usual, her wand ready in her hand. Hermione was in a hushed conversation with them both – telling them about all the traps, including the final one. No danger there: they were both battle-hardened and trustworthy.

"Bellatrix Black and something like two hundred werewolves are attacking," Harry called over to them. His voice was calm. He *felt* calm, against all reason.

"Hide," commanded Hyori, scowling at him and pointing a finger at the door. Harry just shook his head.

Hermione was digging in the pouch at her waist. "Harry, it's irresponsible for you to stay here. Go to the Establishment with Draco, organize that line of defense."

"I need to be able to speak to her," Harry said. "It is *astoundingly* important that I speak to her." He deliberately stopped his next words, which were going to be "if she even makes it this far." *Of course* she was going to make it this far. And she probably had tricks he didn't know about, and plans of her own, and everything

else. Was it really so important that he confront her – that he look her in the eye and speak to her?

*Don't worry, my trusted ally, there's no way that the enemy and their ill-equipped army will manage to penetrate to the center of my fortress, past all of my traps. I won't deny myself the pleasure of watching their demise. And if they do make it this far, then I want to look them in the eye when I defeat them with some of the most powerful objects in the universe that surely will never leave my control and threaten all of mankind.*

"Years of planning with Alastor, and you're going to tell me that you think it's sufficiently pessimistic to think pneumatic tubing is going to do the trick, here?" said Hermione, openly scornful.

"I'm stupid," agreed Harry, and started for the door.

*Is this cowardice?*

"Just..." he started, but he couldn't think of anything good to say. He couldn't think of anything that had enough weight – that sounded right.

"Harry, go. Be good," Hermione said. She was pulling on her golden gauntlet, and the Cloak of Invisibility was draped over her arm.

Harry set up a bubbler before he went, setting it on a conjured stool in a corner with a clear view. Then he left the room, walking with hurried steps out through the rear door, heading to the Extension Establishment.



"Out of the way, little men," snapped Bellatrix Black, as she approached the corridor. But she saw that very many of them were unable to obey, thrashing and choking. "*Bullesco*," she cast, and a bubble swelled from one nostril until it encompassed her head. She felt light-headed, and there was a mad dash to her pulse.

*Here here here here my Lord, I'm here. I'm here for you for you for you for you for you for you*

And she stopped her thoughts before they went too far, before she started laughing again. Time to fight time to kill time to



murder. Despite herself, she giggled at that, a bit. A bit. Bits and bits. Bits and bobs and blobs. *For you for you for you for you*, she chanted in her head, more calmly.

Her skin was burning. Transfiguration attack, airborne acid.

*“You are too slow, Bella, and now you are dead. Do you feel that? Listen to me, do you feel that? That’s your brain dying because you can’t breathe, Bella. I will save you, because I love you, but it is important that you remember this. Remember how it feels. Remember what to do. Listen to me, and do as I say. Look at me, Bella. Listen to me and do as I say. You will learn how to fight. You will learn how to live.”*

She sent a wave of fire down the corridor, roiling and white-hot, feeding and growing on the air itself. Two dozen men burned and died. Her men, her little men. Little wolves. Pups. Puppies. She couldn’t smell the air, but she knew what it must smell like. Fire in the air smelled rich and nutty and scorched.

Aurors at the end of the corridor. More aurors. More dollies.

Curses. Moving slowly, in slow motion. Fighting fighting fighting. Obvious attack and supporting attack – direct and tricky, jam and butter. Twirl to the side and bring up a shield, use Bartolomeo’s Reckoning, easy to cast while moving, redirect the tricky attack and avoid the direct. Move with grace and speed and death. Silly dollies.

*“Do you see this? You had two of these, and now you only have one. You’re slow, Bella. My dear, dear Bella. Dry your tears. Do you wish to be slow? You will be in pain, or perhaps even dead. I would be so sad if you were dead. The world would be less beautiful. Less perfect. For you are a thing of perfection, Bella. But what are we to do? We can put this eye back, but will you still be slow? No, you won’t. You’re a good girl. You will have something to show Dumbledore.”*

Other attacks moving in, but they’re slow, and easy to break out of their rhythm. That was the key to good music – playing with life, rather than plodding along to  $\frac{3}{4}$  time like a fool. She danced to the side and whipped her wand down, sending the Bloodfoot Curse at one of the aurors. Not to hit her, although that would suit Bellatrix fine, but because it was a big red curse that left her wand in the Ochs. She flicked off two quick Bertram Bolts in the

Bloodfoot's wake, but knew a counter-attack must already be on the way, and brought her wand down for another Bartolomeo. *Ha! B b b b b b b b be be be be here be here be here I'm here I'm here*

Unsuccessful, both aurors alive, but that was all right. Bellatrix curved her mind in the right shape and clutched with her will at the space before her, wrapping specific thoughts like gloved fingers into the world and dragged them downward. A burden of hard air curved over her, slowing an incoming red curse – a stunner a stunner dollyes using stunners! – and then laughed another spell of fire downrange at the aurors. The flames licked and slid down the corridor. Someone underfoot was screaming and screaming. There were things hanging in the air, little black bits, what was that? Traps! Muggle traps! Stupid rat Muggles with little rat brains. Won't stop Bella. Not from getting to Him.

*"If you don't want it, then why do you even try? I can't even look at you. You are some... creature. A pathetic, nasty little creature. You're disgusting. It's your soul, that's what's so vile. Thick and clogged... like a stopped-up drain. But you don't even know what that is, do you, nastiness? Why do you do this to me? Why won't you be pure for me?"*

"*Avada Kedavra,*" she sang, and sent a green bolt down the corridor. Her target – the female one – was off-balance and had her wand down from deflecting the fire. Elemental defense required broad gestures. She couldn't hope to react in time. Bella shrieked out laughter as the dolly died.

The other one said nothing, but took the opportunity afforded by her companion's death to whip curse after curse at Bellatrix, casting so quickly that he would have nothing left when it was over. Burning himself out, in the hopes that he might get lucky. *Sacrifice. Silly sacrifice. Stupid silly sacrifice no b is better. B for better.*

She threw herself to the side and then again and then again, ducked and twirled and shielded, and never stopped laughing.

"*Incarcerous. Silencio. Aggragify,*" she cast, a solid string of spells delivered with such fluid beauty and precision that she *knew just knew* He would be proud of her. The auror smashed into the wall behind: wrapped with cords, silenced, and bewitched.

“Silly,” Bellatrix said, slightly out of breath. “Not even dying with dignity like your friend. Just dead and failed, little dolly.” She giggled, and raised her wand. Muggle traps. Muggle traps. Little rat Muggle traps.

The Sigil of Cold Earth, traced in red fire. The ancient name of a bitter creature, spoken six times. Was she calling some part of that creature, or was there only one in the world? One beautiful bitter beast, feeding on her sacrifice – she willed the sacrifice, felt the bite of burning in her breast – one bitter burning beast. *B b b b b b b b.*

“Az-reth. Az-reth. Az-reth. Az-reth. Az-reth. Az-reth,” Bellatrix crooned. And scarlet flames reached out from the rune, stretching indolently, almost casually, as they smoothed into the shape of limbs. It was red all shot through with black, as though the flames had some terrible leprosy.

A chimera of hellish flame padded gently out of the rune and came to stand on the smoking stone before Bellatrix. A leonine head, flame-flickering mane with black-edged teeth. A broken-necked goat’s head sprouting from the body, lolling back and forth and smiling a terrible smile. A snake of scarlet, whipping around and snapping at the air with small puffs of heat.

*“Sweet Bella. Come here. You love me, don’t you, Bella? You must do something for me. It needs to be done. It may be unpleasant. But you will do it. So go. Go and be good.”*



## Chapter Eighteen

# Levels

At some point in the past few minutes, all of Hermione's confusion and anxiety and sadness had been swept away, leaving only the cold and clear consideration of tactics.

*I need to stop Bellatrix, protect Harry and Draco and a roomful of dignitaries to preserve this new peace, and get the Resurrection Stone. And to save any aurors that I can still rescue.*

*I can directly command the aurors and my Returned, and probably also get the Boston Brahmins and the Siberian Rakshasa, if necessary.*

*Bellatrix is, without question, here for Voldemort. Harry said that she didn't seem capable of caring about anything else – she might have plans and secondary goals on his behalf, but her purpose is clear. She'll want Harry, since she'll rightly assume he knows where Voldemort is kept. She is one of the most fearsome witches of her generation and has access to spells and power we don't have, but she also spent years in Azkaban and has been forced to resort to a single desperate attack with a massed army of psychotic, enslaved werewolves.*

*No, that doesn't make any sense. She wouldn't risk herself in an attack like this without some sort of trump card – some way to defeat all the massed forces she knows are present here. Some way to defeat me. That would mean risking Voldemort's last chance at freedom, and if she were unhinged enough to do that, then she wouldn't have waited this long and prepared this much. She has some additional force or power at her command... even beyond Fiendfyre.*

Plans danced in her mind, considered in their permutations and in their costs. No time for optimal planning or more than

one level of preparation – they needed direct response, and they needed it before Bellatrix managed to pass through the trapped south corridor.

*Massed attack with Returned... no, narrow constraints make us all vulnerable to any unknown threat or renewed werewolf attack. Lure into open room and trap... no, would sacrifice too much ground and put her too close to assets.*

*Direct attack, flank her and cut off any reinforcements, set up a second layer of defense and trust to Harry for a third layer. She'll go for him – assume he knows where Voldemort is kept.*

There, yes, that was it. No time to second-guess. She committed.

“Here’s the plan,” said Hermione, throwing the Cloak of Invisibility to Hyori. “Take this and go around the back, to the rear of the clinic. Have them let you through – you know the sequences? – so you can flank Bellatrix. Stop at the Establishment on the way and tell Simon and Esther to come here to guard ‘Harry.’ The Americans and Siberians should stay with the real Harry and prepare to swarm Bellatrix if she makes it that far... he should make a false Voldemort, just in case.” Her last words were as much for the benefit of Harry’s bubbler in the corner as Hyori.

Hyori caught the Cloak and sprinted from the room without another word, her lips pursed.

Tonks, who was lifting the meeting room table onto its side for a barricade, glanced over at Hermione. He had already fashioned himself into a perfect simulacrum of Harry, and had torn the collar of his robes to make them look more masculine. “And you’re going to go try to duel my dear Auntie Black, are you?”

“Yes, in order to protect your dear cousin Draco and everyone else,” said Hermione, working her fingers in her gauntlet and heading to the other door.

“I’m Harry’s distant cousin, too, actually, along with half that room of muckity-mucks,” said Tonks, cheerily. “All our families have been snogging each other for a thousand years.”

“A proud legacy,” said Hermione, smiling. She drew her wand.

“Don’t die, mudblood!” called Tonks, after her.

“You either, blood traitor,” replied Hermione, and then she was through the door and heading to the south corridor, breaking into a run.

She could already see the auror as she rounded into the corridor. He was standing at the corner with the south corridor, putting up runes. Probably runes of balance, out of the hopes that it would damage Bellatrix's Fiendfyre chimera. He didn't run.

*A brave man*, she thought, and pushed into a flat-out run, arms pumping. *Balance probably won't be enough to save his own life, but it's most likely to slow her down. He's willing to die to buy us a few more minutes.*

She raised her wand, holding it level as she ran, and then flicked it twice to the left – “*Lagann!*” – and then with a sharp rising jerk towards herself – “*Impedimenta!*” The auror's location wards broke under her first spell, and he was jerked off his feet with the second, sliding towards her, legs flailing. She leapt as she reached him, one powerful stride carrying her ten meters forward and over him. Hermione had the briefest of glimpses of a look of absolute awe on the man's face – Auror Salamander, she recognized him – and then she was past him. She lowered her body into a lunge and turned herself, and her feet skidded over the stone. She came to a neat stop at the corner, standing over the body of the fallen auror. Everything was red and scarlet. There was Fiendfyre.

And there was Bellatrix Black.

It was hard to see her past the chimera, which was lazily pushing at the stone of the floor, kneading it with lion's paws as it vitrified and bubbled. But she was there. A tall woman with a strong jawline, she was dressed in black leather leggings and a ragged gray tunic, belted at the waist. One of her arms was black and misshapen: an enchanted prosthetic. Bellatrix had a wide smile on her face.

“Ten green bottles, standing on the wall,” she sang, loudly. Her voice was high-pitched – too young for her age. She tilted her head, and stared at Hermione down the length of the corridor. Dozens of carbon nanotubes blocked her path... but they wouldn't withstand an instant of Fiendfyre.

“Bellatrix Black!” shouted Hermione. “My name is Hermione Granger! I know you're here for your Dark Lord... let us give you what you want!” She glanced down at the body of the auror, and leaned over to grasp it with one hand and give it a powerful shove away from her. The fallen auror tumbled end-over-end towards the meeting room.

“Ten green bottles, standing on the wall,” repeated the other witch, and bubbled with a moment of insane laughter.

“Can you hear me? Can you understand me?” shouted Hermione. She tensed her fingers on her wand, and flexed her other hand within her gauntlet.

“And if one green bottle should happen to fall...” said Bellatrix, and raised her free hand. She gestured, and her Fiendfyre chimera jerked upright and lurched forward. The scabrous black lines channeling through the thick flames pulsed, and the broken-necked goat’s head riding atop the nightmare’s back lolled to one side.

“Bellatrix!”

“There’ll be nine green bottles, standing on the wall!” shrieked Bellatrix and waved her hand again. The chimera leapt into the air and blazed forward, flaring bright with hellish flame. It surged towards Hermione, and it was so hot that it was destroying the nanotubes before it even touched them – she could hear the rapid staccato clicks as they broke. The chimera flared and crackled and melted the surface of the corridor into glass as it surged towards Hermione, and nothing stood in its way.

And she had a moment, then, to remember.

*Pain. Heat. A sweet stink in her nostrils. Her hair crackling as it burned. No knowledge of her body, which had gone far away – only pain and panic. Somehow she’d lost track of herself, even though she knew on some level that she was thrashing and screaming and there was no Granville oh god Granville was gone. But no, that level of knowledge was going away. The world was going away. She was fading burning dying. There was one level, and it was blackness.*

Hermione remembered, and as time separated into a series of instants, she felt her stomach clench with fear. She felt herself ready to scream. She felt the blackness, waiting.

But in the next instant all of that was gone, and she was brandishing her wand and shouting her defiance, stamping her heels into the stone beneath her until it cracked.

And in the next instant Hermione could feel the *smile on her face* as the chimera flared even brighter – red and crimson, everything was dyed red and crimson – and she heard the loud crack of seals coming loose.



Then the chimera was jerked violently to the right and down, spinning helplessly. Thousands of pounds of air pulled it along, sucking with hurricane force at its fire-formed body. Its snake-tail whipped around and hissed angrily, only to be caught up by a different force and wrenched in another direction. Hermione's shout was lost in the roar of wind, and she felt herself lifting off of her feet. She buried her gauntlet into the wall with an extravagant punch, pushed down on her embedded heels, and held her ground.

Buried in the walls were forty extended spaces, linked into a system. They were as large as possible, and they were filled with nothing... not even air.

The chimera had time enough to buck twice in the air, its lion's body flexing, and then it splashed into the wall of the corridor with a wash of mad-red flame. Three of the vacuum chambers, exposed by the Fiendfyre flames that had melted into the walls, sucked air by the gallons. They exerted over a ton of force on the corridor, expressed in a hurricane of sucking wind. The chimera shockingly managed to hold itself away from them for a moment, straining to pull away with whatever magical force that gave it motion. Hermione could see the lion of black and red flame roar without sound... and then the chimera was torn apart, rent into scraps of scarlet and ribbons of red, spread out and scattered and dissipated.

According to legend, Fiendfyre could not be stopped or killed or contained. The ritual was the incarnation of a creature of flame and hatred, and nothing could stem its destruction.

That hypothesis, however, hadn't held up under testing.

The wind died in a few moments, as ball valves were sucked into place. Hermione pulled her gauntlet free from the wall with a rattle of stones, and glanced to her right. Auror Salamander had been pulled back towards her, but was already back on his feet, running towards the meeting room.

Bellatrix was also standing up. Behind her, four long gouges in the stone showed where she'd held on – she must have dug her own new hand into the wall. Something of which to take note: that device probably had other powers, as well, if she'd gotten it from some hidden hoard.

"*Stupefy*," cast Hermione, and threw herself low and to the side. Bellatrix's own silent curse came in reply a moment later, a

rippling wave of purple crystal that swept over Hermione's head. Hermione kicked herself back to her feet with a nimble motion, whipping her wand around and raising a rapid and disposable Roger's Shield. The multicoloured disc of light unfolded from a single bright line just in time to intercept a second wave of crystal shards. Translucent pieces of the shattered projectiles scattered everywhere, and Hermione could feel them patter into her hair.

*Classically trained duelist, but acts without the rhythm of convention. Voldemort's work. She'll have something up her sleeve that I can't counter – some wardbreaker or elemental conjuration. And even beyond that... she's just better than me. I need to get in close and press my own advantages.*

A thick wash of fog rolled forward from Bellatrix, but Hermione interrupted with a rapid-fire burst of minor hexes, fired from around the edge of her shield. *That fog's slow and flashy, that's a trap.* Without time for another thought, Hermione cooled her mind into a receptive calm and extended her will, thrusting forth the thought of blue November and the smell of burning leaves. A ward of prisms burst into existence, blocking the corridor from top to bottom, and Bellatrix's hidden curse, the Slow Blade of Unusually Specific Destruction, which had been cruising sedately but invisibly forward, burst like a soap bubble.

*I need to–*

But the thought was interrupted as both the prisms and Roger's Shield exploded towards her, shattered by a blazing beam of white-hot light. Hermione felt a hot wave of pain as the energy clipped her right shoulder, and then she was tumbling backwards from the impact. *So fast*, she thought, but there was *no time* and she rolled to one side and thrust out her hand, pushing herself upright with a powerful motion just in time to avoid a sticky goblet of grey liquid, which landed in a pulsing sphere on the stone and exploded into a fine mist.

Hermione recognized the spell and held her breath, but there was just no time to prepare a counter-attack. She could already see a white glow building in intensity at the other end of the corridor, and could only swirl her wand and raise it to Vom Tag, pulling an eruption of grey stone up from the floor. The beam of light broke against the stone with a sound like shattering glass – *the pattern*,

*I see it* – and Hermione threw herself to the side again, smashing into the side of the corridor, as a Killing Curse passed through the space in which she'd just been standing.

Then Hermione seized her advantage while she could. She smashed her clenched and gauntleted hand into her shield of stone, bursting through it with a golden blow, and barked, "AquaCem!"

Sticky foam rushed out of the gauntlet, seething and swelling as it flooded down the hallway towards Bellatrix. Hermione couldn't see it, thanks to the stone that protected her from any backflow, but she could hear the sizzle of spells, muffled by a corridor crammed with foam.

She had a moment. Bellatrix would be delayed for at least a short time. Time enough for Hermione to prepare, and time enough for Hyori to get in position. She didn't dare hope that she'd just ended the fight; even if she'd managed to surprise the other witch and actually catch her in the foam, there were any number of ways Bellatrix could escape.

"*Ventus*," she cast, clearing away the mist. She took a deep breath, and considered her options.

*I should have kept the Cloak, and had Hyori take Simon and Esther with her*, she thought. She'd been wary of sending anyone without perfect concealment around to the north corridor, since more werewolves might have been on the way. *But I made my decision, and it's done. Hindsight bias be damned.*

*So how do I get in close?* She took a quick inventory, trying to think of some way to get to the end of the corridor before Bellatrix could react. Her broom was too slow and vulnerable. Explosives? No, that was silly and impractical, even if it was theoretically possible. She couldn't bubble and have the Anti-Disapparation wards taken down (even if that was something they could easily so), for obvious reasons.

The foam hissed, and some of its stiff grey bubbles poured through the hole she'd left in the stone shield in front of her. Hermione could hear a crackling sound, growing louder by the second. She had another foam charger, should she...

*Oh. Wait, no, that's crazy.*

But she couldn't think of *why* it wouldn't work, and she didn't have anything better, and this needed to end before more people got hurt. So there it was.

Hermione turned and smashed her gauntleted fist into the stone behind her. She twisted her hand violently, and a small shower of broken rock came loose. Pulling the gauntlet free from her hand, she pushed hard on the underside of one knuckle. The spent foam charger came loose, and she pocketed it. She replaced it with a spare wind charger from her pouch, locking it into place next to an identical one. Then she shoved the gauntlet into the hole she'd made, backwards. It faced the opposite end of the south corridor, where Bellatrix was still dealing with the foam.

The sound of crackling had very nearly reached Hermione, and the air was almost unbreathable with an acrid smell. There was some sort of chemical reaction – had Bellatrix set the foam on fire, somehow?

The answer came in seconds, as Hermione's shield of stone began to sizzle. The top melted at the same time that holes appeared along the surface, and Hermione could see the thick yellow mist that was eating away at the rock. She'd changed the foam into some sort of airborne acid.

*How oddly helpful.*

"*Bullesco*," cast Hermione, and the Bubblehead Charm swelled up and around her head. *Here goes... well, something.* She put her back to the gauntlet, facing the end of the corridor and Bellatrix squarely. Then she raised her wand.\* "*Ventus! Ventus! Kavo!*"

Two gusts of wind swept the airborne acid back at Bellatrix. It was the obvious counter-attack, meaning it was an obvious trap – the dull yellow glow of two Bertram Bolts whipped from out of the swirling acid, which had obscured their passage.

But Hermione had also triggered the two wind chargers in her gauntlet. Twin gales of compressed air, released in a moment from their extended space, swept her up and down the corridor, over the curses, bouncing painfully against the ceiling and turning in an awkward tumble. She lost sight of Bellatrix as she spun, but saw the yellow fog of acid vanish in a glimmer of light – the Obliteration Charm.

Hermione hit Bellatrix's shields with one tense leg. Her ankle twisted to the side violently with the impact and she crashed to the ground, arms akimbo and head cracking into the stone sharply. Bellatrix's eyes were wide with shock and anger and

crazed delight. Her false arm held her wand delicately between three fingers, still pointed forward. She brought it down to point at Hermione. “*Avada-*”

Hermione lashed out with her uninjured foot, sharply striking Bellatrix’s wooden arm. The blow would have broken any human arm, but the smooth-grained wooden arm – oddly delicate in appearance, all shifting layers, an intricate mesh of components – was only knocked away.

“Silly stupid scum,” hissed Bellatrix, hopping backwards and out of reach.

Hermione could see the other witch’s eyes clearly, in this instant as she scrambled to her feet. They had a burning intensity to them: the fever brightness of madness. But she saw more than that, and her heart ached as she recognized that there was a hollowness behind her gaze. A hungry distance that lay somewhere in those crazed dark eyes.

*You never Returned, even when you left Azkaban. You carry your Azkaban with you.*

It was a moment of recognition. A moment of hesitation.

Bellatrix’s wand danced in a complicated swivel and bob, and she tapped it on her chest. “*Amandher Penkue!*”

The air shuddered with a pulse of magical power. Hermione felt it in her bones. One of Bellatrix’s eyes popped wetly, exploding from the socket into a small burst of black dust.

*A sacrifice. An old spell.*

“Here I am,” said Bellatrix Black.

“Here I am here I am,” said a second Bellatrix Black.

“Here I am here I am here I am,” said a third Bellatrix Black.



Pip could barely stand. He was very near *toverislot*, and he could feel his will ache with overexertion. He would pass out soon – should have passed out a while ago, actually.

Despite knowing this, somewhere in the back of his mind, he didn’t stop. He couldn’t stop. Pip crushed the crowded hall with attack after attack. His back against the clinic door, he fought screaming madmen. He broke their bodies and rent their flesh,

casting spell after spell, chaining together one effect after another. He fought without stopping, without resting, without thinking.

Pip fought until there was no one left to fight.

The hallway was a ruin of gore and wrecked humanity. Broken or abandoned wands were strewn in and around the smoking remains of their owners. Someone was wetly wheezing, trying to curse or scream even as they drowned in their own blood. Pip leaned on the wall, his vision swimming – but wand at the ready.

The door to the clinic clanked loudly, and swung open behind him. Pip turned, wearily, to see that witch from the Returned – the angry-looking Korean one. Her wand was out, but she appeared to be missing her other arm. *No, an invisibility cloak. Bugger, I am tired.* She stared at him for a moment, narrowing her eyes with scrutiny.

“Hullo,” he said.

“Come,” she replied, handing him a phial. The label read, “PEPPER-UP POTION.” Then she pushed past him, breaking into a run, throwing the cloak over her shoulders.

*I shouldn’t drink this,* Pip thought, as he swallowed the potion. He felt it burn down into his stomach, boiling in his guts. Thick heat spread throughout his limbs, and his ears burned.

*I’m too tired... I’ll just sit down here and take a rest. Forget the lockdown protocol, let the clinic aurors go fight,* Pip thought, as he raced down the corridor after the vanishing Returned, slipping on blood.

*Mum would want me to let someone else take their turn... bollocks to this, I’m going to go have a nap,* Pip thought, as he began to raise his wards for what felt like the thousandth time. New strength was rising in him, but it felt artificial and thin – the false energy of a strong cup of tea in the wee hours of a long watch.

He could hear Bellatrix’s voice as they neared the junction of the north and south corridors. She was chanting something, but there was some strange effect – it sounded like a chorus. Like there were–

Three of the bloody crazy bints. All fighting Hermione Granger.

It was impossible. Everything about it was impossible. It was impossible that Bellatrix had duplicated herself somehow –

it wasn't even an illusion, they were all doing different things! – since there had never been any magic like that, not that he'd ever heard. It was impossible that anyone could cast so many curses – so many Killing Curses! – with such speed and viciousness. He'd heard stories, but to see it...

And it was impossible that the Goddess was *still alive*.

But she was. She ducked and threw up shields and cast curses and lashed out with her fists and feet. Killing Curses streamed past her, but she slipped gracefully among them, pausing only to rip away wards from her foes or attack them. She moved faster than anyone could move. She was dancing between the raindrops.

“*Lagann! Stupefy!*” Pip shouted, and immediately wished he'd kept quiet. His spell smashed through the shields of one of the Bellatrixen, but his stunner hit her wooden right arm and had no effect.

“Oh hell,” Pip said, as that Bellatrix (Bellatrix #1? Bellatrix A? Bellatrix holyhellrunaway?) rounded on him, leaving her doubles to fight the Goddess. Like the other two, she was missing her right eye. A bloody socket wept crimson down her cheek.

“Silly dolly,” hissed Bellatrix A. “It's time to–”

But her words were cut off suddenly, turning into a wet gurgle as a red slash appeared across her throat. Blood began to spurt from the wound, and Bellatrix A staggered backwards into the wall, clutching it with one hand as she tried to clamp her fingers over her throat with the other. Her wand dropped to the floor.

In unison, the two other Bellatrixes whirled. They spoke in one voice.

“*Avada Kedavra.*”

Both curses flashed through the air and vanished into nothingness. There was the sound of someone collapsing to the ground.

“*Stupefy!*” cast Pip again. The stunner missed, but it did force the two standing Bellatrixen to adapt and raise new shields, distracting them for a further precious instant. It gave the Goddess a moment to snatch a knife from a pouch at her waist. She renewed her attack, casting three Bertram Bolts in as many seconds and lunging at the nearest Bellatrix.

Her target whirled to bring up her artificial arm and wand. The Bellatrix deflected the Bolts with an instantaneous Roger's

Shield, and continued the motion to intercept the knife with the enchanted wood of her forearm. It was a marvel of combat.

Something didn't go as the Bellatrix expected, though, since the knife punched right through the prosthetic. It was a small knife, and its silver tip only just breached the other side of the relic-arm, but it was something.

*"Lagann! Lagann! Lagann! Reducto! Reducto!"* Pip began casting, trying to capitalize on the momentum. He kept his distance and only tried to support the Goddess, because he could feel a vast lethargy welling up from his guts. The potion was wearing off. He didn't give up. He wouldn't give up.

*"Thank you for saving the Goddess and the whole Tower,"* breathed Cedric. *He shook Pip's hand, and then held on. He didn't let go as he looked into Pip's eyes. "I... I don't know how to say this, but... I'd noticed you, before. When you were on duty. I noticed you in your auror's robes. Your eyes."*

Pip dodged to the side with a desperate effort, contorting his body to avoid three precise blasts of Hippo's Fire. *"Lagann!"* he cast. *"Depulso! Reducto! Glacius!"* He was slowing down, dimming, fading. Everything began to get darker, and it felt like he was fighting in knee-deep water. Water that was rapidly rising, and making him sluggish and dull. He pushed himself. He pushed himself beyond where he ever thought he could go.

*It felt odd to be sitting at the head table, next to Headmistress McGonagall. But they'd insisted. It was only proper for the new Head of Slytherin to take the place of honour. "I want you to know," said the Headmistress, with a softness in her Scottish voice that he'd never heard, "that Hogwarts owes you a debt it can never repay. The name of Slytherin has new meaning, thanks to you. Let them all be Silver Slytherins in your mold. Let them strive to live up to the name of Pirrip."*

Everything was slow. Too slow. A bolt of fire hit Pip in the leg. He felt the pain as though at a great distance. He couldn't bring up any more shields, couldn't manage any difficult curses. He cast stunners and disarms, and even that took so much effort that it felt like his soul was being scraped raw. *"Stupefy! Stupefy! Expelliarmus!"* Anything to make the Bellatrix react and fight him – to distract her – needed to distract her – needed to save the Goddess...



*"I'm so proud of you, Philip. Your dad would be so proud of you."*

Then he felt a curse hit him in the stomach. Too slow. Couldn't avoid it. Didn't feel like anything, though. The world tilted and rocked as he fell, crumpling to the ground. Couldn't feel his legs. Couldn't feel bloody anything. Everything sideways. Everything dim.

Pip could see the Bellatrix he'd been fighting turn around. She touched her wand to the one with the slashed throat. After a moment, the hand of the fallen Bellatrix twitched and clenched itself. It scrabbled around, looking for a missing wand.

The Goddess was putting up layered shields, trying to outpace the other Bellatrix, whose prosthetic hand seemed to be moving more slowly. They were getting smaller – the whole fight was getting smaller. Everything was shrinking, as though he were being drawn back into a tunnel. A dark tunnel.

Bellatrixen A and B joined their sister. Dull shapes, moving far away. A thick fog. The Goddess was fighting. But it wasn't... wasn't working... she couldn't...

Dimly, Pip watched as Bellatrix Black and her two duplicates cast the Killing Curse. They cast it in quick succession, and they cast it flawlessly. This time, Hermione Granger was too slow.

One of the Killing Curses hit her. Colors were dim, and Pip's mind was fading, but still he saw the green bolt strike her in the chest.

He saw the Goddess die.

Two of the Bellatrixen sprang forward, down the corridor and out of his sight. Pip watched them go with the distant thought that this was important... that this mattered... but he couldn't quite...

Almost as an afterthought, the last Bellatrix turned to him. He watched, dully. He tried to keep his eyes open. He felt for his wand with numb fingers. He needed... he had to...

*"Avada Kedavra."*



Harry had done everything he could. He entered the Extension Establishment with his most commanding air and had informed

everyone that there had been a security breach. The defence had been easy to organize. Draco was there to publicly and cordially avow that the Honourable and Independents had no hand in the attack, and that the same honour which compelled their defiance of tyranny would compel them to defend innocent lives. Harry suspected that, even if Draco hadn't been there, he would have met little opposition. This was his place of power and his fortress, and those in attendance respected such things.

Politics were still a necessity, though, and having Draco with him helped. The Slytherin was able to make awkward requests with such beautiful elegance that they seemed like compliments. Per Aavik-Söderlundh-Ellingsen and the other incompetents were ushered off to the far corners, where they wouldn't be in the way. The process was considerably eased when Harry sent the Brahmins – a grizzled, enormous pack of battle-hardened witches and wizards – next door, to fetch some of the Mobile Marys and other extended spaces. Fully half of the gathered crowd was dispersed among them. Everyone who would be a liability, or who declined to risk themselves, was put out of the way in that manner, and there was room to maneuver and plan.

But then that was arranged, and he'd worked with Draco and Cedric to deploy the British aurors and the Brahmins and their Siberian counterparts and some of the Returned (Urg, Charlevoix, and Susie) in strategic positions, and everyone was weaving wards and shields that were (frankly) far better left to them. Harry stood where he was politely asked to stand by Buckeye Dave of the Brahmins.

And he had to watch the bubbler and wait.

Tonks-as-Harry made her own preparations with Simon and Esther in the meeting room. They laid magical traps and wards and shields. They made plans. Harry watched and listened to them.

He waited.

Draco stood nearby, talking quietly with his mother (who kept giving Harry hateful glares) and Gregory Goyle. Harry wished they could keep talking, openly, like before – even just about the situation, much less everything else that had happened over these past few years.

Harry thought about everything that could be lost today. He thought about Dumbledore's wise words about war and loss, seven years ago, in a room filled with monuments to the fallen.

*"I see that you still do not understand. I think you will not understand until the day that you – oh, Harry. So very long ago, when I was not much older than you are now, I learned the true face of violence, and its cost. To fill the air with deadly curses – for any reason – for any reason, Harry – it is an ill thing, and its nature is corrupted, as terrible as the darkest rituals. Violence, once begun, becomes like a Lethifold that strikes at any life near it. I... would spare you that lesson the way I learned it, Harry."*

Would Harry learn that lesson today? Would he learn that there were never enough levels to a plan – never enough layers of deception or preparation that could save everyone?

He'd rejected that principle, then and every other time he thought about it. Dumbledore had shown him the costs of war, and had challenged him: did Harry really think he was smart enough – that *anyone* could be smart enough or prepared enough or powerful enough – to fight a war without loss?

Dumbledore had tried to point out that violence was often unpredictable, and seldom neat. They spoke of history – Gandhi and Churchill and Grindelwald – and they spoke of slippery slopes. And still, all around them, had been the evidence of loss. Dumbledore had done everything he could to avoid war, and when it came, he had led the forces of goodness. He had been the most powerful wizard known to the world, and he had somehow discovered the Word of the First Enchanter and had listened to every prophecy held in Britain, and *still* he had suffered grievous losses in the wars against Grindelwald and Voldemort.

"I do not accept your answer, Headmaster," Harry had said at the time. It had been a childish refusal to engage in an argument on its merits, really. "You are willing to accept balances of power where the bad guys end up winning. I am not," he'd said.

*"Refusing to accept something does not change it. I wonder now if you are simply too young to understand this matter, Harry, despite your outward airs; only in children's fantasies can all battles be won, and not a single evil tolerated."*

Harry had hated the bullying at Hogwarts. He'd been willing to disrupt the school to stop it. If that had upset Lord Jugson,

he'd been willing to arrange for Lord Jugson to be exiled. If that had upset Lord Malfoy and his whole Wizengamot contingent, he'd been willing to break Malfoy and every single one of them – or all of them at once, if need be.

For the sake of ending bullying, Harry had been willing to conquer the world.

Was that right?

Harry drew his wand.

It wasn't the Elder Wand. The Elder Wand was hidden in the Tower, guarded by a thousand traps. It would have been foolish to carry it: Harry was clever and creative, but no duelist. Any unguarded moment and he could be "defeated"... no, better to keep it safe and hidden until he had need of it.

This was Harry's wand. Eleven inches long. Holly. Phoenix core.

What would Fawkes say to him now?

Noise from the bubbler. Harry's attention snapped over to it. Charlevoix, standing to his left, stepped closer to watch.

They could see three versions of Bellatrix Black entering the meeting room. There was fighting – hard to make out from the bubbler's limited vantage point. Esther was casting curses, and so was "Harry." Simon was already down. He was just visible at the bottom of the bubbler's view. He wasn't moving.

Flashes of light. Some sort of trap triggered, and the picture on the bubbler was whited-out. When the view returned, Esther and one of the Bellatrixen were both out of sight. Either they were out of range of the bubbler's vision, or... something else. He could hear a sharp intake of breath from Charlevoix.

But now it was Tonks against two Bellatrix Blacks, and no one could have won that battle. Harry cringed as the two attacking witches disarmed "Harry."

One of the Bellatrixen moved, and her back blocked Harry's view of Tonks. The other one was pulling something from within her belt. They struggled with Tonks, who wouldn't cooperate, finally settling on *Incarcerous* to bind him. They forced him to open his mouth, poured something in. A potion. Veritaserum. A *lot* of Veritaserum, more than anyone could ever use on someone they wanted to keep alive and sane. Enough to wrest the truth from Mad-Eye Moody himself.

“I’m Nymphadora Tonks, I’m not Harry Potter! He’s oh Merlin no no he’s back through that door, in the Extension Establishment with everyone else no no no Merlin I’m so sorry Harry I’m so sorry Hermi—”

“*Avada Kedavra*,” said one of the two remaining Bellatrix Blacks. Harry closed his eyes, and felt bile rise in his throat.

He’d taunted Dumbledore. Hurt him on purpose. “*And that’s why I can destroy Dementors and you can’t. Because I believe that the darkness can be broken.*”

The two witches laughed – insane and hideous laughter – and vanished from his view.

Harry heard laboured breathing, and turned to see Charlevoix’s shoulders heaving. Her cheeks were wet with tears.

“Fucking bitches,” said Susie.

Buckeye Dave gave orders to the Brahmins. gave whispered commands to the Rakshasa. Cedric gave direction to the aurors.

Harry waited.

He remembered what Dumbledore had written to him – the last word in that conversation, delivered after the good man’s sacrifice.

*There can only be one piece whose value is beyond price.*

*That piece is not the world, it is the world’s peoples, wizard and Muggle alike, goblins and house-elves and all.*

Harry lurched into motion. First a step forward, and then another. Then he knew what he was doing and knew it was what Fawkes would tell him to do.

He broke for the door.

Angry and dismayed shouts broke out from those important enough to object, but what could they do? Stun him? Who would dare stun Harry Potter-Evans-Verres and ruin his clever plan? Draco called out something in alarm, but Harry couldn’t understand him. Wouldn’t understand him.

He was out the door and into the hall.

Bellatrix Black was there. So was a second Bellatrix Black. They stood side-by-side, ten meters away. They stank of death and madness.

Harry skidded to a halt, almost falling forward, awkwardly. He kept his wand at his side, deliberately, but raised his other hand.

He snapped his fingers.



# Walpurgisnacht

*ZEUS: Well, I'd say something like this. "My lad, get you gone! What business have you here? Do you wish to enforce your rights? Yes, you're brave and strong and spirited. I can see you as a captain in an army of good fighters. You have better things to do than reigning over a dead-and-alive city, a carrion city plagued by flies. These people are great sinners but, as you see, they're working out their atonement. Let them be, young fellow, let them be; respect their sorrowful endeavor, and begone on tiptoe. ... What, moreover, could you give them in exchange? Good digestions, the gray monotony of provincial life, and the boredom — ah, the soul-destroying boredom — of long days of mild content. Go your way, my lad, go your way. The repose of cities and men's souls hangs on a thread; tamper with it and you bring disaster. (Looking him in the eyes.) A disaster which will recoil on you."*

—Les Mouches, *Jean-Paul Sartre*



*April 30th, 1999*

*John Snow Center for Medicine and Tower School of Doubt (The Tower)*

*Now*

Harry snapped his fingers.

To his left, through the open door back into the Establishment, he could hear several people gasp at the gesture – those who knew the legend. But in front of him, the two iterations of Bellatrix Black only stared at him.

“What was that, little man? Another ultimate weapon?” asked the one on the left, her voice mocking. Her right eye was only a torn nugget of ruined red flesh, bloody on her cheek, but it didn’t seem to bother her.

In spite of himself and in spite of everything, Harry felt a mad giggle rising. He fought it back.

“Yes,” he said. “Yes, you could say that.”

“The Empty Fort,” the two witches said, almost in unison. An identical expression of contemptuous glee was spreading on each of their faces.

“Where is the Dark Lord?” asked the one on the right. They raised their wands again, pointing them at Harry.

“*Muffliato*,” said Harry, for some semblance of privacy, “I cut off his hands and wiped his memory and turned him into a rock. But I was worried that wasn’t enough after it almost went wrong, and so I ripped his mind out of his body and imprisoned it in a fungus that I keep inside of a fancy box.” He paused. “Did you want the box? I can have it gift-wrapped, I suppose.”

“Stalling billy dolly,” said the one on the right, sneering. She cocked her head to the side.

“Twist a while and you’ll tell a truer tale,” said the other. Her tongue poked out of her mouth, pinkish and crude, and licked blood from her upper lip.



From the corner of his eye, Harry could see movement. He raised his left hand sharply, to signal whoever it was to stop.

“No, that’s the truth, actually,” he said, calmly. “But I will trade you an even better one, if you answer a question of mine.” He had many, actually. *What is that duplication spell? Did Voldemort know it? It duplicated your arm – could it duplicate any artifact? Is the ritual sacrifice permanent, or can you heal that eye later?*

The Bellatrix on the right giggled. “No time, billy. Bumbling bungling billy. I’m heavy with the milk of your death.” Then the levity vanished from her face, suddenly and completely, and her lips tightened. “Twist.”

“*Crucio*,” cast the other.

And there was pain.



*ORESTE: Il y a des hommes qui naissent engagés: ils n'ont pas le choix, on les a jetés sur un chemin, au bout du chemin il y a un acte qui les attend, leur acte; ils vont, et leurs pieds nus pressent fortement la terre et s'écorchent aux cailloux. Ça te paraît vulgaire, à toi, la joie d'aller quelque part? Et il y en a d'autres, des silencieux, qui sentant au fond de leur cœur le poids d'images troubles et terrestres; leur vie a été changée parce que, un jour de leur enfance, à cinq ans, à sept ans... C'est bon: ce ne sont pas des hommes supérieurs. Je savais déjà, moi, à sept ans, que j'étais exilé; les odeurs et les sons, le bruit de la pluie sur les toits, les tremblements de la lumière, je les laissais glisser le long de mon corps et tomber autour de moi; je savais qu'ils appartenaient aux autres, et que je ne pourrais jamais en faire mes souvenirs. Car les souvenirs sont de grasses nourritures pour ceux qui possèdent les maisons, les bêtes, les domestiques et les champs.*

*ORESTES: Some men are born bespoken; a certain path has been assigned them, and at its end there is something they must do, a deed allotted. So on and on they trudge, wounding their bare feet on the flints. I suppose that strikes you as vulgar—the joy of going somewhere definite. And there are others, men of few words, who bear deep down in their hearts a load of dark imaginings; men whose whole life was changed because one day in childhood, at*

*the age of five or seven— Right; I grant you these are no great men. When I was seven, I know I had no home, no roots. I let sounds and scents, the patter of rain on housetops, the golden play of sunbeams, slip past my body and fall round me and I knew these were for others, I could never make them my memories. For memories are luxuries reserved for people who own houses, cattle, fields, and servants.*

—Les Mouches, *Jean-Paul Sartre*



*April 30th, 1993*

*Office of Harry Potter-Evans-Verres, Hogwarts, Scotland*

*Six years ago*

It had been difficult to visit his parents, as always. It wasn't that it made him unhappy, exactly, or even that it was uncomfortable. It was the sense of loss that bothered him, waiting in the wings.

There was always a huge amount of things to talk about. Mum would always ask after Hermione and Draco and Minerva, although she didn't want to hear about the "politics" or the "magical things," but about how Minerva and Draco were coping with their losses, or about how Hermione was doing so much better these days. She'd met Granville, Hermione's phoenix, at Christmastime, and had been so charmed that she'd been rendered speechless. Granville had given her a feather, and Mum kept it on her vanity mirror.

Dad had his own interests and endless suggestions. He made spirited attempts to talk about magic, but really the possibility of reforming a society was what he always wanted to talk about, sitting down with Harry at the kitchen table for long chats. They'd both read their Heinlein, Asimov, Gibson, Stephenson... they would sit down after dinner and debate possible routes for a future society for hours, talking until their tea was cold and the rest of the world was asleep. How could you intelligently plan for a world of eternal youth, with no disease or poverty? What steps did you need to take now, and in what order? Harry had the sense that

his father thought the entire thing was still a bit unreal, and that Harry might be exaggerating his own role in the world these days... but what Oxford liberal sci-fi fan could resist the opportunity to talk about the way a society *should* be run – a potential Church of All Worlds, or Foundation, or Freeside, or Neo-Victorian England, depending on the choices they made?

His father had paused at one point, last night, to marvel at that. “Do you really think you’re capable of making these decisions, son? Do you think anyone could make them in your place? Account for every possibility and plan out an entire civilization?” A pause. “Does anyone even have the right to try?”

“If I could leave it up to the wisdom of crowds and market forces, I would,” Harry had replied, staring at the kitchen table. “I can’t, and there’s no one else to take my place. I have my Fellowship, and I’m not going to refuse the Ring just because it seems impossible or arrogant. I have to try.”

His father was thoughtful for a quiet moment, and then smiled. “Does that make me Elrond?”

Harry had rolled his eyes, even as his heart answered, *Yes*.

But through all of his visits, Harry knew – even if they didn’t – that he was going to have to stop coming to visit. Not forever – not on the scale at which mankind would be operating soon, an unlimited life of unlimited possibility – but for a long time. Already, he’d been coming to visit less often. Soon, he was going to have to ask them to come visit him, instead. And eventually, he’d need to resign himself to letters. He probably should already have done that for their own safety, if for no other reason. They were risking an eternity of life and he was risking the fate of the world every time he had contact. Harry had needed to think about the possibilities (never refuse to think about something, not even once), but he didn’t like to dwell on them. Kidnapping, blackmail, torture... it was the fate of the world and the species in the balance.

So ever since Harry had returned to Hogwarts, massive defense force and five decoys going along for the ride, he’d been quiet. He’d spoken to Minerva and given her word from his parents, and then gone straight up to his office through the twisting corridors and up the moving stairs, and when he got there he’d exchanged only the barest of pleasantries with Hermione while getting the Stone

back from her and destroying his facsimile. Harry hadn't been unfriendly, but he didn't feel like he had the emotional energy to discuss his feelings, so he'd kept some distance. He got to work on that day's patients as they were cleared and escorted by the aurors, and stayed quiet and polite and distant.

When Draco had gotten there, he'd taken in the look on Harry's face at a glance, and hadn't said much more than good morning.

The first two patients of the day had been easy enough. The first, an older man, had needed his right arm healed from the long and painful twisting that had come from a curse in his younger days. Certain curses were beyond the power of healing spells – indeed, sometimes that was their whole point – and it had been a wonderful thing to see the look on the man's face as his pain faded away for the first time in thirty years. The man had moved and flexed the hand that had been frozen into a claw for decades, and eventually had begun to weep. Harry had accepted his thanks, refused his money, and sent him on his way.

The second patient was even easier: a child born with a chronic seizure disorder. Potions could keep it in check, such as the Caesarian Draught (a potion which had nothing to do with obstetrics, Harry had discovered after one amusing misunderstanding), but that was ruinously expensive. Even taking extraordinary care, it had been easy for Harry to repair the lesions on the child's brain. Unfortunately, he hadn't been able to figure out the cause; the shapes of the lesions, as best he could tell, didn't really point to any specific pathology. Harry had made notes and consulted a manual on differential diagnosis of atypical neural lesions, but had needed to chalk it up to hydrocephaly at the moment and put off further research until later.

He thought he'd have time to dig into it that afternoon. The aurors were slow to vet potential patients, much to Harry's frustration, and despite his wish to scale things up, he probably wouldn't get to see many more than twelve patients that day. He needed to bring on more healers and more aurors, or work out a different system.

Harry was ready when the two aurors escorted in a third patient. It was another older man, and it looked like another easy

case. The man had terrible burn scars on the lower part of his face, covering his chin and one of his cheeks with pale, knotted tissue. The man's eyes were wide, staring around with obvious alarm. It wasn't uncommon. Across the room, for example, Hermione was healing someone who'd come in so terrified they were outright sobbing. It soon passed.

Well, *usually* it soon passed. Harry glanced at the corner, where a short brunette woman was sitting quietly, her hands folded in her lap, her eyes vacant. One of the rescues from Azkaban – a French woman named Charlevoix. She, too, had been rescued from pain, only to remain in a state of near-catatonia. She broke out into screams if she was separated from Hermione. They let her stay.

"Hello, sir," Harry said. He tried to make his voice warm, and mustered up a smile. "Just lie down on the bed, there, if you don't mind. There's nothing to worry about... you're going to feel a lot better, very soon."

The old man lay down without protest, gingerly reclining on the bed. Harry sat in a chair next to it. He lay his wand on his lap. The man was frightened. "Are you all right, sir? Nervous?"

Harry glanced at the aurors who escorted the man. One of them shrugged – nothing to contribute. They stood silently at the foot of the bed: an obvious presence of force. It was just a precaution, as were the twelve other aurors in the room. Everyone was carefully screened and had to submit to Veritaserum before they were permitted to receive healing, and before entering they were disenchanted and dispelled and everything else an auror could do. Precaution was taken against Imperius and Confundus... even against false or locked memories. There were traps and wards and yet more traps, and outside assault was as impossible as they could make it.

"I... I don't... I'm sorry," murmured the patient with a quavering voice.

"For what?" Harry asked, smiling.

"I came for... for my face and chest. All burnt, long ago. I'd forgotten..."

Harry made the connection. "You'd locked away the memory of how it happened?"

“Not me. St. Mungo’s. They’d had to... I couldn’t... I...” The man’s face twisted, stiff flesh on his chin rippling, and he clenched his eyes shut. Tears began to roll down his cheeks.

“I’m sorry you lost that protection,” Harry said, gently. “We can help you with that again, if you want. Or we can put you in touch with someone we work with... a type of special healer who helps people with problems that they can’t face and don’t want to forget.”

“The boy... my boy,” gasped the man. Harry just sat quietly. There was nothing he could say – he needed to just let the man take a moment to work through whatever had happened.

“Th– There was a fire...” said the man, haltingly. “My fault. I wanted... I’m Salvatore Starr, maybe you’ve... I am a pyromancer. There is none greater in Britain.” Harry hadn’t heard of the man, but that wasn’t that surprising. Despite everything that had happened, he’d only learned about magic itself two years ago. There was still a lot of common knowledge that had escaped him, and there were famous magical researchers that he’d never heard of, Chocolate Frog card or no. Harry glanced at one of the aurors again, and the auror nodded in confirmation.

The patient raised his arms up, and hugged himself. He turned onto his side, away from Harry. “So many have been hurt. I myself... There was a fire. There was a terrible fire. I wanted to find a barrier against all flame. Ever since the fall of Sontag... I wanted to find a way to stop it... stop such a fire–” The man stopped speaking, his voice strangled away into a pained squeak by his grief.

“An accident? With your research?” Harry said, gently. The wizarding settlement of Sontag had been burned in the second goblin rebellion of 1612. It had been long-abandoned by that time – making its destruction more of a threat than a real attack – but it had still been considered a tragedy. None of the wizards present then had been able to extinguish the magical flames the goblins had wielded against Sontag, and the incident was always described in history books with an ominous tone.

“My boy... he...” Salvatore’s shoulders shook, and he lapsed back into silence.

“Sir...you had a son, sir?” said the other auror. He sounded surprised – that must not have turned up in their investiga-

tion. *Usually they were so careful... so slow that I have been complaining about it.*

The first auror asked, "Are you quite sure that—"

"Not my child," said the man, his voice thick. "My nephew. A Muggle. But he was like my child. I loved him like my child. My boy. My boy..."

The auror nodded slowly. "Yes, sir."

"I'm so sorry, sir," said Harry. He stood up, as quietly as he could. "We're going to have you back another day, I think, sir."

Salvatore rolled back over, suddenly, and snatched at the hem of Harry's sleeve with a desperate hand. The aurors drew their wands so quickly that Harry barely even saw them move, but didn't intervene.

"Wait!" said Salvatore, his voice harsh. He slid his legs to the side and sat up on the bed, not letting go of Harry. "You're the Boy-Who-Lived. You can... I know you can..."

"I can't bring back the dead, sir. I'm so sorry, but I can't..." *Not yet*, thought Harry, looking over at Draco, who was sitting with Hermione at the other end of the room, helping her with her patient. *But I will. I have promises to keep. I will.*

He looked back down at the patient. "I'm so sorry, but I can't bring him back. I *wish* I could, believe me I do, but I can't."

"He would stay with me, sometimes. I had a room for him. He loved dragons. Always loved dragons. I used Welsh Greens, sometimes, and he would sit behind the wards and stare for hours at them. Big posters of dragons all over the walls. Wanted to see a Chinese Fireball, one day," husked Salvatore.

"I didn't know he was in the house... I didn't know he was in the house... I would never have been experimenting if I'd known they were going to come early. My sister and my boy... The cursed fire, I thought I could stop it with my new ward. I thought I had it. I never would have... I didn't know..." The man's voice broke into a sob. Then it cut off, and his eyes fixed themselves on Harry again, coming back from some far-off place of grief and regret. "Bring back my boy. I know things... I went far abroad when I was young. I know how to do things. I have many things. You can have all my knowledge, everything I have. Bring back my boy. Bring back Davey."

Harry shook his head again. This had gone on long enough, and even though it seemed cruel, he needed to defuse the situation before it got out of hand. "I'm sorry, sir."

He raised one hand to give a signal to the aurors, but paused, staring past them at the entrance to his office, where a piece of parchment folded into an airplane had just glided into the room. It was one of the memos they used at the Ministry of Magic, lazily propelling itself with slow flaps of papery wings.

"Bring back my boy," said Salvatore again, more quietly. "Please... I'm begging you. I know you have the power. I have much to offer. Old rituals and ancient spells, long forgotten by all others. I have sacrificed much to gain them – done grim things for grim people – but I will give them over to you. I have been to the nave of Beatus Payens and I have been to the land of the Tuatha... I have traded power for power, to learn all I could of flame and fire. You can have all that I know. Every rune in my books. Every bit of flame. Please... you must. I didn't... oh Merlin... I didn't know he was there, he was an innocent, don't you see, I didn't know he was there. Bring him back." He steadied himself. "You must, Harry Potter."

The aurors were moving on their own account, and one of them came to Salvatore's elbow. "Master Starr," he said, gently. Harry pulled away from the patient. Salvatore didn't resist, but didn't let go; his hand remained suspended in the air, clutching at nothing as Harry's sleeve left his grip.

"Please, sir," said Salvatore, but the urgency had left his voice. It sounded flat and full of sadness.

Harry stepped towards the memo, which was sailing along sedately, and held out his hand. The parchment plane landed on his palm. Behind him, the auror helped Salvatore to his feet.

When Harry opened the parchment, he found that it really was a standard Ministry memo, sealed and embossed in the normal way. But it was a very long way from home. The seal was cracked in the middle, and the rest of the memo was creased into squares and crinkled with two parallel lines: the thing had been folded up and sent here by owl. Harry opened it, frowning.

The top few inches of a newspaper had been pasted to the parchment: that evening's edition of *The Daily Prophet*. There



was no time marking, but it was only the early afternoon – this was a message from the future. At least four hours, but perhaps as far as six.

*TRAGEDY: POTTER ATTACKED, CLINIC RAZED*

Nothing more.

*Why send only this?* Harry thought. But there was no time to think it through. When given an anonymous warning, the course was clear (or at least, seemed obvious enough to Harry): react quickly, but in an unorthodox way. He couldn't ignore the message, especially since it might have come from the future, but if you reacted predictably to an anonymous warning, then you were only granting your enemy the power to control you.

Harry's thoughts moved in a flash. *First-level response, standard lockdown. Vulnerable to specific kinds of attacks. Obvious alternative – evacuation – has the same problem. Brief message and unorthodox delivery style that bypassed other viewers... points to some betrayal or widespread attack... an owl takes twelve minutes to get here from the Ministry... an ally there, betraying a conspiracy? Why anonymous? Warning was sent from as far as six hours in the future... a message there, clearly. The attack will happen within the next six hours... it will do serious damage, but since this message was sent, we have the power to mitigate or change that.* Still, though, the first question was dragging on his thoughts, demanding attention: *If you're going to help, why send only this? Is the future outcome – the alternative that prompted the message – so terrible that you don't want it known?*

"You must," said Salvatore from behind him, raising his voice again. Hermione and Draco were looking over in alarm, now, and the pair of aurors with their patient and the ones at the door had drawn their wands.

"Harry Potter, I demand it. He cannot remain gone – remain burned." Salvatore's voice cracked at the last word. "You will."

And with a sinking feeling in his stomach, Harry realized another possible reason for the message.

*Sabotage from the future. Information cannot go any further than six hours back in time. So right now, at this moment, we can't go back and prevent–*

"You will!" said Salvatore again, and Harry hadn't even turned around before he felt the bloom of heat on his back.

*“This is an insane thing you’re trying, boy,” Moody had said to them, last year. “There’s too much evil and too much madness in the world. Too much damn randomness. You can’t account for everything. We can test the people who visit, but any security system in any fortress is based on keeping people out. It’s not like in the Muggle world. A Muggle without a weapon is about as dangerous as a dog. A powerful wizard without a wand, on the other hand, could be tasting your blood within minutes. You can’t secure your most important assets – you, the Stone, Voldie – if you also need to allow open access to them. It’s an impossible problem.”*

*“That just means that no one has ever been prepared or paranoid or clever enough,” Harry had replied, with far too much self-assurance. “No problem is impossible.”*

*“Immobinngghh,” Harry heard one auror say, the spell cut off in a grunt of pain, an instant before he felt a sweeping force pluck his legs out from underneath him and lift him into the air, like the scooping palm of a gentle giant. He was hurled across the room in a tumble, the world spinning around him in a confusion of red and grey, before hitting the opposite wall hard enough to drive the air out of his lungs. He found himself looking up at Hermione, Draco, and the pair of aurors that had been escorting her patient. The aurors had jumped in front of the other two and the patient, and were already acting – indeed, they had reacted so quickly that one of them had already raised a shield of brightly-glowing silver spheres the size of golf balls.*

Salvatore barely even used incantations, and had no wand, but he had filled the air with flame, nonetheless. In moments, it had blocked out everything from Harry’s sight but its own bright light, tumbling and toiling in the air like a living thing. He could smell hair burning and knew that he was on fire, and he beat at his head and face, flapping at himself and trying to smother the flames, screaming. He had a moment’s glimpse of the aurors – they were burnt and burning, too, one of them also screaming, his face a blackened thing. Draco tackled that one, putting his wand to her chest and trying to do something. Hermione was already standing, her own wand raised, casting curses. Charlevoix was cowering behind her, her arms wrapped in front of her head in an attempt

to protect herself. Hermione's pale face was lit a hellish orange by the fire-glow.

Harry couldn't follow the combat, couldn't find his wand, could barely hold on to his *sanity* as he yanked his robes up and tried to smother the flames on his body with them, ripping them with desperate yanks until they moved freely and slamming them down again and again to try to beat out the fire.

By the time he had put out the flames, the room was already so full of smoke that he was coughing and choking. He couldn't find his wand, oh god *where was his wand...* what did he have... He jammed his hand into his pouch and tried to choke out some words, but he could only cough and hack, doubling up, and god he could barely even see, everything was just a reddish-orange haze. What was the sign language – he couldn't remember, it was gone from his head – couldn't breathe couldn't see... Just thick smoke everywhere.

Harry could hear someone chanting, and if he hadn't already been panicking, he probably would have dissolved in terror when he recognized the words. "*Az-reth. Az-reth. Az-reth.*" He remembered Voldemort saying that, and he remembered the thing that had come at that call.

The red-lit smoke turned scarlet.

Someone grabbed his legs, and Harry kicked at the hands, wildly. They snatched him with incredible strength – inhuman strength – and he felt himself lifted bodily as he was hauled into the air. He would have screamed again, but when he tried to draw a breath it came with the burning harshness of smoke, and he spasmed with coughing again, sucking poisonous air and choking on it.

The hands threw him, and he was flying.

He landed hard, smashing into a corner of stone, and felt a riot of pain in his ribs, made worse by his hacking and coughing. But the air was fresher where he'd landed. His thoughts were a confused stream – where was he, why was he in the hall, what was happening – but he could breathe. He sucked in the air and the dimming world grew sharper.

Harry rolled onto his side, still gasping, and looked back at his office. Thick black smoke was roiling inside, pouring out in a

dense cloud. He was – oh god, his ring was missing, where was his ring *where was Voldemort?*

As he watched, it began to thin, and he could make out shapes within it. Figures shouting words and casting spells, colored light tinging the smoke. One figure stood at the center, surrounding by a bright glow of scarlet that highlighted it like a silhouette against the sun. That broken man. Salvatore. His Fiendfyre was some monstrous snake, and it was burning away all the smoke in the room as it lashed out again and again. There were five aurors still standing, protecting each other and the patient and Draco and Charlevoix. Harry knew that more would be on the way, here within the minute.

And there was Hermione.

It was impossible to fight Fiendfyre, of course. Nothing could beat that, not that they could imagine. All you could do was hope to avoid it, and even *that* seemed impossible. But somehow, she was doing it. Every time it lashed out, she would leap or dodge or duck, sending another curse Salvatore's way, forcing the creature of hellish fire to return to him. The aurors poured on their own attacks, a blur of aggressive spellcasting that Harry could barely follow. The very nature of the Fiendfyre consumed most curses, but even that extravagance was beginning to prove insufficient. Salvatore was badly wounded. Blood was pouring out of a ragged hole in his stomach, and he was missing some fingers on one hand.

Harry could hear the man screaming, over and over. "NO! NO! NO!" He screamed and threw waves of flame, beat back attacks with living fire, and flooded the room with heat and smoke. "*You can't!*" he screamed.

An instant later, a curse hit him in the chest, and he collapsed, his face lifeless.

The Fiendfyre flared up and roared with leprous flame, surging larger and larger as the control left it, and it ran free. It grew brighter and brighter, its wide coils and thrashing head swelling.

An auror fell, obliterated to the waist by flame. Another had already lost an arm. Draco was screaming. Harry could see Hermione fall, withering like a leaf in the summer heat.

Granville called. The phoenix's cry was piercing and pure, like the voice of a god.

Harry saw the creature for only a moment as it flashed past him, soaring with the speed and determination of an arrow. It swept overhead with a streak of golden flame.

It never hesitated. It flew at the Fiendfyre with a courage and joy so pure that Harry's heart broke to see it.

Gold met scarlet. With a sound like thunder, both vanished. Nothing was left in their wake but stinking smoke and the echoes of a phoenix's last call.

He felt hands on him again – an auror, roughly pulling at his wounds and laying a wand on him.. More were racing in past her, charging towards his office. Spells cleared the air, cleared his view.

He saw burned and dying aurors, thrashing. Several of them still standing, staggering and injured but with wands raised high. Draco, weeping. He saw a green-stone ring on the floor, ignored by everyone by the purest chance.

He saw Charlevoix, her hands a tangle of charred flesh. Cradling something.

Cradling Hermione.



*ÉLECTRE: Il fait beau. Partout, dans la plaine, des hommes lèvant la tête et disent: "Il fait beau", et ils sont contents. O bourreaux de vous-mêmes, avez-vous oublié cet humble contentement du paysan qui marche sur sa terre et qui dit: "Il fait beau"? Vous voilà les bras ballants, la tête basse, respirant à peine. Vos morts se collent contre vous, et vous demeurez immobiles dans la crainte de les bousculer au moindre geste. Ce serait affreux, n'est ce-pas? si vos mains traversaient soudain une petite vapeur moite, l'âme de votre père ou de votre aïeul? Mais regardez-moi: j'étends les bras, je m'élargis, et je m'étire comme un homme qui s'éveille, j'occupe ma place au soleil, toute ma place. Est-ce que le ciel me tombe sur la tête? Je danse, voyez, je danse, et je ne sens rien que le souffle du vent dans mes cheveux. Où sont les morts? Croyez-vous qu'ils dansent avec moi, en mesure?*

*ELECTRA: The sun is shining. Everywhere down in the plains men are looking up and saying: "It's a fine day," and they're happy.*

*Are you so set on making yourselves wretched that you've forgotten the simple joy of the peasant who says as he walks across his fields: "It's a fine day"? No, there you stand hanging your heads, moping and mumbling, more dead than alive. You're too terrified to lift a finger, afraid of jolting your precious ghosts if you make any movement. That would be dreadful, wouldn't it, if your hand suddenly went through a patch of clammy mist, and it was your grandmother's ghost! Now look at me. I'm spreading out my arms freely, and I'm stretching like someone just roused from sleep. I have my place in the sunlight, my full place and to spare. And does the sky fall on my head? Now I'm dancing, see, I'm dancing, and all I feel is the wind's breath fanning my cheeks. Where are the dead? Do you think they're dancing with me, in step?*

—Les Mouches, Jean-Paul Sartre



Wearily, Harry mounted the stairs to the workroom of the Headmistress. In his pocket were four phials of blood from Vincent Crabbe, obtained after two hours of intimidation and veiled threats. Moody had helped, along with two aurors Moody had trained himself – an older one named Hedley Kwannon, and one barely out of training named Nymphadora Tonks. The glass phials, filled with the blood of Hermione's enemy, clicked against each other as Harry climbed the stairs.

He pushed open the door. It was silent inside. Reddish light from the dawn illuminated the alchemical diagram on the floor: nested and interlaced circles and pentagons surrounding a central pentacle. He'd been here once before, when he first demonstrated partial Transfiguration – so long ago! – and the room didn't look to have been used since that visit.

"Mad-Eye's not here yet. We have to wait," said Draco's voice from his left. Harry started, and stepped forward to see that the boy was sitting at the base of the circular wall, head slumped forward.

"How are you, Draco?" asked Harry, quietly.

"This was your fault," Draco replied.

"I know."

“No, you don’t, you stupid piece of arrogant filth,” said the Slytherin boy, but there was no anger in his voice. It was disconcertingly flat, with nothing but weariness and sorrow – the sorrow of someone who had been required to endure too much, too soon. “You think that you just made a mistake. You’d do the same thing all over again, but you’d just be sure to include one more trap. One more level of manipulation or cleverness. You don’t see that the entire thing is... impossible. It’s just impossible, and you won’t see that, and Hermione just keeps *listening to you*, and now *she’s* paid for *your* stupidity.”

“I know.”

“And even worse, this is just another reminder of why I was stupid to ever trust you – to ever get involved in this asinine little play. Your goals are... mad. *Insane*. But you don’t recognize that, since you don’t recognize any limits to... to... to *anything*.”

It was more than that, of course. It was even more than the terrible suffering and temporary absence of Hermione, as badly as that, too, had hurt the other boy. There was something more.

*You’re worried that I can’t deliver on my promises... that you’ve placed hope in false prophecies and a false prophet. You’re wondering if I am just a freak prodigy of Muggle science who looked really impressive in schoolyard antics, since he had a whole other world of tricks to steal, and who got lucky once... but who might just not be able to cut it in the real world.*

Draco looked up at him, and the boy looked unspeakably sad – like he’d lost something precious.

*You’re worried I’ll never be able to bring your father back, after all.*

“Draco, there is–”

“Shut up,” interrupted Draco, his voice hardening. “Shut up and let’s just wait without talking. You’re always *talking*, but it didn’t help her, did it? Her phoenix burned and she burned. And now she’s dead, again, just like she was afraid would happen.” Draco’s eyes were red, but dry. “She told me that... those months when she was trying to get her Patronus. To meet your *expectations*. She told me that she was terrified of dying again and that she thought that was probably the reason she couldn’t do it. ‘I wake up screaming sometimes, Draco,’ she said.”

“Stop,” said Harry, squeezing his eyes shut.

Draco sounded more like he was scolding himself than Harry. His words were black and bitter. “And now she’s all burned up and dead again, and it’s your fault again. Because you don’t understand what is *possible*, and you *talk* and you *push* – oh, Merlin, it always sounds so insane when you first start talking, but by the end of the conversation it’s the *rest of the world* that seems insane, and how could I ever think that *made sense*? How could anyone be that damned arrogant?”

Harry turned away, blindly. His eyes burned with hot tears. For a moment, despite all of his resolutions, he almost called on his dark side: to cool him and calm him and solve this problem. The cold emptiness of Voldemort’s thought patterns would have been preferable to this. Null was better than negative.

But he didn’t, because one did not abandon carefully-considered decisions during the exact sort of situation for which you had prepared them. All he could do, instead, was sink to the stone, slick with dust under his fingers, and cry.

After a time, his shoulders stopped heaving, and his breathing slowed from great shuddering gasps into quiet evenness. Draco had said nothing, and hadn’t moved. When Harry pushed himself up into a sitting position, he saw through a smear of tears that the other boy was just staring at him, dully, with red-rimmed eyes.

“I...” began Harry, but he found that he didn’t have any words. He fell silent again.

Eventually, he stood up and drew his wand. “*Scourgify*,” he cast, his voice heavy. The spell cleared away the dust. Putting away his wand, Harry opened his pouch and reached in. “Cauldron,” he said to it, and felt the metal lip of a small cauldron leap into his hand. He pulled it free of the pouch, which distended to permit its passage, and set it in the center of the diagram.

Harry sat down next to it, and took the phials of blood out of his pocket. He set them down next to the cauldron.

Draco pushed himself to his feet, and walked over. Digging into the pocket of his robes – *still the same burned ones, had he not had a chance to change? no, of course... he left them on for effect* – he pulled out a small bag of soft bicorn skin and dropped it down next to the other objects. The flesh of a servant, willingly given by Odette Charlevoix.



Moody would be here soon, with a piece of bone from Hermione's father. He had insisted on doing this part himself, saying that he didn't trust anyone else to invisibly infiltrate Happy Smiles Family Dentistry, stun one of the owners, extract a chip of bone while the man was unconscious, and fix any memories afterwards. It was a thankless task, and Harry thought that some part of Moody's insistence was probably repentance. Moody blamed himself for the attack, almost as much as he blamed Harry. "We weren't paranoid enough," he had said, bitterly. It was as heavy an indictment as he could deliver.

They waited in silence.

Finally, Harry spoke again. "I tried. I tried as hard as I could. I thought through everything and planned it out and assembled every bit of information... I counted forty-three known threats and planned for eight kinds of unknowns. We had just... *layers* of security and plans." Draco knew most of them, of course. He'd helped, along with Moody and Hermione and Bones.

There were fat folders, stuffed with parchments – or had been, anyway, before the fire ate the hidden boltholes that had been serving as safes. Dossiers on people and information on countries: *CHINA. Overview: Continued worries about European and British dominance in magic, may seek to strike before new regime rises. Often isolates self and seeks to extend power over Ten Thousand, but pragmatic leadership points to a willingness to shift tactics, if seems advantageous. Traditional value for immortality, connected to long specialization in potioneering. Informal and formal power structures largely mirror each other; little vulnerability to factionalization but suggests opportunity to shift key functionaries and alter trajectory of entire country.* And so on.

Plans within plans, contingency upon contingency: living and adaptable Matryoshka dolls whirling in a furious dance. A location that couldn't be stormed by force, allies watching other allies, security measures and magical wards that could cut off the life of an attacker in moments. And none of it had done any good when the mind of a powerful wizard had broken. He had died, but so had others. So had Hermione.

"It's not your fault that you can't do the impossible. It's only your fault that you *try* the impossible, and other people pay for

it,” replied Draco. He stared down at Harry. “You can’t plan for everything. The world is dark and people are vicious. Even the good ones are vicious, and the bad ones are worse, and the crazy ones do things you couldn’t possibly predict. You can’t control the universe, Harry Potter-Evans-Verres, you miserable, arrogant little scrub.”

Harry was silent once more, and looked away, unable to meet Draco’s gaze. He hugged his knees. Draco turned away, walking heavily towards the door.

*There’s too much evil and too much madness in the world,* Moody had said. *Too much damn randomness.*

*You can’t control the universe.*

“I don’t accept that,” he whispered, as much for himself as for Draco.

“What?” demanded Draco, turning back around, his voice incredulous – angry now, where he hadn’t been before.

“I don’t accept that,” Harry repeated, more loudly. He looked up. *“I do not accept that.”*

“You can’t–”

Harry lurched to his feet, swaying slightly, his kneecaps popping from the sudden shift. There was iron in his voice, now. It wasn’t cold iron; it wasn’t the chill metal of his dark side, icy with hateful clarity. It was iron at a white heat. He glowed with it.

“No,” Harry said, his voice as certain as a hammerblow.

“No,” he repeated.

“No,” he said again.

“I do not accept that. I do not accept death. I do not accept decline. I do not accept madness. I do not accept randomness. They are all part of the universe, and they are all important... but I do not – *mankind does not* – have to accept them,” said Harry. “If you want out of this, then say so. If you want to lead a different life, then you *know* I won’t begrudge you that. I will make that happen, and that choice I once gave you will always be yours: you may choose another path and you will not hear a word of regret from me. Your preferences are sacred. So if you think this can’t be done... go.” Harry’s face was grim. “But I’m not going.”

Harry walked towards Draco until he was inches away from the other boy. Iron was bright in his words.

“Right now, there is a little girl somewhere in the world. She’s a small thing for her age, with big eyes. She loves her big brother. She wants to be just like her mother when she grows up. But tonight, there will be an accident. A rotten tree will collapse as the little girl climbs it, and she’ll tumble to the ground, and she’ll land badly. And she’ll die. And then her big eyes will be gone, and her brother will never see her again, and she’ll never grow up to be like her mother. Everything she ever was or will be: gone and dead and buried.

“Her brother will deal with his grief, in time, and may even find solace and strength in stories about how death is necessary. Her mother will cry and hurt, but in time it will hurt less, and she’ll focus more on her son, and eventually the loss will fade until it’s just a nagging ache in her heart – that never quite leaves. And the world will go on, because it’s happened every day in every way, and we have learned how to manage the loss.

“*But it doesn’t have to be that way.* And I don’t just mean saving that little girl, or Hermione, or even your father, Draco, but every little girl and friend and father. People die every day and they always have but I *do not accept it.*”

But something of Harry’s heat had communicated itself with his words, and Draco’s eyes were lit as bright as the red glow of Fiendfyre. He seized the front of Harry’s robes, twisting his fists in them, and shoved as hard as he could. Harry stumbled backwards, foot skidding, and only barely kept his balance.

“Do you think I *want them to die*, you sanctimonious idiot? Are you even *listening* to me? I’m saying that it doesn’t matter *how much you want them to live*, because the world is too complicated! You’re *denying the data!* You want to do things that no one has ever done, and do them all at once which no one has even *dreamed of doing*. Not Dumbledore, not Salazar Slytherin, not the Peverell brothers, not even Merlin the bloody First Enchanter himself! The greatest wizards in the history of the world only barely attempted some tiny fraction of your insane fever dream! You want to rule the world and end death, good and fine, and you want to end poverty and sickness and make everyone equal and put goblins and other trash up on a pedestal and all that other fluffy *nonsense*, fine!” Draco was shouting, now. “But it is *impossible!* It is

just *impossible!* To do any *one* of them was beyond anyone's power, even those who tried, much less *all of it at once!* And by trying to do it, you're going to burn down this world and everyone in it, and it is just *beyond arrogant and stupid to look at the world and declare that you are going to change it so much and so fast*, and we are all *suffering* because of *that!*"

Harry roared back at Draco, his voice larger than himself, as though it were echoing the cries of others, of legions, "I don't give a *damn* if it is impossible! I don't give a *damn* if no one has ever done it or tried it or dreamed it in the history of the world! 'Impossible' is a little word and a petty one – it's the word of small minds and small imaginations, and I *reject it.*"

Draco opened his mouth to say something, but Harry continued over him, shouting now, white iron in his words and eyes and heart, a white glow suffusing him as a glow from his wand waxed brighter and brighter.

"We are standing on the brink – at the moment of crux between peril and paradise, Draco! We are caught at the edges of two singularities, held equipoise at their event horizons, and it is *terrifying*, but when they offer you the Ring you don't reject it with the word 'impossible!'"

Draco shouted back, lunging forward to stab a finger into Harry's chest: accusatory. "*Not everything is possible in this world!*"

And Harry replied, quietly, caught with a sudden stillness as clear as the sweet ring of a tranquil bell, "Draco. There are more worlds than this one. We'll find one where we can save everybody." His voice caught with emotion. "Impossible just means you haven't figured out how to cheat."



*JUPITER: Pauvres gens! Tu vas leur faire cadeau de la solitude et de la honte, tu vas arracher les étoffes dont je les avais couverts, et tu leur montreras soudain leur existence, leur obscène et fade existence, qui leur est donnée pour rien.*

*ORESTE: Pourquoi leur refuserais-je le désespoir qui est en moi, puisque c'est leur lot?*

*JUPITER: Qu'en feront-ils?*

*ORESTE: Ce qu'ils voudront: ils sont libres, et la vie humaine commence de l'autre côté du désespoir.*

*ZEUS: Poor people! Your gift to them will be a sad one; of loneliness and shame. You will tear from their eyes the veils I had laid on them, and they will see their lives as they are, foul and futile, a barren boon.*

*ORESTES: Why, since it is their lot, should I deny them the despair I have in me?*

*ZEUS: What will they make of it?*

*ORESTES: What they choose. They're free; and human life begins on the far side of despair.*

—Les Mouches, *Jean-Paul Sartre*



*April 30th, 1999*

*John Snow Center for Medicine and Tower School of Doubt (The Tower)*

*Now*

Pain has an element of blank, and Harry suffered for some uncertain amount of time, twisting before Bellatrix Black's Cruciatus Curse. It was pain on another level – beyond the sort of suffering that should have been possible with mere nerves – a torture that transcended physicality. His very existence was in agony.

Eventually, it stopped, and Harry found that he was lying on the floor of the corridor some distance down from where he'd begun. They'd moved him. He was soaked in sweat and shaking, and his throat was hoarse from screams he hadn't even know he'd been making.

The other Bellatrix was casting spells, sealing them off from the Extension Establishment. She cast them so quickly and so fluidly that Harry thought that she might have been able to hold off every single one of his gathered allies, striking them down one by one as they attempted the corridor.

His torturer stood over him, leering, crazed. “Little dollies are dead. Your stupid slut of a mudblood is dead. I killed her. Your aurors are dead. And now you’re going to tell me where the Dark Lord is, or we’ll start killing everyone else.”

Harry tried to calm his panting and sobbing. He separated it from himself, and closed his eyes. After a moment, he opened them again, fixing them on the witch. “I’m sorry. I want you to know that. What happened to you should never happen to anyone, and I am so sorry that it did. We’re going to get you help.”

All amusement vanished from her face. She looked bored, and contemptuous, staring at him with eyes of darkness and blood. “There is no help, little billy. And you have no way out.”

Harry closed his eyes again. “I know. I thought, maybe... I thought others could do this with me. That maybe they could take my place if they worked together. That I could be free. And maybe that will happen, someday. But sometimes a person gets lucky enough, or unlucky enough, to be put on the spot. To be the crux of things. And I had a friend, once – a phoenix – who taught me never to shy away from that.”

“You talk like my Lord,” said the other Bellatrix. The one standing over Harry nodded, a look of fascination on her face. The other added, “But you are a wretched little homunculus, and now you’ll learn a lesson.”

“Impossible little billy boy,” sneered the witch standing over Harry, and leaned forward, her wand pointing at his chest. “Time time time.”

“I’m sorry, Bellatrix. I don’t accept this,” Harry said.

She sneered, and then stopped, swaying in place. She looked shocked.

Blood blossomed from her chest, welling through the fabric of her clothing.

Bellatrix Black gurgled. Her remaining eye opened wide, and her mouth worked up and down, speechlessly. She tilted her head to the side, and her face trembled. She didn’t understand.

Behind her, the Cloak of Invisibility slid to the floor, and Hermione Granger pulled her fist from Bellatrix’s back. Blood splattered Hermione’s determined face. Bellatrix collapsed like a broken doll.

“No!” shrieked the other Bellatrix, whirling and raising her wand, but a hail of curses from behind Hermione cut her down and cut off her scream. Stunned and bound and silenced and paralyzed, Bellatrix Black toppled over, her face still distorted in shock and fury and hatred.

“I found a way to cheat,” said Harry.

“Mr. Potter!” called Pip from the corner at the end of the corridor. He was staggering forward, seemingly about to faint, but was supported by J.C. Kraeme. She had his arm around her neck and was holding him up. They trailed behind Hyori, who had her wand up and still fixed on the two Bellatrixen as she strode down the hall. Her face was grim – but less grim than usual.

Hermione glanced over at him and nodded as she knelt next to the witch she’d felled. He could see her wand sticking out of her belt, but it was broken. The last two inches were missing, exposing the raw reddish strand of dragon heartstring at the core. Useless.

Harry winced as Hermione plunged two fingers into her own left arm, and yanked free her spare wand. She set it to Bellatrix’s chest, and began casting, working to heal the wound she’d caused and save the life of the insane villain.

He sighed, lowering his head to the ground. And then he just lay there, still, for a moment, and smiled. Harry smiled in spite of everything. Because of everything.

Out of sight, down where the north and south corridor met, he knew that the entrance to the Tower stood, unharmed. A golden oval, bright-shining and standing with impossible solidity.

This was Harry’s world, and impossible things could happen.



*JUPITER: Rentre dans la nature, fils dénaturé: connais ta faute, abhorre-la, arrache-la de toi comme une dent cariée et puante. Ou redoute que la mer ne se retire devant toi, que les sources ne se tarissent sur ton chemin, que les pierres et les rochers ne roulent hors de ta route et que la terre ne s’effrite sous tes pas.*

*ORESTE: Qu’elle s’effrite! Que les rochers me condamnent et que les plantes se fanent sur mon passage: tout ton univers ne suffira pas à me donner tort. Tu es le roi de Dieux, Jupiter, le*

*roi des pierres et des étoiles, le roi des vagues de la mer. Mais tu n'es pas le roi des hommes.*

*JUPITER: Je ne suis pas ton roi, larve impudente. Qui donc t'a créé?*

*ORESTE: Toi. Mais il ne fallait pas me créer libre.*

*ZEUS: Know your sin, abhor it, and tear it from you as one tears out a rotten, noisome tooth. Or else — beware lest the very seas shrink back at your approach, springs dry up when you pass by, stones and rocks roll from your path, and the earth crumbles under your feet.*

*ORESTES: Let it crumble! Let the rocks revile me, and flowers wilt at my coming. Your whole universe is not enough to prove me wrong. You are the king of gods, king of stones and stars, king of the waves of the sea. But you are not the king of man.*

*ZEUS: Impudent spawn! So I am not your king? Who, then, made you?*

*ORESTES: You. But you blundered; you should not have made me free.*

— Les Mouches, *Jean-Paul Sartre*





# Glossary



**Ackle** The mountain home of much of the goblin nation in Britain.

**Agenspræc** Literally “other-speech,” this term of art refers to the incantation required to authorize or remove a Floo connection to an established network.

**Alping** The fortress-like headquarters of the Council of Westphalia, the Alping (or “All-**Thing**”) serves as an information warehouse and the site of fiery debates.

**Americas** See **Westphalia, Council of**.

**Bogdanova, Agapa “Ilya” Ilyinichna** Head of the Office for the Detection and Confiscation of Counterfeit Defensive Spells and Protective Objects, Ilya is an efficient older witch of Russian extraction. She is a graduate of the Durmstrang Institute, and maintains close ties with its faculty.

**Bones, Amelia** As the Chief Warlock, Madame Amelia Bones serves as the leader of the **Wizengamot** and administrator of the justice system of Magical Britain. As Supreme Mugwump, she leads the **International Confederation of Wizards**.

**Cappadocia** Magical Cappadocia, also called the Exarchate of Cappadocia, is a magical state that controls much of the Balkans and Turkey. It is ruled by an elite class known as the *sakellarioi* (in continuity with the Byzantine state from which it descended), although nominally headed by a single powerful *Strategos*. They are relatively poor when compared with the rest of the world, and the two dominant languages are Greek and Turkish. They have belligerent relations with **Cyprus**.

**Caucasus** Magical Caucasus is officially a single magical state north of **Cappadocia**, but in practice is a fractious conglomeration of small regions with little to unite them but convenience. Delegate status to the **International Confederation** is frequently doled out as a sop to potential rivals of local strongmen, and in practice the Caucasus tends to lean heavily in favor towards Russia and the European contingent.

**Charlevoix, Odette** A member of the **Returned of Hermione Granger**, Charlevoix is of French extraction. She is quiet and shy by nature, which combines oddly with the extremism of the Returned. She looks just like your aunt.

**Covenant, Tilly** Assistant Head of the Office for the Detection and Confiscation of Counterfeit Defensive Spells and Protective Objects.

**Curd** A small community of goblins in Ireland.

**Cyprus** Magical Cyprus is a small and wealthy state in the Mediterranean with strong historical ties to Britain. They have had fractious relations with **Cappadocia**.

**Diggory, Cedric** Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and widely considered to be a prodigy, having risen to his position with remarkable speed.

**Eleusinian Mysteries** The magical cabal that ruled Ancient Rome during much of its early history. After their fall and some discord, they were succeeded by the Caesars and Muggle rule.

**Euphoric** An addict of Euphoria Elixir, unable to resist compulsively indulging in that potion's rush of pleasure and delight.

**Floo FloUNDER** An American device, these take the form of small bellows on the floor and dispense a set amount of Floo powder. It is slightly safer and considerably cleaner than using manual pinches of the stuff, especially for children and the elderly.

**Franklin's Nez** A popular Boston tavern, conspicuous for having Pensieves and a variety of exhilarating or pleasurable memories to rent.

**Free States** Several different small states in the south of Africa that tend to agree on matters of international politics but

which endure frequent friction among themselves: the Orange Free State, the Zulu Free State, and the Transvaal Free State. The Free States are also notable for being one of the areas where the magical world is wholly out of sync with the Muggle world's borders.

**Goddess, The** See **Granger, Hermione Jean**.

**Göreme** A prison complex of the Exarchate of **Cappadocia**, where Dementors are housed. They are kept a maximum distance away from prisoners, who are there to provide sustenance, not suffer punishment.

**Granger, Hermione Jean** Also melodramatically known as the "Goddess," Hermione is an international envoy for the **Treaty for Health and Life** and an activist for various causes (most prominently the abolition of Dementors).

**Grindelwald, Gellert** A Hungarian wizard who was educated at the Durmstrang Institute and who rose to power as a Dark Lord with the stated intention of overturning the Statute of Secrecy and improving the lives of Muggles everywhere under a benevolent dictatorship, modeled after Plato's *The Republic*.

**Hig, Councilor Regulus "Reg" Black-Horse** Arguably the most influential Councilor on the **Council of Westphalia**, Hig has risen to power despite his years spent fighting for the rights of Muggles and Beings. His closest ally is Councilor **Limpel Tineagar**.

**Hírnökei** The "Vég Hírnökei," or "Heralds of the End," were the fighting force assembled by **Gellert Grindelwald** and indoctrinated with a strange kind of fanaticism. They mostly came from former Durmstrang Institute students and the ranks of local warlords from Eastern Europe, and used Hungarian as a lingua franca.

**Howard Prison** A purpose-built prison for magical Britain, created to replace Azkaban after its destruction at the end of 1992.

**International Confederation of Wizards** The international assembly of wizardkind. It is governed by majority vote, and delegates are apportioned to states based on magical population. It is similar to the Muggle United Nations, with

the differences of meeting infrequently, having no permanent headquarters, and occasionally being efficacious.

**International Statute for Health and Life** An attempt at an international law setting into place requirements for all nations to have their sick and elderly restored to health at the **Tower**. It failed to pass in the **International Confederation of Wizards**, and was one of Harry Potter's early failures. See also **Treaty for Health and Life**.

**Lectenbergh, Susie** A member of the **Returned of Hermione Granger**, Susie was a longtime petty criminal who once ran a business selling unauthorized portkeys and fraudulent potions out of Diagon Alley. She was given an unusually harsh sentence of two years in Azkaban. Susie is quite talkative in the pseudo-Dickensian manner of many of the residents of Diagon.

**Li, Hyori** A member of the **Returned of Hermione Granger**, Hyori was a high-ranking duelist on the British circuit before she was imprisoned in Azkaban. She is extremely laconic, but still waters run deep.

**Mercantile, The** The leading newspaper of magical Boston. It is noted for having an excellent reporting staff with top-notch investigations accompanied by entirely deluded editorials.

**Minister for Magic** Purportedly the leader of the government of magical Britain, although the Minister for Magic has historically been secondary to whomever has the greatest support in the Wizengamot, thanks to a governmental structure that strongly favors the legislative branch over the executive one. Recent Ministers in chronological order have been: Millicent Bagnold, Bartemius Crouch, Cornelius Fudge, Rufus Scrimgeour, Pius Thicknesse, Junius Simplewort Smith, and Carmel N'goma (the current Minister).

**Moody, Alastor "Mad Eye"** He's probably watching you now.

**Mukwooru** A powerful Comanche medicine man in antiquity, who probably lived during the fifteenth or sixteenth century.

**N'goma, Carmel** See **Minister for Magic**.

**Nutcombe Society, The** The only currently extant organization for hags in Britain; it has only a handful of members, but it is an important support group for those hags who wish to live an alternative lifestyle.

**Pirrip, Phillip “Pip”** A relatively new auror assigned to the **Tower**, given an unfortunate name by his father, a Muggle literature professor.

**Potter-Evans-Verres, Harry James** Also known as “Harry Potter” or the “**Tower**,” Harry lives in a box, heals people, and schemes.

**Price, Esther** A member of the **Returned** of **Hermione Granger**, Esther is an American by nationality, and her imprisonment in Azkaban (for illegally breeding and selling sphinxes) had been a matter of great contention between the magical States and magical Britain.

**Rejuvenation** The official name for the treatment to restore youth at the **Tower**. The process is done by any of the available healers and certified in every case by Harry Potter himself. Most typically, applicants are restored to the best approximation of their youthful self (usually at the rough physiological age of 25). There is a tendency for distinctive features to be lost or altered during the process, although this can be minimized if the applicant brings sufficient pictures of themselves when young.

**Returned, The** A small group of witches and wizards who work under the direction of **Hermione Granger**. They have several aims, but their paramount purposes are the elimination of Dementors and the end of suffering in the world. They do not lack ambition. Also see **Charlevoix, Odette; Lectenber, Susie; Li, Hyori; Price, Esther; Smith, Simon; Tonks, Nymphadora; or Urg of the Returned**.

**Room 101** Everyone knows what’s in Room 101. The thing that is in Room 101 is the worst thing in the world.

**Russell Center, The** One of the two major schools of magic in North America, the Russell Center focuses on practical application and specialization. Students choose a specific course of study in addition to their general education, and are required to master their chosen field.

**Safety Pole** See **Tower, The**.

**Safety Stick** See **Tower, The**.

**Salor Sprig, The** The Salor Sprig is a revered silver birch sapling at the centre of a sacred clearing in the Forbidden Forest

near Hogwarts, in the northwest of their designated lands. The Sprig remains the same, year after year, never maturing from its sapling stage. According to legend, this is because it accords the centaurs too much respect to obstruct them in their studies or their frolics. A small group of buildings has been built among the trees near the Sprig, and form a rough center to their community.

**Satomi's Dogs** A powerful set of magical items once employed by **Gellert Grindelwald**, these crystal devices granted that Dark Lord some unknown power to sustain himself. The secret of their means and method was restricted to only a handful of people.

**Sawad** The group of magical states in the Middle East, a relic of ancient magical despots that are still customarily considered a unit, despite their actual independence and occasionally divergent interests.

**Science Program** A four-year educational track at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, the Science Program features two years of general magical studies and two years of scientific training. It was introduced in the 1992-1993 school year as an optional vocational program.

**Shacklebolt, Kingsley** Former Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, succeeding **Amelia Bones** upon her ascension to Chief Warlock and dismissed several years later.

**Shichinin** A wildly effective and wildly unconventional trio of Hit Wizards.

**Smith, Junius Simplewort** See **Minister for Magic**.

**Smith, Simon** A member of the **Returned** of **Hermione Granger**, Simon is Scottish and proud of it. He once had a drinking problem and a fighting problem, and in time it led to Azkaban.

**Sontag** A hamlet of medieval Magical Britain, located in the West Country. It was abandoned in the fourteen century. It was near Godric's Hollow, the magical community from which Sontag once sprang due to disagreements over the prohibition of werewolves.

**Ten Thousand, The** Colloquial term used to refer to those twelve magical Asian states with a common Taoist and Confucian heritage.

**Tidewater** The main magical community of Boston, Tidewater is a quaint and narrow dockside village set within Boston. It is dominated, metaphorically and literally, by the stately **Alping**.

**Tineagar, Councilor Limpel** A veteran of the **Council of Westphalia** and the ally of **Reg Hig**, Tineagar is generally disagreeable. She is an expert in Floo networks and similar magics.

**Thing** In addition to being a generic noun, it also historically refers to governing assemblies in many Germanic countries. It is still used in some areas as a term for any magical assembly of lawmakers.

**Tonks, Nymphadora** A member of the **Returned of Hermione Granger**, Tonks is a metamorphmagus and kind of a pain in the ass.

**Treaty for Health and Life** A formal agreement between different magical states, sponsored by Britain and guided by the **Tower**, that directs the establishment of Safety Poles in magical communities, the free availability of Safety Sticks and elite Healer's Kits, and a variety of other social and economic changes.

**Tower, The** The clinic and sprawling research center on the grounds of Hogwarts, led by **Harry Potter** and dedicated to the perfect healing of any wound or sickness, free of charge. Travel to the Tower is free and instantaneous with Safety Sticks or a Safety Pole. Not technically a part of the government of magical Britain. Also see **Tower School of Doubt**.

**Tower School of Doubt, The** The institute of higher learning established by **Harry Potter** and designed to systematically apply the principles of the scientific method to the study of magic. Works closely with the Unspeakables of the Department of Mysteries in the government of magical Britain.

**Unbreakable Honour** The underground newspaper published by Draco and Narcissa Malfoy. It has a worldwide circulation, and has made them the leaders of the minority campaign against the current leadership of Britain and the **Treaty for Health and Life**.

**Urg the Unclean** The charismatic and brilliant leader of the fifth goblin rebellion of 1720-1722 C.E., the “Great Rebellion.”

**Urg the Returned** A member of the **Returned of Hermione Granger**, Urg was imprisoned in Azkaban as a gesture of dominance by the **Wizengamot**, asserting their authority over the goblins. He was one of the first goblins to legitimately purchase a masterwork wand in many centuries.

**Vanishing Room** A natural extension of the concept of the Vanishing Cabinet, constructed for easy international shipping. Put things in, close the door, and they’re teleported to the twin room somewhere else in the world.

**Veres Kezek** The “Red Hands,” one of the death squads of **Gellert Grindelwald** during his reign of terror. See also **Hírnökei**.

**Walpurgisnacht** “Walpurgis Night,” the night of April 30th, is a night of celebration for many Muggles. It is named after St. Walpurga, and in many countries in Europe is marked by the building of big bonfires, evoking the fires in which witches were once burned. It is a grim night of remembrance for wizardkind.

**Weasley, Percy** Senior Undersecretary Percy Weasley is the effective head of government of Magical Britain, serving under a rotating and mostly meaningless series of Ministers. He is seen as slightly priggish by his underlings, but his efficiency and concern for detail are peerless.

**Westphalia, Council of** The Mystical and Benevolent Council of Westphalia, also called the **Westphalian Council** and headquartered in the **Alping**, is the most powerful magical organization in the United States of America and Canada. For years, it has acted as the self-appointed guardian of the interests of both North and South America (or at least, those interests as it sees them). It has controlled a large majority of the Magical Congress of the United States for many years, making it the effective ruler of the country and arbiter of its delegates to the **International Confederation of Wizards**.

**Westphalia, Peace of** A formative historical event in both the Muggle and magical worlds, the Peace ended multiple wars



and established norms regarding the formal existence of states and their rights under international law. Soon led to the founding of the **International Confederation of Wizards**.

**Wizengamot** The supreme judicial and legislative body of magical Britain, the Wizengamot is led by **Amelia Bones** and populated overwhelmingly with supporters of **Harry Potter** and his initiatives. It is composed predominantly of the representatives of Noble Houses, as well as elected Tribunes from other constituent bodies.

**Záh Kardja** The “Sword of Záh,” one of the death squads of **Gellert Grindelwald** during his reign of terror. Named in honor of the Hungarian Felician Záh. See also **Hírnökei**.