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# SIGNIFICANT DIGITS

H continuation of Harry Potter and the Methods of Rationality.

By Hlexander 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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Hrc Chree



Synthesis

### www.chapter One www.www.

## Directoire Executif



When we look for a guiding hand, where do we look? Ever upwards, ever upwards! The stars above radiate a divine influence, and it washes over everything. It gives shape to the lesser seers and to our own wishes, and it gives magic to the flower in the field and beast in the fold. Their unknowable will provides for the oddities of magic. Why does a certain word have effect with a certain wand? Upwards, ever upwards! It is the will of the stars! If you wish to find a pattern to the world, then you must look only upwards... ever upwards! That is the secret of all magic.

— excerpted from Lord Runcible LeValley's translation of The Stars Our Destiny, by Guileford Wednesday

#### 

What possible congruence of theories or schemes could explain the many aspects of magic in the world? It is an outright impossibility, and any attempt to square the circle must reckon with the seemingly innumerable contradictory and unfathomable aspects of the magical world. The blanket assertion that the stars are at work is not explanation enough.

Gamp's Law of Transfiguration, which sets limits seemingly imposed by culture and custom? The inherent magical properties of the subjects of magizoology and herbology, where unthinking flora and fauna both defy consistent categories? The law of sympathy that underlies many rituals or potions, drawing upon either a metaphorical intimacy or a synecdochal partiality to a power or target in order to channel the effect? The potent accidental magic

of the underaged, which seems to have no relation to any theory of practised magic, but instead dwells in a realm of will, wishes, and wild randomness? The linguistic uniformity of high ritual and new spells alike, with onomatopoeic properties to incantations which range from the most ancient syllabaries to last week's innovations? Wordless or wandless magics, which rely upon a twist of thought or frame of mind to produce the intended effect – even when that twist or frame bears not the slightest resemblance to the spoken spell?

Magic is a mystery by its very nature, and each field and aspect of study deserves its own theories – they cannot be reconciled with each other in some grand schema. In every age, and even in our own waning era, the only advancements have come from dedicated transfigurationists, potioneers, magizoologists, enchanters, and the like... never from the grand madness of addled "magical theoreticians." Magic is a gem with many facets, through which we may shine light from many directions. But try to shine light through them all, and you produce no illumination: only confusion. Try to combine these facets into a single face, and you produce no lens – not even the manifold lights of Wednesday's much-beloved stars: only fragments.

— excerpted from American Mage's review of same

### 

On the shores of the lake of teeth, where the black hills end, Tír inna n-Óc May 15th, 1999 Three weeks later

Once upon a time, a city of tents and pavilions stood here, illuminated by its own small sun. Bundiwigs and lejis would run in laughing circles before gladsome parties of elegant gaunts, while the visc let tissue-thin wings carry them in lazy loops overhead. When their sun darkened, it would be time for the sharpening.

But all of that was in the past, and no one today remained to tell that story. There was only the gentle whisper of tooth on tooth as the ivory waves rolled upon the shore... and a certain quiet wail hidden in the wind. Three figures stood in the uncertain grey light, their dreamflesh composed of intricately moving shadows.

"So then," said the first figure. "Our American witch and her organization are gone – years of management, wiped out by incompetence and chance. And now the British bishop has been captured, wasting more of our time. Entire days of our time, considering the effort spent in scrying for her location, altering her to our needs, capturing her pawns from hither and thither, and using the Touch to maintain our position. Our situation has worsened, and the Tower remains beyond our sight or reach. We cannot trigger the Lethe Touch and protect ourselves. We are exposed."

The second figure listened silently. After the first was done speaking, it turned to regard the third creature of living shadow, inviting the conversation to continue.

"And so we need a next move, Meldh, to build on this one," replied the third figure. "It seems clear that the attack worked in its essentials. The Tower was breached and its defenders defeated. Yet there is little discussion in the British gendarmerie about changing their defenses. There is no reason not to awaken Tineagar and send her to the attack. We still have the wolf at Busan – if we double the force we send, then they will succeed by main strength. There is little risk."

"The risk is that we would be wasting our time, enacting the same foolish plan again, and we would be risking leaving the American in their hands, as well. She has much of your lore, Nell – would you see it released back into the world, to strengthen and perpetuate the threat of magic?" Meldh's voice was strident.

"Success will mean we might eliminate the risk of exposure through Bellatrix Black, as well as the threat of the Tower, and cut off the entire threat of this new approach to magical discovery. A few charms and Brittonic rituals are a small risk," said Nell, dismissively.

"When your toes are at the brink, every handspan of distance counts. What if it is the spread of the Babylonian Garden that pushes us over?" retorted Meldh. "I do not doubt you equipped your bishop with that ritual, in addition to a pack of howling idiots. What if the boy employs it in conjunction with the Philosopher's Stone? How many of him do you wish to face?"

"A direct hand is needed," said the second figure, interjecting. "You were correct in our last conversation, when you said as much. We have passed the point where we can hope to deter this new regime. By the time any further action can be taken, all the world will be united. It is time to take control, and employ this new tool that has been readied for our use."

This suggestion, phrased in the mildest of tones, struck the other two like a physical blow.

"You will venture forth and risk yourself? That is... surprising," said Meldh.

"Not myself. You." said the second figure.

This prompted an even longer pause.

"I am not certain that is wise. Putting myself beyond your sight, protection, and aid... I would be submitting myself to greater dangers than I have encountered in centuries."

"I will enrich you with my own lore."

"I am grateful," said Meldh, although his tone of voice suggested otherwise. "And yet it would be risky beyond ken. The dangers are... formidable. I am more accustomed to moving other pieces. That is the sure way: observe and touch at a distance. Until this moment, there was much to be learned even by simple correspondence games. And then a whispered word or the gift of a bit of knowledge... that is the way to do it, I think." But rather than assertive, Meldh's words were hopeful.

"You are powerful and wise, and more than capable," offered Nell, who had been quiet during this exchange. "And you would have all of our support. You are the master of the Touch – it was you who reshaped the pyromancer we employed in our first attempt to curtail the boy, and neither of us could have done it better. If any of us must take control –" (and her tone left no doubt that it was as good as settled) "– then it can be no other but you."

"We cannot wait and attempt influence by less immediate means. New devices appear every month. They defy the very grasp of the earth. The risk is untenable," said the second figure.

"I understand," said Meldh, slowly.

The second figure spoke reassuringly. "The Mirror, late of Atlantis, proves to be the means by which the Tower has escaped

us." Meldh and Nell both moved slightly, and had they visible faces rather than fractal shadow, surprise might have been evident there. "It is being used in a manner that is crude but effective – a single realm of the boy's choosing, with passage left unspecified. All may enter, and all are subject to its strictures... but it is another world, out of reach. When you do this, it will be yours, along with the Stone of the Long Song."

Nell turned sharply at this, saying, "But -"

"His," affirmed the second figure, and Nell fell silent.

"Very well," said Meldh. "But we will act with completeness, then. We have our pawns in the goblins – rouse them. And a secondary line within Britain. If I am to personally intervene, then I require everything we can bring to bear. If we succeed, I will not begrudge whatever extra time is necessary afterwards to hide our hand."

The other two agreed, solemnly, and for some time they discussed the ways in which they would ready themselves. Eventually, they departed the realm of nightmare-stuff. The dark shore was once more unpeopled, and only a gaunt's lost wail within the wind was left to suggest it had ever been otherwise.

Tír inna n-Óc endured.

### 

John Snow Center for Medicine and Tower School of Doubt (The Tower) The same day

"Okay then," said Harry Potter-Evans-Verres, Dean of the Science Program at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, head of the Tower School of Doubt, key advisor to a series of expendable Ministers for Magic, chief architect behind the development of entire new fields of wizardry, and guiding hand behind the course of the world. "I would like someone to seriously explain to me why we are calling them sfaironauts, and why I can't change it."

There was a series of groans from around the table. Cedric Diggory crumpled up a wad of parchment and threw it at Harry,

while Amelia Bones and Alastor Moody gave each other despairing glances. Draco Malfoy looked annoyed, Percy Weasley looked uncomfortable, and Luna Lovegood probably would have looked bored if she had been paying attention (she was thinking about fish). Reg Hig didn't react at all, only glancing up from the stack of parchments in front of him.

"I would like to discuss Bellatrix Black," said Bones, folding her hands in front of her on the meeting room table.

Harry sighed, and appeared to resign himself. "What about her?"

"Alastor and I agree that she cannot remain in Nurmengard. It's not secure enough," Bones said, glancing over at Moody. The handsome young man said nothing, but his roving eye – now back where it belonged, after long hiatus – whipped around to fix itself on the youthful Supreme Mugwump. "It has taken fully a week and an entire dedicated staff to begin to engage her mind, and we are nowhere near the depth of penetration necessary to extract secrets or spells from her, but recent events are a different thing. She has seen, well..." Bones trailed off, pursing her lips.

"Her mind is nastier than a Hungarian Horntail and twice as dangerous," said Moody, finally. "It's like she's taken an Unbreakable Vow to fight all intrusions into her brain." He paused, and his eye spun in his head. "Not a bad idea, actually."

Harry shook his head. "If you're looking to move her somewhere more secure than Nurmengard, the obvious question is: why is there anywhere more secure than Nurmengard? Whatever you're doing better in that other place, do it at Nurmengard, too."

"I maintain that we're being short-sighted about her, Potter," said Draco, frowning. Cedric nodded in agreement with the blond boy, paused as though he'd realized what he was doing, and then turned his attention back to Harry.

"The ticking 'blastbomb' scenario?" Harry asked, rubbing his forehead. "Look, we've spent years and years trying to heal people in St. Mungo's with severe mental trauma, and so have Muggle doctors. It's possible there are some things that can be done to the brain that can't be fully recovered. If Bellatrix Black's mind has been... well, made into some sort of maze, then it will just take a bit longer to get what we need from her. We're not going to tear

it free and damage her, not if it could leave her beyond repair." He looked around the table, but too many faces were skeptical. "If Hermione were here, or one of the Returned, they'd agree with me. 'Save one life,' remember?"

"This 'one life' might be risking that 'whole world,' Potter. You wouldn't hesitate to kill her in battle if it was necessary to save the lives of others. This is the same thing. The fact that it's just less pretty and less obvious doesn't make it any less true," said Draco. "Does anyone here doubt that she is going to suddenly disappear from her holding cell, and in six months we'll be facing her and two hundred wereknarls or whatever?"

Cedric shook his head at that and held up his hand. "No, no, please let's not get back into the 'sick or evil' discussion. Let's keep it on Nurmengard for a moment." He looked back over at Moody. "Our people posted there have been doubled. She has two decoys, one of whom is *herself* convinced she is Bellatrix Black. And there's probably at least two other plans in place that I don't even know about, despite one ordinarily thinking the head of the DMLE *might* rate inclusion on all of that sort of thing. And of course, beyond all that, it's still Nurmengard: one of the most secure places in the world. Where could you possibly move her?"

"Here," said Moody.

"It's -" began Draco, but Moody cut him off.

"The magics that Dumbledore left to help you build this place can't be replicated elsewhere," lied the head of security, smoothly. "Dumbledore's rituals prevent scrying and prevent intrusion – they even make the Killing Curse as dangerous as buttermilk so long as you're in the Tower. But we can't do it in other places, yet. No place can be made as secure as the Tower. If you're going to insist on soft-shoeing the interrogation process, then she needs to come here. We'll expand – new wing in the back. You wanted that anyway."

"I did. And it will give us an opportunity to keep working with her, and maybe keep her mind intact. I don't know if she can become a fully-functional person at this point," said Harry, unwilling to be turned to the new topic. His voice was cool with anger as he continued, "but it's possible, especially on a long enough timeline. It's also possible that kicking her brains apart

to get inside of them is something that might have permanent consequences, no matter how long the timeline." He glanced over at Draco, lips tight. "And killing is when you have no alternative. We have an alternative, so we're taking it."

"And if she wasn't alone? How about the 'Three?'" said Draco, cool as well. "If they exist, and they're not just an obvious bit of misinformation from one rogue American," he continued, ignoring Hig's abrupt attention and sharp glare, "then they might have had a hand in this. They, and not Voldemort, might have been the source of this, ah, 'Multi-Form Ritual.'"

"It wasn't Voldemort, and so that leaves Limpel Tineagar or the Three as the likely source," said Harry, firmly. When Cedric gave him a skeptical look, he tapped the lightning-bolt scar on his forehead. "I know it wasn't him." Cedric nodded, acceptingly and with a hint of sympathy on his face.

"Then can we risk them intervening? Surely we need to know about them now," said Draco, pushing his point home by rapping the table sharply with his knuckles.

"'Save one life,' " said Harry again, shaking his head.

"How about saving more than one, instead?" retorted Draco. "How about saving all the lives we lose if we wait too long, or open ourselves up for another attack? How many people were lost to the time-lock Bellatrix cast when she attacked? How many of her werewolf soldiers are still alive and sane?"

"If you start maiming minds because it's convenient," said Bones, frowning, "then I begin to wonder what we're fighting to protect. Let's not go down the path of the 'greater good,' if possible. It has an ugly history." Moody again said nothing, although he clearly favoured Draco's way of thinking.

"If we can just resolve the matter of Nurmengard, as Mr. Diggory suggested?" broke in Percy, tapping a finger on a parchment in front of him.

"Right, then," said Harry swiftly. "We'll expand. Alastor is right, we were going to do it anyway. I'll be glad of the greater leg-room, too. Unless there's an objection?"

There was none.

"How will we do the transfer?" asked Cedric.

Moody's eye wobbled over to point at him. "I'll be in touch."

"Will Ms. Granger be assisting? I think that would make us all feel better," said Percy, with an apologetic glance at Cedric.

"No argument here," agreed Cedric, with a broad smile. "But I understand she's at Powis for the time being. She deserves the downtime."

"She's as likely as most to work out how that ritual works, and better than anyone to actually try it," said Moody. "So I *hope* she's not just resting and scourging blood out of her sleeve."

This was a rather more grim note than Moody had perhaps intended, and there was an awkward pause. Draco shot him an annoyed glare, and Percy looked a little pale.

"Don't forget," Harry said, gently, "that her sleeve was still bloody when she began trying to heal that Bellatrix."

"Mm," grunted Moody. "Shame the ritual ran its course. If it had been permanent," he said, and his eye whipped around to regard Harry, accusingly, "then we'd have two of them to interrogate."

Harry ignored him. They'd had this discussion several times already, and he expected it to become a common one (not just in the Tower, but among humanity). What are the ethics of creating new sentient beings, when you knew they faced an uncertain or unpleasant end?

"It would be helpful to be able to send Ms. Granger to China, I think, when she has had her rest," said Bones, interrupting Harry's train of thought. There was the slightest hint of judgment in her tone. "Now that the recent conflict has been, er, resolved —" and she gave Draco an ambiguously intent glance "— she can begin representing the Treaty once more."

Draco smiled, and raised a finger, as if in reminder.

"The Treaty for Health and Independence," Bones said with a heavy air.

Hig lowered the parchment he'd been reading, and turned to stare at Draco with his dark little eyes. He let his gaze linger for a moment in warning, and then it broke into warmth and a pleasant smile. "Health and Independence indeed... and more importantly, an end to all the unpleasantness of recent years." He turned his attention to Bones. "I concur with you. The Goddess is far and away the best envoy we could send. I don't think the outcome

is in doubt, now that Russia, the Sawad, New Zealand, and the Caucuses are all with us – and now that all the concessions they demanded are in place. But don't forget Cappadocia... they're still out of the fold. A bad example. We need the best envoy to ensure that China or Thailand don't try to forge their own way."

"Or we could bring Cappadocia in," suggested Draco.

"Oh good," commented Cedric. "I was just saying to myself, 'I sure hope we repeat the same arguments every single time we meet, oh Merlin, am I glad we've gotten so much blonder around here."

Bones cut in over Cedric's sarcasm. "I agree with Councilor Hig."

"Myself as well," said Percy.

"After she takes the time she needs," said Moody, roughly.

"Measured thrust will be easier if we use something similar to those goblins chargers," said Luna, nodding, as though her words were somehow germane to the conversation.

The discussion hiccuped around her interjection.

"So do we wait until she feels ready, or should I go and see how she's doing?" asked Cedric, hopefully.

"The goblins haven't been able to come in to Material Methods for several weeks – something political going on in Ackle, according to Urg. Preparing for a major meeting of the Urgod Ur, I think," said Harry, seizing on Luna's words. "But we can prototype something on a smaller scale in the meantime."

Bones gave Harry a despairing look, then glanced back at Cedric. "No, the 'Goddess' is diligent enough, as you well know. She'll be back when she's ready."

"Let's pick this back up tomorrow," said Hig, smiling indulgently and gesturing at Harry. "Other things are pressing, clearly."

"Harry?" said Moody, leaning forward.

"Unless Percy has something else?" said Harry, rising from his seat.

"No, sir," said Percy. He was smiling. "It looks like everything is working out."  $\$ 



The propaganda agents of the Tower have been toiling away in rotten old England, trying to convince you that the Walpurgis Night War was a resounding victory for the forces of meddling and the armies of colonialism. But thankfully, they protest too much.

In reality, events since that night, when the world teetered on the brink of destruction, have proven to be far more favorable to the Independents and their British counterparts, the Honourable. The leader of the Honourable and one of the voices of the Independence movement, Lord Draco Malfoy of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Malfoy, was only barely able to keep a smile of satisfaction off of his face when interviewed at Siegfried's this past week. "Virtually all of our demands have been met," Malfoy said to this reporter over a Muggle meal of squid-ink pizza and cranberry foam, "and we are very happy with the changes to the Treaty for Health and Life."

When asked about concessions, the handsome young nobleman was more coy. "The negotiators for the Independents, who kindly invited me along, did have to give up some things in negotiation, of course. I understand that Russia has reluctantly agreed to contribute their own aurors to help protect the Tower. Thankfully, that will also let them keep a close eye on it," said Lord Malfoy, with a twinkle in his eye.

The Honourable leader conceded that he would be ending publication of his long-running journal Unbreakable Honour, due to new responsibilities. "I understand that the Thunderer and several of the Emirati Councils insisted on having representation within the Tower, if their people were going to be expected to cooperate. A reasonable request. But to my surprise, they thought my long... association with Harry Potter would make me the best person to keep an eye on things in some sort of executive capacity." Lord Malfoy did not appear to be unhappy at the prospect of exercising oversight on his old schoolyard rival.

A representative of the Tower has called the outcome of negotiations between the two treaty organizations an "equitable outcome." But the results would appear to be markedly in favor of the Independents, regardless of the spin you might be hearing.

Excerpted from "A New Age,"by Sylvia de Kamp in American Mage

# Interlude mmmmmm

# Science

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John Snow Center for Medicine and Tower School of Doubt (The Tower) October 3rd, 1998

"Mr. Abercrombie, Ms. Ryan. How can I help you?" asked the dean, glancing at his wristwatch. "It must be important if you've come to see me during my office hours this week."

Visiting the dean was relatively simple, but annoyingly tedious: you simply pinned a note to the front of your robes about office hours, then snapped a Safety Stick. Few students ever bothered, especially considering how intimidating the former prodigy and current magical titan could be. His inaugural speech to the Science Program students hadn't been especially impressive – a great deal of fuss about a "pale blue dot" – but some of the new students in the Program had felt faint just from being in the Tower and in such proximity to the great man. Craig Abercrombie and Siobhan Ryan thought this visit was necessary, however.

As usual, every team in their year of the Science Program had been given their project on Sunday. In this instance, each trio of students was handed a small brown box containing the broken shards of a vase and a small card of information. Craig, Siobhan, and Perry Paderau got a box full of white-glazed pieces decorated with delicate designs in blue and green. The card had informed them that this was formerly an Art Nouveau vase created by Leon Solon, and told them that they were required to "repair the vase" without magic. You may use magic in any way you please during the process, as long as no spell directly touches or affects the pieces of the vase. Points will be awarded based on the completeness of the restoration, overall aesthetic effect, and creativity.

"Well, sir, it's just got to be Muggle glue, right?" said Craig. "Nothing else you can do. Not much of a challenge. We were wondering if you might talk to Professor Syracuse about it, and get him to change it a bit."

"I suggested this assignment, actually," said Dean of the Science Program Harry Potter-Evans-Verres. He leaned back in his chair behind the huge wooden table, adjusting his glasses, and gestured at a pile of books at one end of the table. Craig recognized some of the textbooks from the science program and several books on pottery styles and history, along with a handful of note-filled parchments.

There was a brief pause as the two students absorbed this information, then Siobhan spoke up. "Sir, I'm not sure it fits with some of the other projects we've done. They all needed... well, you had to think about them. This will just be... tedious. Gluing things together."

"Don't underestimate the value of patience, Ms. Ryan," said the dean. "Having the fortitude to do something annoying and fiddly is a key aspect of good science." He pushed himself back from the big table, and stood up, gesturing vaguely. "A few rooms away is a project I've been working on for *years*, trying minor variations on the same thing over and over again to try to find the exact shielding that will work for my purposes. And I'll probably keep working at it tomorrow, and next week, and so on. If you've decided on a way to complete your project, don't quit just because it seems tedious. Most worthwhile things are tedious at some point, so you should get used to tedium... as long as it's for a good purpose, and not just busywork."

"This is just different than Professor Syracuse's previous assignments, that's all," said Siobhan.

Craig nodded in agreement, and then his face lit up. "There was something about this sort of thing in one of our books..." He walked over to the pile of books and notes that the dean had indicated. He leafed through them until he found what he was looking for: a copy of *Surely You're Joking*, *Mr. Feynman!* Craig opened it and began flipping through it, rapidly.

Some of the previous weekly projects from the Professor of Engineering had been:

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• Construct a way to view a basilisk with sufficient clarity that it could be effectively fought. Any means allowed, Muggle or magical. Entries included glasses with mirrors built into them, blindfolds enchanted with vitalis revelio, a purchased pair of Muggle night-vision goggles, and a simple piece of parchment inscribed with the words, "Use the Killing Curse and then view it as much as you want."

- Build upon last week's work studying Muggle agriculture, and suggest a new way to improve it in a well-structured essay. No minimum number of inches. Answers were almost universally centered around either the use of magical creatures (interbreeding, pest control, etc.) or the production of fresh water (wide-scale weather management, enchanted saltwater filters, etc.) The most successful team pointed out that simply using Vanishing Rooms would result in the biggest improvement to Muggle agriculture, eliminating all the problems of preservation and transportation.
- Go to the northeast corridor, take the second stairwell, go left down the hall, and enter the eighteenth room on the left. Once the door locks behind you, your team will have one hour to escape. You may not use your wands. You may bring anything else with you that you wish. Students brought lockpicks enchanted with flawless function, battering rams transfigured to a small size, bottles of magical fire or Bundimun acid, and other things. Most plans had needed to be altered somewhat after the door vanished.
- This is a Muggle device known as a "mousetrap," used in place of the Vermexous Charm. It is missing the spring which would normally power it with mechanical energy. Make it work. Points will be awarded based on the effectiveness of the trap on a living mouse and creativity. Most teams succeeded to get the trap to work, replacing the spring with twisted rope or other solutions. The two winning teams, however, found more innovative approaches. One team had put a lump of poisoned bait on the trap and ignored the device's original purpose. The other had tied the broken mousetrap to the back of a hungry kneazle.
- Write an essay in three parts: (1) Where is an example of the Pareto Principle at work within Hogwarts? (2) Where can

- you find an example of the normal distribution in Hogwarts?
  (3) Identify a place where you would normally expect to find an example of either concept, even though it is not present. No minimum number of inches.
- Golden Snitches have been immobilized and hidden throughout the fifth floor. Find any Snitch, but remember that most sensory spells will not be effective. Do not go past the mungbeans or you will certainly become lost. Only two teams had won. The first had gone and purchased a new Golden Snitch in Hogsmeade, pointing out that the rules didn't state which Snitch they needed to find. The other had researched the history of Quidditch's most famous cheaters and found a little-known fifteenth-century charm to divine the location of a Snitch. It used a distinctive wand motion. The following month, the Seeker for the Slough Sizzlers was fined a hundred Galleons and barred from competition.

After a moment of searching through the book, Craig had found the part he wanted.

"Sir, remember when Mr. Feynman goes to Brasilia and talks to them about what they do with their science education?" Dean Potter nodded; it was one of the more famous parts of the book. "Well, sir, Mr. Feynman says they have to choose a way because of 'a good reason, a sensible reason; not just because other countries do.' "The student tapped the spot in the book.

"Yes, Mr. Abercrombie. But I assure you, we're not doing this project just because other engineering classes do it this way." The dean smiled indulgently, and the expression paradoxically made him look very young. He was only a few years older than them, after all.

"Yes, sir, but maybe you're assigning this project because you're doing the sort of thing you think that Mr. Feynman would do?" said Craig, questioningly. He closed the book and set it back down with the rest.

Siobhan frowned, shaking her head. "Well, I don't know if that's it, Craig. I just thought..."

"It's a good point," said the dean, looking thoughtful. "When I was younger, I spent quite a bit of time feeling frustrated with

my teachers, and wishing I had a truly talented and creative tutor. I wasn't quite prepared when I got my wish." He fell quiet for a moment, and the students waited, a bit impatient despite their awe. The dean was either referring to Albus Dumbledore or David Monroe, and it was a dramatic reminder of how close they were to history... but they still wanted to leave as soon as possible.

"I'll think about it," said the dean. "And before I give any more suggestions to Professor Syracuse, I'll write out some clear lesson objectives. Cleverness isn't a substitute for pedagogy, I suppose."

"Thank you, sir," said Craig and Siobhan, just slightly out of unison. They seemed discomfited by the end of the conversation; Craig was tugging at his robes nervously and Siobhan was visibly sweating. They left without another word.

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The ensuing week was relatively normal – or what passed for normal in Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry's Science Program, which was not known for its normality. The lower-form students (in their first two years of the Program) scurried in small packs from one class to another, learning the rudiments of seven core subjects and one elective. The upper-form students spent their time with fewer professors, studying the rudiments of a few branches of science and doing labs. It was a ruthlessly intense program, and more than half of the students quit during their first year.

Professor Syracuse's afternoon class on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Saturdays was a group of fourth-years. They had a swagger about them: they'd survived three years of a course of study that was already legendary for its difficulty, surpassing even the Salem Witches' Institute's "Trial by Fire" graduate school of languages. In another year, they'd be choosing independent courses of study in magical science in the School of Doubt, working with Tower or Unspeakable researchers – or even just beginning careers, if they wanted. They would be the third graduating class of the Science Program, and they were on top of the world.

Truth be told, the swagger in these fourth-years might explain why Professor Santo Syracuse agreed so readily to the vase project when it was suggested by Dean Potter-Evans-Verres. Such an assignment had good prospects for teaching some arrogant teenagers a little humility.

"Sit down, sit down," snapped Professor Syracuse. "Paderau! You heard me! Sit down and be quiet! We have no time for your nonsense – the ladies aren't impressed. If you want to impress them, learn your equations."

The boy in question stood up from where he'd been crouched between two witches and walked around their station back towards his own in the back, wearing an expression of aggrieved innocence. He sat down between Siobhan and Craig, making as much noise as possible as he settled his elbows on the high table and his rear on the stool. His partners exchanged a look of annoyance behind his back.

Professor Syracuse watched him intently for a moment to be sure that the admonishment had been effective, then brightened as he turned to the class as a whole. He was a thin man of average height, and gloriously bald, with a shiny pink scalp and a mouth that twitched from side to side when he was excited. He was often excited.

"Today we'll spend the first hour on project presentation, and then after the break we'll be doing more work on friction," the professor said, rubbing his hands together in anticipation and illustration. "We'll try to hammer at least a few basic principles into you, so that you're only woefully ignorant, and not completely ignorant. It will be a rich, full day." He waggled his eyebrows in anticipation. "Okay! Get out your projects – whatever you have, get it out, even if it's just your notes! You can put your binders away for now. Do not spill your flobberworm mucus or murtlap essence, or you will be cleaning everyone's station at the end of the afternoon."

There was some shuffling and murmuring as people got themselves sorted, taking out whatever their team had managed to complete that week. All six of the teams appeared to have put together something in order to repair the vase, but as everyone looked around, they saw a variety of solutions.

"What did we get done, guys?" Perry Paderau asked the other two, in a hushed voice.

"'We' didn't get anything done... Craig and I did finish something, though," answered Siobhan, annoyed. She was arranging a closed box in front of herself, carefully.

"Don't be that way, Ryan... it's been crazy this past week," said Perry, frowning. "My dad wants me to come work for him when we get done this year, and so I've been trying to get some extra help from Professor Sprout in the evenings." Perry's father grew Sopophorous beans for export.

"You didn't do anything, you just let Siobhan and I do it, and now you're going to take credit," said Craig, irritably.

Perry turned to him, and spoke in a harsh whisper, "Hey, you're not the one who's expected to spend the rest of his life with baskets of Mooncalf dung and a pair of silver scissors, okay? Do you know how *often* you need to sharpen silver scissors?" He scowled. "I did all the work to get us out of that room last month, when the door vanished, so have some mercy, will you?"

"This is the only time," said Siobhan.

"Fine!" said Perry, a bit too loudly.

"Quiet over there!" said Professor Syracuse, darting his gaze at their team. He frowned. "Again, Paderau? One point from Ravenclaw!" Perry groaned and slumped forward on the table. "Okay, first team... Jess, Raphael, Sally... what do you have?"

Two boys and a girl rose from their stools and walked awkwardly to the front table. They set a vase down, carefully, as well as two small bowls. The vase was small, brown, and extremely plain.

"Our solution was simple. We had a broken vase, and we needed to make a working vase – to 'repair' it. So it seemed to us like the best thing would be to just make a new vase, rather than trying to remake the old one." She gestured at the table, and one of her teammates dipped his fingers into one of the small bowls, lifting out a palmful of brown powder. "We took the pieces of the original vase and ground them down into dust. Then we took that dust," she gestured again, and another teammate displayed a handful of dark clay, "and we added water, turning it back into clay. We didn't use any magic on the pieces, before or after we ground them down. We didn't even use *Aguamenti* to create the water – we just used the tap." She sounded very proud.

"Then," she said, gesturing at the brown pot, "we made a pot, and asked a house elf to put it in the kilns for us the next time they fired something. We got it back this morning, and here is the pot: clean and new, and in one piece."

The professor approached the front table, frowning. "Full marks for creativity, and I suppose this is a 'complete restoration.'" He picked up their pot, and examined it. "I am actually surprised that this worked. I wouldn't have thought that you'd be able to grind it down and then just re-fire it. The vitrification… hmm…"

Professor Syracuse drew his wand and tapped the side of the pot twice, saying, "Aparecium." The pot and the bowl of clay changed color – very slightly, tinting itself just a bit pink. The bowl of powder, on the other hand, turned red. The professor turned to regard the trio of students, eyebrow raised. "Oddly, very little of the invisible dye seems to have found its way into your new pot... almost as though you just mixed a little in with new clay, after discovering that your plan wouldn't work."

They muttered some excuses, but the professor was already waving them back to their seats. "If you want to remedy your low score today, then I'd suggest you each write me thirteen inches on why you think your plan didn't work, and what you should have done instead. I'd also suggest availing yourself of the library, this time around. If you'd done even a bit of research – or if you'd been paying attention when we discussed ceramics – you'd have known about why this wouldn't work."

Professor Syracuse turned back to the class. "Next."

The next two teams had simply glued the vase back together. One of the teams had done much better than the other, and had clearly taken the time to choose a specific kind of glue and practice, while the other team's vase had small chips missing and beaded lines of overflow dried along the seams. It even leaned a bit to the side.

Professor Syracuse commented on patience and conscientiousness as each team presented their work. The team that would go last watched in dismay, since it was obvious to everyone in the room that they had done the worst job – their glue didn't even look dry. One of them muttered a charm under their breath, and tried to subtly position their box so that it hid her efforts to use the warming spell on her work.

"Next."

The fourth team had tried hard for the "creative" and "aesthetics" points as a strategy, and had used the pieces of their broken vase as a mosaic on the outside of a different vase, breaking them into even smaller fragments and arranging them in an attractive pattern. They held up drawings they'd copied from a book with a Quarto Quickening Quill from Queevel's, showing different examples of mosaics in art around the world, as well as a large diagram indicating the best way to fit the pieces and stick them in place. They were a very thorough group, and the class was just lucky that they hadn't had time to make a diorama of a Pompeiian antechamber. They looked to be leading the class this week, easily.

"Next," said the professor, gesturing at Craig, Siobhan, and Perry.

The three of them got up. Siobhan carried the box with their project in it. She set it down, stood in front of it, and took out the vase. The white vase stood tall, and patterns of blue meshed with patterns of green on its surface. All of the pieces had been placed neatly where they belonged, but despite this care, the seams were clearly visible. Indeed, they gleamed with gold. Thick lines of the metal traced the joints between each piece. It was ostentatious, calling attention to the damage rather than trying to hide it.

Perry looked horrified. "This looks like we went mad," he hissed to Siobhan.

"Shut up," she whispered back, fiercely.

"We wanted to do a technique from Japan called 'kintsugi.' It's a traditional Japanese craft, and part of an approach that doesn't try to hide the history of a piece of broken ceramic, but instead make that history part of the visible story of the piece," Craig said, sounding a bit wooden and rehearsed. "We couldn't find a shop that sold the sort of lacquer that would work, which comes from a special tree, so we experimented with different things – potions and some goop from a Doxy nest and that sort of thing that we thought might work."

"This is Skele-Grow, reduced by half," said Siobhan, and she carefully lifted the pot and held it up. "We added a tiny bit of bone to activate it, and dusted it with some powdered gold. Not a lot, and it turns out to be cheaper than you'd think —"

"Because it's very ductile, so it can be made extremely thin," interrupted Perry, smiling as he was won over.

"...and so our receipts still only total up to about five Sickles," finished Siobhan, after an annoyed glance at Perry.

"Wonderful!" exclaimed Professor Syracuse, looking positively delighted. "It looks beautiful – and it shows not just creativity, but real scholarship. This is actually – my goodness – this is actually something specifically mentioned to me by the dean when we discussed this project! He is quite a Japanophile, in fact, and we discussed the *wabi-sabi* aesthetic in particular!" The professor shook his head, marveling. "I know we don't have *any* books on the topic... how exactly did you learn about this technique?"

"Ah, well," said Craig, thinking about the notes on the table in the Tower that he'd read while looking for the Feynman book. "We remembered what you said about 'social engineering'... it's easier if you start with half the solution. So we asked around."

The top sheet had read:

Santo, one final thought on my suggested assignment for next week:

I don't want to step on your toes, or make you feel like you have to give this. We promised you broad discretion when Minerva first came to you about your position in Killarney, and that hasn't changed. This is just an idea I thought would be fun. The idea here isn't just to make it difficult or tedious, since students will encounter enough of that without our help. But we're giving them only the rudiments of a scientific education here... I want to challenge them as much as possible. I mentioned kintsugi to you as one possible solution to the project, but it's also a metaphor for the wizarding world. You're a Muggleborn, and you were ostracized for relying on Muggle science for your research on mermaids and evolution, so you know what we're up against as we try to change society. These students are golden, but we have to make them strong... so they can hold together a broken world.

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I think it goes back to my high school days. In computer class, the first assignment was to write a program to print the first 100 Fibonacci numbers. Instead, I wrote a program that would steal passwords of students. My teacher gave me an A.

—Kevin Mitnick

# \*\*\*\*\*\*\* Chapter Two \*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

# Mascon



300 miles above the Earth May 16th, 1999 Now

"Pocket is away," Basil Horton said into the radio. He folded the controls to the waldo back into the wall, and the sturdy little arm, moved by the Protean Charm to mimic the movement of the controls, collapsed against the outside of the ship, out of sight beneath the viewport. He watched the satellite, freed of the waldo's grip, float away. "Floating free of the ship – I don't see any problems."

He waited for a response, squinting at the Muggle device, irritably. There was none. Scowling, Basil got to his knees in the small space between the pilot's seat and the wall, pushed down by the ship's inverted floating charm, and tapped the bulky black radio box. Probably waited until now to give up the ghost. Would be typical. Everything works fine until the very moment it becomes important.

He tapped the microphone on the headset again, and repeated the message. There was still no response... just the quiet crackles or hissing. At least it had electricity, and the speaker still seemed to be working. Basil cursed the very name of Marconi and got back to his feet, stooping significantly. He was a big man with an athletic build, even if he'd gotten a bit soft around the middle in recent years, and he couldn't stand comfortably in the ship without rapping his head against the smooth goblin-silver ceiling.

The entire ship was ridiculous, really... just a big silver ball. When that Ronnie Weasley boy had taken the first trip up, everyone had been all agog about "making history" and claptrap like that. The ginger idiot had the biggest, stupidest grin that Basil had ever seen when he got into the ship, and called out some Russian word before they closed the hatch – sounded like "Poor yeah cally" or some nonsense.

Should he get out the spare, or the repair kit? He could fix the damn thing, he knew... it was one of seventeen Muggle devices that they'd trained him to repair (sitting in a desk in some miserable little Muggle classroom like a wandless nitwit). Maybe something was wrong on the RCP's end, instead.

Basil tugged gently at the lead coming out of the back of the radio, to see if it had come loose on either end. The gobbos had needed to bore a small hole through the surface of the sphere, so that the Tower could slap an antenna along the outside, after discovering that the ship became more and more radio-impenetrable by the day. Had that lead gotten loose outside, or had one of the seals fouled it up somehow? Could the seals strangle off the flow of the signal, somehow? Basil considered. He didn't think so.

Annoyed, he turned and peered out the viewport. The brown satchel of the pocket world was visible, securely fixed to a Mitsubishi platform and surrounded by the white plastic Leaf spheres that protected the electronic sensors, thrusters, and other Muggle components. It seemed to be unharmed, but it also wasn't adjusting its attitude or showing any other signs that the staff at the RCP had taken control. They didn't seem to have heard him; they were still waiting to hear that the pocket was clear.

Maybe the radio had died – killed by a nearby enchantment or his own spells? There should have been enough Leaf inside the casing to protect it, absorbing ambient magic and preventing the accompanying electromagnetic interference, but the ship had been put into orbit with the Vanishing Cabinet on the *Monroe*, their first satellite... that could have been too much magic for the radio to endure.

Basil thought about the Tower's words when they'd been talking about possible equipment failures and the necessary redundancies. "My father always says that firm percussive maintenance is part of any good troubleshooting toolkit," the young man had said – speaking in that way he had, both patronizing and making

an annoying show of being considerate. Hard to believe that everyone in the Ministry fell all over themselves to try to please the kid... in Basil's opinion, Potter had just been lucky in his friends. He was riding back-broom after the Goddess, holding onto her coat-tails. Someday soon, she'd take over, and Potter would be put in his place.

"Basil? Are you clear of the pocket? We have its camera, now, but we don't see you," buzzed the radio, and not even the crackle of static could hide the sweetness of Dolores Umbridge's voice. Basil smiled, then leaned over and gave the radio a single good thump with the palm of his hand. It squealed and fell completely silent. Bugger.

He took another glance out at the pocket world, which was floating further and further away, and then sighed heavily. Merlin's nose, there's nothing for it but to get to it... Muggle junk. Basil opened the supply kit and found the pouch labeled "A6," and began the process of getting out the backup radio (bulkier with even more Lovegood Leaf to shield its components) and connecting it to the antenna lead. He should have enough time to try broadcasting. If it didn't work, he'd use the Vanishing Cabinet and a Quotes Quill, however clunky that solution might be. He wished the bubblers had enough range that they could just use them, or that they'd hurry up in the Vision Verge and get some other magical solution.

After almost fifteen minutes of laborious fiddling, Basil shoved the broken radio into the pouch and grabbed the headset of the new one, turning the frequency knob until the display showed the correct number. "Hullo... Dolores, am I transmitting?"

"Basil!" said Umbridge. "We were worried," she cooed. "Everything all right?" He could picture her as she spoke, that curvy beauty. Basil grinned.

"Fine, fine. Pocket is away and I'm well clear. Bit of trouble with this Muggle junk, but I've sorted it out," he said into the radio.

"Well done, Basil," Umbridge said, sounding a bit tinny over the radio – but still sweet. "We're getting a good connection with the pocket. Keep an eye on it, wouldn't you?"

Basil shifted around the pilot's seat and sat down in it, radio still in hand. He rested his free palm on one of his guidance sticks.

"Of course, madame." He willed the stick to move – as though he were flying a broomstick, funny enough – and the ship shifted slightly so that he had a clear view of the satellite.

He watched as one and then another of the thrusters fired in short bursts, and the satchel-carrying satellite, with its completely mental marriage of Muggle and magical materiel, moved gradually... presumably, finding a stable orbit.

The radio crackled. "Everything looks good on our end. How is it up there? Are you receiving still?"

"Five by five," Basil replied with a touch of irony, and smiled as Umbridge tittered. "Yes, everything looks good." He watched as the satellite slowly spun in place, and settled back a little into his seat.

The whole thing was truly remarkable, he had to admit. He never would have dreamed of this sort of thing when he was a younger man – it was more than impossible, it was inconceivable – beyond what he could have imagined. But these days... well, everything was speeding up and there were new ideas and new devices every week, it seemed. Anything seemed possible in a world where *Muggles* could fly beyond the end of the air. Basil and most everyone else might poke fun at the antics of the Muggles and their crude, fragile world... but they'd lain down there in the mud and looked up at the stars, and reached for them. It was inspiring, really.

After the satellite was safely in orbit, floating precisely where it should be, according to its onboard sensors and the tracking data they were collecting in the increasingly well-staffed RCP, Basil stayed in position for some time. He stared out at the steady dots of light that were scattered in the black like glittering alchemist's sand.

Basil knew the plans – what they wanted to do. What the Tower wanted. He wanted to send wizards out there... out among those stars.

It had started small – sending up the *Monroe* with its onboard Vanishing Cabinet, and sending the goblin-silver ship through that Cabinet, carrying a Weasley, for a test run of twelve minutes. Half of the onboard equipment had failed and one of the seams on the viewscreen had leaked, but Weasley had come through it

unharmed. He'd made another trip three days later with new equipment shielded against ambient magic. Basil went out the next week, and by now between the two of them they had nearly twenty hours of flight-time.

And now they had the pocket world – the "slicebox world," as some called it – in orbit as well. After testing its stability, they'd be bringing out the airlock chamber in pieces from the *Monroe* and locking it on outside of that brown satchel. They'd pump the vast chamber full of air and put some of the more useful Transfiguration wards in place as a safeguard. Then they'd slap a high-powered, long-term, *upside-down* Floating Charm on the whole giant cavern to float everything towards the "ground," just like the ship Basil was in. It would be its own little world.

There would be a lot of testing, of course. Basil was friendly with one of the gobbos – good bloke, even if he was a Puddlemere supporter – who had told him that the Tower already had some of the people in Material Methods working on a way to transport huge amounts of soil and water. There were even some specific sites in mind, such as some wetlands in the American South. Of course, even after they filled the big thing with dirt and water and whatever, it would still be experimental. Basil supposed they'd leave rats and flies in the pocket world for a good month before even beginning human testing, and the first planned permanent residents would be acromantulas.

But the trajectory was clear. Wizards in pocket worlds, out in space.

Basil sat there for a long time, and watched the stars.

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John Snow Center for Medicine and Tower School of Doubt (The Tower) May 16th, 1999

"Trade?" asked Harry, leaning forward on the stool. He reached over and moved the microphone away from the shiny black box. The box flickered with a pulse of reddish light as he did so.

Voldemort fell silent, the bland male voice going quiet for a few beats. Any pause was a message – surely Voldemort had already

considered whether he'd be willing to trade more information, and what questions he might ask in return. A pause this long was very nearly a shout – a strong reminder that the voice in the box had leverage. Harry smiled.

"Yes," came the answer, eventually.

"You discovered the Chamber of Secrets of Salazar Slytherin. I'd like to hear about that... whatever you could share." *I'll cast a wide net, first.* 

"Very well. In exchange, I would like to know more about your Tower," replied Voldemort.

"Vetoed," Harry said immediately. He didn't need to think about it: he'd set some hard rules about what information he was willing to trade, and some things fell entirely out of the range of acceptable discussion. And this was spectacularly dangerous information.

Harry remembered.

"Tell me what you can do." No answer.

"Tell me what you are." No answer.

"Help." No answer.

"Root." No answer. In fairness, that one had been rather a longshot.

"Noitilov." And with that – at that word, which really should have been obvious, since why have any backwards-meaning runes on the device at all, honestly it didn't provide any security and just looked silly, you just needed to spent thirty seconds with a microcasette recorder to figure it out – the Mirror changed. The image of Harry and the Hogwarts room behind him vanished. In its place, the Mirror displayed question.

Not the word "question," or a symbol like a question mark, or really any other visual communication. Instead, the very idea of questioning was reflected in the Mirror. This was obviously sheer semantic nonsense since an amorphous concept had no physical reality that could be represented with light, and Harry thought it was ridiculously silly. Obnoxiously, it continued to be true.

Harry considered what he would ask of the Mirror.

"Show me the world where the phoenixes came from." He could try to verify some of the information he already had about the Mirror, and maybe discover more about how it worked. Nothing happened. Still only: question.

"Show me my extrapolated volition." Nothing.

"Show me my coherent extrapolated volition." Nothing.

"Noitilov detalo partxe tnere hoc." Nothing.

Different attempts at pronunciation also had no result.

There was only the question, staring back at him. What question? What was it asking? Voldemort had said that the Mirror was supposed to possess morality – didn't that imply intelligence? Or that it consulted some external intelligent to make moral assessments of a person or situation or request? Could every possibility have been programmed into it ahead of time? Or did it borrow intelligence or morality from the viewer somehow?

What was it asking?

Did it want to know what he wanted?

Harry closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them again. He stared intently at the Mirror and said, his voice fervent with desire, and spoke his will.

"Sorry," Harry said again, returning to the present. "Can't do it."

Within the Tower, the Killing Curse had no power to take life. Here, the human spirit clung to the flesh more tenaciously than anywhere else. It was a plane of life and possibility, accidentally discovered – or accidentally *created* – during those hesitant experiments with the Mirror, years ago. That secret was beyond price.

It didn't matter that Voldemort was stuck in the box. There was not even the slightest reason to risk it, and the rules of their trading game stated that Harry had absolute veto power.

"More about this box, at least –"

"Vetoed," Harry said again, interrupting.

This was easier. Harry simply didn't know much about the box. Neither did the Unspeakables. It was clearly an item of significant power, and bore every mark of being goblin-made, but the only information that the Department of Mystery had on record was that it was intended to be an unbreachable prison. Tentative investigation, carefully done to avoid piquing anyone's notice, had turned up more than a few possibilities for the box... but no definitive answer.

Those would both obviously be off-limits, Harry thought. Next will come a slightly more subtle question, which I will feel more obliged to answer. But that didn't serve. No, it would be another level further.

"All right, then," said Voldemort. There was a tone of resignation in the voice – he had been getting more and more adept with using the magically-generated speech to convey emotion or emphasis. "Tell me about Ms. Granger, then. What have the effects of the Gattai Ritual been on her?"

Harry could see no reason to avoid this question. It seemed harmless, and was certainly something that Voldemort would be genuinely curious about.

"Vetoed," he said. Just because he couldn't spot the plot at work, or understand what Voldemort might gain, didn't mean he had to agree to the first mysterious step.

"Tell me about some new person, someone interesting," replied Voldemort, almost immediately. There was an odd warble to his last word. Harry supposed it was the artificial voice's version of "irritation."

"All right," said Harry. He felt confident he could make a harmless selection.

"You have already seen the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets - the hidden door had a mural of Salazar fighting a jötunn. We took a different passage, one of many that Salazar wove through Hogwarts and required the castle to maintain, but had we continued down the first path, we would have come to the Chamber proper. It is a large stone vault in a plain style, rather like the Tower of Mendoza, lit by a green light. I assume we would also have found the bones of a basilisk, fallen and defanged where I left it, but at the time that I first discovered the Chamber, the basilisk was very much alive and dwelling within a ludicrous statue of Salazar Slytherin himself. It ignored me, and did not look upon me, and would not speak to me despite my commands in Parseltongue." Voldemort paused. "I was a young man, then, and not as rich in lore, but I had wits enough to recognize the telltale shape of the statue's joints, and magic enough to know the minor enchantment which gave mobility to the design. All of the statues in Hogwarts have the same purpose. I could see the expected next step.

"When animated, the statue attempted to engage me in an old game of gestures which had been popular for many centuries in Salazar's time. It is a game of symbols with a vocabulary of handsigns, combining them in sequences of three, and one attempts to back one's opponent into a position where they can take no action. It is forgotten today by all except the most learned.

"I was poor and unpracticed at the game, knowing about it only from hoary scrolls, and I swiftly lost. The basilisk ignored me when I commanded it to assist me, replying that it had ears only for victory. I played the game again with the statue, which moved its stone limbs with flawless strategy.

"Some hours later, I was finally able to win by playing the Pestle, the Dragon, and the Worm. The statue of Salazar bowed to me and returned to its former posture – arms crossed, intending to be imposing. Only then would the basilisk speak to me, asking me to produce something called the 'writ of the blood,' in preparation for the second trial." There was another pause from the box, accompanied by a buzz. Harry had heard this imitation of a sigh before. "I admit that I lost my temper, then, and acted out of turn. I cast the Killing Curse thrice in succession, deliberately missing the basilisk each time, and I made some sort of speech – the bold words of an ignorant boy, threatening and demanding in Parseltongue.

"This, too, was within the expectations of Salazar Slytherin, it would seem, for the basilisk hissed its laughter and asked me what I would know of it."

"You destroyed the basilisk, so you must have been satisfied that you'd learned everything it could teach you," Harry said. "How did that work?"

"It was a matter of some months, Mr. Potter. An intellectual game between the basilisk and myself. It was compelled to cooperate with me, but was also driven to continually assess my motives, worthiness, and will... this meant that it did not merely spill its secrets. It required things of me... further trials, and it would accept no bluffs. It was a... harrowing time. And I think that is all I will speak of it, for now."

Harry didn't press the issue, yet, by asking about specific spells or rituals. That treasure trove still existed, and had incredible value, but there was no reason to press the issue. And as far as Harry could verify, the story was true. He'd been to the Chamber of Secrets, and found only a statue and a skeleton.

"Tell me of an interesting person, then, Mr. Potter," said Voldemort.

Harry considered who would qualify as interesting while still being harmless. "All right. There is a young man named Lawrence Bradwian whom I met a few months ago. He has a prophecy about him, supposedly... he is said to be fated to 'bring down a great house.' You'd think this would result in him being shunned by everyone else with noble blood, but instead he seems to be quite popular. He's a Slytherin, but almost seems a Gryffindor... rescuing a half-giant from persecution, breaking up a Euphoric ring, and accidentally helping me recover an artifact." One of your oldest Horcruxes, which we then destroyed, along with dozens of others we've found by tracing the paths of the invisible links between them with the most sensitive magic detector ever created, Harry thought, remembering the device Luna's team had created. "He even badly assaulted a classmate and framed him for an attack on the Tower, with the goal of becoming... I don't know, my protege or favorite? He's a Silver Slytherin, so I think he was more misguided than anything."

"And I expect you did not expel him or arrange for his removal, ensuring no large disruptions in the political scene? Instead, did you take him aside for a gentle scolding?" asked Voldemort.

"Well," said Harry, "rather more than that. But yes, I arranged for him to learn what real intrigue and danger and fear are like. I never put him in any real danger, but I think the experience might have been enough to actually change his mind. That's harder to do than one might think."

Like when you tried with me.

"I recall. Be careful you are not being overconfident."

Harry shook his head. "He's back in his normal student role, and one of the Silver Slytherin mentors – a Tower auror – is keeping an eye on him."

"It is a disturbing thing to hear how little you have learned from your own story, Mr. Potter. Do you not think that someone in a position of power should perhaps be wary of an adventurous and precocious young man with a prophesied role in great events? Does that not, perhaps, call anything to mind?"

"The thought had occurred to me," Harry said. He felt a moment of sadness... Voldemort should be speaking in the acid tones of a sarcastic Professor Quirrell for this moment of mocking pedagogy. He paused, then asked in a natural tone, "Willing to do another trade? I'd like to hear about the Resurrection Stone, if you're willing to discuss it."

It was tempting to add a diversionary turn of phrase, such as "wherever it may be" or "if I ever got ahold of it," or the like. But in the absence of body language and nonverbal cues, Harry had to be even more careful about his phrasing to avoid revealing to Voldemort that they'd already *captured* the Resurrection Stone, along with Bellatrix Black.

He had plans, and had uncovered some of the designs and powers of the Resurrection Stone – including some truly surprising things about the Peverell "brothers," but that didn't mean verification wouldn't be useful.

"No... I think not, Mr. Potter," replied the bland voice of Voldemort. "I know you have grand designs, and I do not object to many of them. But I will not help you in that, I think."

"Okay, Professor," said Harry, already deep in thought over his next possible question. "But let's talk about something else. Let's talk about some theories of magic. I have been doing some reading of both old and new ideas... tell me about how this theory sounds."

# 

Powis Castle, Wales May 16th, 1999

"So tell me honestly, Simon: how do you think we stand, right now? There are no big threats on the horizon, and no reason not to take every bit of necessary time to make sure they're okay," Hermione said. "We can let the world wait until they're feeling better."

"Esther is quiet. She doesn't say much... it's like before. Tonks is... I don't know," said Simon. His voice sounded flat and tired,

and the hollowness of his eyes was more pronounced. These had been rough weeks for everyone.

Hermione turned to Nikitas Seyhan, who was sitting quietly at the table with them. The young man had been here at Powis for months, and seemed to regard it as his natural home... certainly he appeared to have no desire to ever return back to Cappadocia. His twelve years in Göreme had wiped out most of his memories of his old life anyway. He had learned some decent English, received a new face, and grown close to his caretakers here... the people like Jessie and Simon who had looked after him, in the time since his liberation. He'd Returned, and he looked likely to stay.

"Nikitas? What do you think?" she asked him, gently.

He looked surprised that she'd ask, and after a moment began to appear almost panicked.

"It's okay, dear," Hermione said with her best reassurance, smiling. She leaned forward to put a hand on his shoulder, patting him softly. "Just take a moment and think. Esther, Hyori, and Tonks all went through a lot on Walpurgisnacht. You know them. How do you think they are doing?"

"Hyori," Nikitas said, awkwardly, "only ever just one word." "That's normal," said Simon.

Nikitas hesitated, then went on. "Esther does not talk. Before, she talked much more." He paused again. "Tonks..." He trailed off, frowning, and finally made a pained face and shrugged, discomfited.

"It's okay," Hermione repeated, warmly. She turned back to Simon. "We take as long as we need. Get in touch with St. Mungo's... let's get some outside help. This is different from dementation."



Khecheopalri Village, West Sikkim, India May 16th, 1999

The mountains of Sikkim lie far to the north in India, in a region balkanized by the vagaries of history and war. They are cold and high and proud, counting the mighty peak of Kangchenjunga

among their number. One of these mountains cradles the lakeside village of Khecheopalri, twenty miles away from the nearest sizable town. It is a small village, with perhaps two dozen buildings and eighty residents. Few Muggle tourists ever visit, except to see the holy lake – said to be a footprint left by Lord Shiva – and the last time a wizard came to stay was during the eighteenth century.

Even at this time of year, it is cold in Khecheopalri. When an older man left the small village temple, he traced his fingers on the surface of the bell, and found it unpleasantly cold. He pulled an old shawl closer around his shoulders, and walked off down the path away from the temple, slowly.

After some time, he reached his home. It appeared as modest as its neighbors – two rooms and a garden. A small pile of broken and discarded chhang gourds lay in one corner of the garden. The man entered the building, nodding a hello to one of his neighbors, Dorji, who was outside, trying to enjoy the warm sunshine, sheltered from the wind behind her low garden wall as she wrapped momos.

After some time, the man emerged. He went to the small wall that separated his garden from Dorji's, and addressed her politely in Sikkimese Tibetan.

"Dorji-la, I am going away on a small trip to Siliguri. I may be gone some time. I wonder if I could ask you to tend to my garden, in my absence?"

Dorji was already nodding and waving in agreement before he even finished speaking. "Yes, yes. Not a problem. We have been neighbors since I was young, and my garden and yours are one. But you go away so seldom! I hope there is no tragedy, umdze."

"No, no tragedy. Just a small matter of a property to which I must attend," said the man, smiling. "It is not a happy journey, and full of risk, but that is life."

"I hope that you have good results, umdze," Dorji said, smiling and placing another momo on the growing pile.

"Thank you. I hope so myself, as well," the man agreed, nodding solemnly.

"Let us play a game of shatranj when you return... it has been too long since you schooled me in my ignorance, umdze," she said, and returned her attention to her cooking. "I would enjoy that," said the man. He returned inside of his home, to make preparations for leaving.

# 

"And were we not saying long ago that the soul when using the body as an instrument of perception, that is to say, when using the sense of sight or hearing or some other sense (for the meaning of perceiving through the body is perceiving through the senses)—were we not saying that the soul too is then dragged by the body into the region of the changeable, and wanders and is confused; the world spins round her, and she is like a drunkard, when she touches change?"

"Very true."

"But when returning into herself she reflects, then she passes into the other world, the region of purity, and eternity, and immortality, and unchangeableness, which are her kindred, and with them she ever lives, when she is by herself and is not let or hindered; then she ceases from her erring ways, and being in communion with the unchanging is unchanging. And this state of the soul is called wisdom?"

"That is well and truly said, Socrates," he replied.

— Phaedo, Plato

# \*\*\*\*\*\* Chapter Three \*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

# Jagannatha



After Ten Years of Effort, it must be admitted that facrifice cannot be Undone. Having facrificed the Life of the plant, no Power fufficed to return that Life to it. We muft conclude that fome Harms are Irreparable in this Mortal Coil, and when a fubftance has been Unmade and its Effence Created into a Paffage for Forces of Magick, then that fubftance is utterly Gone from this Earth. To be Otherwife would mean a flaw in the course of Time Itself, for that which has been Done would be Undone in the past. Disaster would come on the Heels of such a remedy.

— Ruminations on the Workings of Ritual, Bartleby Bertram

# 

Powis Castle, Wales
May 16th, 1999
Two weeks after Bellatrix Black's attack

It was warm outside, warmer than it had been all spring, and the Returned were watching the peacock. The bird was a brilliant blue, and it had been walking in idle circles nearby for almost ten minutes now. Several times, it had stopped and spread its plumage, its head shuddering and throat working rapidly as the great feathers rose and fanned out, their magnificent colors and Argusian spots on display. By unspoken agreement, the Returned all sat and watched quietly.

Hermione thought there was only the one peacock – or at least, she'd only ever seen one. It had shown up two years ago. Both winters since, the peacock had been seen every time the gamekeeper put out food for the many pheasant. It stood out, unique and bold and beautiful, crowded in among the dull brown game birds as it dipped its head to snatch mouthfuls of grain.

Now the bird was alone, across the clearing from where they sat on their transfigured stools and rough wooden chairs, but it seemed no less singular. It twitched its head to one side, turning to stare back at them, and rippled its feathers.

"παγώνι," whispered Nikitas. "English?"

"Peacock," replied Susie, her voice also at a hush.

Tonks sat hunched over, her legs crossed and folded hands shoved between her thighs. One foot was vibrating with agitation. Her hair was a phantasmagoria of colours: blue and greens as vivid as the peacock chased each other down individual locks, only to be swarmed with streaks of black that would then erupt into platinum blonde.

Finally she bent forward and groaned, a long and low sound. The peacock froze in place, then bobbed its head suspiciously staring in their direction. Urg rose from his seat beside her and stood next to her, as tall standing as she was sitting, so that he could put a comforting hand on her back.

Hermione called over, her voice quiet, "Tonks, are you -"

"The clouds aren't white they're all different colors like grey and blue and yellow and others," Tonks interrupted, her voice a strained and rapid whisper. "I saw a man in the alley behind Gringott's once when I was little and he put his hand on my bum and I kicked him so hard that he sat down and said oh. On the seventieth page of my seventh-year Potions textbook I used to leave a quill-end so that I could find it quickly because it had all the distilling instructions and that was hard for me. I like chipped beef on toast but only if it's hot because otherwise it reminds me of nasty things. Baby mandrakes sound like children and they scream and scream but they don't have any lungs so I don't know where does the air comes and goes."

Jessie had joined Tonks and Urg, rising from her transfigured chair and crouching down with her. She put a tight arm around the metamorphmagus' waist. "Shh, it's okay." She glanced over at Hermione, her hollow eyes worried.

The peacock lowered its feathers and moved with unhurried but purposeful steps, away from them and into the undergrowth. All the motion was making it nervous.

Tonks took a deep breath, sucking it between tight lips as though it were painful.

Esther, who was sitting closest to Hermione, whispered, "She's getting better." She glanced over at Charlevoix, as though for confirmation, and the French witch nodded her agreement.

Hermione watched Tonks for a moment before replying. "Yes. But slowly, and painfully."

"She's an Occlumens," said Esther. "We should be thankful."

Hermione nodded. They all sat for a while, waiting for Tonks to collect herself.

She'd been forced to drink a full draught of Veritaserum during the attack by Bellatrix. Fortunately, Esther had been nearby, knocked unconscious by the Killing Curse, and upon waking had been able to rush to the clinic and get a phial of antidote. Most of the truth potion was purged before Tonks could be too badly poisoned, leaving only what Harry had called "Prak syndrome" (*Life, the Universe, and Everything*, page 223, her brain automatically supplied) and what magical medicine called Uncontrollable Utterance Ailment. It sometimes occurred with people of a nervous temperament when using more than two drops of Veritaserum, and it was one of the reasons why more than three drops were never given – not even to people known to be skilled in Occlumency, who were able to defeat small doses.

The danger wasn't the babbling of thoughts and secrets. After all, there were no secrets among the Returned, not really. They had nothing but absolute trust and their own special, insuperable love. No, the danger was that the burning compulsion to tell the truth, any truth, all truth, could damage the mind. Victims of interrogation accidents could be left crippled, unable to sustain normal chains of thought for any length of time.

"You are all right," said Urg to Tonks, seriously. "We're here." "I won't be able to go back to being an auror," whispered Tonks. "I won't, not anymore."

"No, love, you're wrong," said Susie. "The healer said there wouldn't be any permanent effects. Esther got you in time."

"No, it's over," said Tonks, shaking her head, hunching down and hugging her legs. Her voice was ragged. "They don't let you come back after something like this, a St. Mungo's something." But the words were barely out of her mouth before she rushed on, more words following in a rapid strained stream. "They don't let you look through the display robes at Madam Malkin's because they're afraid they'll get wrinkled but they told me it would be okay if I just looked at the pretty velvet one. Computers are stupid and Harry spent years just to build a toy and now that's all he's going to do. Odette's fingers look bad and won't stay healed and just go back to being scarred no matter what and it's because she gave them up to bring back Hermione but she shouldn't have done that just because they'd gotten hurt she should have used a toe. I really want to have children someday but I like hairy men and hairy men usually smell and I hate that so really I don't even know what to do."

Urg just patted her on the back. Charlevoix looked down at her hands, folded in her lap, thoughtfully, her expression unemotional.

Better just to get right to it, Hermione thought. She'd brought them together for a reason – well, before the peacock showed up.

"I wanted to talk to everyone. I have been thinking about what we should do, going forward. It doesn't seem like it will be too much longer before every country is part of the new Treaty. More and more, they're worried about logistics, about how to efficiently treat the entire world's magical population, and Squibs, and eventually even Muggles. There will eventually be something that's beyond that... beyond the Treaty, when even all the Dementors are gone."

She paused, glancing around, but they were only listening to her, attentively, with the exception of Tonks. Hermione went on.

"It seems strange to be saying this – strange even to be thinking this – but that's the truth. I don't think we can or should stop doing the right thing. 'Save one life'... I'll always believe that, and I'll always try. But... well, what else? It's maybe time to start thinking about the implications of eternity." She stopped again, awkwardly, then shook her head. "It's just... a few weeks ago, Charlevoix and Esther told me they wanted to get their own place, together. You know that. And Tonks, you will go back to being an auror, like you wanted. But I just wanted to say, now, before we get back to that point... Well, I wanted to say that those things make me so happy, and so proud. It's want I want for all of you... when you want it, that is."

She sighed, and smiled a small smile, both sad and happy. "I love all of you. You are my heart. And there will never come a day when I won't want you around. There's no rush – literally no rush at all, we have *forever*. But it's okay to think about yourselves, now, if you can. The world is on the right track. Things are going to be okay."

# 

The Ministry of Magic, Whitehall May 17th, 1999

When Amelia Bones visualized the world, she pictured a herd of bicorn, milling around and tossing their heads. Each nation pushed to go its own way, bellowing and butting its head against obstacles, and only rarely did two beasts move in the same direction. To start a stampede, you needed leadership and you needed something so loud that it would startle the whole herd.

At this moment, Bones was writing a letter to a Korean official, intent on spurring the state to join the stampede into the Treaty for Health and Independence. China was threatening to bolt, and Thailand had already vowed they would not stand alone among the Ten Thousand if China went its own way with the rest of that bloc. That solidarity gave them too much strength and too much bargaining power. So right now, the best thing for the Treaty was to break off a strong but small state from the Ten Thousand, while at the same time offering the Court of Rubies an illusory opportunity to split Russia away from the new Treaty.

The entire enterprise was complicated and delicate, and so Bones did not relish the knock on her office door. She looked up in irritation at the sound.

"Come," she snapped. She returned her attention to the letter, trying to finish the sentence before she forgot the phrasing she'd chosen. The Court of Rubies has nothing but your best interests in mind, Chancellor Lee, she wrote, and while I might have my own views on the subject, I urge you to listen to them.

The door pushed open, and she glanced up. It was Reg Hig, looking his usual self with his lump of a nose and unshaven chin.

"Madame Bones, do you have a minute?"

"Yes, Councilor. Come in, please," Bones said. She swallowed her irritation without a second thought, ensuring she looked calm as she stood up. She offered her polite smile – no warmth, but cordiality.

"Thank you," said Hig. He sat down in the chair in front of her desk, and Bones sat back down.

"How can I help you? Was there something from yesterday's meeting you wanted to follow up on? I know we're both concerned about Bellatrix Black, and I'd welcome any solution you could offer. The American skill with devices is well-known."

"There were a few things I wanted to talk about, Madame Bones," said Hig. "The rumours I've been hearing about your goblins getting ready for a new uprising, for one. Also I wanted to discuss the provisions in the Treaty for a timeline towards more rights for Beings. I'm not quite sure that will end up being workable for centaurs, who don't have the same faculties as wizards, and so we need to discuss alternatives." Bones opened her mouth, but he was already continuing, "But the most pressing matter is a concern I have about Mr. Potter." Bones subsided, looking expectant.

"After the meeting the other day," Hig went on, "Mr. Potter and I had a chance for a brief conversation about those Vanishing Rooms and the new trade that's starting up now that the tariffs have been lifted. But he did also have occasion to ask me about laws in the United States about magical research safety. He wanted to know what the most restrictive law we had might be — what could the longest sentence someone could get in an American jail for endangering others with dangerous Transfiguration research." Hig paused, leaning forward, fixing his eyes on hers. "Now why might he have been asking that, I wonder?"

Bones smiled, genuinely. Harry was still so young, sometimes, and didn't always think through on the implications of his words

in a larger world. It was charming, in its own way... his method of earnest honesty. He certainly never hesitated to admit he was wrong or apologize for unintended offense. But Harry was, after all, barely an adult.

"Councilor, I promise you unreservedly that we are not doing any research anywhere in the Americas. All of our research is done here, in the Tower, or in Antarctica. As sinister as Mr. Potter's question might have sounded, it's actually a good sign - once you know the explanation. I see no harm in telling you that we have a wizard locked up in Nurmengard whom we caught when we first began strongly pushing back against Honourable and Independent aggression. He'd already been sacked from the Tower for failing to consider the safety of others as he did his research, with his memory altered to prevent him from continuing that work. When we took him into custody again, we found that he hadn't stopped that sort of dangerous research, and so he was brought before the Wizengamot." The proceedings were sealed, so Bones still tried to remain as vague as she could be while still being credible. The Council of Westphalia had ears everywhere, and the less they knew about this, the better. "Unfortunately, we couldn't sentence him to the sort of time he deserved... precedent is ample on this matter, and a lengthy term in Nurmengard would have drawn attention."

"There are other options in such cases," said Hig. "When such things come up in the Americas, it's usually dealt with in a less official manner."

Bones nodded. "That is the usual way, of course. And several of us advised Mr. Potter of that fact – about the way the world really works. At the time, he said that the law might need to change, but he wasn't going to go throwing people in prison for dangerous ideas. He insisted on strict surveillance, instead." She shook her head, ruefully. "Mr. Potter is an idealistic young man."

"So you believe this is good news, because he was asking about possibilities for sending this dangerous researcher to an American prison, instead. It could be done, I suppose, although there are simpler ways." Hig considered. "Strange, though, that he would change his mind and become more interested in practical methods for solving such problems. It seems unlike Mr. Potter, as far I know him."

"In recent weeks," said Bones, "he has seemed to be a little more hard-nosed. He sounds more like he did when he first came to Hogwarts as a boy. It is, I think, a good thing. At that age he was bold enough to face down the Wizengamot to save his friend... that sort of grit will only help us in the difficulties to come."

Hig nodded, leaning back. "I see. I suppose that is one perspective. I am happy to have your word that there are no secret research stations in the Americas, at least. Let's talk of those other matters. The centaurs. Now, I'm certainly glad we're not moving the other way, and the young Lord Malfoy isn't pushing us to allow centaur hunts anymore. But don't you think this is a little extreme?"

Bones had a ready reply, and Hig had a prepared argument. It was far too long before Bones could return to her letter, and by then she'd forgotten her train of thought. Damned Americans.

# 

Fort, Mumbai May 17th, 1999 8:00 a.m.

The Yazdani Bakery was already full of people, everyone crammed in around the tiny tables as they sipped chai and passed around slices of brun maska and ramekins of butter. Many were local Irani, but the bakery was famous enough so that other sorts of people had come from farther away. There was even a timid pair of German backpackers in one corner, enormous dusty packs stuffed under their seat, holding hands as they shared a chai.

An older man slipped through the door. He wore a white shirt over his lungi, and he waved away an approaching waiter, seeming to know where he was going. He squeezed between two tables, then stepped around another.

Arriving at a table near the rear, the man stopped and folded his hands in front of himself, standing there. Two younger men were sitting at the table, eating ginger biscuits and brum maska. A third chair was empty. After a moment, one of the young men glanced at the other, and then looked up at the stranger. "Not much room... sit with us, uncle?"

"Thank you," said the older man with a smile, also speaking in English. He nodded and pulled out the chair, lowering himself into it with care. "Very crowded."

"It's the workmen who are at Chaphekar Chowk," agreed the young man. "They come here first and spend an hour over their chai." He pushed the plate of biscuits closer to the older man.

"Have a biscuit, uncle," said the other young man, gesturing at them. "We have too many."

The man shook his head slightly, smiling again. "No, thank you." He leaned forward, looking closely at the fellow who'd asked him to sit down. "Excuse me, but might you be Rushad Irani? Is that right?"

The young man smiled widely, raising his eyebrows. He glanced over at his friend, but the friend also smiled and shrugged. The first turned his attention back to the stranger. "Yes... sorry, we have met?"

The older man chuckled, reaching out to put a hand on Rushad's forearm. "I feel almost that it is so… I am an old friend, Kumar Khan. *Equustimentis*."

Rushad looked blankly back at the other man. His friend frowned and leaned forward. "What?"

The other two both ignored him for the span of a few seconds, then the older man let go of the Rushad's arm and turned to the friend. "I knew Rushad's mother when we were in school. She was fast with her samhitas! Always much better than me."

"Yaa, so?" said the friend in amazement, smiling again. "And you are in a Muggle cafe, uncle! I thought we were the only ones who liked it here. Rushad, this is so crazy."

"Oh, the brun maska – very very good," said the man.

As though he'd been lost in thought, Rushad fluttered his eyelids, then gave his head a little shake. He frowned, but only for a moment. Then a slow smile spread back over his face. "Jāt khāli-yé! This is so good!" He turned to his friend. "Mr. Khan always did so much for us, my mother always said. Helped us in very bad times. I have always wanted to do something for him."

Rushad's face lit up, and he dug inside of his pocket. "Here, here... here, uncle." He produced a small case in black goatskin, the size of his palm.

"Rushad, what?" said the other young man, looking aghast at his friend. "Your portkey?"

"Yes, yes... here, please, sir. Take it, take it... a trip to London," said Rushad, pressing it into the man's hand.

"You saved for months for your trip, Rushad! That is fifty cauldrons!" said the friend. He looked uncomfortable, as though privy to something too private for an outsider to see.

"Mr. Khan saved my family!" said Rushad, almost harshly. "This is only a part of our debt."

"Yaa," said the friend, uncertainly. "Well -"

"Thank you, Rushad," said the older man, bowing his head slightly. "Thank you so much. It has been a very, very long time since I was in London."

"No, I thank you, Mr. Khan... it is good to be able to do something for you."

"I should go, and let you return to your breakfast among the Muggles. Such a generous gift... thank you, Rushad," said the older man, solemnly. He rose to his feet. The two young men also stood up politely.

"Please, Mr. Khan, while you are in town, will you visit my mother? She talks of you still," said Rushad, clasping the older man's hand.

"I will try," said the man, smiling. "You are a fine young man, Rushad." He turned to clasp the friend's hand. "And it is good to meet you, too. *Equatimentis.*"

The friend stared back at the older man blankly for a moment, then nodded, slowly. Rushad frowned. "What is the matter?"

Blinking rapidly, his friend turned to him. "I think that -"

"Egeustimentis Ba," said the older man. Then, without another word, and pausing only to scoop a handful of ginger biscuits from the table, he left. He moved carefully around the other tables in the crowded bakery. Then the older man was out the door, and gone.

The two young men stood there. After some time, they both sat down back in their seats – but slowly and clumsily, like

sleepwalkers. Their neighbors at another table noticed, and one young lady made a joke at their expense while her companion chuckled.

They stared off into space for a while. Then Rushad reached for his chai, and lifted it to his lips. He sipped it, casually, and reached for a ginger biscuit. There were only a couple left.

Rushad leaned over and frowned at the plate. He looked up at his friend. "You ate all the biscuits."

# 

From the journal of Edgar Erasmus, as written in his cell in Nurmengard:

They don't understand. Little men with little minds, and they don't understand.

These Muggle ideas are simply too great to be ignored, too magnificent to be left where we found them. That is what so few understand. Yes, there is a risk, I acknowledge that... but don't they realize the stakes? How many generations of wizards have warned about the fading of magic, when our wands will be sticks in our hands? But I think no one has really paid attention to actually doing something. We have propositions we can try. Wipe out or send away all the Muggles of Scotland – will the flame of the Hebridean Black wax stronger? Purge the mudbloods of Cyprus – does a Cyprusian Cyprian Cypriot light glow brighter?

But there's no one to do such things, and so men of genius must take the matter into their own hands. Magic decreases with every generation, replaced with a milksop sort of imitation. So we must seize new ideas where we find them. If little men denounce that innovation because it comes from Muggles: more fools they! If little men denounce that innovation because it poses some petty risk: more fools they! Damn that boy in his tower damn him damn him damn him for the imbecile he is.

And all the better since I can see the shape of ideas yet to be realized – true and new advances in magical thinking. It's in the air with these new thoughts... testing and sorting, the new "journals," all of that. Waiting to be discovered. A genuine new idea of magic – a new insight into how it works. If that were found for the first time in generations... amazing new power. It is impossible to overestimate how great the power such a discovery could bring. And these fools stand in the way!!!!

My research is gone twice over, even the very knowledge of it taken from me and stoppered behind glass. But I will not be deterred. My sentence will be over in a trifle of two years, and I will have much time to think. To discover a new law of magic will be to become a power.

Cromwell, our chief of men, who through a cloud Not of war only, but detractions rude, Guided by faith and matchless fortitude, To peace and truth thy glorious way hast ploughed, And on the neck of crowned Fortune proud Hast reared God's trophies, and his work pursued, While Darwen stream, with blood of Scots imbrued,

And Dunbar field, resounds thy praises loud, And Worcester's laureate wreath: yet much remains

To conquer still; Peace hath her victories No less renowned than War: new foes arise, Threatening to bind our souls with secular chains. Help us to save free conscience from the paw Of hireling wolves, whose Gospel is their maw.

—John Milton

# \*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*Chapter four \*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

# Dip Around the Morld



Portkey Office, Ministry of Magic, Whitehall, London May 17th, 1999

"Hullo!" said Pip, smiling at the gent at the Official Business desk.

He looked up wearily from a thick ledger, squinting at Pip. "Hello." He stared at Pip with red-rimmed eyes, and waited. Pip smiled brightly back at him, expectantly. Finally, the man said, "Can I help you with something?"

"Auror Philip Pirrip, here to pick up some portkeys," said Pip, his smile dimming slightly at the reception. He rather thought people would be recognizing him at this point – that word would have gotten around. He knew he was only one of a dozen people on similar errands today, but still... His smile brightened again as he leaned forward and said, meaningfully, "On business for the Tower."

The official stared at Pip for a moment, then looked back down at the ledger. He ran his finger down a column on the left, and then the one next to it. "Pirrip, Philip... yes. 875 Oxtail Red." He looked back up at Pip, and shoved back from his desk. His wheeled seat squeaked rhythmically as it bore him over to a bureau along the wall of the office. The man didn't even bother to get up, but just pushed himself along with his legs as he trailed an index finger along one row of small drawers, then down to another. All of them were progressively darker shades of red. When the official had found the one he wanted, he yanked it open. "Here we are, then." Another scoot of his chair brought the man squeaking back to his desk and Pip.

The official put a velvet sack on the desk. "Hangzhou, Bangkok, Cyprus, and return to the Ministry. All labeled. Don't mix them up." He took a quill from his desk and made some notes in his ledger, shoving the sack over to Pip.

"Thank you," Pip said, scooping up the sack. He opened it and checked inside, just for a quick count of the grimy old envelopes inside. There were four, sure enough. One of the envelopes was open – it looked to have an old biro inside.

"They're all there and all correct," said the man behind the desk, and Pip looked up to see him frowning in disapproval.

"Just checking," Pip said, uncomfortably. "After that thing the Weasley twins did, it just –"

"They're all there and all correct," said the official again, grindingly. He slammed the heavy ledger shut, and his inkwell rattled on the desk. They didn't like to be reminded of when the Weasleys had replaced all the Russian and Hungarian portkeys. Everyone who'd tried to go to Moscow had ended up in the third-floor loo, instead.

Well, there was no telling from looking at the bloody things, anyway, Pip supposed. He'd just have to hope he didn't end up somewhere nasty. Or if not, at least someplace dry.

# 

Yu's Library, The Court of Rubies, Hangzhou

"Hullo!" said Pip, his face serious. "I'm here to pick up a parcel for Mr. Harry Potter-Evans-Verres." He did his absolute best to project an image of power and foreign might, tilting his chin upward and slightly to the side. It was a haughty look, he thought – the look of someone who had looked death in the eye and triumphed.

"Are you okay?" Sunny Chow asked from his side. He turned to see the Wizengamot's Special Envoy to the Court of Rubies staring up at him: a short woman with plain features. She was looking at him, frank curiosity in her hazel eyes.

Pip deflated slightly. Maybe his jawline wasn't strong enough to pull that off.

"No parcels here," said the librarian, his English heavily accented. He shook his head, and swept one palm around the room, as though to draw Pip's attention to the towering, haphazard stacks of books and piles of scrolls that occupied almost all of the long and wide room. "This is the library. You want the owlery. That way, sir." He pointed to one of the doors.

"No, Zhongying," said Chow, waving a hand dismissively. "This is Auror Pirrip. His Excellency He Jin has left a package here for the auror. It's going to a Mr. Harry Potter-Evans-Verres. His Excellency would have left this here himself."

"I will check," said the librarian. He turned and made his way to a corner of the room, stepping lightly among stacks of books that were easily twice his own height. They swayed unsteadily, simply from the touch of air left by his passage, but none of them fell.

Why a queer way to sort everything, thought Pip, watching a pyramid of scrolls. A stray scroll slipped from its place at the top of the heap and skidded halfway down the side of the pile, only to catch on the curling corner of a companion and hang there, precariously. And this place would be a nightmare to defend. Must be like this for protection against theft, and maybe camouflage. Hard to browse, but maybe that's not something they want people doing.

The librarian pushed aside a false panel in the wooden wall, and withdrew a metal case. He opened it, and Pip saw it was filled with glowing phials of memories. The librarian squinted at them, then nodded, slowly. He turned back to them. "Yes, there is something here for you. I apologize for my rudeness. If it would not be too much trouble, I must use precautions before I retrieve your package." He gestured at one of the few clear areas on the floor, and Pip saw that there was a faint outline of chalk there in the shape of a circle.

Pip glanced at the Special Envoy, but Chow had nodded easily, and was already stepping into the circle. He joined her. "What is this?" he muttered, uneasily. "Ward?"

"Not quite. Do you know the writings of a Xiang Yu?" Chow whispered back. The librarian rummaged in his robe, pulling his wand from some interior pocket. Pip shook his head in the negative.

"Well," Chow said, as the librarian pointed his wand at them, "let's just say you don't want to move."

"Peskipiksi rendehoushan," cast the librarian.

Almost without transition, Pip and Chow were encircled by an orange screen of some kind. It stretched in an unbroken column from the wooden floor to the wooden ceiling, and Pip could feel the heat of it on his face. He didn't start in surprise, but his wand was already in his hand, and he held the first stage of the wordless Drill Breaking Hex ready in his mind. But they didn't seem to be in any immediate danger, as long as they didn't move, and Chow was standing calmly next to him with her arms folded.

Pip could see through the orange. It was some manner of liquid, and small eddies and swirls moved lazily through it, but also thin enough that it was translucent. The librarian was visible through it, and Pip watched him as he stepped to one side of the room, and levitated a short stack of books to one side, uncovering a Pensieve. He added a memory to it, and then immersed his head.

Less than a minute later, the librarian rose from the basin, and turned to the chalk circle. He whispered the command word inaudibly, and the orange glare vanished as quickly as it had come.

"I apologize to you, Special Envoy and sir auror," the librarian said, inclining his head slightly. "The parcel was left here under some special circumstances, and we were not permitted to know about it."

"It is, I am told, a matter of some security and secrecy," said Chow. "The fault is ours, not yours."

The librarian inclined his head again, and turned to the wall where he'd retrieved the memory. He took hold of a seemingly random wooden panel and pulled on it, and the board telescoped out from the wall, revealing itself to be a large cabinet with numerous small cubby-holes apparent in its surface.

He pulled on the knobs of four of the drawers in sequence, and the last one slid open at his touch, allowing the librarian to slide his hand inside. The mouth of the cubby was too small for this, but it obligingly distended to permit him to reach inside.

I bet that if you do the sequence wrong, or choose the wrong little drawer, or something else like that, then you could lose your hand that way, Pip marveled. It was a good idea, but he'd bet it

led to a lot of accidents. He'd have to tell the Ministry about it. Maybe they could imitate it, and a certain rude squeaky squinty git at the Portkey Office might be a little more polite in the future.

The librarian slowly and gently pulled out something from the hole – a book. No, part of a book. The ragged edges of torn binding showed that it was just a few dozen pages and a cover, ripped free from the whole book. The librarian turned and offered the packet to Chow, inclining his head again. She accepted it, bowing slightly in return, and turned to hand it to Pip.

He took it, and glanced at the cover. Not Mandarin, but an English book. Not new binding either, and it looked at least two or three centuries old. But it was also clearly the *re*binding... a glance at the exposed back page showed that it was truly ancient, tinted yellow and marred with small imperfections in the parchment. The longskin goat had been bred in the fourteenth century, making the original book at least six hundred years old. It had seen some mishandling, too... affixed inside of the cover was a scrap of parchment that was clearly only the middle part of a page. None of the text was legible to him, which was probably just as well.

Pip looked at the cover again. The book was by Harry Lowe, according to the gilt letters.

The Transmygracioun, it was called.

# 

resisted them with its power. Our people took hold of the knowledge, and have donne great things. Likewise in the future, there will be invaders. But thei shall take the whole world. Fear shall come with them, and ruin. There lies the doom of which I have spoken to you. Pis shall not last. There shall be new maistery, and new maisters to take the place of the old. I have seen pis, and so I say to you to come pis key. The fires of the soul are great and burn

# 

The Wizarding Bank of Bangkok, Bangkok, Thailand

"Hullo!" said Pip, peering over the counter. "Anyone here?"

The bank building was dimly lit and poorly maintained. The floor was beautiful marble, but it was marked with innumerable scratches and scrapes. The long front desk was similar, made of a creamy soapstone marred with long gashes all along its surface. The place looked deserted, without even a guard, which was rather odd for a bank. It was somehow stranger, though, when Pip noticed that there also wasn't any furniture. No stools were behind the counter, no message boxes or unsummonable security boxes were resting on it, and there weren't even any chairs for customers.

"ขอโทษ... ขอโทษ!" called a voice from a back room, speaking in rapid Thai. A moment later, a chubby man with dark skin shuffled out into view. He was wearing a loose white robe and linen trousers, and he was barefoot. "สวัสดีครับ."

"Sorry, do you speak English?"

"คุณพูดไทยได้ใหม?" came the reply from the man, who looked puzzled.

"What?"

"อะไร?"

"Is there anyone here who speaks English?" Pip said, desperately. He'd just assumed that the bank would have someone who spoke English. Maybe that was silly, but English had been the wizarding language of the world for centuries. Almost everything the Confederation did was in English.

"Prasong!" called out the man, turning to shout over his shoulder. "Praaaaaasong! Prasong! คนอังกฤษ!"

"Yaaaaa!" called a response, sounding irritable. "ฉันกำลัง-มาาาาาา!" Another man emerged from the back room. He looked identical to the first. For a moment Pip worried that he was turning into a Muggle and a horrible person, but realized after a moment that the two were twins.

"Hello, sir?" said the second twin. He had a strange way of speaking, ending each sentence as though it were a question. "Welcome to the Wizarding Bank of Bangkok? Can I help you?"

"Yes, hullo. I'm here to pick up a parcel? Auror Philip Pirrip, from Britain?" said Pip. He glanced around the room. "Is everything all right here?"

"Yes? Only English parcel here, I think?" said the man, nodding. "No problems?" He turned to his brother and said some

things rapidly. They sounded like questions but were apparently instructions instead, since the other man vanished into the back again, nodding repeatedly.

Pip and the anglophone stood there in silence, awkwardly. The Thai man yawned hugely, rubbing at his face. Pip wondered if he'd just woken up. It was rather late here, after all.

"Where is everything?" Pip asked, speaking up to break the silence.

"Everything what?" asked the man.

"Well, this is a bank, right? Where are all the... banking things?" Pip finished, lamely.

The man shrugged. "We don't want things to be stolen? Money is in the vaults, so we can keep it from people... outside?" He flapped his hand at the door.

"But what's to stop someone from just... going back there and going into the vaults? Only you're here to guard the place," Pip pointed out. "In Gringott's, they have all sorts of guards... wizards and goblins both." He paused. "Are there loads of goblins back there or something?"

The man scratched his face, looking thoughtful at the question, then shook his head. "No, no... all the guards down on the sub-level? And Prethang and I are สคริบ... ah, Squibs? We just work?"

"This doesn't make any bloody sense," said Pip.

The Squib (could that be true?) shrugged. "One way into the bank? Naga live there, and they eat magic? If you are magic or have magic, they will eat you? So we go through the waterfall and down to the bank?" He shrugged again. "Guards down there, though, if you worry?"

Pip studied him. "That can't be true. There's not a kind of beast that only eats wizards. Professor Kettleburn wasn't good, but he wasn't so bad he'd have left that out."

The man just shrugged a third time, and said nothing. The pair stood in silence until his twin returned bearing another torn piece of book. It was the same book, Pip saw immediately. The last page was mostly gone, with only the first third still present. The rips looked like they would fit together.

The auror left without ever getting an answer, though he would make a full report. He never would find out the secrets of the Bangkok Bank... or a great many other things.

# 

Alle of these things I have told you, but there is one thing I have not told you. Pis then hear, and then I shall be donne. At the end of his tyme, Merlin seiden then he hadde a great prophetie, but that he would not explain it. He seiden instead these words, and bade rememberance. "The Achaeans have brought many knowledge to owr island of Britain. Thei came to us as invaders, joyning with the little and the færie and laying waste to our places of power. Ac Britain is a strong land, and it

# 

Cypriot Hold, Cyprus

"Hullo!" said Pip. Some of the cheer had worn out of his voice, but he still tried to keep his best foot forward. It was like his mum always said: Act like a troll and folks will treat you like one.

The woman who turned towards Pip to fix him with a wary look was intimidatingly tall and extraordinarily beautiful. Thick waves of black hair were swept up into a loose and long ponytail that nearly reached her back, and her formal robes were a glimmering metallic fabric that clung to her body with the tailored precision of enchanted garments. Her eyebrows were sharply sculpted, slashing in skeptical curves over enormous brown eyes.

"Auror Pirrip?" she asked, her voice a throaty burr. "From the Tower?"

Pip thought he must be floating.

"Yes," he managed. "It is I."

She studied him for a moment longer, then nodded. "I am Lady Feri Sarah Ellesmere Önder, of the Noble House of Önder. I have a parcel for you, if you wish it."

Pip nodded, and tried to keep his smile from stretching to silly dimensions. "Thank you, Lady Önder. That would be appreciated."

"This way, then."

Pip fell into step next to the Cypriot as she led the way out of the Hold. It was a fragile-looking building of fluted glass columns and diamondine crenulations, and it looked all the more delicate for the damage that scarred its sides. Fire had taken some of the columns, and great melted rents had eaten into the walls behind. When the Tower had fought back against Independent aggression around the world, the Cappadocians had seized the opportunity to attack their ancient enemy once more. Even at this hour, three goblins were at work repairing a column. The wizard who owned them stood nearby – an immediate reminder that this was a barbaric country in some ways. It was scarcely believable that the bloody slavers here considered themselves British.

"Why has your master requested this book of me?" asked the Lady Önder as they walked, speaking quietly. "It is the greatest treasure of my House. I'd know the purpose of its journey."

"I don't know, madam," Pip admitted. "He wants to read it, I suppose. My, ah, 'master' is the Tower, and he seems to want to know everything."

Their path took them down the streets of Magical Cyprus, walking on smooth stones that had seen thousands of years of foot-traffic. There were few others on the streets – a single vendor selling aromatic snacks of roasted nut-and-fruit pastries; a pair of young women out for a romantic stroll, arm in arm; and a collared goblin carrying a caged owl.

"Your master thinks he already knows everything, I think," said the Cypriot. She stopped at the door of a grand home of green stone. It was very British in appearance – looked rather like pictures Pip had seen of Malfoy Manor, in fact – with the exception of the elegant minaret that rose from the roof peak. A crest was worked in gold into the stone above the door – three arms bendwise couped.

"What do you mean?" Pip asked.

The Lady Önder opened the door. "The Treaty, and now its successor, have brought much good to me and mine. But there is also a great deal of... direction in it. Matters that I had thought long settled are re-opened, and there is even some... well, some might call it ingratitude." She stepped aside, and gestured. "Please."

Pip nodded, and entered. "I am sorry to hear that you feel this way, madam. Cyprus and Britain have always been close."

The Cypriot smiled sharply. "Not always. But yes, for a long time we have followed the leadership of your country. At times, we have been the only ones to do so. In the minds of many, this should earn us some measure of respect from Britain. A friend does not like to see another friend take advantage."

"You don't like the interference," said Pip. It was cool and dark inside the home, but it was obvious that the House of Önder was enormously wealthy. There were low couches of white bicorn leather, an expensive-looking scrying mirror on one wall, and a vase with a towering arrangement of silver flowers. A wide staircase led up and out of sight.

"We do not," said the Lady Önder. Her voice was chilly. "Things have now been arranged so carefully that we have no alternative. That doesn't mean we need be pleased with that change, or the other changes that will be forced on us."

"I'm sorry that it is disturbing the relations between our countries," said Pip, summoning his best diplomatic turns of phrase. Yes, terribly sorry to be interfering in your bloody slavery, you crazy pile of kneazle-kak. Can't use house-elves like civilized people? What a bother for us to disturb your traditions. I'll try to get out of your hair as soon as possible so you can get back to sipping baby blood out of your goblin-skull goblets, or whatever it is you do here.

"Mithri!" called the Cypriot, raising her voice. "The Britisher is here. Bring me the book."

There was a quiet scraping sound from above. "Yes, Lady Önder," called back a tired voice.

The owner of the voice made his way to them. The steps sounded wrong – a thump and a scrape – and the reason became apparent as speaker came down the stairs, into the lights at the front entrance. It was a goblin, and he had only one leg. He used a crutch, hobbling slowly and carefully down the steps. The Being had very short ears for a goblin, but a long nose. The nose had a kink in the middle. It looked very tired, although at least they'd seen fit to give it decent clothing: a white tunic and necktie. The steel of a collar was just visible under the tie. There was a book under its free arm.

"Here you are, Auror Pirrip," said the Lady Önder, as her slave offered Pip the book. "I do not expect to see it again. I hope it brings your master ill." "Thank you, Lady Önder," said Pip. "Thank you for everything."

"Everything?" asked the Cypriot, frowning, as Pip walked to the door.

"Yes, everything," Pip said, as he left. "Please believe me when I say that you have made me very proud tonight. Twice."

#### 

as bright as the stars." At his there was silence, and then protest, and then dismai, for none could understand these words. Thei were once more trublid. Mundre of the Brook took these words and set them down, and from him they passed to his son Mundre, and from him thei were taken by Togrod Teulu, and recovered from the little in the time of Yæl, who passed them to me. I have set them for you, that they may not be lost. So we are complete, and my tale is donne.

# 

Safety Pole, Godric's Hollow The same day

"Hello," said a kindly-looking older man. "I wonder if you could help me?"

The auror and the healer on duty at the Godric's Hollow Safety Pole were deep in a hand of Dragon Poker, but the healer was dutiful, and he dropped the cards without a thought. He ignored the sour look on the auror's face.

"Of course, sir. Are you feeling all right?" said the healer, drawing his wand.

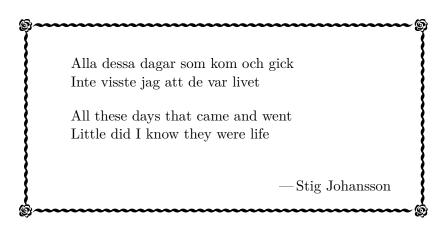
"A little peaky," said the man. He accepted the offered hand of the healer, nodding gratefully. "It's been a worry."

"Ah, no need to worry any more," said the healer. "Everything will be all right."

# 

Alle of these things I have told you, but there is one thing I have not told you. Pis then hear, and then I shall be donne. At the end of his tyme, Merlin seiden then he hadde a great prophetie, but that he would not explain it. He seiden instead these words, and bade rememberance. "The Achaeans have brought many knowledge to owr island of Britain. Thei came to us as invaders, joyning with the little and the færie and laying waste to our places of power. Ac Britain is a strong land, and it resisted them with its power. Our people took hold of the knowledge, and have donne great things. Likewise in the future, there will be invaders. But thei shall take the whole world. Fear shall come with them, and ruin. There lies the doom of which I have spoken to you. Pis shall not last. There shall be new maistery, and new maisters to take the place of the old. I have seen his, and so I say to you to come his key. The fires of the soul are great and burn as bright as the stars." At his there was silence, and then protest, and then dismai, for none could understand these words. Thei were once more trublid. Mundre of the Brook took these words and set them down, and from him they passed to his son Mundre, and from him thei were taken by Togrod Teulu, and recovered from the little in the time of Yæl, who passed them to me. I have set them for you, that they may not be lost. So we are complete, and my tale is donne.

Harry Lowe, The Transmygracioun, passus tertius decimus



## 

## The Ineluctable Modality of the Visible



"What stories do you mean, and what fault do you find in them?"

"The fault one ought to find first and foremost, especially if
the falsehood isn't well told."

"For example?"

"When a story gives a bad image of what the gods and heroes are like, the way a painter does whose picture is not at all like the things he's trying to paint."

"You're right to object to that. But what sort of story in particular do you have in mind?"

"First, telling the greatest falsehood about the most important things doesn't make a fine story – I mean Hesiod telling us about how Uranus behaved, how Cronus punished him for it, and how he was in turn punished by his own son. Even if that were true, it should be passed over in silence, not told to foolish young people. And if, for some reason, it has to be told, only a very few people – pledged to secrecy and after sacrificing not just a pig but something great and scarce – should hear it, so that their number is kept as small as possible."

"Yes. Such stories are hard to deal with."

—Plato, The Republic II.377e-378a



John Snow Center for Medicine and Tower School of Doubt (The Tower) May 17th, 1999 The same day

"Well, that was a waste of two hours," drawled Draco, as he walked into the Pairing Partnership. He closed the door behind him, and the Lovegood Leaf rustled. "I suppose I never really considered just how tedious it would be to watch a gaggle of Muggles for any length of time." He shook his head, and swept one hand along his hair, smoothing it.

"Didn't enjoy the movie?" asked Harry, turning in his seat away from the computer screen. Auror Kraeme, nearby, kept a close eye on Draco. She was leaning with her back against a large metal cabinet, arms folded – but eyes sharp.

"You should call them something different, too. 'Movie'... it just emphasizes how primitive the entire thing is, compared to a real play." He affected his high-pitched Muggle Voice: "'Wow, look, they're *moving* just like real people would, if only we had taste enough to go watch an actual troupe of performers!'"

"They used to be called 'talkies,' "Harry said, wryly. "So it could be worse. But ticket sales at the movie theatre go up every week, so I'm not sure that everyone agrees with you."

"It's the thing to do, like eating at Siegfried's. People are sheep, and right now you've set out some new paddocks. That doesn't mean there will be any long-term success. Grindelwald was a fanatic for painting, they say, but it's not as though Hungary is full of painters today. After Grindelwald was locked up in Nurmengard, most of the artists went back to sculpting. If you want people to become actually interested, not just intrigued by the novelty, then you need to make movies about things that they care about. Not Muggles with guns," Draco said. He pulled a chair over next to the EEG machine, where Harry was sitting in front of the attached computer.

"I am not going to start a production company," said Harry, shaking his head. But he froze in the middle of the gesture and frowned. "Well, actually, I guess there's no reason why we *couldn't* do that. They could begin with adaptations of some

famous wizard plays, and cast some of the same actors, probably." "Ah yes, one more industry dominated from first to last by Harry Potter," said Draco. "No, I don't think you'll be doing that. It will hardly help generate an appearance of real success if you look to be propping up your Muggle ventures like that. No, I think we need to decentralize a little."

Harry laughed. "Malfoy Productions?"

Draco glanced over at the auror by the wall, within earshot, wordlessly. Harry followed the glance, then looked back at Draco with a smile. "A Vow of secrecy, don't worry."

The Lord Malfoy nodded, and went on. "Well, I was thinking of a joint venture with some Americans, actually. It wouldn't be difficult to start up a similar movies theatre in Tidewater. There's an old Westphalian ally with deep pockets, Littlebrook Strongbound, who might like to get ahead of your bosom friend Hig on something. Too much gold and control slipping through his fingers... and I think he senses the leash slipping around the Council's neck."

"You'll need visible capital to start something like that," said Harry, "since Malfoys have typically been invested rather heavily in flying castles, which are not known for their liquidity. And the finance sector hasn't been your friend over the past few years." Traditional private usury was almost extinct in Britain, along with the corresponding interest rates. "Too many people are paying attention."

"Yes," said Draco. "A visible success to explain the new money, and I'll whisper in a few confidential ears that it's really Cappadocian gold – payment for steering things their way, here." "I was thinking Amycus Carrow as a source, actually," said Harry. "If you'd taken control of some of his assets, it would be a tidier explanation."

"The Carrow sisters might not appreciate the news that I've taken control of some of their uncle's properties and loans, Harry," said Draco, raising an eyebrow. "They've already been through rather a lot."

It was subtle and quiet, but those words were question and concern and accusation, all at once. It wasn't like Harry to forget about innocent bystanders — and whatever their ideology, the

Carrow sisters were certainly innocent of anything that might merit dragging them through any more ugliness.

"You're right, of course," said Harry, shaking his head. He rubbed his forehead, sighing. "I'm distracted – not at my optimum self today."

"Mm," Draco said, in noncommital acknowledgment. "Anyway, if the Cappadocian plan doesn't seem enough, add another layer for the clever folk: have Moody 'investigate' the possibility that I've co-opted one of the Tower arithmencers, and that the windfall is actually your money. You've already been working on building up their mystique for years, so rumors of a rogue arithmencer would help with that, as well."

"All right," Harry agreed. He sounded unsettled.

"Have you been sleeping enough, Harry?" asked Draco. "Or have you been spending half your time in the clinic tending to mermaids with mumps and Squibs with splinters, and the other half in here, scanning people's brains as they cast Goat Into Goblet?"

"Why would anyone need a spell to... no, never mind," said Harry, rolling his eyes. "Yes, I've been getting plenty of sleep. There's just been a lot to keep track of. Managing the Tower and Britain – and well, the world – just keeps getting more complicated, especially without Hermione around." Draco pursed his lips, and Harry rushed on. "It's been good to rely on you, of course... but uniting the Treaties hasn't actually simplified the situation."

"And you keep finding new projects," Draco said, agreeably. "Like ancient discoveries one of your Unspeakable or Tower minions brought back to you."

Harry looked surprised. "How did..." He followed Draco's gaze to a nearby table, where a box of Macadam's Easy-Apply Melters was still out, and made a face. "Maybe I am tired," he muttered. "The only reason you'd need repair strips would be if you were trying to fix something you couldn't transfigure," said Draco, smiling. "And that's a short list. Something we can use?"

"A book about Merlin," said Harry. "It's given me some ideas, but nothing I can use – unless I decide I'd really enjoy the entropic heat death of the universe."

Draco didn't ask. "Then maybe give it a rest. Honestly, you should probably take a vacation. You have the government and

the Confederation and Tower research and all of your little side projects, like the stupid movies and the sfaironauts and your theory of magic research. And you've been at this pace for... well, since we met. You can't keep it up forever; you're only a Rayenclaw."

"Maybe I just need some smarter Slytherins to help," said Harry. "Whatever happened to Vincent Crabbe?"

"Still trying to get something working in Knockturn Alley," Draco admitted. "He's never really forgiven me, and I rather think he'd like to be a power of his own. He backed a chandler's, but unfortunately I understand that investment's gone pear-shaped recently." It was an elegant retort and reminder of Draco's subtlety, but Draco didn't gloat, and allowed himself only the slightest smirk. "Anyway, just think of taking a few days off. Leave government to that gawky frump of a Weasley, the world to Bones, and everything else to Moody and me. Catch up on your reading."

"Eventually I'm going to take an entire *year* off... I'll go to Japan and spend my days having fun in the lab," said Harry. "But not yet. Things are still delicate. I'll be fine."

"I have a feeling this 'eventually' is scheduled sometime after everyone in the world has become free and immortal, there's a city on the Moon, and you've been able to take a quick little jaunt to Atlantis to pick up Dumbledore from outside of Time," said Draco. His voice was gentler than his words.

"We're one minute from midnight, Draco," said Harry, firmly. "Muggles have had the capability to destroy the world for generations, now, and it's only by the grace of Petrov it hasn't happened yet. I'm not going to introduce wizards to science and then take a vacation at the most delicate point. It's too dangerous. Look at Edgar Erasmus and how we've had to juggle people like him, to keep everyone safe." He shook his head. "Merlin tried to shut down the forward march of knowledge, since he thought that magical power was spreading too quickly and too easily. I don't think he was right about the solution, but that doesn't mean he was wrong about the problem. We have to keep tight control over things for right now. It's too dangerous for everyone, otherwise."

#### 

Elsewhere in the Tower The same day

Healer Owen Wilifred frowned. There was something very strange going on, here.

He glanced down at the patient, who was lying unconscious, immobile, and safely stunned. An older man of indeterminate ethnicity – Asia or India or someplace. Clearly never rejuvenated, and no external symptoms. But when Owen moved his wand lower on the patient's abdomen, he kept seeing the same thing: absolutely perfect internal organs, without a single flaw or oddity.

The diagnosis convivium seemed to be working correctly; when Owen placed his wand on his own stomach, the spell suite produced a vivid mental image of his intestines gently shifting. There was a familiar series of benign nodules along the outside of his colon, and his duodenum looked just as oddly lumpy as usual. But when Owen returned the wand to the patient and focused the diagnosis convivium back on him, there was not a single cyst, scar, or other irregularity. And no matter where he looked, it was the same. The patient's body was as perfect as the illustrations of a medical textbook, and that was simply strange... especially since he was complaining of general aches and pains. They didn't appear to have any irregularities at all, much less a condition that would cause any suffering.

Owen considered the possibilities. It was conceivable that the patient just happened to be a bizarrely perfect specimen who had never had any sort of trauma, despite what appeared to be at least six decades of life. That was very unlikely, though. It was also possible that the man – Mr. Khan, by his intake parchment – had been seriously hurt and had received magical healing to most of his body. But that usually left traces; skele-grow, for example, left bones with a distinctive (if harmless) spiral pattern of nonlamellar and lamellar.

The most likely explanation that occurred to Owen, though, was also the most alarming one: that the patient had been one of the first wizards to receive rejuvenation. If that were the case, it

might explain the fact that his appearance was still middle-aged. In the earliest days of the Tower, Owen had heard that they'd sometimes omitted the cosmetic restoration. If the patient had been one of the first to be rejuvenated, it might also explain why they didn't have any treatment records for him. Many of those early records had been lost in some sort of fire, years ago.

It was also possible that Mr. Khan had been rejuvenated more recently, and had been granted special exemption from the cosmetic restoration. That was very rare, however, and it wouldn't explain the lack of a Tower record for the procedure.

At this point, Owen really couldn't go any further without waking up the patient and eliminating some of these possibilities. He was beginning to be worried about time, though. The clock said that he had only about fifty minutes before Harry's next pass through the clinic. The Tower enchantments required Harry's express touch before any healing transfiguration would become permanent, so if Owen didn't get this solved and the healing done quickly, he'd be stuck with Mr. Khan until the next scheduled pass—three more hours.

Did he need an auror when he woke up the patient? Probably not. Mr. Khan wasn't important or powerful enough to have any sort of file, and he didn't have his wand, like every patient. Plus, Owen wasn't a bigot or anything, but he hadn't been able to help noticing that Mr. Khan's wand was so battered-looking that it must be second-hand (or even third-hand).

Still, protocol was protocol. The security at the Tower was incredibly complex, considering the difficulties of admitting and treating powerful strangers from all over the world, but it wasn't infallible.

Owen stuck his head out of the screened-off examination cubicle, pushing aside the curtain. He called down the hall, "Wake-up here, need an auror!"

A bored-looking auror came striding on down past the rows of cubicles, nodding. "Anything I need to know?"

"He's a bit funny in his guts. I think he might have been an earlier rejuvenation – back before the Tower moved to this facility. I've heard about them... you were here then, right?" said Owen, handing over the sparse file that they'd started on Mr. Khan in the Receiving Room.

"No," said Auror Madagascar. "I was stationed somewhere else, then. But I heard the same thing." He flipped open the file, but it had virtually no information beyond a few uninteresting personal details like place of origin (the Vedic Kingdom, though he was admitted via the Godric's Hollow pole), number of siblings (seven, all deceased), and the like. Madagascar shrugged. "Wake him up."

Owen did so, after making sure a privacy spell was on and that Madagascar had raised the basic safety wards. That was just standard – some people didn't react well to waking up from the stunning effect of the Safety Stick or Safety Poles. A majority awoke as calmly though they were waking from a nap, but some people become disoriented and alarmed.

The patient opened his eyes, gently, and blinked a moment. He tilted his head and took in the healer and the auror, then glanced around. A flicker of some expression passed over his face — not the usual fear or uncertainty or pain, but instead a shadow of apprehension. But it was gone as quickly as it came.

"Am I all right?" Mr. Khan asked. He closed his eyes for a moment, and let out a long sigh.

Owen smiled. "You're fine, Mr. Khan. You're in the John Snow Center for Medicine. In the Tower. My name is Wilifred Owen. I'm a healer here. This is Harry Madagascar – he works here with me. We wanted to ask you a few questions, but if you need a moment to get oriented, take your time."

The patient sat up, nodding. "May I stand up? Is that all right?" he asked, mildly.

"No, sorry," said Owen. "It might make you dizzy. Just give it a minute." He stepped back next to Madagascar, but the auror waved him to the side. *Clear line of fire*, thought Owen, and restrained the temptation to roll his eyes.

Mr. Khan shifted where he lay on the cot, moving carefully. He was wearing very simple brown robes, worn through in spots with use.

"You told the healer you'd been feeling pains?" asked Owen.

"Yes," said Mr. Khan. He turned to look at Owen, and then at Madagascar, and then jerked his head downward, sharply, cringing. He reached to his chest with one hand, and grimaced. "Again."

Owen frowned, shaking his head. "I don't know what could be causing that... " He stepped forward again, lifting his wand. Behind him, he heard Madagascar move to one side – finding a good angle for a clear view. "Tell me, have you been here before, sir?" Owen set his wand on Mr. Khan's chest, and stared at the blank white wall of the cubicle as he focused on the view of the patient's organs afforded by the convivium. Everything looked pristine.

Mr. Khan murmured something, quietly. Owen lowered his head a little. "Pardon?" The patient reached up and gently touched Owen's elbow, and repeated himself in a whisper.

"I said, Equistimentis."

And Owen went away for a while, and he and Mr. Khan were alone for a time in some narrow space. It seemed like hours, though it was only seconds.

While they were there, Mr. Khan made some changes to the way Owen thought about things. Owen distantly observed the process, and found it interesting. It was as though Mr. Khan were simultaneously very large and very small, peering down from a great height at Owen's mind – even as he moved within it. Owen's mind, Owen noted, was a ceaselessly sliding mass of a thousand thousand thin layers of slippery jelly, undulating and quivering as they slithered into and over each other. Simultaneously, it was an intricate tracery of vinegar-smelling lights that touched each other and flared bright and faded. And it was a stabbing prickery of needles stabbing in and out of dark shapes that quietly sighed. And Owen's mind was other things as well, as need be.

Mr. Khan moved things and explained to Owen that he needed Owen to be a slightly different sort of person. Not very different, but different enough to help Mr. Khan. After it had all been explained, it made sense. They spoke for a long while. All the while that they spoke, Mr. Khan was moving jelly/lights/needles/switches/teeth. And at the end of this time, Owen had been both persuaded and altered, and he wasn't sure where the persuasion had ended and alteration had begun, or if there was even a division between the two, or if there was even a difference.

Owen agreed it was probably best that Mr. Khan set up a way for him to forget about the whole thing. Mr. Khan set up a pressure in

Owen's mind, waiting to be released by a command word – thoughts and impulses forced out of place and bent into tension, ready to spring out along a chosen path. He would leave only the one pressure, Mr. Khan explained, because he didn't want to hurt Owen. When Mr. Khan triggered the release of that pressure, Owen's mind would snap back into place along that chosen path... and Owen would forget that he'd ever treated Mr. Khan, helped Mr. Khan, and even that he'd ever known this Mr. Khan existed. By that time, everything would be all over.

Everything would be all right, Mr. Khan said. They'd sort everything out.

And then

"Wilifred, you all right?" asked Madagascar.

Owen turned around. "Sure. Just can't figure this out." He shrugged, and turned away from the patient. "Mr. Khan, just relax for a moment. Let me get another healer to consult. We have some excellent people on staff here at the Tower, and we'll do what it takes to sort everything out."

#### 

Begin by asking students to consider how a rumor might spread among a population. Suppose on Day 1 a single person tells someone else a rumor, and suppose that on every subsequent day, each person who knows the rumor tells exactly one other person the rumor. Have students ponder, discuss and answer questions like: "How many days until 50 people have heard the rumor? 100 people? The whole school? The whole country?"

In the situation with the rumor, the number of people who have heard the rumor doubles every day; this is because, each day, every person who knows the rumor tells it to a new person. In other words, there is a 100 percent transmission rate: 100 percent of those who know the rumor spread it to someone else. A transmission rate this high means that the number of people who know the rumor will grow very quickly. In fact, in this simplified exponential model, one person could spread the rumor to the entire population of the United States in less than a month!

Patrick Honner, "Exponential Outbreaks: The Mathematics of Epidemics."

## sussissississississis Interlude mmmmmm

## Draco

### ~~~~~~@*~~~~~~*

Pursuant to an agreement, I grant and confirm to Armand Malfoi the Vale of Haxburn Downs, with the Manor of Haxburn, and the Chapel of Haxburn, &c of the gift of Osmundus Æbelindus, Earl of Haxburn. I commend it to the Use of the selfsame Armand Malfoi with all good thanks for his Service for he has ever been a True Friend and Loyal Servant of my House, and I know it shall ever be So, and I do charge Armand Malfoi with the good maintenance and safekeep of the Treasury of the South West with all my Trust.

— Grant of Lord-Enchanter Assurence de Chute, two years before his untimely death

#### 

Malfoy Manor, Wiltshire, England February 12th, 1997 A year aqo

"Put the samovar on," Draco said, gesturing at the tapered silver device and glancing at Gregory. Three domovoi were visiting that evening, and they tended to be particular about such niceties. It was probably part of their unrelenting feelings of inferiority towards the British, as though Merlin's heirs were to blame for their position on top of the Confederation or their legacy of powerful magic. The Russians always wanted to be treated with every little courtesy, and bristled at any perceived slight.

Not that Draco would have it any other way. It was an easy lever to use, and required nothing of him but a bit of forethought. Everyone should be so pliable.

Gregory Goyle obliged, twisting one of the handles of the samovar. The device was an elegant piece, with two stylized dragon's heads protruding from the top. It began to heat itself with a quiet hiss. "What's the plan?"

"You bring them in, and then go and tag their brooms. The Thunderer has been spreading gold around, looking for ways to co-opt the Honourable. I want to know who's been helpful enough to be the point person for his emissaries," said Draco. "Once you've done that — and check out their people, see if there's any opportunities there — then you'll join us and play the heavy."

Draco paused, then spoke to the air, curtly. "Dobby."

Barely a breath passed before the elf appeared, stepping out from behind a curtain. It was rude to apparate into the middle of a room, of course... proper house elf etiquette required a furtive entrance. The bedraggled little creature's bony face was pained with anxiety. "Master?"

"Pack for a journey. Mother and I, both. Cold weather. Riding, formal blacks, formal greens, and lounging," Draco commanded. "I'll want to be ready to go by the time my meeting tonight is concluded." He turned away, gesturing dismissively.

"Yes, Master," said Dobby, eyes wide. He gently stepped back behind the curtain.

"Will Carrow be here for the meeting?" Gregory asked, looking uncomfortable.

"Yes," said Draco, giving Gregory a direct and cold look. What of it?, his face said.

"Fine," said Gregory. Nothing more. He busied himself with arranging the furniture appropriately. He removed the two light wooden chairs from the room, levitating them out and replacing them with heavier armchairs. There were five of these: two set in close pairs and one separate, near the fire. Draco would take the single chair, of course, and allow the visitors to choose their own seats.

How the Russians arranged themselves would be valuable information. If two sat and one stood nearby, it would show that they were choosing solidarity in some respect – usually indicating nervousness or conscious opposition. If all three sat immediately, it would show comfort and ease, suggesting Draco could easily

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advance the relationship by taking the domovoi into his confidence that very evening. If there was hesitation, the process and order in which they sat could be observed: who was the leader, who deferred to others, and so on.

Poor little domovoi, coming to Malfoy Manor.

They were necessary for the future, though – not just entertainment. Draco had a significant power base in Britain and many admirers abroad – the international subscriptions to *Unbreakable Honour* were almost equal to the domestic numbers – but he'd never be a credible player on the world stage until he had some firmer connections with some of the globe's more reliable leaders. Voters were all well and good, but if you wanted iron in the glove, you needed some of the better sort on your side. You needed some tyrants.

There was a creak in the hallway outside, and Draco froze. Gregory snatched his wand up, his face hard.

"It's I," came the smooth voice of Amycus Carrow, "your Uncle Amycus."

"Come," said Draco.

The door opened, and Amycus Carrow entered. Tall and gaunt, the spymaster of the Honourable and old ally of the Malfoys was wearing black robes with shiny buttons, fastened tight up to his chin. The dark shadow of some scraggly whiskers were visible on his upper lip, and his hair was clipped very short.

"Draco, my boy," said Carrow. "So good to see you." His eyes flickered over the length of Draco's body, the way they always did – a possessive and lingering look. "Nacreous liver," he murmured, bizarrely and almost inaudibly. He seemed almost hungry.

"Hullo, Mr. Carrow," said Gregory, just a touch too loudly. He put a smile on his face as a shield.

Carrow started slightly, as though he hadn't realized Gregory was there, and swiveled his head to glance at the other man. "Gregory," he said in acknowledgment.

As usual, Draco was forced to admire the performance of Mad-Eye Moody. It wasn't simply the perfection of the acting, although that was so masterful that not even Amycus Carrow's nieces suspected the subterfuge (it helped that they were never permitted to spend much time with him, or to ever be alone

with him: the uneasy parent's usual precaution against an "acrohandula"). No, the true magnificence of the performance was that Draco knew – he knew – that Moody was putting on this perfect imitation of Carrow at the same time as he played the part of Draco's spymaster while also watching out for Harry Potter's interests and remaining constantly vigilant of immediate threats. It was the virtuoso exhibition of a masterful fanatic.

"Was your excursion useful, Amycus?" Draco asked.

Moody – no, it was impossible to think of him as anything other than Amycus Carrow – Carrow pursed his lips. "Yes... I think so. You are the only one who can credibly promise such gifts to the Thai. They won't step out ahead of China, for fear of being left alone in the cold, but they will drag their feet as much as they may. The Ten Thousand are never quick on the stick, but I don't believe we need to worry about them joining the ranks of our enemies, any time soon."

The dragons' heads on top of the samovar opened their mouths, hissing twin streams of steam. Their eyes glowed a dull red.

Draco walked to one of the room's tall windows, and stood there for a moment, looking out at the night. He could see one of the towers of *The Declaration of Intent*, and it was a sharp reminder of the importance of the stewardship of assets.

"We will give them nothing they can use – ideas of promise, but no application. Dead ends," said Draco. "A taste of power, but nothing to tip our hand or upset the balance in the Ten Thousand."

"They aren't fools, my boy," said Carrow. "They won't be so easily misled. If a bitch will bear no pups, you don't just cut its throat... you also give your elf a lesson with the knife."

Draco thought of Dobby, and smirked. "If an elf is left so poorly trained, then there's no one to blame but yourself." He reversed Carrow's metaphor, making it more to his liking: "We will throw a treat to our foreign friends. The Thais, the Russians, those Americans... old allies and new, they'll learn the potential power of joining us. We have people within the Tower and in the Department of Mysteries to assist."

"Such as Umbridge won't get you what we need," said Carrow, stroking his chin.

"Stolen secrets won't be the sole bait. There will also be simple advancements harvested from the Muggles. There is remarkable Interlude. Draco S 85

power in these techniques... power that will astonish even you, Amycus," said Draco, turning to the side and regarding Carrow again. "The principles of Mendel can reshape the flesh of beasts in a fashion more safe and more stable than even the feats of the fabled sarkamancers of the Eleusinian Mysteries. You think it is an accident that Loony Lovegood is meddling with Devil's Snare? The methods behind her madness are a coin for us, too." He snapped his fingers. "And we will also buy trust with deceit. Already and at this very moment, I am acting to set up a rival to the Honourable – a rival that will conspicuously fail, and in the process cost our erstwhile allies any investment they might make."

"Your lovely mother... she's off selecting your chosen fools," said Amycus, nodding slowly.

"Taking a meeting – she is considerably enthused about the project. I believe it amuses her to hand-craft a rival. Traps made of people are an elegant thing."

"I would have been able to assist in this, had I known ahead of time, my boy." Carrow folded his hands in front of himself, tilting his head slightly to the side. His right eye twitched. "A mistake."

Draco's expression became cold, and his eyes narrowed.

Carrow stared back, unblinking.

There was a long pause. Then Draco drew a breath, and spoke with cold care. "You presume too much, *Carrow*."

Gregory stood up a little straighter, and squared his shoulders; a subtle and appreciated signal.

Draco turned to face Carrow, and brought his palms together in front of himself. He drew them apart across his chest, and as they parted, his father's cane appeared in the gap, growing as Draco spread his hands, until the Lord Malfoy could grasp the snake-headed silver handle and bring the other end down to the floorboards with a sharp crack.

Draco raised his voice, beginning loudly, all thunder and lightning "I am Draco Malfoy, and I..."

His voice trailed off. Draco lowered his gaze. He fell silent. He let his shoulders slump slightly, as though the wind had been taken from his sails. He stood like that, and held it. Waited.

"Lord Malfoy?" asked Gregory, hesitantly.

"No," said Draco.

Gregory drew a sharp breath.

Draco raised his eyes again, glancing at Gregory. "No," he said again. "This is too important. It is too important for grandstanding."

Then he met Carrow's eyes with a steady gaze, and his voice was quiet. "No speeches, no grandeur, no orders. I tell you here tonight, Amycus Carrow, that this is the sticking point for a hundred generations of wizardkind. If we fail, then the world will be a darker and sadder place." Draco thought of a silver light he'd once seen... a pure glow that had overturned so many lies with its very existence, filling him with such an argent awe that it changed his world in a heartbeat. He imagined that light gone forever, and let that sorrow fill his voice. "If we fail – if we let one trick slip by or fall short by an ounce of wit, then our world will become a Muggle-made thing of immortal monsters. We are confronting an existential threat: a looming power that might not only end us, but end everything we hold dear."

He shook his head. "So no threats and no foolishness. If you don't have the mettle to hold to your place and do your part, even when it harms your pride, well – go, and may your chains sit lightly upon you." He raised his cane – a mere symbol and a powerless prop, but wasn't persuasion the mightiest thing of all? – and he pointed it at Carrow. "But if you have honour, and you're with us… then you are with us, and you will heed your place."

A pophasis.

Before he'd even finished speaking, Carrow had fallen to one knee. "I can offer nothing but my apology and my fealty, Lord Malfoy."

Gregory looked as satisfied as the kneazle that caught the cracklebit. He crossed his arms, and a smile lurked at the corner of his mouth. He looked a foot taller. He looked like faith fulfilled.

"Master," said Dobby, emerging from behind a different curtain. "Your visitors are here."

"Let them in," said Draco, without taking his gaze off of Carrow. Dobby disappeared back behind the curtain once more. Draco lowered his cane. "Goyle, go meet them."

Goyle left, his face revealing barely-disguised triumph. The story of this moment would travel. Draco smiled.

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Carrow and Draco were alone. There was only the quiet hiss of steam, rising dangerously from twin dragon heads, to keep them company.

"Bah," said Carrow, rising off of his knee and standing up again. He snatched out his wand and as he waggled it, almost too fast to follow, the warm crackle of wards settled on around them. Privacy screens, above and beyond the ones that already layered the Manor.

Draco didn't say anything – didn't rub it in. There was no need.

"Try that again, Malfoy," he said, glowering, "and you will get a rather different reaction. Goyle will be spreading the story of how you lost an ear, instead."

Draco watched him coolly. "And damage everything we've been building? You have more discipline than that."

"Maybe. But also too much discipline to be afraid to upset the applecart, if need be," replied Carrow.

"Before you do, be quite certain it's worth it. One only gets one chance at ruining plans like these."

"Plans like these? Your mother is setting up some small circle of idiots to take a fall, sucking some Cappadocian money with them as they go, eh? Helping build up the Honourable to draw in all the enemy?" said Carrow. He stabbed a finger at Draco. "Or is it a cover for your own efforts to set up an independent base of power?"

"I'm not above a fall-back plan, Mad-eye," said Draco, "because I am not an idiot. If something happens to Harry, or he goes too far, or anything else... well, I don't intend to wager everything on one game of pitch-and-toss. But my fall-back lies in the Honourable: they are my 'independent' base of power, if need be, not some momentary troop of patsies. That is why the Honourable are loyal to me, personally. Harry knows that. You know that. And you both understand it, too, I think." He fixed Carrow with a harsh look. "Don't pretend to purity. I know you have your own private plans."

Not that he knew, really, but there could not be a safer assumption.

"There's a difference between preparation and betrayal," said Carrow, in a most un-Carrow-like growl. "Which are you at, I wonder?"

"Continue to wonder," pronounced Draco, curtly.

"Aye," said Carrow, slowly. "Well. You may believe you can bludger Potter in the back, if you get the opportunity. And maybe you're right. He's clever, but soft. He trusts you. But I don't." Carrow gave Draco a hard stare, and his very face was a reminder of his capacity for subterfuge. "But be careful thinking you can play a deeper game than me, boy. Many have tried... and gotten no deeper than six feet."

"Lord Draco Malfoy," said Gregory, opening the door across the room, "of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Malfoy, Britain's last and best defender of the honour of wizardkind and the fate of magic."

Draco turned to regard the door, cane in hand, and his face slid into a courteous smile of welcome. Three men with hard faces but indifferent grooming stepped into the room ahead of Gregory. They had the weighty air of importance. One of them wore a brooch of emeralds-and-alicorn, while another openly carried an old wand of the Slavic style, two feet long and bladed. They all wore the red woollen cloaks of Russian domovoi: the decision-makers of one of the great peoples in the wizarding world, no less magisterial than the Wizengamot. These were men who had held lives in their hands, who had scrutinized their subjects down to the curve of their soul, who had begun and ended wars as they saw fit.

Now they were come to Malfoy Manor.

Carrow and Goyle walked over to stand beside Draco. Draco's smile broadened.

"Please, gentlemen," he said. "Sit wherever you like."

## www.chapter Six www.

# The Compresence of Opposites



In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.

—John 1:1-5



The end came without notice or noise.

Auror Kwannon came in, waved Auror Kraeme over, and murmured something. Kraeme nodded and left, and Kwannon took up position behind Harry in the meeting room. He gave her a nod, but it didn't merit comment – it could be as simple as a bathroom break, and it happened all the time, and he trusted Kwannon just as much as Kraeme.

Harry went on with his meeting, talking with Luna and Umbridge about the next steps for the sfaironaut program. Frustratingly, the biggest problem seemed to be conflict between their two sfaironauts, Basil Horton and Ron Weasley. They were refusing to work together. Luna wanted to sack them both from the program and find someone new; Umbridge was determinedly defending Horton, and thought only Weasley should be grounded.

After twenty minutes, they hadn't reached a consensus. "I'll decide about this next week, after speaking to both of them,"

Harry said, sighing. He folded up the parchments in front of him, and swept them to one side.

"All right, Harry," said Umbridge sweetly, turning to look at Luna with an obvious look of triumph. She looked back at Harry as she got up from the table. "You'll see, once you speak to them. The difference is striking – a gawky boy versus an experienced man."

"A lot of experience," said Luna, cryptically, as she too stood up. Umbridge blushed. Harry sighed.

"Thank you," he said, shaking his head.

"You're due in the clinic?" Luna asked, as Umbridge left with a flounce.

"Not for an hour," Harry said. He leaned back in his chair. "I'm going to do some reading, I think. It's been —"

"Mr. Potter?" came a voice at the door. It was Kraeme, back again.

"Yes?" Harry asked, glancing over. He'd been planning to go chat with Professor Quirrell, bringing the captive-in-a-box some more books on tape. He'd been able to make more time for that lately. It was good to have those sorts of conversations again – ones where he didn't have to hold back or go slowly – and he'd be irritated if some nonsense emergency got in the way of that today. It was always some prankster students hoping for his favour, or a small-time warlord testing the Tower's defenses.

"You're needed in Material Methods, sir. One of the goblins showed up, finally, and he wants to speak to you about what's been happening with them," said Kraeme. She looked mildly concerned, which was unusual.

"Fine," said Harry. "I'll be glad to know what's going on in Ackle, that we've gotten to this point. I don't need a group of angry and sullen Beings... we already have the centaurs for that."

"Good luck, Harry," Luna said, heading out the door ahead of him. "Try to get them back... we need them."

"Of course, Luna," Harry said, parting ways with her. He walked down the hall.

As he rounded the corner, though, he was surprised to find a stranger standing there, flanked by several healers from the clinic and six or seven aurors. Umbridge was also standing next to the man, smiling.

"Wha—" said Harry, but the man had already darted forward. Harry jerked back, instinctively. Almost as quickly, he shoved one hand into the opposite sleeve to snatch out his wand. But the man's hand was fast, and it touched his wrist, and it was too late.

"Egeustimentis," said the man.

#### 

Harry Potter-Evans-Verres existed. This was true. And there was more of him, elsewhere and here. So much of his being was held back from him, excluded into another place, even as the entirety of his mind was laid out before him and subject to the careful touch of his enemy.

He watched, and felt nothing but idle curiosity.

Harry's mind was laid out in front of him. It shifted from shape to shape in the way of something in a dream, somehow without ever changing while at the same time being in constant flux. He could see hormonal drives, deep impulses, passing memories, flighty sensations, and everything else that made up his cognition, but that knowledge was far from him. He could even see a rigidity that stiffened its way through parts of his mind, a visible Unbreakable Vow that kept his thoughts from ever taking certain shapes... but that sight meant nothing to him. Harry was a speck, a fragment, a mote of consciousness.

A man was there – the man who had touched Harry. His enemy. Harry knew that, somewhere and somehow far away. But it didn't matter. With the flicker of self left to him, Harry observed.

"Hello there, Mr. Potter. You look older than the last time I was able to watch you," said the man. He was of middling height and uncertain ethnicity, with dark skin but an Asian cast to his features. He wore robes of extraordinary simplicity and extraordinary quality. His hair was thinning on top. His eyes were brown, and calm.

"I am Meldh," the man said. "Or so you can call me. It is an old word of my youth."

Harry absorbed this information, and felt it pass through his consciousness, out into the larger part of his mind, where it met with a shiver of doubt. Only a sliver of Harry was aware, though, and it had no room for such complexities as reaction or speech.

"You are safe, Mr. Potter. I am not going to kill you. When we are done, you will be changed, but you will be alive. Do not try to resist. There is no method available to you that would allow you to resist the Lethe Touch. Your Occlumency is a child's toy, more suitable for games than protection. Nor would it be well for the world for you to try to resist... believe me when I say that it is for the good of that world that I act," said Meldh. "Magic must perish, if life is to survive. This is the legacy of Atlantis. This is the legacy of the Prince of Enchanters, Merlin. For years beyond counting, I and others have preserved that legacy. We have moved our pieces as we could, and watched magic fade."

Meldh stepped out through Harry's mind, shifting gently to shoulder his way past rippling curtains of curds that reeked of whiteness. "You are unpredictable and strange, Mr. Potter, so I have left you little of your wakefulness. Who knows what unconventional preparations you might have laid up in your mind, hidden away from our scrying in your Mirror-bound Tower? I take no risks. For now, though, this means we cannot have a conversation. I apologize for that."

He slid his fingers into a white ripple, and parted it. He looked curiously at the parting. "So many unusual ideas... "He smiled. "Here we are. Ah, ah, ah... prophecies are at work? 'Only by seeking the scorpion and the archer, locked beyond return, shall the crux succeed. By this path shall death be defeated for the banished father.' And what does that... ah, I see."

Meldh plucked at a grey burr, and lifted it up for inspection. It drew a tangle of its fellows along, like a springy mat of thorns. Meldh examined the section of burrs. His face changed from curiosity to surprise, as though he'd understood something.

"A clever use of the Spirit Stone, if you have deduced the answer correctly. I admit that this is... clever. Genius, even, considering the way in which you obtained the Stone from our pawn." He shook his head, chuckling. "It is fortunate indeed that I came here, if this was your plan. 'Defeat death'...? What would such an event look like? If you spent even a moment thinking of alternate outcomes or possible interpretations, you would turn away in horror and take your own life. You decided your preferred meaning, and seized it." A pause, as he plucked at

nearby bristles and burrs, contemplatively. "Your guilt drives you to these lengths, not your good sense."

Meldh dropped the vinegar-smelling lights in his hands, allowing them to settle back into a glowing three-dimensional web that rippled with pulses of energy. There had been no transition from fibrous thorn-tangle to web of lights, and somehow both were still true. Meldh traced a handful of the web's strands, an acid tang accompanying every pulse of light under his careful fingers, until he reached a bright node.

"Other prophecies... a boy fated to bring down a great house, but that is no matter. This Lawrence boy might just as well fulfill his part by causing the destruction of some noble manor, rather than any great shift in your little political game. Your attempts to change his attitude were a waste of time.

"Ah, here here here..." Meldh said, snatching at a bony protuberance, pulling at it until it stretched like yellowed taffy. It distended from the great knobby mass of bone, and it seemed to impart meaning to the wizard as he worked it with his fingers.

Harry watched from some other place, both here and there. His world was constrained to the moment, as though he were a brute animal. It was shallow and wonderful.

"Yes," he said, "you are the child who will 'tear apart the very stars in heaven.' And if that is indeed you, then you will also 'rend asunder the fires of the sky' or 'tear open the eyes of heaven' and other such phrasings. A nexus of prophecy, all surely referring to one child and one decision. Unmistakable, even to Nell's toppled queen, Dumbledore.

"I suppose you can't be blamed. You have done your best, your very best, with what you had and what you knew. You are master of the world – or at least, you could be master, with a flick of your wrist to bring your opponents into mate. Or near enough to make no matter," Meldh paused for a moment. "Few enough have ever been able to make that boast. Perhaps only Merlin. But your goals have been misguided, even foolish, and you have not made the most of your opportunities. For years now, you have had access to some of the deepest lore. But you have wasted your time on frivolities – 'lifeboats from Earth,' honestly?"

The wizard shook his head, chuckling. He walked to a new place along the outside of the bony mass, and touched a polished knob that stuck out prominently. "Combining the Muggle and magical is not a new thing, despite your arrogance. What has it given you, besides trinkets up high in the air? Let us see."

He pushed the knob aside and scooped his hand into the surface of the bone, distending it as he forced his fingers deeper inside. He drew out a thick handful of whiteish bone, sculpted out in a column by his careful but insistent hand.

"What is this?" He examined the thoughts. "Some mawkish combination of old philosophy and new 'science' and something Merlin once said? Well, all that is..."

There was a heavy pause, a pause as weighty as iron, as Meldh's voice died. He looked stunned by what he'd found. He took a step back, and then he threw up his hands, his face reddening, snapping, "You realized *this*, and you *discarded* the idea?!"

Harry, a mote of pleasant consciousness, observed this anger with distant interest. He could see changes in the whispering rattle of long serrated teeth moving in the immense jaw that now represented his mind; Meldh held one long incisor, but others were moving in a swirl up and down, revealing in some unimaginable fashion that a part of Harry was upset. The mote that was Harry saw himself struggling mightily, and finding no purchase.

"You even believe that you want to keep everyone alive, and I could have credited your good intentions. But you do not even seem to understand the contradiction in the fact that you're willing to sacrifice human lives out of fear of some insanity that will happen in —" Meldh paused and swiped at the large incisor's surface, scrutinizing it. "— a 'googol' of years. It's stupidity of the highest order, and it shows why you are such a threat."

Meldh swept his hand forward, seeming to let release his anger at the same time that he released the enormous tooth in his hand, letting it slide from his grip and settle back into its rattling place. He sighed. "The implications of this... even beyond the practical benefits... ah, but you know so little, ultimately. An idiot genius, placing his pieces on the board with a fool's luck. And how much corruption here, spreading through you like a rot! Tom Riddle within you and Tom Riddle without you, and you becoming more like both."

He shook his head, and placed his hands on his hips, looking down at the gobbets of thick fat that hung in the air all around him. "It is good that I came, though I was afraid. Not only will I stop you from your foolishness, you provide me here with new knowledge a thousandfold beyond what I ever could have hoped. I can find no metaphor from the game of kings... suffice to say that your mad insight will raise me beyond where even centuries of effort has brought me."

The fraction of Harry that was awake, the mild observer, saw motion within itself. A planned uprising of mental discipline – the buried power of years of practice at introspection and systematic thought. He couldn't touch it, and knew it not, but he could observe it.

He had been a creature of the mind for so long. Heuristics and biases, Occlumency and Vows. He was not ancient and was not powerful, but he was a creature of the mind. He was the master of his mind, and no one else.

That distant mind swelled in shudders, setting the constellation of grease into a rhythm. It pulsed and built to a crescendo, striving mightily to take possession of itself. A powerful tremble ran through his entire mind.

Harry and Meldh observed, calmly.

His mind subsided. It became quiet. It conceded.

"First," Meldh said, reaching out to guide two droplets of fat into each other, "we must make some changes. Your Unbreakable Vow might have saved us all before now – it is truly unbreakable, even for me – and we must be grateful for Tom Riddle's foresight, but it will be all the better when you are wholly mine, instead."

Harry Potter-Evans-Verres observed his master, and felt nothing but idle curiosity.

## www.chapter Seven www.

## The Ching with Mings



KARL: You think you are safe here, in your village utopia? War is upon us! Hear the sound of drums. The enemy approaches in scant minutes, and our hourglass flows so quickly... witness the last of the time! Lords and ladies... I beseech you! Wake up and attend to your own hour of doom! Flee!

ERIN: We hear. We understand. But we will not run. We will not abandon Sontag.

— The Last Days of Exses O'Bruinan," by S. Leigh, as staged in the 1979 London production

#### 

John Snow Center for Medicine and Tower School of Doub (The Tower) May 18th, 1999 One day later

Draco's office in the Tower was in the rear of the complex, where it had been expanded. He had originally been situated near Material Methods. It might have been quiet there at the moment, with the goblins all shut up and withdrawn into Curd and Ackle, off doing gobliney things (presumably comparing ear length or bathing in rubies). But as soon as the dodgy little blokes were back to work, hammering out more absurdly large golden gloves, then that area would become intolerable: unfortunate smells, clamorous

noise, and a horde of chest-high half-elves swarming underfoot in the corridor.

Now he was comfortably ensconced next to the new offices of the Vision Verge, instead. They were almost all wizards and witches, except for the one centaur, and they mostly did quiet things involving lenses and the like. It was uninteresting work – what possible use was there for the tiny Protean-Charmed little toggles they were making? – but also a peaceful little corner of the oft-bustling Tower.

Dearest Mother, he wrote, leaning over the parchment on the desk in front of him.

All is going well – better than we could have hoped. There are plans to reorganize the way the Tower operates, now that a new Receiving Room will be built to accommodate the Ten Thousand. That has meant a second Terminus to be in charge, and a second command structure for it, and now the whole question of who reports to whom has been upended. The Westphalians are all in a clamour about the new addition, as well, and are arguing that the Americas should also have their own Receiving Room. If they win, then simple pride will oblige the construction of a fourth Room for the Free States, Nigeria, and any other African states that join.

In fact, I believe that the Tower will become a proxy body for the Confederation, which will soon mean, of course, that it will become subject to votes from that body. Potter is a soft touch, and he won't be able to flout the Confederation forever without the excuse of the Independent opposition. That will be an opportunity for many, including us. Good fortune floats into our hand like a ripe dirigible plum.

Draco continued in this vein for some length, setting forth his pretended expectations with just enough vagueness to appear plausible. He laid out a vision of a potential path to power within the Tower – and more importantly, made sure that this vision was transferable: a blueprint for others to follow, as well.

When he was done, he took a parchment razor and notched the lower-left corner of the first page twice, then folded and sealed the packet. Draco would send it to his mother, and she'd know it was meant for others to see. It would be "stolen," and reinforce his efforts at tempting a few choice individuals into the fold.

There was a loud knock at his office door.

Draco looked up, irritated at the interruption. He glanced at the big watch on the wall. He was expecting his "spy" and ally Dolores Umbridge at ten o'clock, but he'd expected to have time to write a genuine dispatch to his mother in addition to the fake one. They'd built something special over these past years with their Honourable, and he had no intentions of letting it – or their relationship with each other – decay. "Who is it?" he asked, curtly.

"There are some who call me... Tim," said a voice from the other side of the door.

"Come in, Longbottom," Draco said, sighing in annoyance.

Neville opened the door, glancing around the room as he stepped inside. At some point in the years since he and Draco had first boarded the Hogwarts Express, Neville had grown tall and handsome. He was a bit gawky, but with an obvious strength in his wiry frame. His eyes were bright and his smile was wide and he was utterly intolerable.

"Harry wanted to know if you had a minute," Neville said. He squinted at a statue in the corner – a beautiful sculpture in gold of a fat-bodied cobra with numerous heads, coils piling up beneath it and a single broad hood loomed behind its heads.

"Fine," said Draco, checking the wall-watch again. He dropped the cover over the inkwell built into his desk and cleared the parchments to one side. He included the fake dispatch among them. He'd send it later.

Neville jerked a thumb in the direction of the statue. "That's new."

"It's from Thailand," said Draco, turning to regard it. "Not a real beast. 'Ananta Shesha,' a fanciful notion of the Muggles... They say that it holds the entire world on its hood."

Neville regarded it closely. There were tiny scales pricked into its surface, and each tiny snake-head wore a delicate crown. "So he's trod down by everyone else, despite all his crowns?" he asked, lightly.

Draco ignored the jab for a moment. He adjusted his robes as he walked around the desk, and he kept his voice mild as he replied, "One day, they say he will uncoil."

Neville scowled as the Slytherin stepped past him and out into the corridor. Draco turned to give him a level look, and spoke over his shoulder, "And then, he'll be all that's left." Draco smiled coolly. "Ananta Shesha: 'that which remains.'"

Not his best work... but then, it was only Neville, who spent most of his day wallowing with Muggles and play-fighting with them.

Draco walked briskly down the corridor, past the Verge, and along the hallway squeezed between the Conjuration Conjunction and Extension Establishment, the latter filled with annoyed people snapping at each other irritably. There had been serious malfunctions in the latest slicebox prototypes. They were intended for the creation of a second pocket world, which would also be put into orbit out past the sky, but they'd been rupturing instead. One researcher had nearly been killed by an accidental backlash that had bisected her at the waist.

He turned left, moving past the entrance to Material Methods, and then pushed open the door to the meeting room, striding on inside. It's important not just to look like you know what's going on, but to appear to actually be in command of it, his father had used to say.

There were a few people in the meeting room with Harry. A couple of aurors, Percy Weasley, and Cedric Diggory. No Bones and no Mad-Eye... nothing about the Tower or politics or anything foreign. Probably government...

He considered likely possibilities as quickly as possible as he nodded to those sitting at the table and walked over, past the aurors.

Was this about his mother? No, they'd leave that alone, no matter what. They knew better than to get between Draco and his family. They knew he was a Malfoy above all.

Had one of his minions gotten out of hand? Draco did an inventory of the likely suspects – the lowbrow pawns who'd run most of Knockturn Alley. Gem and his people were in Howard Prison for another three months... Laura Lock and Tallow Enser were still in hiding in Kent and unwilling to come out. That left Jean-Luc Bigby and Mortimer Kainen. They'd been kipps by trade six years ago, collecting loans and insurance. Had they gone back to that and gotten picked up after hexing the wrong person?

Was this more personal? Had they started getting information from Bellatrix, finally – penetrating the unfathomable protection of her insanity?

"Hello, Harry," Draco said, standing behind an empty seat. He rested his hands on it. He waited just a fraction of a second before turning to the other two, saying, "Diggory. Weasley." A gentle reminder of the order of things. "What are we on about this morning?"

"Just the usual, Malfoy," said Cedric, with his customary badly-disguised air of scorn. He'd had difficulty accepting the new reality in the Tower: Draco as ally and not defeated enemy.

Draco smiled a knowing smile, and pulled his chair out. But he didn't sit down, pausing.

There was something wrong.

Draco didn't know what it was, but he knew there was something wrong. He glanced from face to face, again. He couldn't quite put his finger on it, but he felt the disquiet in his guts.

What is it? Is it Mother, after all? No, Harry would tell me in private first, if that were it. Was it a misunderstanding – the uncovering of a "plot" to overthrow Harry, and it's been misunderstood?

He could see it, now, all of a sudden, as they looked back at him. It was their expressions. Harry and Diggory and Weasley all seemed to have their attention somewhere else. Not as though they weren't paying attention or anything so obvious – but rather, it was as though they were distracted by a noise or presence that he couldn't see. It was subtle... but then, Draco's tutor in the social graces, Master DeCampo, had always said that manipulation was the most delicate dance of all. These were three people struggling with their guilt. He could see it.

Why do they feel guilty?

"I think -" Draco began, but he could already feel the presence of the aurors close behind him.

A wand jabbed into his back.

Draco smirked, despite the roiling of his stomach. Did Harry seriously think I've never considered the possibility of betrayal? "There are only three certainties: death, betrayal, and hag's teeth." He'd personally made a portkey to his own office within the Tower.

Portkeys couldn't take him outside the facility, but they could travel within its bounds – to a prepared escape cache.

"This is a mistake, Potter," he said. He considered the appropriate bon mot to leave in his wake, and fixed Harry's eyes with his own. Harry looked conflicted, his face uncertain. Uncommitted. Ultimately, not enough will to carry this out. Draco felt more confidence at the thought. This might actually be a good thing.

A hand rested lightly on his shoulder from behind, from someone unseen.

"Egeustimentis," he heard.

#### 

After the necessary adjustments, they all sat down together. The Master took Harry's usual seat. They began to discuss what seemed to be the next step.

"Trying to ambush Mad-Eye," said Draco, shaking his head. "It sounds almost like a... like something that is untrue by its very nature."

"A contradiction in terms?" suggested Cedric.

"A paradox?" offered Harry.

Draco nodded at Harry. "A paradox. Like burning water. Or a lucky elf." He shook his head. "'An ambushed Moody.' Impossible."

"Well, we've hit critical mass, I think," said Harry. "We have enough people to do it, but not so many people that we've been found out. Most of the aurors on shift yesterday and during the night, and everyone on shift today – and now Draco. If we act now, we might even keep it from getting messy." He looked hopefully over at the Master.

"Yes," Meldh said, nodding gently. "The changes I have made are not... subtle. The Lethe Touch takes centuries to master, but even my skill is not enough to disguise such a change in, ah, *priorities*, shall we say?"

Draco nodded in agreement, as well. "I knew something was different when I walked into the meeting. And there's no sense in wasting an asset that might help the Master later. You're right, we should act immediately."

Harry leaned forward, using one hand to brush the end of his ponytail back over his shoulder. "Is there any risk the Lethe Touch will wear off?" he asked Meldh. "If it has a time limit, we should make sure to set up a schedule – maybe a system to keep an eye on each other." He paused, thoughtfully, and wagged a finger at his Master. "If we're going to help you, you're going to need to start telling us things about what you want and your assets."

Meldh raised an eyebrow. He leaned forward and folded his arms on the table in front of him. He had a mild look on his face – amused curiosity, as though he were looking at children. "Oh?"

"Are you fishing for information, Harry?" asked Cedric, frowning suspiciously.

"Well, yes," said Harry, contemplatively. "It's interesting. I suppose I'd always assumed that mind magic like Imperius would come with an underlying change in personality and methodology. Maybe I've been making comparisons to Muggle techniques that don't serve – things like brainwashing. Instead, it's more like Muggle politics than anything else... the dark side of rationality, where ideas don't have inherent value, but only matter as... as... "He made a gesture. "As soldiers. In politics, whether or not an idea or theory reflects reality is less important than whether it helps or hurts my team."

Meldh's face darkened. He rose from his seat, slowly. "How can you speak this way? How have you defeated the Touch?"

Harry shook his head. "It's not what you think. I serve you above all else, Master Meldh. But you didn't lobotomize me. I'm capable of introspection — I can recognize that the change to my priorities wasn't predicated on rational assessment of the situation." He grinned, good-naturedly. "More knowledge is better, even about yourself. You'd be amazed how many times I've had to talk about this —"

"Lecture about this," Cedric put in, sighing.

"– but it's true," Harry continued, unperturbed. "There's no danger to knowing how your own mind works, including all of the biases that damage your ability to make rational decisions. We're incredibly biased towards acting according to your instructions, Master, and it wouldn't serve you to pretend that's not so."

"It would be less creepy, Harry, if you would just make your peace with it," said Draco, frowning. "Accept that this is the way it is, and don't overthink it."

"No, no," said Harry, quickly. "That's just it! You're conflating the idea of resisting the change in our minds with the idea of understanding it."

"This is not useful," said Meldh, quietly. He'd become mild again, apparently accepting Harry's explanation, and lowered himself back into his seat. "We will finish planning, so that we eliminate all threats. Then we will take the time to prepare our moves for the future... what pieces we keep and what pieces we sacrifice. We will adjust our strategy, so we can move towards my chosen endgame – not your madness of healing Muggles and throwing things into the sky. Magic must have its end."

Harry looked momentarily flummoxed, opening and closing his mouth a few times. Draco smirked, watching. Eventually, Harry found words again, frowning. "Yes, sir." His frown became surprise, as though he'd intended to say something else.

Draco turned his attention back to the Master. "Moody is due to come in today at some point for an intrusion attempt, since it's an even-numbered day. I suggest we prepare a fake repeater in the clinic, and ask him for help."

"There have been a few people who have been unhappy with their rejuvenation who have tried to convince us to do the process again," Cedric explained. "It's against policy, since it's too time-consuming and it takes time away from others. If a healer is rejuvenating someone for the second or third time, that means there's someone else in actual need of rejuvenation who has to wait in suspension. We had three French wizards who caused a problem about this, a couple of years ago, and backed up the queue so badly that several people came very near to dying. We keep a sharp eye on répéteurs ever since."

"Moody has prepared for this sort of thing," said Harry. "I know for a fact. One of his jobs is to be paranoid about everyone." He stabbed a finger onto the surface of the table. "Even me." He turned to Draco. "One level won't be enough. We need levels and levels if we want to have any hope, here."

## 

Alastor Moody was waiting until just before midnight. People got sloppy at night – forgot to check their corners, lost track of everyone in the room, and other laxness. He hadn't done a night intrusion on the Tower in months. By that time, they'd be wondering if he'd already managed to get in... they'd start double-checking the patients already in the clinic and verifying the identity of everyone in the halls. Added to their fatigue, it might be the edge he needed to get to Harry and "assassinate" him.

He smiled to himself as he checked the Glenwallace Traps on the doorframes of his house. This was going to be a fun one.

It helped that he was in a good body. A tall and healthy man with a dark complexion and brown eyes – nondescript but usefully vital. There was a lot to be said for the usefulness of sheer physical health when it came to break-ins, although the stealth value of a small child or an obese man wasn't to be shunned.

A small bell rang twice, and Moody frowned. Owl in the hutch. He checked the front door and the windows, and then went to the hutch. It was carrying nothing but parchment, so he opened the swivel-door barrier and let the owl through, and plucked the message free.

REPEATER IN THE CLINIC.
WE NEED A QUIET REMOVAL AND
TO MAKE SURE THIS DOESN'T HAPPEN AGAIN.
APPLY PERSUASION.

It was signed by Malfoy.

A trick? A trap? Alastor knew where at least 75% of Malfoy's little gang were, and they were almost all neutralized. Assuming he could be wrong by as much as a fifth, and that Malfoy might have gotten leverage over some of the mid-level aurors – maybe a Terminus on duty – or maybe Malfoy himself had been suborned by a larger operation or a powerful individual, maybe the Three. Or just an attempt to curry favor. Or rather, more subtle: an attempt to appear as though he were currying favor, so as to be taking an obvious hopeless action in a safe way while putting forth another plan.

Might also be the Chinese or Americans, making a try now that they had their foot in the door. He wouldn't put it past that lousy little Hig, who was all helpful and sweet now that the Westphalians had what they wanted.

It was also just barely possible that there was no ulterior motive to the situation or message. He chuckled out loud at the thought.

Alastor snatched some leaves of parchment from the writing desk near the hutch and wrote three terse messages in his crooked and crabbed hand, ordering a change in the shift commanders at the RCP and the Ministry, and sending a further letter to a cold-drop. Unlikely Malfoy or anyone else could have sway enough to manage every single shift commander. He sealed them with a hasty Verification Charm to match his wand, and sent them on their way.

He checked the Glenwallace Traps again, and the other Dark Detectors while he was at it. Then Alastor pulled on his gear and checked it over. He studied his appearance in the glass for a long moment, but he looked safely ordinary.

The safest way would be to Apparate to the Ministry and then take a secure Floo, but they'd be expecting that and it would, ironically, make him more identifiable. No, as so often, the best way was the more direct and fastest. A Safety Stick.

#### 

It had looked wrong, right from the start.

Alastor walked into the clinic from the Receiving Room to find a repeater, all right – someone with the unblemished skin and youth of the rejuvenated. He was arguing in the middle of the clinic with a healer, who was calmly trying to redirect the repeater back into a cubicle.

But there were also seven aurors.

There was not any reason for there to be seven aurors. That was far too many. The three on shift here would have been sufficient, and an additional one from the Receiving Room would have been an abundance of caution. Sending four aurors in as reinforcement for a minor difficulty like this wasn't just a waste

of resources: it would actually cause the very problem that they tried to avoid when repeaters showed up. Repeaters needed to be soothed, reassured, and sent on their way without a fuss.

Protocol was well-known. More than that, it was just common sense. And these weren't new aurors to the Tower, either, he noticed. They were old hands; people with experience, and no known ties to any other power that he knew. But here they were, where they shouldn't be, all standing in bunches.

Time to address the likelihood that this was a Malfoy trap for him (or a trap by someone else).

Alastor backed out of the clinic and turned to the auror standing farther down the corridor, the one he'd just passed. "Pirrip!"

The idiot turned. "Sir?" He'd just cleared Alastor mere moments ago, exchanging passwords.

"Go tell Harry that there's something very suspicious with the repeater in the clinic. Then come back at speed. Bring another hand with you – someone with battle experience," Alastor barked, sharply. He waited just long enough to see Pirrip on the jump, then turned and strode back into the clinic.

But scarcely was he inside before he heard a scream. He whirled to see that Pirrip hadn't even made it out of sight down the corridor – the young auror was down, thrashing on the ground. Gutclench Curse or something similar.

Almost without thinking, Alastor sidestepped to the right, and without a pause charged into motion, out of the clinic. Behind him, he could hear voices shouting and spells being cast. Not all focused on him – whatever this was, he still had allies. He barely thought about his reactions as he raised the purplish light of Azarian Fire behind him, throwing himself to the side once he was clear of the doorway to the clinic. The Fire erupted behind him with a rush of smoke, and he took the opportunity to crouch low and lean back around the doorway, snatching at the goblin-silver door just to one side. A spray of Bertram Bolts sizzled through the air over his head as he hauled at the door, and it smoothly slid into place.

He needed to get to Harry. Alastor took off at a dead run.

He didn't pause over Pirrip, not even breaking stride as he sprinted down the corridor over the lad. He spared a look to his right as he went past the entrance, but he could already see that the Receiving Room aurors had sent two of their number to assist him (traitors to stab him in the back? No, Madagascar and Nimue hated each other, that hate was more reliable than most things) and so he could rely on the alert being raised.

Down past the Advancement Agency, still sprinting, plucking a potion from his belt with his free hand and dropping it behind him, Alastor cursed. Whoever was behind this was causing chaos, but how could they think they'd win? That they'd get control of the Tower – they didn't even know what the Tower really was, or what happened here. Did they think to learn the "special webs" that made "Tower Transfiguration" possible here? Had they figured out the Stone... were they just trying to steal that? Alastor hoped that Harry had his wits about him, and that he'd put on one of the decoy gloves as soon as he was threatened. The decoys each had a fragment of an ancient and ruined cup embedded in their palm, where the Stone went in the real glove – if anything was stolen, let it be one of them.

But it was much worse than he thought. Charging around the corner, taking the turn at a momentary crouch, wand raised, he saw that they'd already gotten to Harry oh Merlin oh no –

Harry was on the ground, and a knife was buried in his chest. Blood was spreading around him.

- check behind, nothing, run forward, call for help, two bringing up the rear to watch your back -

There was so much blood already, was the boy already dead? His shoes were wrong. He had to be saved, he had to be saved, there was no one who could take his place, not really.

- move to the side, wand up, there's someone Disillusioned, see the shimmer, no bother with removal, wide-angle attack, get down

He dropped into a crouch again and raised his wand to Vom Tag, reaching out with his mind. He focused his will into the necessary shape and pushed away from him the thought of a grandmother's eyes and sparkling blue lights. It was devilishly tricky to aim, but he just needed to get it *out there* and he felt with relief the rush of arctic wind as it swept in a torrent away from his fingers, ripe with cold.

He brought up more Azarian Fire in front of him almost in the same breath, but never took his eye off the corridor. The blur of distortion that was his enemy made a movement, redirecting his attack. A skillful turn. Foolish to do it so well, they revealed too much about their style. Possibly meant to tempt him into overconfidence.

no time for this, no time no time, use the arch you can make
 it secret again later like the last time -

Alastor whipped three rapid-fire curses at his opponent, buying a half-second to reach into his robes. He felt the metal ring in its pocket, and snatched it free. Lunging to the side, he snapped his wand forward, shouting a curse powerful enough that his own ears ached from the pressure of its passage.

And he hurled a metal ring at his enemy, urging it to work. He needed it to work. He needed it to save Harry.

The Arch of Ulak Unconquered, the most perfect prison ever devised, swelled impossibly as it sailed through the air. Within moments it had ceased to be a thing of physical reality, and had become a force of nature, transforming from a slender metal ring into a burnished hoop the size of a man.

Alastor's foe was fast: he had time to try two full spells as the Arch flew at him. Both spells, a rush of wind and a blaze of fire, were swallowed by the Arch so thoroughly that they might never have existed. The Arch was a thing unyielding and unknowable – the last sanction of Alastor Moody, the reserve he retained against any betrayal.

And then the Arch dropped down, encircling the enemy, and then the enemy was gone. There was only the empty metal hoop of the Arch resting on the stone, and Alastor brandishing his wand, and the aurors on his heels running in lockstep, and a dying Harry Potter-Evans-Verres. Whose shoes were wrong.

Whose shoes were wrong.

Trap.

There was only a moment between the realization and unconsciousness, but that moment was long enough for Alastor to understand. A fake Harry meant a fake enemy, already in control of the Stone. That meant a fake attack. That meant a set-up in the clinic, assisted by the Receiving Room. That meant no one raised the alarm. That meant everyone was in on it.

## Constant vigila

## 

After Moody was theirs, the two aurors took away Kraeme's body, still transfigured into the shape of Harry. On Meldh's instructions, they put it in the clinic for the moment, until arrangements could be made. The Arch was more difficult. Moody himself had to whisper arcane words to it before he could lift it, releasing Cedric from a prison so complete that the Head Auror had not even been aware of the passage of time.

Everyone took a moment to recover.

But only a moment.

"Now, then," said Meldh, turning to Harry. The Tower was blinking away tears, but with awkward shakes of his head that suggested he wasn't aware of it. "I believe now is an excellent time to visit a certain black box. There is a threat we need to address... and I think on a more permanent basis than you are willing to do."

Harry felt an ache within himself, but no conflict within his will. The new arrangement of his mind carried him forward, as inexorably as a satellite sailing through space, and he nodded readily.

It was time to visit Voldemort.

# www.chapter Eight www.www. Pithos



[The goblin warlord CRAD THE CALLOW and two ATTENDANTS enter, stage left. CRAD, a loathsome beast with a foaming mouth, wears filthy animal skins and a necklace of wizard teeth. His hands are covered in blood. His ATTENDANTS are dressed in similarly barbaric regalia, and each carries bright torches. They stand before ERIN and KARL, triumphant.]

CRAD: Look at the princess! Now that I, Crad, the revenging angel of goblinkind, has come to spill wizard blood... now she cowers! This is the price your people pay for their crimes. It is natural for vengeance to follow foul deeds, as one season follows another... and this is my harvest season... and your season of death!

ERIN: I am a noble witch of Britain, sir, and I do not cower. That is a thing for beasts.

KARL: [Boldly] And goblins.

CRAD: [Gnashes his teeth and jumps up and down, waving his arms.] Still you defy me, though this miserable village lies in ashes?! Though every beast lies dead, and even the flax smolders in the fields?!

KARL: We do.

ERIN: And so shall we ever. The choice between right and wrong is as clear as the difference between night and day.

And if there were aught others to witness this, perhaps in some later day, then I would declare to them that they need only use their eyes to tell the difference between good and evil! And what seeing wizard, witnessing the ugliness and needless cruelty of evil, could fail to promise to seek the good of their own kind?

— "The Last Days of Exses O'Bruinan," by S. Leigh, as staged in the 1979 London production

## 

John Snow Center for Medicine and Tower School of Doubt (The Tower) May 18th, 1999 The same day

"Why did you keep this place a secret to so many, Mr. Potter?" asked Meldh, calmly. He glanced around the small room as they emerged from a nightmarish corridor of traps and wards and locks—including even a five-minute waiting period that considerably amused Meldh.

The room was still sparsely furnished. There were stacks of cassette tapes and several auto-players sitting in a thick mass of Lovegood Leaf. There was a small wooden stool, with a yellow legal pad and mechanical pencil set upon it.

There was a black box.

Harry didn't answer for a moment, glancing over at the box, which remained silent. He walked over to the auto-players instead, where a quiet voice was reading a book-on-tape aloud. Harry bent down and turned it off, and the recorded sentence was strangled mid-word: "His professions might be sincere; but in the situation where fortune had placed him, it was scarcely poss—"

"Mr. Potter?" prompted Meldh.

"This is the second Tower," Harry said. "Before this, there was another facility... one that was part of Hogwarts. There was... an attack. A powerful wizard who had been driven insane with grief. He said that he wanted us to bring back his child, but I think it was

a form of suicide for him. He'd planned it – arranged for a message to be sent from the future to stop us from using Time-Turners to stop him. He killed Hermione. Killed her phoenix."

Harry sighed. "At that time, I'd transfigured Voldemort into a small stone, so that I didn't have to kill him. But during the attack, Hermione threw me to safety, and when I landed, I lost the ring. And it was then that I realized that if I'd been seriously hurt or killed... well, Voldemort could have awakened or been freed, with the Philosopher's Stone right at hand. Moody had warned me of this before, and we'd taken additional measures, but... well, that plan wasn't going to work. Of all the possible solutions to keeping hold of him, I'd been taking one of the riskiest possible. So I set to work finding a solution. It was easier than I'd thought... many wizards in the past had worked on transferring or creating consciousness in artificial environments, enough to be actually worrying. This form of mandrake, when properly prepared, holds his consciousness. But I knew that many people wouldn't share my ethics about going to such lengths – that they might prefer more lethal solutions."

"I see," mused Meldh. They both looked at the box for a moment, contemplatively. Voldemort remained silent.

"You are mistaken, though, Mr. Potter," Meldh added. "It was we who sent that message. We'd known the gentleman for some time, after he intruded on our meeting place. An early attempt at an intervention in your affairs. Ineffective, I'm afraid... but perhaps that's for the best, now that I consider the matter in hindsight."

Harry's eyes were closed, and he staggered to the side. He clutched for the wall but fell short, dropping to one knee. He gasped, "Killed Granville... so many people... sir, I can't... I'm sorry..."

Meldh shook his head and smiled kindly. He walked over to Harry and bent down, putting a comforting hand on the young man's back. "It's all right, just give it a moment. This is my fault, I'm afraid... I have changed very little in you. Just your... ah, there is no word. Just your telos. The most important things for you. So there is some conflict. But my alterations cannot be overcome. Fear not."

"Fear," said Voldemort, suddenly. Meldh turned his head sharply and stood up straight at the sound, but did not appear

alarmed. As ever, his expression was pleasant. It suited the older man well.

"I am not aping you," continued the voice from the box in neutral male tones. "That is a suggestion."

Meldh didn't respond immediately. Instead, he walked closer, scrutinizing the black box. After a moment, he said, "I do not accept your suggestion, but thank you for it. You are Tom Riddle? Or is it the more recent name – Professor Quirrell – that you go by?"

"I have had many names," said Voldemort. "Please address me as best suits you."

"Very well, Lord Voldemort," said Meldh, smiling. "I am a visitor to the Tower. You may call me Meldh – an old word from my youth."

There was a pause, then Voldemort said, "Your implication is obvious. But that is not a credible lie. I will thank you not to insult my intelligence, Meldh, if we are to speak."

"Oh?" asked Meldh, raising his voice slightly to be heard over Harry's gasping sobs, as the young man struggled to control himself.

"While I do not know if my faculties have been affected by this prison, I am not yet a gibbering moron," said Voldemort. "Accordingly, I am not credulous enough to accept the existence of such antiquity without rather more proof than that. It is apparent that you have directly interceded to enforce your will on Mr. Potter in some manner. Such an intervention would come at some risk, no matter your abilities. If you took even the most miniscule of risks regularly, even only once in the span of each century, then it is not credible that you would be here, alive. Fate is fickle." The voice from the box formed an artificial chuckle. "On that, you may take my word."

"Interesting," said Meldh, pleasantly. He did not comment further, but tilted his head to one side. He lifted one palm and stretched it to the box, and whispered some words with syllables as harsh as knives.

After some time, Meldh lowered his palm and raised his eyebrows. "Ah. This box. There used to be three of these. I do not know if the others survive. But this is well. Destroying

this one will ensure that, even if the others exist, they are useless for their other purposes." He smiled, gently. "Kári Orden would be amused to see one of her boxes used as a zoo." He leaned forward, reaching out his hand as though to touch the box. He stopped short, however, his palm held over the fine black surface. A whisper of red light flickered across the box's surface.

"You little tyrants have always been useful. You swirl like a whirlwind, drawing lore and devices into your chaotic storm. You kill off rivals, steal items of power, and break open hidden hoards. And eventually, thanks to a hero – and sometimes with the help of the Lethe Touch or the Ritual of Home or the Dustukhíascue – you and much of what you've gathered are destroyed." Meldh straightened back up, smiling again. "You do the world much good with your attempted evil."

Across the small room, Harry was gathering himself to his feet, finally. His face was reddened with emotion, and his hair had come loose across his shoulders. He looked as though he'd been to war.

"You are here to end me," said Voldemort.

"Oh, yes," said Meldh. "Sixty years after my last victory over you, when we played at *shatranj*. A poignant moment, perhaps."

"Then I am in the most enjoyable position of advantage. All roads lead to my will. That has not been the case for some time," said Voldemort. "You will forgive me for taking some pleasure in the situation."

"Sir, he has cast a unique spell – a new version of the Horcrux spell," said Harry. His voice still sounded strained, but he was upright and trying as hard as possible to help. "If he is killed, or manages to kill himself, or even if he is simply returned to a human brain that the spell recognizes, then his spirit will be free to resurrect in another place. We developed a way to detect the Horcrux network and have destroyed many of them, but many others still remain... including at least one that is far beyond our means at the moment."

"My contingencies are numerous, laid over the course of many years and reinforced during the year of my return," said Voldemort. The bland voice conveyed a hint of mockery, somehow. "With the Goblet of Fire and the Resurrection Stone, two of the most potent artifacts still in existence, I have laid my traps." Meldh nodded, smiling pleasantly, and glanced back at Harry. "Is that so, Mr. Potter?"

"No, sir. As far as I can tell, Voldemort never had access to the Goblet of Fire, despite what he says," Harry said, slowly. Voldemort made no reply or contradiction. "It is locked away in the Department of Mysteries... they consider it Cadmean Class: too dangerous to use or research. It was kept in a vault that is inside of some sort of magical lake or pond or something – some security to put it beyond everyone's reach without the Line of Merlin - and it has been there for many years, since they stopped holding the Triwizard Tournament. Even I've never seen it, although I did spend some time looking for its companion device - or the pieces of it, anyway." Harry held up his left hand, clad in a fingerless glove much like the one he would ordinarily be wearing on his right, and tapped the smooth round decoration that was slightly raised from its palm. "Ancient and powerful enough to be effective decoys for the real Philosopher's Stone." Harry paused, thoughtfully, and a drop of sweat trickled down the side of his face. He added, "But I suspect that the Professor only said this because he wanted that information, since he anticipates going free once killed."

"And will he, Mr. Potter?" asked Meldh, gently.

"Some time ago, some researchers with the Tower and the Unspeakables – Mafalda Hopkirk, Dolores Umbridge, Luna Lovegood, Basil Horton, and Nemeniah Salieri – adapted a Dark Detector to be extremely sensitive and able to detect even the weakest of magical energies. It didn't have much initial use, since in any magical area, the background magical energies would swamp it. But more recently, we developed that," Harry answered, pointing at the Lovegood Leaf. "It consumes ambient magic in the air. It's proven to be useful in allowing us to employ Muggle devices alongside magical ones, sir, but when combined with thaumometers, we are able to trace even very faint magical connections such as Floo networks... or a network of Horcruxes. He has many... but he is now separate from all of them except the Resurrection Stone. since they are all outside of the Tower. This is a world apart. But while the Resurrection Stone or any other Horcrux is present in the Tower within the Mirror... yes, he could go free. It is best not to kill him, sir."

"These are things I saw in Mr. Potter's mind, Lord Voldemort, and all quite true," said Meldh, turning back to the box. "You might understand why I was interested, since you have correctly divined that I... implied a rather greater age than is strictly accurate."

There was a long pause.

"Lord Foul," said Voldemort.

"Archon Heraclius Hero," corrected Meldh, still smiling. "But yes, I am known to history as the 'Slithering One' or 'Lord Foul,' thanks to the very effective tales of four famous witches and wizards."

Harry was staring openly at Meldh, awe and disgust and pain all in combat on his face. "You're Herpo the Foul... who invented the Horcrux spell? Who fought Rowena Ravenclaw, Godric Gryffindor, Salazar Slytherin, and Helga Hufflepuff?"

"Yes. Good people, all – or rather, well-intentioned. But even then, in my youth, I saw further than such as they. I knew the dangers of will-work – broaching other worlds and inviting them into our own. Even then, I could not understand why so few wizards understood the lessons of Atlantis." Meldh shook his head, ruefully. "The great school of Hogwarts had been prophesied – indeed, prophecy was perhaps the very thing that led those four to band together, for what else but great glory and great threat could have done so? – and so I attempted to intervene. A mighty stronghold of magical education and research was not in the best interests of the world, and I wished to save us all," said Meldh, agreeably and without a trace of pride.

"You failed and died, if the stories are true," said Voldemort.

"Yes. But I was not gone, thanks to some precautions. And my efforts were noticed by another," replied Meldh. "But of that we shall not speak."

"Very well," said Voldemort. "Then your purpose remains the same? I wonder if Mr. Potter is still able to appreciate the irony? Are you intact in there, behind this spell of control?"

"The Lethe Touch," said Meldh, helpfully, smiling again.

"I have read of it," said Voldemort curtly. "So, Mr. Potter – do you see the irony?"

"Yes, Professor," said Harry, closing his eyes once more and wrapping his arms around his stomach. "It's me. And I can see the irony."

"What is the irony?" asked Meldh, curious.

"We have the same goals – maybe even many of the same values, sir," said Harry. "Or rather, I have one goal now, to serve you as best I can, but before –"

Meldh shook his head and waved his hand dismissively. "I understand, it's all right," he said. "You mean that we both wish to save the world."

"And yet you fundamentally disagree, Mr. Potter. It is not a question of truth or evidence, is it?" asked Voldemort. "You have the same purpose in the same world, and yet you disagree. And how was that disagreement resolved?"

"With force," said Harry, reluctantly. "My mind was altered against my will."

Meldh glanced with interest back and forth between Harry and the box. "I do not understand the messages hidden beneath the surface, here, but I have observed your minions often enough, Mr. Potter, to know that you have no objection to force. You have several individuals in your employ whose efforts are directed almost exclusively to force – stunning Muggles and providing them with new memories as you deem fit."

"Weaponizing cognitive dissonance," said Harry, nodding again, even more reluctantly. "But the Professor is offering me a lesson on dominance, not ethics."

"I see," said Meldh. "Well then, I believe we have spent enough time at this. Enough time here." He adjusted the front of his simple robes, and looked around them. "This is a threat that you did not have the heart to end – a threat that you still call 'Professor.' A threat that has managed to worm within your heart and mind, despite being imprisoned and powerless. The world has nothing to gain from this creature's existence, and much to lose." Meldh did not appear saddened by his words, but neither did he seem happy – or even cold. Rather, he spoke with a quiet and inoffensive resignation. "Unless you have something else you wish to say, Lord Voldemort?"

"Will you entertain argument?" asked Voldemort, calm in his own right.

"I will listen to anything you wish to say, but no, I will not change my mind," said Meldh. "I am sorry. You are too dangerous, and your restraints are too uncertain. My purpose has not changed since the fields of Alto Alentejo, among the broken marble of Estremoz, where I led my tarasque and Dementors in a great battle against four titans from prophecy. Neither the double death of a Hero and his name, that day, nor the long passage of millennia since have altered my purpose, which I have sought in a thousand different ways on a thousand different days. I will not give you a cruel and false hope. Your fate awaits, and will not change."

"I see," said Voldemort.

Harry's hair was wild, half-covering his face. Some strands stuck to one cheek, wet with tears.

"Then let me say this," said Voldemort, speaking with leaden seriousness. "It is not too late."

Meldh smiled, but didn't reply. He listened.

"Truly," Voldemort went on, "you even now have the chance for an equitable and peaceful solution. If you undo your control of Mr. Potter and his little friends, he will not seek vengeance for what you have done. Astoundingly and against all sense, he will be willing to work with you – to find a path forward. He believes he is a hero, and he believes heroes must always show mercy and seek the path of nonviolence where possible. He is not troubled by the conflict between effectiveness and mercy that is obvious to you and me.

"To all appearances, you have found an easy victory here. That should be the most obvious of warning signs. Mr. Potter's footsteps are littered with the corpses of those who once thought him their catspaw. And I assure you, as a ragged and trapped spirit who once opposed him, that Mr. Potter's cataclysms are all the more terrible for their lack of malice. His cruelty is beyond even my own imaginings, for it results from misguided mercy... and should you be so fortunate as to survive, you will not even have the consolation of hate.

"Take my advice, old one. Relent. Recant. Retreat."

Meldh waited to be sure Voldemort was done, then mildly replied, "I think not." He sounded amused at the thought. "Your kindness is appreciated, however. Why not simply enjoy the thought that the boy will destroy me in due course? He himself has no knowledge of any such plans, I assure you, but why do you show such benevolence?"

Voldemort laughed. It was a cold, mocking laugh, twisting the limits of the generic male voice. For just a moment, it sounded exactly like the Professor Quirrell that once was: cynical and clever, cruel and caustic. A broken man who was without joy or love, and who found solace only in the cold pleasure of ambition fulfilled and dominance achieved. Mentor and monster.

"I am offering you fair warning and a peaceful alternative," Voldemort said, and there was triumph in his words. "If you truly do not understand that these words are the greatest damage I can do to you, then you will deserve your fate."

"I hope that you find comfort in such thoughts," said Meldh, softly. He turned to Harry. "Do what we discussed, please, Mr. Potter. The world is more important than sentiment."

"Yes, sir," Harry said. He pulled his wand out of his sleeve. He and Meldh both walked over to the entrance to the extended space – the narrow corridor buzzing with traps and wards.

Harry pulled a lump of tungsten from his pocket. "Geminio," he cast on it, twirling his wand over its surface. One lump became two, and after a moment, that became four, then there were seven, then twelve, then twenty. Within seconds, metal began to clatter from Harry's palm. He tossed what was left in his hand across the room, scattering it, and the tungsten continued replicating itself even as it flew through the air: thirty-three, fifty-four, eighty-eight, lumps of metal raining down, cracking loudly on the stone and a black box that shivered with red light.

Harry and Meldh stepped back into the corridor, and Meldh gestured at the door. Thin blue crystal grew from the ceiling and floor, covering the entrance. It was translucent, and through its cerulean screen the two wizards watched as the room rapidly filled with replicating metal. Normally, it would decay and vanish before too long. But the Philosopher's Stone, embedded in Harry's right glove, could make it permanent. It was not a trick he'd often used, since it threatened the illusion of "special Transfiguration webs" that they used to explain the feats of the Tower healers.

After a very short time, there was no more room left in the small chamber beyond the blue crystal. The replicating metal filled all available space. The two wizards could no longer see anything but a blue-tinted irregular wall of metal. Harry ended the Gemino Curse with a touch of his will, lowering a trembling wand to his side. His teeth were gritted, and the back of his robes was dark with sweat.

Meldh folded his arms, and they stood there, quietly. Gently, the older wizard asked, "Would it help you to take a moment?"

"Yes, sir," said Harry, laboriously. "I'm sorry... it's difficult to manage my feelings." He shuddered and wrapped his arms around his stomach, clutching himself and bending over slightly.

"I understand," Meldh said. He reached forward and touched the blue crystal screen with one finger, and an opening appeared – no more than a palm-span wide. A few chunks of tungsten fell through and free, but the pressure from above kept most of them in place.

Harry tried to stand up straight and raise his wand, but shuddered again, bending back over. He gasped, "I just... I'm..."

"Let me help you," Meldh said. Gently, he lifted Harry's arm, raising it until the wand in the young man's grip was at the level of the hole in the screen. "You may say goodbye, if you wish."

"Goodbye, Professor!" Harry screamed.

His face reddened as he screamed it again - screamed it as loudly as he could.

"Goodbye, Professor! Goodbye! I'm sorry!"

Screamed the words... to try to be heard through the mass of metal, to try to be heard through everything.

There was a reply. It should have been impossible, really. Harry had cast the Thoughtsay Ritual himself, following the dictates of parchment scrupulously, and it should not have been able to get so *loud*. But it happened, nonetheless, by whatever trick or manipulation. And that reply was not forgiveness or kindness or pleading.

It was scorn.

"Bah!" howled Lord Voldemort with a cold laugh, a last word of mockery and hatred, and then the voice failed with a warble and squeal of magical sound.

There was silence.

Meldh frowned. "No grace, even now. A sad end. Do it," he commanded.

Harry closed his eyes and touched his wand to the pieces of tungsten in the room. After a moment, they gently slipped out of shape, flowing together, forming a solid mass – an immense plug of metal, filling almost the whole room and burying Voldemort in a metal coffin ten feet thick.

Then Harry lifted his other hand and pressed the Stone of Permanence, loose in his grip, to the surface of the metal.

And that was the story of Tom Riddle.

## 

Hermione's Mobile Mary, Powis Castle, Wales May 19th, 1999 The next morning

Hermione awoke with tears on her face. She'd been dreaming of Granville. She could hear the echo of his cry still – hear the joy of it.

"Hermione?" said Esther, pushing open the door to the Mobile Mary gently, peering inside the darkened space. Morning sunlight was visible outside, bright on the gardens of Powis. "Sorry, but there's a message for you from Harry. You asked to be woken? Are you all right?"

Wiping her face on her sleeve, Hermione nodded, sniffling. She sat up. "Yes... just a bad dream. What does Harry want?"

Esther held up a parchment. "Nothing serious, it seems like... he just wants you to come around. Says he has someone he wants you to meet."

Πρὶν μὲν γὰρ ζώεσκον ἐπὶ χθονὶ φῦλ' ἀνθρώπων νόσφιν ἄτερ τε κακῶν καὶ ἄτερ χαλεποῖο πόνοιο νούσων τ' ἀργαλέων, αι τ' ἀνδράσι Κῆρας ἔδωκαν. αίψα γὰρ ἐν κακότητι βροτοὶ καταγηράσκουσιν. άλλὰ γυνὴ χείρεσσι πίθου μέγα πῶμ' ἀφελοῦσα έσκέδασ': ἀνθρώποισι δ' ἐμήσατο κήδεα λυγρά. μούνη δ' αὐτόθι Ἐλπὶς ἐν ἀρρήκτοισι δόμοισιν ἔνδον ἔμιμνε πίθου ὑπὸ χείλεσιν, οὐδὲ θύραζε έξέπτη: πρόσθεν γὰρ ἐπέλλαβε πῶμα πίθοιο αἰγιόχου βουλῆσι Διὸς νεφεληγερέταο. άλλα δὲ μυρία λυγρὰ κατ' ἀνθρώπους ἀλάληται: πλείη μὲν γὰρ γαῖα κακῶν, πλείη δὲ θάλασσα: νούσοι δ' ανθρώποισιν έφ' ήμέρη, αι δ' έπι νυκτί αὐτόματοι φοιτῶσι κακὰ θνητοῖσι φέρουσαι σιγή, ἐπεὶ φωνὴν ἐξείλετο μητίετα Ζεύς. οὕτως οὔτι πη ἔστι Διὸς νόον ἐξαλέασθαι.

At first the tribes of men had lived upon the earth apart and free of evils and of tiresome toil and hard diseases, which have brought to men their dooms,

because by hardship mortal men are quickly aged. But with her hands the woman raised the jar's great lid,

released all these, devising grievous cares for men. Alone there, Hope, in her indestructible home, remained within, beneath the lip, nor by the door escaped, because the vessel's lid had stopped her first,

by will of aegis-bearing, cloud-compelling Zeus. Among the people wander countless miseries; the earth is full of evils, and the sea is full; diseases come by day to people, and by night, spontaneous, rushing, bringing mortals evil things in silence, since contriving Zeus removed their voice.

And thus from Zeus's mind there can be no escape.

—Hesiod, "Works and Days"

## www.chapter Nine www.www

# Commentarii de Bello



CRAD: Now you understand that these are the deadly years for wizards. [Throws KARL's bloodstained necklace onto the ground in front of ERIN.] The metamorphosis of the world has begun... no more the plaything of the tall and beautiful!

[The remaining ATTENDANT takes notice, abandoning the corpse of his friend. He jumps up and down with joy, yelling and grimacing with savagery and waving his torch.]

ERIN: The Lady O'Bruinan will save me.

CRAD: [Strikes her across the face with a bloody hand. It leaves a mark of blood across her face. The blood is a symbol of violence.] Fool! I have destroyed Sontag, and should the aged Lady appear in my arena, here, I shall show her a taste of armageddon... as I did your mad lover!

[EXSES enters from stage right with a clamour of thunder, clad all in gold. In her left hand is a wand, and in her right is a spear.]

EXSES: I am come! I have seen the terrors you have wrought upon my people of Sontag, and I have brought my vengeance!

[CRAD and ATTENDANT cower back from EXSES. CRAD seizes ATTENDANT and pushes him at EXSES. She strikes him down with her spear, and there is another clamour of thunder.]

ERIN: My Lady! I never lost hope!

CRAD: No, no, no!

[CRAD wails and strips off his necklace of wizard teeth, flinging it to the ground. It lands next to KARL's necklace.]

EXSES: Yes! I will bring the goblins low for their crimes, a deserved punishment for their deeds! [She raises her spear, holding it high.] Thus do I condemn them: let them scrape in metal and toil in tin! Let them fear to raise their heads, lest those heads be struck from their shoulders! The blood of Sontag demands it – and let all know their just reward for such bloody deeds as have been done this day!

[CRAD collapses, wailing. ERIN inclines her head, and leans down to pick up KARL's necklace. She pauses, and then brings her delicate foot down upon CRAD's necklace, ruining it. ALL exit.]

[The stage darkens, and a spotlight focuses on CRAD's necklace. It is a symbol of hubris.]

— "The Last Days of Exses O'Bruinan," by S. Leigh, as staged in the 1979 London production

## 

John Snow Center for Medicine and Tower School of Doubt (The Tower) May 19th, 1999 The same day

"There," said Meldh, lifting his hand from Harry's wrist. "Think back, and see if you can remember anything."

Harry shut his eyes, standing silently. It was very quiet in the blank span of corridor where they stood, near the rear of the Tower – there were no distractions.

After a while, Harry opened his eyes again. "No, sir. I can't remember anything about where Voldemort might be. And I seem to remember all about the Tower departments, otherwise. There's no obvious gap that might provide a clue." He paused. "Thank you, sir, for leaving me with everything else."

"It seemed cruel to take all of that away from you," said Meldh, nodding.

"Thank you, sir," said Harry, smiling. His smile faded, though, as he said hesitantly, "Sir, before we go back to the others, I think we should talk about your succession to my place – at least in the broad strokes, so I can begin thinking about how to help. I know that you believe the Lethe Touch to be infallible, but there's no reason to risk it. It's basic information hygiene."

Meldh waved a hand, dismissively. "There is no concern. I will take your identity and you will become a new person. We will alter the trajectory you have chosen for the world, using the tools you have put at my command."

"No, sir," Harry said, shaking his head. "There are serious problems there. For one, the new terminal values you've given us are too..." He fumbled for words. "There's too much internal conflict, sir. It shows on our faces, and it will lead to strange behavior at some point. It will be like an Asimov story with the Three Laws... outside observers will be able to deduce from aberrant behavior that there are new underlying rules. Many people are very loyal to me, but no one is absolutely loyal, to the extent where my will and wishes are their most important goals."

"We have taken dozens of your allies here, but I have set up a pressure within them," Meldh said. "They are enchanted in the same fashion as yourself, but there is a capacity for release by recasting the Touch and adding—"

"No!" said Harry, abruptly, holding up his hand. "I don't need to know! Information hygiene." Sheepishly, he lowered his hand, smiling a bit. "Sorry, sir, but there's no need to tell me the command word... it can't possibly help. Yes, you can trust me absolutely, right now, but what if I were to get free somehow? The best weapon you'd have in that situation would be your control of almost all of my closest friends... I'm going to be substantially weaker if any attack on you risks killing Draco or Moody – or even

if your death would just leave all of my friends as your servants, forever."

"Do not worry, Mr. Potter," said Meldh, kindly. "There is no risk that you will go free. No one has ever defeated the Lethe Touch by sheer willpower, and there is no spell known to you or any of your allies that could dispel the enchantment. We now possess the only real trust that can ever exist between two people."

"What about my Unbreakable Vow, sir?" asked Harry. "It's an obvious problem... what if you ask me to do something that might destroy the world?"

Meldh folded his hands in his sleeves. "You will not be able to comply, of course. But the results would be the same if I asked you to fetch me a Lethifold's smile— you could not do it, but neither would the Touch fail. I spent some time examining your mind, Mr. Potter, and I assure you that there is no power known to you that poses a threat to me."

Harry fell silent, and leaned back against the wall of the corridor. Meldh waited, patiently. After a time, Harry spoke up again, saying, "When I think about possible contingency plans for something like this, it seems obvious I would have prepared something and stored the memory in a Pensieve, or just erased it with such care as to leave no traces. Of course, if I thought of a contingency once, I should be able to think of it again, so it would also be necessary to erase the memories that led me to the plan in the first place."

"Then we're no better off for the wondering," said Meldh, chuckling mildly. "You cannot worry or defend against the unknown, since it can take any shape. The key to great strength is defending against every known, whether it appears a threat or not, and staying *hidden* from the unknown."

"I disagree, sir. It's possible to plan for the unknown – you can make a path for it or put in place some contingency that embraces a host of possibilities. And I am fairly sure that I must have at least *tried* to do so. The way magic works, it was never an outlandish idea that someone old and powerful might show up and take offense. I knew for certain that people like Nicholas Flamel were out there. Given the long history of the world and the fact that magic was once much more powerful, it was actually

more likely than not that there would be some immortals out there." Harry shrugged. "I should have perhaps even foreseen you yourself, sir. The inventor of the Horcrux spell? It seems obvious, in retrospect. Maybe I *did* foresee it, actually."

Meldh looked amused. "You and Voldemort share the same opinion of your abilities. You will forgive me for saying that I do not, Mr. Potter. My victory was not a difficult one, and cost scarcely even a pawn's worth of trouble."

Harry shrugged. "That seems suspicious to me, sir." Then he opened his mouth, as though to go on speaking, but made no sound. He grimaced and shook his head, accidentally rapping it against the wall and wincing.

Meldh watched him, and replied to the unaskable question. "No, Mr. Potter," he said gently. "I do not think it is necessary to kill you now, out of fear of some possible trap you've laid. Rather, I will need your help.

"Once I take my place as the new Mr. Potter, you will be by my side in some altered shape, as an adjunct and adviser," he said. "I will release all others – they will continue to serve 'you,' and the Tower will move in a new direction to decisively end magic. Your Muggle knowledge will be turned to proper ends... without your foolishness." He chortled, amiably. "Some things can even be done immediately, to help stave off the end of the world and its people. There is at least one new ritual we may enact, based on your knowledge. To think what you would have let go to waste – for the sake of some distant bits of fire!"

Harry looked at the ground, his face uncomfortable. "Sir, I considered it to be immoral, especially when there are alternatives that don't increase entropy in the universe so much. And..." Harry fumbled over his words clumsily, as though many ideas were fighting for expression at the same time. "And many stars have the possibility of life, either now or in the future, and that risk is so apocalyptically bad that it overwhelms any benefit to an individual life here, and when we reach the second type on the Kardashev scale we'll then be confronted with a loss of useful energy on a scale of... of... well, I don't even know how to make a comparison! Obviously it would be like sacrificing our own Sun, but... well, it would be like a wiping out every scrap of phoenix flame that ever existed and could ever exist, all to save one person."

His voice wasn't rising, but it was filled with strange tension, as though he weren't arguing with Meldh, but were arguing with himself. He kept talking, though, fumbling through in a rush. "And we might not even need to do that! The Advancement Agency has made amazing strides in only a few years. With reconfiguring parts alone, they'll raise life expectancy. The prostate, the heart, the optic nerve, the retina, the spine, the knees, the teeth... there are all sorts of design fixes that will reduce the chances of morbidity. Making them a part of the standard rejuvenation and putting in greater security – even perhaps with the aid of the Touch, sir – will put us well ahead of the curve on a new Moore's Law of lifespan."

"No," said Meldh, flatly... that short and curt blade of a word. "We will not wait, not when the new ritual will be so simple to devise – with some little study of your Muggle knowledge about the stars. Not one more minute, as the saying goes."

Harry choked a little in his throat, then hung his head, and made no reply. He stared at the floor.

"To think I feared to come here, considering it an unwarranted risk," marveled Meldh, shaking his head and gesturing down the corridor. "Come. We must arrange for the death of the fallen bishop, Bellatrix Black, and take what actions are necessary to suborn the absentee goblins, and set them, too, on the correct path." He smiled at the thought. "Then I have some preparations to make before I step outside of this Tower to consult with my allies."

Harry began moving obediently, and they began walking back to the meeting room. Meldh glanced at him, and spoke, his voice kind. "The new immortals of the world, the ones that we choose to aid us in our cause, will have cause to praise my risk and your losses, Mr. Potter. There are endless stars in the sky... more than enough for every witch and wizard we might select."



On the shores of the lake of teeth, where the black hills end, Tir inna n-Óc May 19th, 1999 Later that day

Whispering teeth. Fractal shadows.

Desolation.

"You have succeeded... well done," said the third figure – Nell. Her congratulations were light and pleasant, but none the more convincing for that.

"Thank you," said the first figure – Meldh. "We have swept the board."

The second figure said nothing, only watching them both.

"You have Touched the boy-king... will you leave him in charge?" asked Nell.

"No," said Meldh. "I will take his shape and his identity. He has built a formidable apparatus, and I think that few threats now exist that could stand against it."

"You do not think that you might be, perhaps, overconfident? Is your control already so sure?" asked Nell.

Meldh paused and did not reply for a time. The second figure, silent still, turned a face of slithering shadow to regard him, watching intently.

"My pride prompts me to deny you, but mirgo que n'a qu'un trpu est bientôt prise... yes, perhaps you are correct," said Meldh, finally. "Mr. Potter himself said as much to me, not an hour ago. I had thought to use the goblins as an excuse to change policy, but even a goblin army may not be sufficient to rouse enough alarm and stem the suspicion of his allies."

"If you require further assistance, then you shall have it," said the second figure.

"We are gambling a great deal," agreed Nell. "You shall have every support we can offer."

"Then so be it," said Meldh. "I will not turn away one ounce of assistance. And for my part, I find that I will not have need of the Stone of the Long Song, so long as you would still be willing to lend its power on occasion, Madame."

"Of course," said Nell, and the shadows writhed in some distant imitation of a smile.

"No," said the second figure. "That shall not be sufficient. Now is not the time for conservative policies. We must take this opportunity to act. Our hand is in play – we will make it a fist. Now is the time to act. We will do as we have not done in many years. Sontag once thrived and threatened, rich on the concentrated lore of the Peverells, and made a perfect plum to be plucked. You fear preparations against you? Let us swamp them in violence."

"Is that not hasty?" asked Meldh.

Even Nell seemed startled by the proposition. "I will commit all to the enterprise, if necessary, but I think –"

"We will raise mighty forces. Armies. I will act with all puissance at my command," said the second figure, as though the others had not spoken. "Not only the goblins, strong with the restored knowledge of their ancient will-work. Also the visc and lejis of this place will take breath again, driven by the gaunt-horrors. I will break the cycle of the unsleeping, and bring forth your long-vanished terrasque and basilisks. Muggles in their hordes will take the eaters on themselves. They will march, we will sacrifice many... and take the opportunity to wipe away the magics of London, Boston, and Hangzhou."

"I am not sure that..." said Nell, hesitantly. "We have not acted on such a scale since..." She shook her head, darkness swirling. "Never. This is audacity truly worthy of Merlin. And unspeakably risky."

"Thus shall it be, Perenelle du Marais," said the second figure. He did not wait for a reply, but turned to Meldh, and stated, "Thus shall it be, Heraclius Hero. We will sweep the world with discord and blood, crush a thousand artifacts and burn a thousand scrolls, and raise such fear as has never been seen."

There was a desperately long pause, when none of them moved. They were not the sort to act in haste, despite the brutal decisiveness they could bring to a conversation. All Three waited, patiently, for each of the others to think through and come to terms with the new shape of the world to come.

Tentatively, Nell said, "In the face of such a threat, those remaining wizards will unite behind the Tower. Behind you." She looked back at Meldh.

"Behind us," corrected Meldh, mildly. "And I think we will have no resistance, then, in a push to redouble the Statute of Secrecy's strictures and limit the scope and growth of magic. The plan will need further thought to arrange all of the pieces, but there will be resources to spare, now that I have mastered the Tower."

"You disposed of Bellatrix Black and Voldemort," said the second figure – a question that was not really a question.

"I have made arrangements for the death of the Black woman, but there are... complications with Voldemort. I actually have much to say to you about Horcruxes at another time. I have sealed Voldemort away, however, and erased all memory of his hiding place. It will suffice, I think," said Meldh.

"Kill Potter, as well," said the second figure. "Whatever his lore, the risk is too great. And we need no more *complications*."

"As you wish, although the odd patterns of his brain have been fruitful," said Meldh, untroubled. "I will strip his mind of what else might be gleaned, and then end him." He inclined his head, gently. "I will send signal for our next meeting presently, after concluding such matters. We will plan for our war and arrange our pieces."

"Yes," said the second figure. "Consider, each of you, the utmost of your might. We will spare no energy or lore in the conflict to come. Victory must be certain for us to take such a risk."

All three departed, each their separate ways.

Whispering teeth.

Fractal shadows.

Desolation.

Tír inna n-Óc endured.



John Snow Center for Medicine and Tower School of Doubt (The Tower)

May 19th, 1999 The afternoon of the same day

Upon his return to the Tower, Meldh appeared tired. He walked with heavy feet out of the annex next to the Receiving Room, where he'd performed the ritual. His fingers were still bloody, wet with the necessary components of a trip to the land of the Unseelie.

For a moment, the assured and calm wizard was gone. He looked the same... dusky skin, dark eyes, broad lips. But he looked weary and battered, and it was enough to bring a worried Moody to his side with gruff but concerned questions. Meldh waved away the Tower's spymaster, and stepped through the golden oval of the Tower entrance. Harry waited just inside, frowning and unhappy, accompanied by Diggory. Both young men looked immensely relieved to see their master alive, though their worried glances at each other showed their distress at his state.

"Sir, we're holding some people in Material Methods," said Diggory, speaking first. He and Harry walked along with Meldh down the corridor, slowly, towards the clinic. "Madame Bones, Percy Weasley, Councilor Reg Hig, and seven aurors reporting for their normal shifts. All stunned and waiting for you. And there is regular Tower business... people to heal."

"Good, good," said Meldh, vaguely. "Harry shall go and attend to healing. But I must rest. Keep the prisoners stunned and secured for now. All else is well?"

"Ackle and Curd have both sent away emissaries from Minister N'goma," said Harry, studying Meldh closely. "And Hermione Granger sent a message to let me know she'd be here this evening. All is well with your allies?"

"Fine," said Meldh. He sighed, heavily. "Ah, but... forgive my weariness, but there is such *violence* in the offing, Mr. Potter. I confess that I did not anticipate it, and the very thought makes me ache for my garden and my home and my temple. I fear I will not see them for a great while, and that is not a discomfort I have needed to endure for many years." He shook his head. Harry touched him on the arm, reassuringly, and the older wizard glanced down at the hand and smiled a small smile.

"Sir, I'm sorry, but we should prepare for Granger," said Diggory, breaking in on the moment. "She is resourceful and her Returned are insane."

"I am too tired, young man," said Meldh. "Mr. Potter, make plans accordingly." He sighed again. "I must rest. There will be war soon, and the world will shake because of it. A great and fearsome god calls for blood. That is not something I have seen for centuries. I must rest and think."

Harry took hold of Diggory's arm, restraining him, and they stopped in their tracks. Meldh continued on, moving slowly. He vanished from sight into the clinic.

"This is for the best, Cedric," said Harry. "I'm not sure that he would be able to appreciate the threat that Hermione could present, but we do. Let's make a plan."

I think we are in rats' alley
Where the dead men lost their bones.

"What is that noise?"
The wind under the door.

"What is that noise now?"
What is the wind doing?"
Nothing again nothing.

"Do you know nothing?"

"Do you see nothing?"

"Do you remember nothing?"
I remember
Those are pearls that were his eyes.

"Are you alive, or not? Is there nothing in your head?"

—"The Waste Land," T.S. Eliot

# www.www. Chapter Ten www.www

# Melpomene



The Urgod Ur, Ackle May 19th, 1999 The same day

"I have no powers plenipotentiary," said Nagrod, nodding gravely at the assembled Urgod Ur. "I'm a messenger, and cannot come to any accord."

"But you bring word from Curd," said Sub Gol, folding his arms over his stomach, squinting down from his high seat.

"Excellent," said the Jurg, nearby, smiling eagerly down at Nagrod. "We'd be glad of our cousins' counsel."

Nagrod glanced around the Urgod Ur. It was a small room, and it smelled of sweat and unwashed flesh. All of the goblins within were respected and clever – the pillars of Acklish society, guiding their people for generations – but they had been cloistered in rooms like these for more than three weeks. No one was permitted to enter or leave, except by under the strictest security (a collar of consumption was locked around Nagrod's neck even now, despite his own high status). These were the inevitable requirements for independence in a hostile world run by vicious and subtle wizards.

"What word, then?" asked Bilgurd the Marrowed, his lips tight and his face skeptical. "What is Curd's decision?"

Weak-kneed and short-eared, this lot, thought Nagrod, studying Bilgurd for a moment. But we'd best be united.

"Curd will accept the Archon's offer," said Nagrod, flatly. "Our heritage is worth any war. We hope that Ackle will join us in this."

"Curd is bold," said Bilgurd, as his compatriots murmured to each other and exchanged significant glances. Several goblins looked particularly at the Jurg, who had fixed an expression of solemn approval on his face. He must have hoped to take the lead, thought Nagrod. His forge has hummed this past month, if the news is correct. Yet if that Hod is in favor of the deal, then where can opposition lie? Someone must have stood in the way of consensus.

"I believe this speaks with leather lungs," said Sub Gol, nodding. "We have gone back and forth a hundred times and more. 'They have given us wands,' 'they have given us power,' 'they will give us youth'... But Curd has it right! Our cousins have seen through to the truth of it: that this is a chance we may never get again – a chance to take back our birthright of true will-work. Ackle can soar again in gold and diamond, as it was before the Edict of Hortensius."

"It would be a mistake," said Bilgurd. He was looking at Nagrod when he said it, and Nagrod met Bilgurd's eyes with firmness. Ah, here we are. You're the one.

"In only a few years, that same Edict has been repealed," said Bilgurd, "or its modern equivalent, anyway. And wands are nothing to mock." He reached into a shiny leather dueling holster at his waist and withdrew one, holding it up. Like most goblin wands — with a few notable exceptions — it had seen little use. They all had them, anyway. "Generations of goblins fought and died to regain these sticks. Caislean-i-Cahaenn rose under Crad the Callow for them. And now you and others would agree to attack the very Tower that gave them to us?"

"Are we Beasts, then, truly?" asked Sub Gol, his voice ridged with scorn. "Like a whipped dog, returning to the hand that held the lash because it has thrown us an old crust? There is no doubt about this 'Archon' and his power, or the power of his allies. That was shown us in spectacular fashion. And he offers us something we might never regain, otherwise — things not in the gift of the Tower. We cannot know in what shape the Archon will take control of things, but surely it will be in the same subtle fashion as the Tower... and thus we will have all the Tower gave us, plus all the Archon promises, and a powerful new friend— who owes us greatly, to boot! If we are to be the catspaw of a Dark Lord, let it be the one with the greater pay. Should we make a terrible new enemy rather than a terrible new ally?"

"Why do we quarrel so? The debate was split and sundered, but now Curd has come down with us," pointed out the Jurg.

Nagrod nodded, putting an expression of gratitude on his face. And yet this still might turn either way. And should they decide wrongly, what will stop Curd from reconsidering? The Archon's messages echoed strangely in Nagrod's mind, and it was intolerable that this discussion might turn out poorly.

"Ackle must make up its own mind," he said, "and not let our decision overly influence your own. But I should say that we heard much the same arguments along much the same lines... as though we should be grateful to the Tower, as though we owe it -him—anything. And for myself, I do not count it a favor when my neighbor ceases to beat me, and I do not reckon any debt might spring from the mere cessation of injustice."

"The Tower is a wizard," retorted Bilgurd, "not every wizard. You propose to betray him and those who have worked to right the wrongs of the past. We would show no honour, and no gratitude, and no fealty to contract." His voice was heated. "We must not be cowards and hide our specific treachery under a general cloak. Let us at least admit what we do, if we do it... we would abandon our honour, as we knife the wizard who has helped us more than any other in generations."

There was a moment of quiet at this comment, as all took a moment to reflect. Then Sub Gol shrugged, leaning forward in his stone seat. "Very well, so be it. Our children will thank us, and our children's children, and ask only why we endured servitude for so long before taking action once more, as our forebears once did. I do not think we should pass up the opportunity to ally ourselves with this Archon – this new Dark Lord. He is mighty. Nor can we in good conscience turn away from our ancient birthright... the techniques of will-work that we thought long lost."

"And while it is true the Tower does not represent all wizardkind, that is rather the point," agreed Nagrod, eyeing Bilgurd closely. "Would you wager everything on honour?"

Bilgurd replied with hot words, and now the Jurg and others joined him, worried about flimsy ideas and trivialities. Nagrod responded with persuasion and pressure, and many others echoed him.

But truly, everything had been said at that moment, and it was on these arguments that the decision of Ackle would be made. As so often, the further hours of argument would come to nothing – there was no real exchange of ideas or harrowing of their merits, but only a war of mental attrition and emotional manipulation. Within one day more, the Acklish had made their choice.

Who would ever wager everything on honour, after all?

## 

John Snow Center for Medicine and Tower School of Doubt (The Tower) May 19th, 1999 The same day

Like almost everyone, the simplest way for Hermione, Esther, and Hyori to travel to the Tower was with a Safety Stick. They used one: Esther and Hyori held on to one end, and Hermione took the other. She bent it sharply, and it broke. The three of them whirled away with a wrench, sideways to reality and away.

### 

The Matchless Vault of the Unsleeping, Seogwipo, Jeju, South Korea May 19th, 1999 The same day

In 1976, a team of treasure-hunters from Hangzhou discovered the entrance to the Matchless Vault of the Unsleeping, seeking it out from scraps of rumor and cryptic maps. Their search had taken long years, but the rewards would be worth it. The Matchless Vault of the Unsleeping was said to hold an ancient hoard of enchanted silver – a vast wealth from the time of the Tamna.

There were layers of traps and seals. A front gate, guarded by faceless inferi. A twisting passage, deadly at every step. A sealed inner gate, locked behind a puzzle-door of bismuth bronze. An antechamber thick with poisonous fumes.

"When we discovered the true location of this deathtrap, buried at the base of Mount Halla, we were a party of twelve," wrote Guang Mu in *An Exploration Ten Fathoms Deep*. "By the time we had pierced through to the inner chambers, we'd lost half our number."

Once inside, though, the six remaining treasure-hunters were gratified to see gleaming silver, piled in heaps of coins and stacked in ingots as large as a wizard's head. But in their haste to take hold of their prize, they forget their caution.

"Chi Guo rushed forward and plunged his arms up to the elbows into a pile of coins that filled an iron coffer, scooping them out in great handfuls," wrote Guang Mu. "He had poured them from his palms back into the chest, causing a deal of noise. When he turned to me with an expression of great delight, though, we became aware of another sound. It was a quiet rasping from many sources: scale on stone and horn on metal. We had awoken the final guardians.

"The basilisk struck from another chamber like an arrow, flying through the air the length of its body. We retreated, covering our eyes lest the beast turn its gaze on us, but it was preoccupied with poor Chi Guo. I had only an instant's impression of his body, stiffening and turning grey even as the great serpent entwined itself about him and began to pull him apart and reduce him to dust.

"We fled, but in our terror we neglected the door. This proved to be a fatal mistake for some, for it gave opening to a second monster: the deadly terrasque. It burst forth from a pile of silver, screeching with fearsome noise, and gave chase.

"Should you ever be so unfortunate as to encounter one of these fell beasts, you may know it by these signs: it stands twice the height of a wizard, and its body is composed of shiny red rock. It has six legs of crystal, a broad shell of rough stone, and a lion's head of obsidian and stinking saltpetre.

"Horrified, we attempted to block its path with web and ward, but it brushed aside our spells. In a trice, the terrasque had seized Zeng Zhang in its mouth. He fought bravely to the last, but perished. He was soon followed by Duo We.

"I was forced to draw upon the Killing Curse, only to find to my dismay that it had no effect on the creature of rock. It was only by the quick reactions and clever thinking of my remaining allies that we rallied, depriving the terraque of its footing with the Butterball Charm, and then sealing it away within the rock, fortifying this makeshift tomb with the stoutest barriers.

"Nothing further could be done about the basilisk or the Vault. We sealed the latter away and posted a guard, then went to seek aid. A plan was necessary for our return. And this time, we would be triumphant."

As told by Guang Mu, his group gathered reinforcements, including a noted hunter of dark wizards, and returned to work their vengeance. They were able to draw out and defeat the basilisk, defeating it with little loss of life. Its prized flesh and fangs were parceled out and added to the great wealth that the group took from the Matchless Vault of the Unsleeping.

The Vault has since become a place for historians and archaeologists to examine, searching for traces of the unknown witch or wizard who deposited their treasure in its coffers and tamed two of the most fearsome of known beasts to their service. There was little evidence to be found: a handful of unknown runes and a few tool marks on some of the ingots.

On this particular day, however, no one was present at the Vault when a cloaked figure arrived, borne on a chariot of fire. The visitor did not pause at the entrance, which was covered by a modern barrier of stone and steel; they said a soft word. Then they walked forward and the barrier swung open without complaint, despite its locks and seals.

The front gate was denuded of its undead guardians. The twisting passage was cleared of its clever traps. The puzzle-door on the inner gate stood open. The antechamber was fresh and pure. And the inner chambers were empty, ransacked of their silver and decorated only with a giant, yellow snake skull, locked within a display case.

But the visitor had no interest in any of these, walking with a brisk step through the gate, down the twisting passages, within the puzzle-door, and past the antechamber. They walked to one of the inner chambers, to the point where one wall met another. Their pace never slowed as they stepped sideways into an invisible seam, turning sharply to the side and up and beyond in some impossible

fashion, entering a hidden passage that had been cleverly and maddeningly concealed in two dimensions.

The visitor met no apparent consequences for the loss of a dimension, though certainly common sense (and geometry) must imply that such a transition would be the immediate death of anyone foolish enough to attempt it. But in defiance of reason and Euclid and Edwin A. Abbott, the visitor simply moved down the corridor.

Shortly, the visitor reached the apparent end of the corridor, where ceiling and floor met a wall. But the visitor pushed forward through the wall, emerging with unhurried step in another place, far deeper within Mount Halla.

The air within this new chamber was stale and close, thick with the powdery dust of long ages and filled with the steady whisper of scale on stone and horn on metal. It was black night in the room, and the visitor summoned a light to hand with a thought.

The light illuminated a great and crowded room.

Basilisks hissed in their dozens, sleepily and irritably raising their heads as they awoke from long hibernation, and terresque shifted lethargically where they lay in their rocky sleepless mounds.

The visitor raised a hand in command, and began.

#### 

John Snow Center for Medicine and Tower School of Doubt (The Tower) May 19th, 1999 The same day

"Wake up, Hermione," said Harry. She opened her eyes, smiling... although it was a bit odd that Harry was there. Usually they just unstunned her and the Returned in the Receiving Room, and she walked into the Tower under her own power. It was better for her image. Had Harry finally left the Tower, for the first time in years?

No, she was in the clinic. In one of the cubicles. Esther and Hyori weren't there.

She couldn't move. When she tried, she could feel cold metal on her arms and legs, with more restraints over her waist and chest.

Oh God.

She heaved, but the metal didn't yield even slightly. Goblin silver?

Was this really the Tower? Was that really Harry?

How could she get free without killing him? She searched her mind, considering the spells she could cast without wand or significant gestures.

"It's all right," Harry said, reassuringly.

She was not reassured.

"Harry, what are you doing?" she asked. She kept her voice calm.

#### 

Žižkovské divadlo Járy Cimrmana, Prague, Czech Republic May 19th, 1999 The same day

"Dobrý den!" called out a cheerful female voice. Jakub glanced to his left, across the street, where an attractive young woman was waving at him from a doorway – the entrance to a theatre. She was on the short side, with a generous chest and wide hips. She was wearing a strange sort of green dress, which was so long it touched the pavement underfoot and which came so high on the neck that it even included a little collar. It looked more like a costume than clothing, and Jakub wondered if she was promoting a play. He glanced at his wristwatch... he had a little time before he needed to get home. Curious, he paused and glanced both ways along the street, then crossed.

"Co pro vás mohu udělat, slečno?" he asked, smiling, as he walked up to the actress. She smiled back at him. She had a very wide mouth and a little button nose, making her appear almost like a doll.

"Ahoj!" she replied, cheerfully. "Máš něco v plánu na dnešní večer?"

He was, in fact, busy that evening: Hana was expecting him. They were going to go dancing. But Jakub could still find out what was going on, here – what the promotion might be. Maybe Hana might like to skip the clubs tonight, and come see a play, instead. "Ještě nevím," he said, smiling and shrugging (maybe even flirting a little, but he wasn't a monk, for God's sake). "Proč se ptáte? Napadá vás nějaké místo kam bychom mohli zajít?"

The woman shrugged back at him, turning her head slightly and smiling coyly. She reached into a long pocket of her dress, making a show of it, and pulled out a stick. "Ano, napadá mě jedno specifické místo. Potřebujeme vaši pomoc. Confundo."

Jakub felt a tingle run through him, as though he'd been plunged into warm water. It was odd, but somehow reassuring at the same time.

"Jdi dovnitř a čekej na další pokyny. Jdeme do války," the woman said, and Jakub found himself nodding and agreeing, since of course he had already intended to go inside and wait quietly for further instruction.

He pushed open the door to the theatre. The lobby was empty, but of course he was supposed to just walk right on past the ticket counter and on inside. That was just obvious to him.

Every seat was occupied already, he saw with some disappointment. Even most of the space in the aisles was already packed full of other people – random men and women of every shape and size and age. Jakub frowned, and pushed along the outer edge of the theatre, finding a corner that wasn't quite crammed full of some of these other patiently waiting people.

Once he'd found a space, he leaned against the wall and relaxed. He glanced at his wristwatch. Nothing to do tonight or ever, so he had plenty of time to wait until he was needed. It was clearly what he should be doing... just standing here and waiting until it was time to go and collect the weapons. Then they'd go off to war, of course. It was obvious enough.

Jakub closed his eyes and rested. Best to save his strength.



John Snow Center for Medicine and Tower School of Doubt (The Tower) May 19th, 1999 The same day

She'd had only a few seconds to think before someone stepped into the cubicle, past Harry.

It was an older man with a pleasant smile. He glanced at Harry, but said nothing. He reached out to put his hand on Hermione's ankle.

#### 

The murderfields, Tír inna n-Óc May 19th, 1999 The same day

The murderfields were still and icy, as they had been for years without end. None of the cold chopped flesh moved, and sweet chunks of pain lay scattered as the lord of the lunar caustic had left them.

The milk rains had left a white frost on everything.

"Kruwos," whispered a voice on the wind, reaching from a cautious distance, out beyond the fields' end. "Spondejo kruwos. Kruwos. Kruwos. Spondejo kruwos."

Kruwos, replied cold lips. Kruwos.

A ragged hand slid gently from beneath a ragged thigh, slipping out of the ground and up into the air. Milkrime crackled as the hand moved and thrust its fingers into a crevice. It pulled with nightmare strength, joints popping all around like sloppy mouths, until an entire arm was revealed. Then it released its grip and delicately reached back to pluck away a pale, loose band of flesh, setting it aside with care upon a withered labia near at hand.

The gaunt's eyes were wide and staring, wet pools of black ichor in a taut white face. It smiled, and its teeth were madness.

The murderfields rustled and cracked. A leji-claw appeared, and then the long fingers of another gaunt.

The Unseelie rose again.

#### 

Meldh released Hermione, and smiled a miably. "There. All better."  $\,$ 

She looked back at him.

The world shuddered, as though in pain.

### \*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\* Chapter Eleven \*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

## Batter My heart



O royal Hera, of majestic mien, aerial-formed, divine, Zeus' blessed queen, throned in the bosom of cerulean air, the race of mortals is thy constant care. The cooling gales they power alone inspires, which nourish life, which every life desires. Mother of showers and winds, from thee alone, producing all things, mortal life is known: all natures share thy temperament divine, and universal sway alone is thine, with sounding blasts of wind, the swelling sea and rolling rivers roar when shook by thee. Come, blessed Goddess, famed almighty queen, with aspect kind, rejoicing and serene.

— Orphic Hymn to Hera (trans. Thomas Taylor)

#### 

John Snow Center for Medicine and Tower School of Doubt (The Tower) May 19th, 1999 The same day

Hermione had only a few seconds to think before someone stepped into the cubicle, past Harry.

It was an older man with a pleasant smile. He glanced at Harry, but said nothing. He reached out to put his hand on Hermione's ankle.

"E geustiment is."

#### 

Hermione existed as a fragment of consciousness, while a strange man walked through her mind. "And you are Miss Granger," mused the man. He stroked the broad fur of one thought, as it wriggled down among its fellows. "Or shall I call you Hermione? Maybe when I know you better." The thought squirmed away from the man's touch.

"I am Meldh," said the man. "It has become necessary for you to be altered to a certain degree. All of your friends have been changed thus, including Harry Potter." He waded through the thoughts that seethed around him in their furry multitudes, plucking at them here and there. "Another Muggleborn... and so much like Mr. Potter, himself. He would be pleased to hear that, I think. There is no romance, there... more worship than anything else, as though you were a statue on a pedestal. But it would please him to hear it."

The mote that was Hermione observed this, distantly.

Meldh touched a tightly-spun wire of dense yellow fog, and it undulated at the contact. "So much that is interesting, here." He flickering his fingers over a series of fog wires, and seized one between two fingers to examine it. "You think a great deal of your 'Returned,' hmm? We will take them into our organization as well, then. Great events are in motion, Miss Granger. Entire armies are moving and preparing, getting ready to crash against each other like great waves. Nations will fall. Worlds will end. We will add your Returned to the ranks of the belligerents... take them off of the map, too."

The wizard smiled, amiably. "But first we must make some changes. One rather important change, laid down upon your brain." He picked at a wire, pulled it free, and moved it. "We begin, Hermione."

#### 

Meldh released Hermione, and smiled amiably. "There. All better."

She looked back at her master.

The world shuddered, as though in pain.

A ripple passed through the small white cubicle in the Tower clinic, through Hermione where she lay, bound, on the bed, and through Harry and Meldh. It was as though someone had taken hold of reality by the corners, like a bedsheet, and given it a firm snapping shake.

Meldh said nothing, but shot Harry a questioning look, his lips firm. He stripped back the sleeves of his robes with two rapid movements. His skin had begun emitting golden light, pleasant in color, but pricklish on the skin, and some manner of green-skinned creature, translucent and smelling of sulfur, had slithered out from beneath Meldh's clothing to wrap around his waist. The beast had innumerable jointless legs, like clawed tentacles, and the wide-nosed snout and beady eyes of a great lizard.

Harry looked around, bewildered, sweat on his brow. His hands were trembling.

"What –" began Hermione, her voice a croak.

"My God," interrupted Harry, whipping his head around at her. "You used it, didn't you, Hermione?" His voice was rising into an accusing, outraged shout. "I can't believe you would be so reckless! Don't you realize you've put us all in danger?! You've put the whole Tower – all of *England* in danger! Are you insane?!"

"What is it, boy?" cut in Meldh, his voice an uncharacteristic snarl. His eyes were narrow and dark.

Harry stabbed an accusing finger at Hermione. "It's the ultimate power in the universe. And you have *used it*."

Meldh whirled to stare at Hermione, raising his hands in front of him. His palms seethed with black ichor, boiling forth as he glared threateningly. The wizard was all alive with anger, brightedged and sharp, and it was as though he were a different person. "What have you done?!"

#### 

John Snow Center for Medicine and Tower School of Doubt (The Tower) January 17th, 1996 Three years ago

Harry set the leather satchel carefully on the table. "Here it is," he said. "Fred says that it was just where the centaurs said it would be."

"And we're sure," Hermione said, staring at the bag, "that it's not a fake, made into a trap that will turn us into frogs or something?"

"The Headmistress, Moody, Mafalda Hopkirk, and Edgar Erasmus have all independently verified it," said Harry. In answer to Hermione's raised eyebrow, he added, "...shortly before their memories were voluntarily wiped."

She pursed her lips, and leaned forward across the table, opening the satchel. She reached inside, and pulled out the Goblet of Fire, also known as the Cup of Dawn. It was a crude-looking thing with a thick rim and rough base. There was no fire or glow about it, and to all appearances was nothing more than a poorly-made wooden goblet.

"This is... underwhelming," Hermione said, frowning.

"That's the cup of a carpenter," Harry said, smiling.

"Is it really -" Hermione began, then frowned again. "Oh, shut up."

"I worked out the language for the contract," Harry said, pulling folded parchment out of his pocket. "They used to use this cup for sporting events and major contracts between magical races, so it's pretty well-understood. Hopkirk explained it to me. It can bind anyone to a contract if their names are placed in it. Only valid contracts – binding two or more people, clearly stated terms, only negative consequences, and so on. But it's famously impossible to evade the penalty clauses."

"It doesn't seem that useful to us, then," said Hermione, disappointed. "We don't need a contract to trust each other."

"The idea of 'negative consequences' is relative," Harry said. He shoved the parchment over to her. "We swear this, and then seal the memories of all of this away."

The proposed contract was lengthy.

We, the oathbound, hereby make contract that at no point shall we be controlled, possessed, or otherwise ensorceled by the same individual, group of individuals, club, coterie, organization ... Should we fail to abide by this bargain, whether it be by fault of our own or the deeds of others ... shall suffer the immediate and complete dismissal of all enchantments or alterations of mind present on our persons at that time, including but not limited to...

as further specified in Appendix XIV ... required loss of memory of all terms and conditions for the contract, as well as loss of memory of the contract itself, as well as the location and status of all agents or objects involved in maintenance of the contract, for the duration of the contract...

It went on.

"You don't think this is paranoid?" she asked, studying the oath, looking for flaws or loopholes. "I mean, even beyond Alastor levels of paranoia. There are other ways to use this... there's an opportunity cost for setting this contingency up. If we hide this thing and erase it from our memories, then we can't use it for anything else. Why not use it to lock in support from signatories to the Treaty? Or even just use it to keep all our aurors loyal?"

Harry picked up the Goblet of Fire, and studied it. "Magic is too big. It's too unpredictable. That's a good thing in a lot of ways, since it means we can't even begin to guess at the possible limits for humanity in a universe full of magic. Exploring and colonizing outside of our light cone, reversing entropy... we can't rule anything out. There are thousands of spells, and tens of thousands more that have been forgotten or mostly forgotten. There are too many possible unknowns. This might actually not even be paranoid enough... I tried to figure a way for this to work for us individually, but you can't contract with yourself." He put the Goblet back down. "Yes, we'd pay a price for doing this. But we have to defend against everything, even the impossible things we don't know about yet. Levels and levels."

Hermione regarded the Goblet of Fire, and nodded, slowly. "All right. Although honestly, I'm not sure why all of these sorts of things have such silly names."

#### 

John Snow Center for Medicine and Tower School of Doubt (The Tower) May 19th, 1999 Now

"She has used the Star of Death," said Harry to Meldh, his voice upset and his face sweaty. "And now we're all at risk. Our

very existence in Time is at risk. Sir, we have to get you someplace safe!"

The Goblet of Fire... our contract, Hermione thought, blinking rapidly. The memory was there – the knowledge of the contract was present, as though it had always been lurking just out of her mind's eye. We broke the contract, and it has imposed its penalty. The failsafe worked. We're free. She glanced down at the bands of goblin silver across her legs, her waist, her chest, and each forearm, fixing her in place to a strip of silver on the underside of the cot. Well, free in a manner of speaking. Are these restraints for unruly werewolves, or something created just for me?

Meldh pivoted in place, holding one palm towards Hermione and swinging the other towards Harry. Ichor bubbled from between his fingers. Where it dripped on the floor, the surface vanished, leaving a series of divots and pocks in the stone. "The 'Star of Death?' There was no hint of such in either of your minds," declared Meldh, his voice taut with tension and anger.

Smart man. When your captured enemy is making implausible claims about secret weapons, he's almost always lying. And even when he isn't, your enemy's demise will often be the best solution. Better for your health and your reputation to wipe them out immediately.

He needs fear. She glanced at the marks left by the black ichor. Fear of obliteration. Fear of the unknown.

"It's coming," said Hermione. "And it's already altered our past — eating it up from the source. I think... I think it begins from the first moment of its own existence. Even our memories of it. Maybe it... I'm not sure. I only know that it won't stop until it has devoured our time. Yours, mine, and Harry's. We'll be gone." She breathed out, heavily, and closed her eyes. "I'm willing to pay that price."

"You defy the Lethe Touch," Meldh observed, coldly. "I mastered you and I changed you, yet now you are glad of my death." He paused. "There is something at work here that I do not understand."

Hermione opened her eyes again, and saw the Asiatic wizard staring at her with narrowed eyes. She remembered lunch with Reg Hig and Per Aavik-Söderlundh-Ellingsen, and the value of a strategic but subtle slip.

"It doesn't matter what you do," she replied, her own voice as firm as bedrock. "I will not stop the Star of Death." She raised her voice, pronouncing as clearly and coldly as a mountain stream, "Die. And be damned."

He turned to face her, fully. Just behind him, she saw Harry watching, carefully but silently. *Good. Don't oversell it.* The translucent green creature that clung to Meldh's waist hissed, quietly, and kept its attention on Harry.

Meldh said nothing, either. He only met her gaze with dark eyes. She felt a touch on her mind – the gentlest of probing contact with another's thoughts. Barely a whisper of Legilimency: a thin needle of attack so perfectly honed in its intrusive power that it seemed to have physical form.

Hermione didn't react. Her training had not overlooked the obvious. Her mind was a stone her mind was steel her mind was wax her mind was an ox her mind was a child her mind was herself.

And there was nothing for Meldh to find there but contempt. Die, and be damned.

Meldh said nothing, but she felt the touch on her mind change. The whisper-sharp needle of Legilimency vanished and was replaced by something unfamiliar... a draining emptiness that settled down around her thoughts. It plucked at her from many directions at once, presenting a blankness into which her mind could pour. It was like the last moments of consciousness before sleep, where a thought could occur, linger on the edges of awareness, and then gently tumble away into the darkness.

But Hermione had an answer for that, too. She cast thoughts into that darkness, one after the other, flinging them out into the sucking unconsciousness that lay on her thoughts like a blanket. She hurled memories like weapons, a bulwark of recall that could be offered without loss: the feeling of sunshine on her shoulders as she sat in a field at Powis; the rich ribbons of smell that filled the house when Gran made venison pies; the joyful screams of Granville that shattered the grimness of Azkaban; the click of one chess-piece against another as her father taught her how to castle.

The draining emptiness vanished with that last thought, and she saw a flicker of reaction on Meldh's face. Surprise and suspicion. Hermione never moved her eyes from his.

"Курва," Meldh spat at her, his face reddening. "Very well. Another Touch. And I will tear your mind to *shreds* this time."

You have to get near me to do that, little man, thought Hermione.

He took a step towards her, reaching out for Hermione's restrained arm. The golden light that had been gently emanating from him faded, and the ichor vanished from his palms.

Behind Meldh, Harry drew his wand.

She bucked in place, kicking both legs as hard as she can, straining her stomach, wrenching her arms in place. The goblin silver didn't yield even a little. But she remembered fighting Tineagar in a Tidewater basement – remembered the value of sacrifice. Pain is nothing. Save one life.

Her right arm braced against the restraint, and she twisted it to the side. It broke with the sharp sound of fracturing bone. Pain roared like a lion, savaging her.

Meldh, reaching out for her, lurched backwards in surprise.

Harry raised his wand to point at Meldh. Almost immediately, the green creature wrapped around Meldh's waist hissed loudly, and lunged at Harry. He backpedaled, swatting at the creature as it landed on his chest, shrilly hissing and baring its smoking fangs. Meldh jerked around in shock.

Hermione jerked her arm free, torn hand and forearm still locked in place on the bed, blood pouring out of her like a bolt of crimson fabric. A scream burst from her.

But the end of her backup wand, the Ultimate Ulna, was exposed amid the splintered ends of her bones.

"Lagann. Stuporfy."

The Breaking Drill Hex cleared the way, and the Swerving Stunner didn't even need to swerve: it hit Meldh full in the chest.

The member of the Three didn't fall. He staggered, red flickering energy jolting through him. The green creature on Harry's chest – connected somehow? a sort of magical circuit-breaker? – whipped its head back and exploded in a shower of phosphorescent green sparks torn through with flickering red. In the same moment, the Ultimate Ulna also flared green and red, and burnt itself into ashes. She could smell her own flesh as it burnt.

I'm unarmed, she thought crazily.

Meldh lurched forward towards Hermione, grunting something unintelligible, his face a grimace of rage. He reached for her.

Desperate, she lashed out with her broken arm. The splintered bones lashed Meldh across the face, leaving deep scratches along his cheek. The pain was Fiendfyre on her nerves.

"Hermione!" called Harry, reaching for his dropped wand, eyes wide.

"Hermione," snarled Meldh, arm outstretched, swaying in place.

"Hermione," agreed Hermione, and struck once more with her broken arm, and her splintered bones tore like talons through Meldh's throat. Blood geysered across her chest and face.

The dying man's hand came down on her shoulder, his dark eyes bright with anger. Blood poured onto her from the lacerated meat of Meldh's throat. He tried to speak, to cast a spell, but could produce nothing more than a bubbling gurgle and a mouthful of blood. Meldh grimaced, and his teeth were red.

"Stupefy. Stupefy." cast Harry from behind him. And this time, mortally injured and bereft of his defences, the spells took Meldh. The member of the Three shivered through with red energy, his muscles locking, and toppled to the ground like a fallen tree.

#### 

Oh, All-Nature, Queen, Mother of all things, untiring Mother, exalted, creating, She who tames all, Unmentionable, shining, the Firstborn who quenches everything, who brings the Light! Born of yourself, present everywhere and all-knowing You Blessed One, who makes things grow and rot, Father and Mother of all things, Universal Worker, you who walk forth in an endless maelstrom, conserving, you who uphold yourself through repeated metamorphosis: I pray to you, give me peace!

— Orphic Hymn to Demeter (trans. Thomas Taylor)

#### 

Hermione, shaking, clutched at her injured arm with the other. It had stopped bleeding already, which was a relief. She'd been worried that her innate healing ability had been "dismissed" by the Goblet of Fire.

Across the cubicle, Harry was leaning on a chair, wand in hand. He was shaking, and there was a scorch mark on his cheek. Hermione supposed that had happened when that green creature had exploded – taking her wand with it.

She found her voice, finally, glancing from Harry to the frozen Meldh, and then back again. "The Death Star?"

Harry shrugged, but couldn't stop a smile from spreading on his face. It was an odd contrast with his trembling hands and the sweat plastering his hair to his forehead. "I couldn't... I couldn't think of anything else that sounded plausible and scary enough." He shook his head. "I don't know how we..."

His voice trailed off, and he paled. "Oh, God... everyone else. The Tower, the *entire Tower*, is magically bound to serve Meldh. He got almost everyone, Hermione. Draco, Moody, Cedric, the aurors, the healers... dozens and dozens of people are still under the effects of that... that... that *spell*."

"Get me out of this, first," Hermione said, slumping back against the bed. The pain in her arm was fading, finally.

"Buttons thirteen Sangomas," Harry said, and the restraints opened with a gentle click. "I'm so sorry about that, I didn't -"

"No time," interrupted Hermione, "and anyway, don't be stupid. How do we free everyone?"

Harry rubbed his temples, gritting his teeth. "I don't know. There's a counter-spell, but I stopped him from telling me about it. For exactly this reason, as a matter of fact. You cast the spell – which is Egeustimentis – and then you say something else. But I don't know what."

Hermione knelt down next to Meldh, and clamped a hand over his neck. "Get out your medical kit. Maybe we can wake him up and get the spell out of him, somehow."

Harry knelt beside her, opening his mokeskin pouch. "Medical kit," he told it. He opened the small white case as soon as it leapt

to hand, taking out Haverford's Marvelous Coagulant and some bandages. "It's been weeks, and I only just found out yesterday that we had finally managed to safely get some things out of Bellatrix Black. You think we can crack *this* guy in the next few minutes, before someone checks on us? Without him playing puppeteer again?"

"Point taken," Hermione allowed. "But I don't even have a wand, much less my other stuff, so I don't know what we're going to do, otherwise. Can you manage to stun everyone here by yourself? Have you been secretly practicing duelling with Cedric or something?" she asked. She lifted her hand from the injured wizard's throat.

Harry didn't answer, just rolled his eyes as he squeezed orange gel onto Meldh's neck. The blood pouring out of the wizard's ragged throat began to slow, and soon stopped. "Your usual wand is in the meeting room, with the rest of your things. But I have a back-up wand for you. It's actually here in the clinic. I wanted to keep it especially safe, sealed off even from the rest of the Tower in case of trouble." He held out his wand to her. "Take mine for the moment."

Hermione took it from him with her uninjured arm. The wound on the other had closed, but she thought it would be ten or twenty minutes before the arm was usable again. She examined the raw-looking pink skin of the stump, which throbbed with pain in time to her heartbeat. She made a face.

"For now, I'll transfigure Meldh," Harry said. "We can't kill him, since we really might need him to release everyone. Let me have that back for a moment." She handed him back the wand, reluctant despite the obvious necessity. Harry was not a duelist.

He took the wand and held the tip against the chest of the villain's stiff body. Meldh began to shrink and warp in color and shape. Harry glanced over at her. "He was really Herpo the Foul, you know. Inventor of the Horcrux spell."

Hermione nodded, thoughtfully. "That makes sense." She stood up and went to the curtained entrance to their little white cubicle. "That spell... it was enslavement. How long were you like that? How long has he been here?"

"A couple of days," Harry said, quietly. His voice was very small. "It hurt. It was like being at war with myself. Everything

in me pushed as hard as it could, but it was like part of my mind had forgotten itself. Couldn't help itself. And it was the most powerful part." He stopped speaking for a moment, staring down at the diminishing Meldh with distant, unseeing eyes. "I worry a lot about addiction. I think that this was what addiction would feel like." Meldh was gone. In his place was a small white rock.

"Then you'll have put at least some plans in place in case something like this happened," said Hermione, firmly. Stay with me, Harry. "How long do we have before someone comes to ch-"

Cedric Diggory pulled back the curtain to the cubicle, flanked by a pair of aurors. He looked startled, opening his mouth to say something. The aurors behind him were quicker on the uptake, and their wands were already drawn. They raised them.

Harry still has his wand. I've got nothing – less than nothing, only one arm. Need to close the distance.

"Είναι ο ίδιος!" called out Hermione, firmly, walking towards them with a bold and unafraid step. Her Greek was abysmal, a basic vocabulary put together in haste before the raid on the Cappadocian fortress of Göreme, but that wasn't important. They have one overriding priority, the same one that was given me: protect and obey Meldh. That's an advantage for me. And they might be the slower for their internal conflict.

They were too well-trained and experienced, however, for any of that to slow them more than a moment. She was still out of reach when they recovered from their surprise, deciding that the better part of service was to incapacitate first and ask questions later. Good for them, that was the right decision. Even if it's massively inconvenient at the moment. The faces of the aurors hardened, and she saw their arms tense again. Cedric's eyes widened in alarm, and he snatched for his own wand.

Hermione thrust out her mind with the thought of blue November and the smell of burning leaves, and threw herself forward in an inhumanly powerful tumble. Her ward of prisms burst into existence, unfolding themselves with a crackle of crystal into a solid wall across the front of the cubicle.

They didn't fall for the gambit. The auror to Cedric's left fired Bertram's Bolts high and low, while the other tracked her with his wand, casting the Stunning Hex at her moving form. As Hermione tumbled forward, she heard the prism-barrier shatter and evaporate, and felt the numbing sting of a near miss.

"Stupefy! Stupefy! Expelliarmus!" she heard Harry cast, just before her tumble rolled her into the trio of aurors. She smashed into and through Cedric's legs with her back, carrying them out from under him. He fell on top of her, thrashing at her as he struggled to bring his wand to bear on her.

One of the aurors gestured a Roger's Shield into being in front of himself, almost effortlessly catching Harry's attacks with the multicolored circle. The other had his wand pointed at her, his mouth open to curse her. Cedric was in the way, but that didn't matter if he was just going to stun her, anyway. The auror was just too far to reach, and she didn't have any weapons. Could she grapple with Cedric and get his wand?

Oh. Cedric.

She seized one of Cedric's legs with her good arm. She had a moment to see him staring at her, horror on his face. Then she heaved on the leg, hauling it as hard as she could upwards and away from her. She couldn't actually lift him off the ground that way – his leg would have come off if she tried, she thought – but he swung along the floor like an enormous club, smashing into the threatening auror's legs. The two wizards fell into a tangle of injured limbs.

The other auror turned his attentions to her, but it was too late. She was on her feet like lightning, and dropped him with a light backhand across the side of his skull. He collapsed, unconscious.

Harry darted forward and stunned the other two. They froze into immobility, still folded around each other and struggling. He threw her the wand, and she snatched it out of the air with her good hand.

"Last cubicle on the end," he said. "Password is 'splendour fifty Buick.'"

Hermione nodded. "Make sure none of these three are too badly hurt."

"Go," Harry said, already reaching for the medical kit.

She leapt over the auror she'd knocked out, into the main corridor of the clinic. The long row of white cubicles confronted her, screened off with sheets. She sprinted the length of the corridor in the blink of an eye, arriving at the other end of the general ward at the same moment as a running auror appeared at the door – Hedley Kwannon. Kwannon's wand was already drawn, Hermione saw.

"Stupefy!" cast Kwannon and Hermione at the same time. As she cast, Hermione lunged to the side into one of the cubicles, clawing out with her mind to raise another wall of prismatic crystal. For her part, Kwannon was unbelievably fast, raising a wall of Azarian Fire and the red mist of Bartolomeo's Reckoning almost at the same time, and still able to bring her wand back to Pflug position. The auror's wards absorbed Hermione's curse, and Kwannon was ready to cast three Bertram's Bolts, each a foot apart from the next — avoiding the lure of the prism ward, and aiming for where her target was actually going. Hermione felt them sizzle past her, the dull yellow hexes missing her only by the grace of her speed and luck.

Hermione sprang to her feet as Kwannon charged through the door. Immediately, Kwannon raised more Azarian Fire, and it was again a cover for an attack. But this time she attacked Hermione's footing. "Orbis." Hermione felt the stone underfoot soften, sloughing away from under her shoes. She's better at chaining and a better shot than me; if I lose my mobility, I'm done, Hermione thought.

Hermione responded the way Alastor had always taught her: once you know your advantages, press them relentlessly. She sacrificed position and used the stone for her own purposes, charming it into a swirling wall of rock between the two of them. Then she sprang forward, driving her toes hard into the softening floor.

From the other side of the wall, Hermione heard Kwannon chant the first few syllables of the runes of balance: a delaying action. Unfortunately for Kwannon, Hermione simply had no time for more of this.

She threw herself shoulder-first into the stone at full speed, and it yielded before her. She burst through, into a startled Kwannon – still tracing orange symbols in the air – and stunned the auror with a crackling red curse.

Panting, Hermione turned to the cubicle on the end. "Splendour fifty Buick," she said, holding her shoulder.

The plain stone of the wall shifted in one spot, slightly and silently.

Hermione stepped over to the stone that moved, and gently pushed it to one side. It swiveled open on an invisible hinge, exposing a small ledge within the wall.

Resting on the ledge was a wand of elder wood. She recognized it. It had once belonged to Albus Dumbledore, before it passed to Lord Voldemort. He in turn passed it to Harry Potter, who became – as she understood it – the rightful owner, by dint of conquest.

Until he was defeated by Bellatrix Black, she realized. Right before I put my fist through her.

Hermione Granger picked up her wand.

#### 

O Powerful Nike, by men desir'd, with adverse breasts to dreadful fury fir'd, Thee I invoke, whose might alone can quell contending rage, and molestation fell: 'Tis thine in battle to confer the crown, the victor's prize, the mark of sweet renown; For thou rul'st all things, Nike divine! And glorious strife, and joyful shouts are thine. Come, mighty Goddess, and thy suppliant bless, with sparkling eye, elated with success; May deeds illustrious thy protection claim, and find, led on by thee immortal Fame.

—Hymn to Nike (trans. Thomas Taylor)

## www.chapter Twelve www.

# homophone



Hermione hefted the Elder Wand. It was long for a wand, and oddly-shaped – it even looked like there were carvings on the surface, faint knobbly engravings. She'd only seen it a few times before, for Dumbledore had seldom used it in the presence of students, but its distinctive appearance made it easy to recognize.

As she held it between her fingers, she slowly became aware that a new voice had joined a hymn within her - a hymn that had been there for a long time, but which she'd never noticed. It was a hymn to glory and war, and it sang within her as deeply and innately as her own heartbeat.

What do you do? What are capable of? How can you help me? she asked it, speaking to that bone-deep hymn. There was no response, and no indication of the wand's power or nature. She knew that Harry had stopped using it long ago, when he'd begun sacrificing parts of his magic – over and over, year after year – to revive some of the dead. Once he'd committed to that, focusing all of his efforts on organizing, planning, leading... well, he was never going to be a wizard of immense arcane power, and that made carrying the Elder Wand around with him a liability, rather than an advantage.

"It's too dangerous for me to carry around, putting it at risk, when we barely understand it," he'd said. "We don't even know what it would mean to be 'defeated' and lose the Wand to a new master. If I lose a game to someone, or get charmed by someone, or even just get killed by an attacker, I don't want them able to just reach down and pick up an ancient device of this sort of power. It makes all of your spells more powerful, but who knows what else it could do in the hands of the wrong person? None of our research

could find out its hidden properties, but if it's anything like the True Cloak of Invisibility, there's another hidden level."

Well, it didn't matter right now, anyway. Whatever the hidden power that might exist here, at the moment Hermione just appreciated the boost to her magical power. The entire Tower was set against them, magically compelled to do their best to rescue Meldh. There were no more contingencies, no more plans. It was possible there was yet another plan, another level, hidden from her own memories the same way the Goblet had been... but she doubted it. No, it was just her and Harry against the world, it seemed.

She flicked the wand between her fingers, and it trailed silver sparks. The work of the legendary Peverells, another of the Hallows. The thought put her back in mind of their situation. We need to get to the meeting room, to get my things. The Cloak will get us out of here – and help us rescue Esther and Hyori, if they haven't already been dominated. Then we can work on a plan to free everyone else.

Hermione lowered the wand, and took a look at her injured arm. It was healing, pink flesh pushing new, raw skin out from the swirl-seamed stump. She'd be able to use it in a few more minutes.

Firming her resolve, she stepped out of the cubicle, to head back to Harry near the other end of the clinic's general ward. She saw that he'd rolled the goblin-silver shield in place to block off the other entry, and was heading towards her with quick steps. Harry looked disheveled – a skinny young man in simple robes, soiled with streaks of blood, his hair coming loose from its ponytail. These days, the scar on his forehead was usually faded, but he was flushed and a pale lightning bolt was visible on his brow. He had dark circles under his eyes.

They met halfway down the hall. She turned, and they walked together, moving briskly.

"Meeting room," she said. "Not too far. Just through the discharge ward, around the corner, and down the hall. We can do it."

"When they come, just try to get through. You stand a better chance of making it, and then you can rescue everyone," Harry

replied, holding his wand in tense fingers. He offered her the white rock that had been Meldh, and she tapped her wand to it and spent a half-second of her will Transfiguring it into its present shape, taking control of the spell with her own magic.

She didn't bother to respond to his words, and he didn't push it. They'd long-since dropped pretenses between them, and didn't play to roles. She didn't tell him that she wasn't about to leave him, and that he stood the best chance of figuring out a plan to reverse all this – to free the Tower. He didn't reply that it was more important that someone got out, and that too much depended on someone staying free. No roles. No wasted words. Just Harry and Hermione.

A stranger appeared at the end of the ward, racing through at a sprint. On seeing them, he skidded to a halt. Almost certainly an auror, Hermione thought. Average height, average weight, but no one she'd ever seen before. Wand in hand.

Then the auror grinned wolfishly, and she knew.

Alastor.

He wasn't even trying to disguise his body language, with his shoulders rounded and his feet already in correct position for Mezzo Passo. He was using his primary wand. He looked as he'd looked in a dozen bodies on hundreds of different mornings, putting her through her paces along with four other students. He looked prepared.

"Hermione. Harry. You're free," he said. An unknown voice, but familiar cadence and gruffness. "Well done."

"Alastor," she said, calmly. "Meldh is dead."

"We must serve his interests, and find a way to bring him back," Harry said, standing at her side.

Alastor shook his head, still grinning, and tapped one side of his head with his free hand, chidingly. The Eye of Vance, embedded in his head like a real eye. He could see that there was no Meldh in the room, and see the white stone she'd dropped into the pocket of her robes. He knew.

Which means, Hermione realized in a flash so quick that it could barely be called a thought, that we'll be swamped with aurors in a moment, and he's delaying me and hoping for some banter, and he can see through all the cubicles and barriers so he has a

tactical advantage, and he knows I know this but also knows my options are limited, but he also knows I have the Elder Wand now and will have incentive to fight him individually, so he won't go for the quick stun, no stupid stupid of course he will but he'll also try to slow me down some other way, Harry is a weak point so he'll hit him too and make me sacrifice to protect him, watch for it watch for it.

They acted at the same instant. Alastor whipped his wand in front of himself, turning to the side, and cast two curses as quickly as most people could breathe – muttered spells that she didn't recognize from a distance, and without visible effect. Simultaneously, Harry raised his wand, starting the movement for the Lesser Action of Shahryar's Delay. He didn't get past the first twirl of his wandtip, however, before Hermione violently shoved him aside. He was lifted bodily off the ground, through one of the thin cubicle partitions.

Before Harry had even landed in a tangle of white sheet and metal frame, Alastor had launched his next attack, and Hermione had raised a ward. Not her customary Roger's Shield, but Azarian Fire. The aqua flames were something he'd taught her, which was both a risk and an investment – he was intimately familiar with the spell, but it would remind him of how close he'd been to her. Hermione didn't think anyone could throw off the Lethe Touch; during the few moments it had bound her, it hadn't even felt like a separate constraint that *could* be fought. But that was still Alastor, and some part of him must still be vulnerable to emotional attack.

The Tower's chief of security didn't appear to even slow down, however, and he didn't try to break her ward, either. That was wise: when it crackled into life in front of her, Hermione had seen the blue flames surge unusually bright, hotter than she'd ever seen with the spell. The Wand.

He struck overhead, instead, snapping off a curse at the stone above her. "Reducto," he cast, and some of the fitted stones of the clinic roof, five feet above, exploded. Hermione had seen it coming, however, and brought a Roger's Shield over herself with time to spare. It left her wand in Ochs, so she capitalized, slashing down with a rightward flick of her wrist as loose stone and dust cascaded down around her. "Hominem Revelio," she said.

She felt a cool wind blow against her from four directions – from Harry, who was climbing to his feet to her left, from Alastor straight ahead (who was casting yet another spell without any visible effect), and from the two aurors who were Disillusioned or wearing Invisibility Cloaks (or more likely, both) as they crept up on her. The hidden aurors were nearly halfway to her.

Hermione took one with a stunner, using the back-draw from the gesture to bring up a wall of prisms behind her Azarian Fire. The other auror sprang to the attack, joining Alastor, who had taken the moment to raise new wards. She watched through blue flame, firing pass-through curses as quickly as she could. The Elder Wand gave each attack greater strength: her Bertram Bolts flew with the speed of thought and her stunners were broad and bright, almost hungry for impact, despite the added effort of casting through her own shields. She dodged return attacks and dispersed an anaesthetic gas produced by the Disillusioned auror, whose presence she could still feel, roughly. She had no need of the exact counter-spell: brute disenchantment served just as well.

To her left, Harry had stayed crouched down in the cubicle into which she'd thrown him, keeping a low profile on one knee, wand in hand, just touching the floor, ready to be swept up in defense. He'd used a minor charm to clear a line of the sight through the cubicles to Moody, but was keeping out of the way.

As Hermione dodged yet another stunner, she saw the double flash as two Slow Blades of Unusually Specific Destruction popped against her Azarian Fire. Realization flooded her thoughts as she remembered the spells Alastor had cast without effect, twice before and once more recently. Lashing away a stunner with a dashed-off Rune of Abatement, Hermione reached out with her wand hand in the same gesture to raise Bartolomeo's Reckoning between Harry and Alastor, desperately hoping to block the third Slow Blade that must be headed towards Harry.

Too late, she recognized how Alastor's gambit had been telegraphed, and realized she'd been forced into turning almost the full of her back on her attackers in order to shield Harry. "Lagann!" she heard from both her attackers, and her Azarian Fire died.

Hermione didn't try to turn back, but kept moving, lifting herself onto her toes and spinning into chaînés turns away from where she'd been standing, close to the white wall of the cubicles. A Bloodfoot Curse ripped along through the ground where she'd just been standing.

As the sickening purplish glow swept by, Hermione brought up her wand, recovering back into Pfugh and Mezzo Passo. The Disillusioned auror was fading from her awareness, but she could feel through the Revelation Charm that he was running towards her. She felt the churn of panic in the back of her mind – even with the Elder Wand, fighting Alastor would have been hard enough. She couldn't afford to deal with this other threat.

No sooner had she thought that, however, when she saw the stone floor five feet ahead of her split open, a hole of darker grey yawning and a wide area rippling with gray-limned spiderweb cracks. It was as though ten square feet of the clinic floor had melted and retained only a thin covering of its native stone. The auror that had been attacking became visible as he sank into the bubbling grey substance beneath the stone, sprawling forward in surprise, struggling as a sticky substance coated him with thick goo, pulling him down.

To her left, she could see Harry rise to his feet, grinning. The invisible auror strained against the expanding pool of sticky foam that had been partially transfigured under a thin shell of stone, but he only continued to sink: out of the fight.

Alastor's wolfish grin vanished. He went back on the attack, and curses flew between him, Harry, and Hermione like a hail-storm.

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Harry was awed and confused watching Hermione and Moody duel, as though he were watching experts play cricket (or Quidditch, for that matter, which had always seemed a mix of rugby and test cricket played a hundred yards off the ground). He understood the rules and the basic tactics, but he couldn't help but be aware that there were tactics and patterns that were moving beneath the surface that he could barely even notice, much less appreciate.

They both seemed indomitable. He'd had occasion to see fighting on the highest level from time to time, but the level of play here... he hadn't seen it since a bitter black night in Azkaban, many years ago. He could understand why, on a certain level: Moody and Hermione were both skilled combatants, intelligent and creative, with Moody's breadth of experience and inordinate canniness (and his use of both arms) matched against Hermione's inhuman reflexes and the Elder Wand. But more than that, the duels both then and now had been non-lethal. Neither Moody nor Hermione wanted to kill each other – in Moody's case probably because he wanted to preserve a key asset for Meldh – while in Azkaban the auror had been following protocol (and Voldemort had been toying with his prey). Duels to the death, Harry thought, usually ended much more quickly.

He kept his wand to the ground, and worked to help. He made sure to transfigure an air passage for the trapped auror, turning a tube of the foam into feathers. Then he tried to undermine Moody's footing in the same way he'd gotten the auror, but the Eye of Vance kept Moody apprised of a repeat of the same trick. Now that he was looking for it, Moody kept an eye for any shift in the stone around him. At least it cost him a moment to dispel the creeping transfiguration, giving Hermione opportunity to tear away one of his shields with a coruscating blue curse. Harry had continued the strategy, using partial transfiguration again and again in order to carve out falling rocks from the ceiling, turn parts of the walls behind Moody into ether or nitrous oxide, or simply destabilize the security chief's footing. He did anything he could do quickly and nonlethally, before Moody could spot the change in the stone.

Hermione caught three hexes on three consecutively appearing shields, lunging to one side as she counter-attacked with brilliant yellow bolts of light. Moody pivoted so that they missed, raising a new ward to protect himself, and Harry saw the pupil of the Eye of Vance vanish as it swiveled around inside of Moody's head. It didn't swivel back immediately.

His reinforcements are almost here – we've been fighting for too long. They must have gone to prepare something on Moody's orders, in case he was defeated. Need to end this.

They simply got lucky, as so often happened in combat. Harry turned part of the ceiling into benzocaine, and a gobbet of the topical anaesthetic the size of a Bludger fell onto Moody, just as Hermione ripped away his last tactile ward. It splattered onto his arm and along his chest.

The auror slapped the chemical away, spattering the floor, but the damage was immediate. Within seconds, Moody's wand slipped from his numb grip. The determined security chief used the hand that hadn't been deadened to try to raise barriers in front of himself, but Hermione simply broke through them by main force, using the Elder Wand to dispel them with powerful charms.

It wasn't pretty or dramatic or clever... just a misstep by their opponent. Life wasn't a play, and sometimes that was how things went.

Harry thought of Voldemort's wasted last word, a moment of meaningless spite. Sometimes that was how things went.

Just before the end, Moody opened his mouth to say something, but Hermione stunned him without stopping to chat. He toppled over, an awkward-looking statue. She went to check on him, calling over her shoulder at him, "Call for help, while I make sure he'll be okay!"

Harry took a moment to summon up the thought of mankind unbridled, transcendent over death and time and pain. It was as easy as smiling. "Expecto Patronum."

The glowing silver humanoid stood before him, brilliant argent. Its light was a reminder of gentle things.

"Go and tell Headmistress McGonagall that everyone in the Tower but Harry and Hermione has been taken over by a villain named Meldh. Moody, Bones, Hig, Malfoy, and all Tower aurors have been controlled. Alert the Ministry and the Council of Westphalia," Harry said. Then he repeated it all again, just in case she was too startled to take it in, the first time. He hadn't seen much of her since she'd declined his offer to help him manage Britain; now they met only a few times a year. She was a full-time teacher and administrator, and he thought she liked it that way. She might not be ready to be dragged into this sort of madness again on a moment's notice. But she'd step up. She always did.

The humanoid was gone in moments, vanishing from sight with long silver strides that carried it longer than they should, right through the wall and towards the Tower exit.

Hermione stood up from where she'd been kneeling beside Moody. "He's fine."

Without another word, they sprinted on down the corridor, heading for the unsealed exit.

No time to lose. Have to get to the meeting room. We need to escape. We can't possibly win against the entire Tower, Elder Wand or no. Once again, Harry cursed his past self for his unfortunate foresight. Meldh had said the Lethe Touch had the "capacity for release," by recasting it and adding another word, or words. Harry had stopped Meldh from telling him the release command, anticipating just this scenario.

I should really be glad, he thought, wryly, as they raced down the corridor, that a release command even exists. That always seems to be the case... a strange kind of "conservation of magic." No continuous effect is permanent unless there is a permanent loss, like with a sacrifice, or a permanent source of "power," like with the creation of Hogwarts on a ley line. It's a strange sort of moral balance, one of those odd things that hints that maybe it's a designed system.

One day, he'd track down the designer – the people of Atlantis, an unknown civilization before them, or whoever else – and get some answers. And maybe help them fix some exploits, like the existence of the Killing Curse.

In a few seconds, they'd reached the exit of the clinic. The Tower was shaped like an enormous isosceles triangle, with the Mirror at the vertex angle. The clinic ran along one side of the complex, while research departments ran along the other. Larger departments, like Material Methods and the Extension Establishment, were located at the base of the triangle, where there was the most space. In the center was the meeting room. Not very far.

Hermione held up a hand to stop him as they reached the exit. The hand was pink and raw-looking; only slowly returning to its normal tones, but at least she had both limbs again. She peeked her head around.

Almost instantly, she jerked back, narrowly avoiding the red bolts of several stunners and the wash of flame from a prepared flame trap. A lock of her chestnut hair was scorched away, but she was otherwise unharmed.

"They're set and waiting," she said, scowling. "Neville, the twins, and that Russian witch, plus at least ten other aurors. And there will be more at successive defense points."

"Once their defenses are set up, they'll storm the clinic," Harry said, frowning. He gripped his wand more tightly at the thought. "There are weapons in Material Methods... things in development."

Please, pretty please, I hope I anticipated this and set up yet another contingency. He searched his brain for likely activation words in times of desperation. When he was seven, he'd come up with a set of signals, in case he was kidnapped, being held hostage, unjustly imprisoned, or a number of other scenarios. He'd given it to his parents and insisted they memorize it. Then he'd quizzed them about it for a month. Maybe one of those would work? It was a nostalgic call-back to a personal moment, and it was occurring to him in this moment of stress... maybe he'd set up the secret Spoon of Solving My Immediate Problems to respond to one of them?

"Chumble spuzz," he said, loudly and hopefully to the air. Nothing happened, except Hermione turned to stare at him. "Chumble spuzz chumble spuzz," he repeated. Still nothing. "Anatidaephobia! Anatidaephobia anatidaephobia! Plippy ploppy cheese nose!" No... no sudden crash of thunder or magical rescue centaurs.

Hermione was still staring at him, her brown eyes concerned. "Just trying some possible secret command words I might have made myself forget," he explained.

"Ah," she said. "I thought you might have had a stroke." She turned back to the door, and grabbed the goblin-silver barricade.

"What are you doing? We can't lock down the clinic and hope for rescue. We'd never hold out in the time it took an outside force to breach into the Tower," Harry objected, raising a hand to stop her.

"You're right," she said, rolling the seal over the door. It clicked into place in its silver brackets. "Which is why we can't try to fight through prepared defenses. We'll sacrifice our fall-back position, instead." She pointed at the wall. "Carve a big rectangle. I'll push through, and take them out from behind. We won't be able to retreat without the wall intact, but there are

enough people out there to just carve through in fifteen minutes with the Reductor curse, anyway."

"There's no going back from that," Harry said. But he was already running over to the wall that she'd indicated, laying his wandtip on it.

"There was never been any going back... not since an afternoon on a train with a very annoying boy," Hermione said. He glanced back at her to see a tight smile on her face.

It took only a moment to transfigure four thin slices of stone in the shape of a doorway, turning the substance into grease. A rectangular block of stone was now separate from the wall, ready to be moved. An old trick – one of his first partial transfiguration tricks, in fact. He stepped back.

Harry felt his stomach tighten with tension as Hermione stepped up to the stone and flexed her hands open and closed. She put her palms on the block, and grinned. "It's my own fault, really, for knowing the six quarks."

She shook her head, as though rueful, and then pushed.

The huge block of stone slid slowly for a moment, as though stuck, but then Hermione lurched forward and slammed her shoulder against it. With the strength of a goddess, she shoved the stone through and out. It tipped forward as it reached the end, chipping the upper part of the hole, and then it fell forward with a colossal crash, smashing against the floor hard enough to make Harry's teeth feel like they were rattling in his head.

Then Hermione was through, wand whipping into several spells before she was even out in the hall, and Harry could hear the sound of battle. "Left floor," she called back to him, urgently, and he hurriedly leapt forward, to touch his wand back to the stone. He began to transfigure, pushing out into the stone. Harry moved the point of change down away from him and below. He couldn't see, so he was forced to guess at how far away from him he needed the effect; he knew the layout of the Tower intimately, of course, but not where the enemy was in the corridor to Hermione's left. The larger the area he affected, the more time it would take; he settled on transfiguring the same size of trap as before, transforming another block of stone into sticky foam beneath a thin stone shell.

All the while, he could hear curses and hexes and charms, barked orders. He heard the crackle of flame and the sizzle of spells. And all the while, he heard Hermione continue to cast, almost as quickly as she could speak. She didn't tire and didn't pause. Was this the Elder Wand? Was it just her?

There was a crash in the corridor and a hiss of foam before his transfiguration was over. Harry ended the effect.

"Right fl—" Hermione called out. But before she finished her thought, there was an explosion, and she was thrown back through the hole in the wall, limp, along with thick black smoke. She crashed through two of the cubicle partitions, landing bonelessly. Her robes were smouldering.

"Got her!" Harry heard Neville Longbottom call from the hall, cheerfully. "She'll be okay, don't worry! Load it again!"

What did Neville have? Did Neville have a rocket launcher?

Harry leapt in front of the hole and raised his wand. *Need to buy time*. "*Prismatis!*" he cast. A sparkling multicoloured wall burst forth from his wand to cover the aperture – not an instant too soon, either, as George Weasley appeared from the hall, dashing forward. The Weasley twin checked his charge as he saw the Prismatic Wall. George smirked.

"Hello -" he said.

"- Harry," finished Fred, stepping in next to his brother.

Together, they raised their wands. He spared a glance back at Hermione. She still wasn't moving. She looked badly injured, crumpled and broken-limbed. Her eyes were open. Sightless.

Harry felt a moment of despair.

This is all so stupid and so pointless. We could have set up the Goblet different ways. We could have tried binding everyone with it – redundant contracts, nested together. To have come so far, and to be so close to success... we were really doing it, after all. We could have saved everyone.

It would have been perfect. Now this sad and stupid ending. Just like Voldemort, who wasted every chance he ever had, even his last chance at dignity, and now he's lost in a prison of metal and magic, hidden somewhere in the Tower beyond Harry's reach.

"Lagann!" cast the twins, together, and the Breaking Drill shattered Harry's shield. It vanished, and Harry staggered back.

And even at this moment, when all was lost, his thoughts didn't stop. Instead, they came faster – faster and faster, still thinking

of the last moment he'd ever spend with Professor Quirrell – Lord Voldemort. Wasting his own last moment.

That scornful last word. That wasted last word. And he could almost hear it again, now, as the twins leveled their wands at him. He could hear that cold laugh, and the roaring mocking hateful last word: "Bah!"

Bah.

The instant of understanding was like a breath of sweet air to a drowning man's lungs.

"Bah. Egeustimentis Ba," Harry said, loudly.

The twins swayed in place slightly, blinking. They lowered their wands, and looked at each other, raising their eyebrows.

It was suddenly very quiet. It was suddenly very still.

And for once in their life, the Weasley twins found they didn't have a single clever thing to say.

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## Levee



Eventually, of course, help arrived. A gathered force of Russian, Chinese, American, and Korean witches and wizards had answered the urgent plea of Headmistress McGonagall, who had acted swiftly and with her usual competence to demand assistance. Indeed, they had sent their most elite response teams: the Boston Brahmins, the Siberian Rakshasa, the Jīngluò, and the Three Treasures. After an initial accident in the Receiving Room, it took half an hour to negotiate a peaceful end to rising hostility and suspicion. Harry's message had stated that everyone in the Tower had been suborned by an intruder, and it was – unsurprisingly – difficult to prove that this was no longer true... especially since the visitors from around the world brought grim news of their own.

The Muggle news services had broken into panic – in some cases, outright hysteria – over mass disappearances that had occurred in major cities around the globe. Thousands of people, maybe tens of thousands, had gone missing. Entire neighborhoods had been emptied of their populations in less than a day. The Witch-Watchers and their counterparts in other countries had passed on the news, of course, but few in the magical world had been able to say what it might mean. Such feats of malice were beyond the abilities of any person or persons yet known. Nothing on the scale had been done in many generations, since the era when magical combat between powerful wizards depended heavily on controlling crowds of armed Muggles with charms and threats.

Also troubling was the restive behavior of the goblins. It had already been apparent that all seven goblin cities had been in communication with each other, and most particularly with Ackle. Spies and spells revealed that these Beings had gone further, and

that a fearsome gathering of goblins had massed on the plains near Ackle, heedless of Muggle eyes. The goblin nation, encamped in their thousands, rejected all emissaries and inquiries and threats with cold words and armed guards. Magical observers could only watch them huddle amid brightly-colored canvas and clockwork beasts of silver, and wonder.

There were rumors and suspicions, especially after two exhausting hours had been spent communicating the events of the past two days and all the concerns that faced them. Communications were sent back to different Things, and responses multiplied by the minute. Grindelwald's cell had been examined, and the shackles of the Abiku were checked, and the dark pit of Sarai's oubliette was secured. But the monsters were all snug in their captivity, and worried minds turned to other possibilities. The name of Merlin was mentioned. Atlantis was mentioned. Only a few knew enough to speak of the Three, and tremble.

Some did not react well. A seer in Istanbul had gone mad, screaming about the return of the Dökkálfr – sheer madness, for that grim faerie people had been gone from the earth for a hundred generations. And a Slytherin boy named Lawrence felt a cold shiver run up his spine as he read the late edition of *The Daily Prophet* and recognized that, once more, deathly dangerous events were building on the near horizon.

And yet for all this, as Harry Potter-Evans-Verres sat in a crowded meeting room, surrounded by some of the most important and powerful individuals on the planet, drafting orders to be delivered to the Muggle Prime Minister and Minister of Magic Carmel N'Goma, and struggling to understand the sheer scale of the threat that loomed... for all this, Harry yet found himself wondering about Voldemort.

Where are you, Professor? They could probably find him with the thaumometers, the same way they'd located Horcruxes. But Harry had lost not only the memories of where he'd hidden away Voldemort's cell, he'd even lost how he'd hidden it away. Just thinking about it, he knew he'd be unable to look for the secret prison within the Tower... it was too dangerous for him. What sorts of traps or obfuscation did I put in place? Hermione will have to look for it, but will she even agree? Yes, she will, once I

put her to imagining an endless hell of solitary confinement and sensory deprivation. We will have to –

"Harry!" said Mafalda Hopkirk, irritably, snapping her fingers. The buxom head of the Unspeakables had clearly been trying to get his attention for some time. Amelia Bones and Reg Hig, standing next to her, looked almost as upset.

"Sorry," Harry said, feeling his face redden. He stood up from his seat at the conference table, glancing around the meeting room. No one else seemed to have noticed his distraction. Moody was conferring with his aides, several of the Americans and Chinese, and three representatives from the Muggle government; Cedric was speaking urgently with Hermione, the Shichinin – why did Neville have a black eye? – and the Koreans; a pale Umbridge was sitting silently in the corner while the two sfaironauts (Percy's brother, Ron, and Basil Horton) spoke with Draco; and two of the Returned, Hyori and Esther, were standing watchfully with several aurors.

Harry turned to Hopkirk, taking a deep breath and trying to settle himself. "Sorry, Mafalda," he said again. "It's been a difficult couple of days. Where are we?"

"We're in crisis," Hopkirk replied, succinctly. Her smooth, commanding voice was clipped.

"While we were trapped and enslaved, the world went mad," said Hig. He rubbed the end of his plum nose, sighing. "I have to leave almost immediately to start dealing with just the problems springing up in the Americas. Thousands of people are missing from New York, Rio de Janeiro, and Mexico City. And Van Rensselaer, Randolphs, and Hardicanute," and Hig indicated three of the Boston Brahmins, "all have reports of other disturbances. Infierno has been breached, and twenty dark wizards and witches have escaped custody."

"La Boca del Infierno has been broken into?" broke in Bones, sharply. Without waiting for a reply, she stabbed a finger at one of Moody's aides, who compliantly approached. "Send a team of Hit Wizards to check on Howard. Gecko protocol." The aide's face paled, and he raced away.

"Our prophecy-analysts agree with the verdict of the Pool of Demand... something is happening, bigger than... well, bigger than anything they've ever seen or heard of," said Hopkirk. She sounded calm, but her shoulders were rigid with tension. "Time is frozen," said Moody, who approached. There was a grim set to his jaw. "Time everywhere is frozen. We tried to set some surveillance in place and begin preparations, and we lost two aurors. Bad deaths. Shouldn't be possible to do that, but the second attempt was made in Japan, and it failed too."

"I checked back in with Powis," said Hermione, who joined the conclave, Cedric and Draco following. "Urg says he's gotten messages from Curd, and it confirms what Cedric just told me. Thousands of goblins from all over the world have gathered in Ackle."

"Apparating, though most of them only recently got wands?" said Bones, in surprise. She checked herself in a moment. "No, of course not... stockpiled portkeys." She frowned, grimly. "And that hints at long preparation."

"We knew they'd been gathering weapons," said Harry, wearily. "We were going to... I don't even know what we were going to do. Speak to them, I suppose. This isn't a surprise, though." He felt sick to his stomach. He knew that it wasn't the right way to think about it – to think that they *owed* him anything, just because he'd finally begun to put an end to years of oppression. A good person stopped doing evil because it was evil, not because they wanted something from the victim. But it was still a bitter pill to swallow.

"After all we've done for those vile little creatures," said Hopkirk. Moody and Bones nodded, their faces sour. Draco looked torn between smugness and horror.

Hermione frowned and glanced at Harry, but said nothing.

Harry imagined all the deadly things that could be done with goblincraft and a little ingenuity. He imagined all the damage a mass mob of people could do when enchanted, even without magic. He imagined the power of ancient magic from ages past, wielded today. He imagined all the unknowns that might yet present themselves.

"Assets," he said, abruptly, swallowing the bile rising in his throat. "What are our assets?"

They collaborated to tick them off, estimating the number of witches and wizards they could bring to bear in battle in different scenarios, and their effectiveness. The leaders of the Jīngluò and Rakshasa joined the group, working with Hig to fill in the gaps.

Everyone lied to everyone else, omitting available artifacts and warriors from their accounting, but it wasn't too long before the small group had an estimate of the total armed force they might be able to summon, if every member of the Confederation could be brought to bear.

There were perhaps a million wizards and witches in the world, with higher concentrations in a few places like Britain (for reasons that might best be described as "imperial"). Perhaps half of that number had more than rudimentary magical schooling, and an even smaller proportion could be said to be ready to fight. All told, an optimistic estimate of the wizards available to fight in a world-threatening emergency – like massed armies of Muggles or goblins – would be something like fifty thousand. The actual forces they'd probably have on hand on short notice would be something like a tenth of that total.

"Are we moving too fast?" Cedric asked, as they reached their grim conclusions. "We don't even know if the disappearances or the goblins are related to each other, or to Meldh's attack here, or even if there's going to be conflict."

"I think," said Hermione, carefully, "that we should probably work on the assumption that all of the events are related in some way, even if it's not the way we might think. We certainly shouldn't start any accidental wars, but it's the Three, after all, not the One. There are two more Meldhs out there, and he told Harry that there was going to be violence."

"We should assume the worst," said Draco with a look of gentle scorn for Cedric. "But even if wizards are outnumbered by goblins or Muggles, even if it's three to one, we can win. As long as we know where they will strike and prepare for rapid movement, we'll wipe out any attack."

Harry held up his hand and waited for the bustle to quiet down. He looked to Madame Bones.

"Supreme Mugwump, if I might?" She nodded assent, impatiently, and Harry raised his voice. "We need to prioritize and organize. We need communication between decision-makers. We need to determine likely targets, and likely forces at our command. We need to try to figure out who is behind this – if it is the Three – and what they want."

He pointed at Moody and Hig, in turn. "Reg, I know you want to go home, but you need to have home brought to you. You will work with Moody and sort out our vulnerabilities... no, the *world's* vulnerabilities. If possible, get in touch with He Jin of the Court of Rubies, and let him take the lead."

Harry next turned to Draco and Bones. "Draco, you and Madame Bones might best work on a command structure and mobilizing our forces. Everyone you can think of, and assume some groups will betray us – either out of short-sighted ignorance or deliberate treachery. Find the Minister and Percy and ask them to help."

He turned to the remaining individuals. "Our friends from other countries need to assign emergency plenipotentiary representatives. Everyone else, we'll have specific things for you to do, shortly." He drew a deep breath, reaching back to pull his ponytail snug. "Listen, Draco is right. Some of you know me, but I think I can say without ego that everyone here knows of me. And trust me when I say that we can do this. Even if we're surprised by an attack, and an enemy has local superiority, wizards have superior mobility and firepower in almost every direct conflict. Even if this is the worst-case scenario — a return to the old days we've read about in books, with armies of thousands and goblin armies wielding their weapons — we'll be evenly matched with them. If we keep our heads about us, we can do this."

Many people nodded firmly, cheering at the little speech. Placing their faith in him. Some scowled or rolled their eyes. They needed no encouragement, or didn't buy it. A few only looked angry. He didn't know why.

"Meldh put those of us in the Tower through hell, but we beat him. We beat him with our wits and our preparation. We can do that now, if the Three are really attacking on this scale – really stepping out of the shadows. They're using all the powers of the old world, everything that's always worked for villains like them in the days gone by. But we're going to use all the powers of our new world to match them, and we're going to beat them."

Before Harry had finished speaking, an auror had appeared at the front entrance to the meeting room, his face shiny with sweat and filled with horror. Another messenger was on his heels, and she rushed to Mafalda Hopkirk. Oh no.

"Madame Bones," he said, his voice strained. "An army of Muggles has attacked the Ministry. It's been evacuated and they're holding off the enemy, but there are thousands of them. And Howard Prison has been breached. And there's —"

He was interrupted by a short shriek from Hopkirk, who was swaying where she stood, drunkenly, her face stricken.

All eyes turned to her.

"The Unseelie have risen. The flesh-harrowers. The ravers. The sailors of the sea of teeth. Oh Merlin, no, no, no... to hell with Muggles and goblins, the *Unseelie* have returned to the world." Her voice was strangled, and it was hard to say if it was the shock of her words or the dissolution of her normal composure that was the more disturbing. "It's not... we can't... oh, Merlin, why? You do not call up that which you cannot put down. We're... we're..." She swayed again, putting a hand on the shoulder of an adjunct, overcome with horror.

"We're all going to die," Hopkirk whispered. "This whole world is going to die."

## www.chapter fourteen www.

# **Bell**



And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech.

And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar; and they dwelt there.

And they said one to another, Go to, let us make brick, and burn them thoroughly. And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for morter.

And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.

And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded.

And the Lord said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do.

Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech.

So the Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city.

— Genesis 11:1-8



Trafalgar Square, London May 19th, 1999 4:40 PM

The deep timbre of the anchor's voice was so low-pitched that it was hard to understand over Andrea's earpiece, and she had to ask him to repeat his question. She held one hand over the earpiece, both to help her make out his bass rumble and to serve as a visual excuse for the repetition.

"Andrea, have you been able to speak to anyone there to get an idea of what's happening?" Bill repeated in an anchor's practiced voice: warm and concerned, but confident enough to reassure. Andrea was reasonably certain that his sort were grown in a vat somewhere.

"There is a lot of confusion, and a lot of fear, Bill," she said, shaking her head and using the obvious for filler as she planned the rest of her response. "We're not sure what is going on, but we know that it's something serious... and something dangerous. Officials here will only say that there has been a dangerous incident to our south – something so dangerous that they've evacuated everyone from the government buildings in Whitehall: the office of the Treasury, the Old Admiralty, and very nearly the whole of this area, the seat of the whole British government."

"And just to confirm, we haven't been able to get any more details? Theories right now range from some sort of chemical spill to an attack with biological weapons, and many experts have stated that they believe this incident is related to the recent mass disappearances around the world."

"There are no details available, Bill, but we can hear regular explosions coming from beyond the cordon... and the police here are preventing us from advancing any further," Andrea said. *Especially after what happened to the BBC crew*. The thought of those poor people – of what she'd seen on the feed from their cameras – it made her skin crawl.

There were seventeen crews here, and they'd all huddled around a monitor set up on the back gate of the BBC ops truck. They'd sworn not to say anything until they were cleared to do so by the authorities. How could they do otherwise?

The rough footage showed the crew advancing down the riverwalk on the Victoria Embankment, skirting a police cordon that hadn't yet been established. One of the producers was audible, talking to the other in rough, quiet tones as they moved at nearly a jog down the pavement. There was a buzz of indiscriminate noise behind her words, and eventually it grew loud enough that they all fell silent, rather than raising their voices to be heard. The late afternoon sun cut sharp shadows from the trees to their right. No one else was visible.

The BBC crew had paused for a moment to get an establishing shot of the river and Big Ben, turning the camera south along the deserted street and panning past a long line of motionless cars and buses.

Then the camera had rocked and swerved, dipping forward as someone made a guttural sound of surprise or alarm. For a moment, all that was visible was blurry pavement, and then the camera reared back up and to the right. For one sickeningly long second – no more than a second – a heavyset woman in a thick, tan apron was visible, eyes wide and staring. Her hair was streaming down the side of her face, torn loose from a bun, and there was a thick section of pipe clutched in her hands. It was covered in blood, and a matted wad of gorey hair dangled from its end. There were other people visible behind her, packed into a dense mob. They were marching steadily forward in a single mass that parted around the Fleet Air Arm Memorial statue, heading towards the BBC crew. A few people were distinct in the crowd: a man with a rifle in his hands, a child with a knife, a woman with some sort of large tube hugged to her chest.

Then the second was past, and the camera lurched away and leapt at the pavement, smashing itself dark.

"We know her Majesty the Queen has been confirmed as safe, and also the British Prime Minister," said the anchor, "but how much is this going to impact the government there?

Andrea nodded thoughtfully to show that this was a meaningful conversation and not just speculation, and answered, "Some of the most important leaders of the country may be in danger, but we just don't know enough yet to say for sure, Bill."

"Thank you, Andrea. We'll be back with you later. Stay safe out there," Bill said, and she nodded sagely, as though she had a fucking clue whether or not she was safe. "Let's turn now to analysis from Lieutenant General Hassan. General, what are some of the possibilities we might be looking at?"

The entrance to the Ministry of Magic, Gwydyr House, London

After ten minutes of hell, the aurors began using lethal spells. There hadn't been any order to that effect, but in a moment of desperation or anger an auror animated the centaur statue on the fountain in the center of the atrium. The stone sculpture clopped down off of its perch with granite feet, nocked an arrow, and sent the yard-long stone bolt across the atrium and through the chests of two Muggles. They crumpled to the ground, dead. Two other Muggles snatched up their weapons — a knife and a gun — but a taboo had been broken. Another auror lit the clothing of his attackers on fire with a word, and the room dissolved into blood and battle.

Some of the staff and aurors at the Ministry recognized what was happening for what it was. The more learned wizards and the amateur historians knew why the time-turners weren't working and why they couldn't Apparate, even though the only enemy visible was a monstrous wall of hate-faced Muggles. They'd read the stories of the great battles of the old days, when warlord wizards had matched their armies against each other.

At least now there was no more wondering about where the missing Muggles had gone, stolen in their thousands from cities around the world. Some were here. *Many* were here.

History was full of accounts of wars much like this one; as the Mhlongo Scroll said, "The most fundamental principle of war is control. Your beasts are a steady wave, and it is your task to unsteady your opponent, the better to wet them. Direct your attacks so as to limit their options, not to damage the foe. Then the waves will overtake them."

Casting spells took energy and will. Even the most powerful wizard wouldn't have an infinite supply of both. Keep them pinned down and eliminate their options for escape. Eventually, they would tire or make a mistake or lose heart. And as every student of magical history knew, that's when the Muggles got you.

The wars of armies and attrition had been gone for generations, abandoned with the Statute of Secrecy and the creation of modern magical nation-states after the Peace of Westphalia. Private armies of Muggles were not conducive to secrecy nor governance, and they had become a thing of the past.

Unfortunately, it seemed the past had caught up with them.

The well-equipped and well-trained aurors stationed at the Ministry of Magic had done their jobs. Those few stationed outside had alerted their compatriots the instant the massed wall of humanity had charged down the street towards the Ministry, a mad parade of mayhem that seemingly had come from nowhere. The aurors had managed to evacuate almost everyone except for active defenders; they'd gotten out word of the attack; and they'd sealed the Ministry at three points. The stout doors hadn't stopped the Muggle mob for very long, but successive layers of wards and traps had sealed away the atrium for nearly an half hour, despite the concussive power of the weapons the Muggles had brought. Bodies soon littered the streets outside, mounded up among the Muggle government buildings, torn by shards of crystal, burnt by acid, and otherwise ruined by every craft of magic. It was magical slaughter, and it was madness. But the Ministry stood.

Then chariots of fire swept down into the atrium from some sideways place, drawn by horses of stomping flame, and Muggles began to pour out among the defenders – far more than should ever have fit on those chariots, as though the phaetons of fire had no limits on their capacity. It was a novel attack, an *impossible* attack, casting an army in the midst of the aurors despite the thick protections that should have prevented such transportation.

Many of the Muggles were already injured or covered with blood, stained with the efforts of previous misdeeds. They attacked with purpose and intensity, but showed no malice or madness. They had guns, clubs, knives, and improvised weapons. And there seemed no end to them. Hundreds. Thousands. More.

The atrium soon began to fill with the dead and dying. One auror team fought to create a new perimeter, conjuring acrid smoke in clouds enough to choke the Muggles. But their attackers only staggered forward through the smoke, climbing over the fallen in an endless flood of grim murder, beating savagely on shields and wards with their weapons.

The defenders tore through them: stabbing hails of splinters; infectious pulses of green light; blasts of acid-filled wind. Each dead Muggle was replaced with two more, and when shields began to fail under the rain of blows, attackers began to slip through the

gaps. Determined fingers seized one auror's arm when he was a trifle too slow, dragging him down in an instant. A man with an iron club smashed it against the wizard's skull, and he stopped moving. The man pulped the auror's head with two more blows before the Killing Curse took him from the world. Too late.

The defenders fell back to a choke point. They abandoned the atrium, filling it with a last billowing cloud of fire and smoke, and then took the elevators down a floor to the DMLE. They destroyed the magical lifts, filled the shaft with rubble, and began creating traps and barriers.

It should have been impossible for Muggles to breach the Ministry proper. But then, it should have been impossible for Muggles to even find the entrance to the Ministry, much less break through to the atrium.

The defenders made frantic calls on their bubblers for reinforcements, desperate to create some kind of plan to drive away the enemy. The possibility of simply abandoning the premises was considered, but discarded; it wasn't a matter of pride or principle that they needed to retain control, but rather a concern for all the objects safeguarded in the Department of Mysteries, and the hidden hand that might be seeking them. There were secret and powerful things under guard there, some beyond the understanding of the Unspeakables themselves, and they could not be allowed to fall into the wrong hands.

Two dozen wizards arrived by Vanishing Cabinet, and two dozen more began to harry the close-packed horde surrounding the Ministry, killing as many as they could with their most devastating spells. Still other aurors flew to Gringotts, hoping to beg or bribe to borrow the dragons that the goblins kept. Beasts had been a method of Muggle control too, once. Such control might even have been their intended purpose. At this moment, however, the doors were found sealed, and another hope dashed.

The wizards were remembering and employing some of their more creative methods of killing *en masse*. The Butterball Charm turned the road liquid, drowning its victims in a slurry of slippery stone. Mandrakes had been fetched, and their screams killed everyone around them. And magical fires consumed Muggle after Muggle. The enemy fell in droves. But there was simply *no* 

end to the Muggles. There were thousands of them, pouring in every minute without stop, unleashed from some hidden hoard of humanity. It wasn't fair. No, worse than that... it wasn't even sane. It was as though the hidden hand behind the attack didn't care about their forces or any perceivable objective. It was all pointless—all the fear and blood and anger.

Some of the Muggles had little packages that exploded. Blast-bombs. Inside the Ministry, those who had fallen back to the lower level felt the stone around them shake and heard explosions, and cast grim looks at each other. Even if the explosives couldn't really reach them, eventually more flaming chariots would arrive among them.

The Muggles were coming. Endless. Remorseless. The defenders of the Ministry of Magic were fighting an ocean, and the ocean was winning.

It is perhaps understandable that some began to weep when they heard from their bubblers that a wave of Muggles, packed in a plenitude without end, had appeared at Hogsmeade. And there was no one to stop them, for there were other attacks happening... all over the world. Even the Tower was under attack, locked down and sealed off. Tears were only natural.

Many of the aurors had children at Hogwarts, after all.

## 

"Oh, sacred Ether and you winds, masters of speed! You, waters of rivers and you, endless laughter of Ocean's waves! Oh, Mother Earth! And you, Sun, who sees all!

Look at me! Look at my suffering, I, a god who must suffer the punishment of gods!

Look at what outrageous torment I must endure for countless years! Look at these dire shackles this new ruler of the Gods has devised for me!

Ah! Ah! I groan for my suffering now and for all the suffering to come. When will I see their end?

But what am I saying? I know the future and all that it will bring and I know all my suffering beforehand, so I must endure as best I can what Necessity has sent upon me because she cannot be resisted.

Yet, neither can I speak nor stay silent about this agony that I am forced to suffer. I've hunted down and stolen, inside the hollow of a fennel's stalk, the seed of fire, a gift that has proven itself to be the teacher of every craft and the greatest resource for humans. Such is the crime I have committed and this is the penalty I am to suffer: nailed and chained on this rock beneath the open sky."

— Prometheus Bound, Aeschylus

#### 

Tidewater, Boston, United States of America Earlier The same day

It was a fine, clear afternoon, and Councilor Littlebrook Strong-bound was having his mulled egg-wine on the grotto balcony. The Alþing had a lovely view of the harbour, sticking up from among the lesser buildings of Tidewater with sharp concrete edges, and one of the small perks of his long tenure on the Council was access to an office like this one. He sipped his drink and looked out on the water, sighing contentedly.

Already, today had been a productive day. Hig had been playing things close to the vest for months when it came to the Brits and their damned Treaties. Strongbound had known it was all a power play by his old foe. He'd tried to shore up support along traditional lines, making a deal with that little snakeling son of Lucius, only to discover that the little brute had turned the whole Independence movement out for fools, capitalizing on the idiocy of the Thunderer and the Cappadocians' brute hatred, precipitating a conflict that was obviously doomed from the start. The very evening of that one-day war had left the Malfoy boy in a position to negotiate his way into the top of that stupid Tower hospital/school/Thing, but had left all of his erstwhile allies out in the cold. There was no chance of a better deal at that point, and so they had supported him, reasoning that it was better to have a seat at the table than be left alone in the world.

Now it was becoming clear that the Malfoy boy had few ideals, if any, and was just waiting for his chance to depose the scar-faced pottery king. And Hig – damn that ugly stump! — was in the catbird seat. Strongbound could see it, now... Hig had spent months railing against the "new dark lord" and the Treaty for Health and Life in order to maximize his bargaining position. Then Hig made one trip to Britain, and suddenly he was open to a deal. And the deal he made with the Goddess just happened to include enormous subsidies to Salem and the Russell Institute, arithmancers to "help" with the Council finances, the end to damnable British support for the damned Cypriots, and the elimination of tariffs. Hig claimed personal credit for the feat – meaning that he could claim the gratitude of the monied merchants, the support of the elites, and the appeasement of all the Turcophiles who'd long distrusted him.

But today, Strongbound would finally begin to make inroads. He examined the drink in his fingers, smiling at the thought. Ever since the centaur bill, Hig had held the upper hand on access to the Earnest Ears Bureau. More of his review requests were approved by the oversight committee than anyone else, meaning he had access to essentially any of the wealth of information that the Council programs were always bringing in. Finally, though, Strongbound had struck gold with one of his own requests – one of the few he'd gotten past the committee – and soon, things would change. A delightful, dirty little secret between two of the councilors on the committee, and now he knew it. It was leverage, and that leverage would translate into information, and that information would translate into power.

Strongbound sipped his warm drink, and began to be happy and make plans.

"Hoooo," called someone from the street, their voice lilting and strange. Strongbound frowned, and leaned forward, to peer over the balcony railing. There was no one standing on the cobblestones below: the afternoon light showed nothing but a scrap of lone parchment scraping its way along in the gentle breeze.

Strongbound leaned back.

There was someone behind him. He could feel it.

He turned.

Large eyes. Black and oily. Wet. White skin. Flaky, run through with spidering cracks. Ragged in places, as gnawed.

Long, thin limbs. Sparse flesh. Lumpy joint.

Mouth. Smile.

Smile.

The thing turned hand finger open smile. Teeth dark touching rough. Rasping. Skin part yawn moving scream. Night whisper lust end cut. Thousand no my ripping beyond wet. Rough. Red. Black. Black. Cut. Scream.

Smile.

#### 

It took Councilor Littlebrook Strongbound a very long time to die. When he finally did, the Alþing of the Mystical and Benevolent Council of Westphalia was left quiet and empty of life. A bundiwig remained to walk the halls alone, pausing to lick wet spots on the floor now and again, its swarming mass of chizpurfles milling about on its back. The gaunts moved on to the next taste of magic and time, moving from building to building in Tidewater. None escaped, their magic dying in their veins. Viscs lazily flapped through the air in their wake, borne on tissue-thin wings.

#### 

Hogsmeade, Scotland At the same time The same day

While a few stubborn and brave wizards stood their ground to try to drive off some of the Muggles, almost all the residents and workers of Hogsmeade evacuated their little village as soon as they saw the steady-marching mass of the unmagical. The enemy's presence was known instantly, of course. Even before the Tower existed, security precautions had included the closest settlement to the school. Nicomedius Salamander and Holly Nguyễn had been stationed there. It was a tedious assignment and one dreaded by aurors, but the pair had voluntary service in Azkaban on their record, and so their careers had stalled. They were on duty,

standing idly outside of Honeydukes, when they heard the first screams and saw someone send up red sparks.

Despite their current status, the two aurors were well-trained and experienced. Salamander alerted the DMLE and the Receiving Room, while Nguyễn took to the air to reconnoiter the enemy.

Nguyễn barely caught sight of the mob before she was attacked. They were lucky or too numerous, and a bullet tore through her outer thigh before she could shield herself appropriately. She yelped and wobbled in her seat, but held on, pulling up and away. Stupid, stupid, stupid. Firearms were surprising and instantaneous, but they only shot bullets – a repetitive and easily countered attack. Even if Nguyễn hadn't been a Muggleborn, she would have been able to deal with a few gun-toting Muggles.

A thousand gun-toting Muggles were a different story. They were crowding into Hogsmeade, their numbers so great that their weight brought down fences, and several of them were actually being pushed through shop windows as the village streets were filled to overflowing. Nguyễn saw broad red puddles, smeary with dozens of trudging Muggles, where they'd already seized some poor innocents. She didn't see whoever it was who'd sent up red sparks, but scraps of bloody robes were visible underfoot in front of Dervish & Banges. The front of the Magic Neep had been smashed in, and smoke was pouring out.

Nguyễn circled the mass in a wide arc, high enough so that their thrown weapons fell short, and looked for the wizards in control. Some sort of bus or plane must have brought all of them, she thought as she tore open a package of Wondo-Slo-Blood, slapping the wet cloth on her leg. Too bloody many for... well, even portkeys wouldn't work. You'd need hundreds of them.

But she saw no apparent magical attackers and no apparent transportation, which was very worrying. It was as though a football stadium full of unusually well-armed hooligans had taken it upon themselves to go have a pint at the Hog's Head, and had just walked straight into a magically protected village that was stacked with Anti-Muggle Charms.

Nguyễn returned to Salamander, finding him standing outside of the Three Broomsticks, and felt panic rising in her guts. It got worse when Salamander told her curtly that the Ministry was under siege by Muggles, and that the Tower had been in lockdown and wasn't operational, and that there were a hundred other things going wrong all over the world. Had the Statute of Secrecy just been broken somehow, everywhere? Had Muggles gone to war on wizards? She'd always thought that was Slytherin bunk, but there didn't seem to be any alternative.

"Everybody safely out?" she asked Salamander, dropping down next to him. She remained on her broom, with one hand pressed to her thigh.

Salamander shook his head, and slammed the heel of one hand into the inn's door again. "No! Almost everyone responded to the alarm, but this idiot won't leave – I was about to knock in this door and drag her out!"

Nguyễn glanced over her shoulder. The Muggles would be there in minutes, a well-armed wall of humanity. She shouted at the door, "Madame Rosmerta? It's Holly! You need to leave — you need to get out *now*! There are hundreds of Muggles coming, and they've already killed some people! We can't protect you if they try to get in and get you... a few casks of butterbeer aren't worth your life!"

There was a heavy thump, and the door opened. Madame Rosmerta peeked out. She'd been rejuvenated, but she'd already been so young that her appearance was little changed: bouncy brown hair, pale green eyes, and a skeptical pinch to her mouth. "Muggles? Well, why don't —"

"Confundus," Nguyễn cast, her wand a flicker of motion. She didn't bother with any alternate states of mind, and leaving just a dull-witted confusion in place. She pulled a Safety Stick from inside of her robes.

"Wait!" said Salamander, reaching up to grab her wrist. "The Tower just got out of lockdown – I already told you." He handed her a milled metal rod, dimpled in the center. "Use this. It's international, but I don't have any others, and we can't take the time to side-along her."

Nguyễn didn't argue. She put the rod right into Rosmerta's hands, then mimed a bending motion to the woman. Rosmerta complied, a dull look in her eyes. The rod bent, and she was lifted sideways and away, spinning off into a direction that didn't exist

and vanishing from sight with the familiar, comforting sound of a portkey.

"Signal to Hogwarts. That's where they're headed. And call for help," said Nguyễn. She kicked her broom up to be even with the roof, and heard the sound of Muggle feet, far too close.

"Call where?" Salamander asked. "Broom," he said to his pouch, and mounted. He rose up next to her. "The DMLE and the Tower are both under attack. We can fly up to the castle, but who are we going to call to come help? Those are the people who should be helping us!"

"Call someone – anyone!" snapped Nguyễn. "Bubble anyone you know who's stationed at a Safety Pole. Or Howie – maybe they can spare some people."

The two aurors pulled away as the first Muggles came into view. They sped off towards the castle.

No one stationed at the Safety Poles or Howard Prison answered. Either they were too busy – an ominous possibility – or they were unable to pick up a bubbler at all – a much worse possibility.

Nguyễn and Salamander put on more speed and tried to think of someone else they could call for help... someone who might answer quickly, and with force. The Hogwarts grounds whipped by below, the Forbidden Forest looming large and the school growing swiftly ahead of them as they approached.

Things were desperate, so Salamander resorted to desperate measures. He bubbled a former auror who had been acting like a nutter for years. It was true desperation, that it had come to this.

She picked up almost instantly, babbling in a strained rush. "Hullo. Just realized I missed a button and three weeks ago I saw a dog and it looked at me and I thought of five good names for it but when I was seventeen a dog vommed in my bed and so all the names had to do with vomit and I'm very worried about things right now at the Tower and we're about to leave so you better make this quick. Sorry about that, it keeps happening, what is it?"

"Tonks," Salamander said, cupping the mirror with his hand and shouting to be heard over the rush of wind. "We need help!"

#### 

Everywhere, there were attacks. Everywhere, there were invaders. Salem, Paris, Oslo, Huangzhou, Moscow, Cyprus, Johannesburg, Abuja, Dunedin. Vast crowds of Muggles attacked, or hooting Unseelie, or newly-free dark wizards in their dozens, or other... things. It was a masterpiece of coercion and coordination and carnage, as though some monstrous god were raining down the wrath of armies upon the world. And in many places, there was no help at all.

#### 

Godric's Hollow At the same time The same day

The alarm had been raised, and there was no one to come.

Ten monsters stood on a clear ridge above the village, looking down a steep slope at the thatched huts and low brick walls of the magical settlement. The basilisks had been hooded, swaying in place uncomfortably, and the terrasque stood as impassive as the rock from which they had been made. Four wizards stood behind the monsters, wands in hand. Their posture was tense and uncertain; they were not the masters, rather merely the attendants to beasts beyond their ability to truly control. The snakes and stones acted under the command of an unseen presence, and those dark wizards who'd accepted the cheerful offer of a chirpy young stranger now found themselves regretting that choice.

Still, they were free. That was more than could be said yesterday. And the power they had seen from their savior... no, they would do as they were told. They waited where they had been told to wait.

The defenders moved rapidly in the village below. Two of the patrol-wizards were escorting one last protesting inhabitant out of his home, a wizard who had refused to abandon his kneazles. The others were working under the direction of the aurors and the Hit Wizard squad to try to set up wards and traps – even simple barriers of stone, whatever they thought might slow down the

earthbound enemy. There had been some discussion of attacking the fiends on the ridge before the situation deteriorated even further, but... well, reason could be flexible in the face of fear, even among the trained and brave. There were twoscore wizards to defend the ancient village, and they were afraid.

Should they have fled? Abandoned Godric's Hollow and its treasures and its history? Perhaps that would have been wise. But they did not go. They found mirrors, instead, that they might bear the basilisk's gaze from at least some distance, and they searched their memories for the spells that might work – some of them desperately trying to remember combat magic for the first time in decades – and they hoped for help.

No help came.

Goblins came instead.

The sound of their approach was like the grumbling of a great metal dragon. One hundred goblins marched up onto the ridge from the west, their armored boots slamming into the ground. They bore pennants fixed to their spears, bright with the colors of inscrutable traditions and clans. Many of them bore shields of silver or gold or bronze as well, and every shield was different and every shield was beautiful.

They did not march in unison, but they had discipline enough, for at a shouted signal, they came to an abrupt halt on the ridge's edge, twenty yards from the monsters. One of the dark wizards behind the beasts nodded solemnly, as if in greeting.

The goblins turned to regard the cowed defenders of Godric's Hollow.

#### 

The country was as noisy as a bellowing bull

The God grew restless at their racket,

Enlil had to listen to their noise.

He addressed the great gods,

"The noise of mankind has become too much,

I am losing sleep over their racket.

Give the order that surrupu-disease shall break out."

— The Epic of Gilgamesh

### 

## Hogwarts

"The Tower is open again – there was a takeover attempt," said Salamander, lowering his bubbler.

In unison, all five of the Returned turned to stare at him, lowering their wands. It was disturbing.

They stood in various places on the gentle slope in front of the castle's gate, where a staircase led up to the main doors and Great Hall. The path to Hogsmeade lay in front of them, time-smooth stones set in cement-hard earth, while the Forbidden Forest stretched out to their right, dark and dangerous. The Malfoy flying fortress, *The Declaration of Intent*, was just visible to the left, around the edge of the castle where the greenhouses were located.

"They're trying to sort things out, but the Goddess is fine," he said, crossly.

Simon glanced at Susie. She returned the glance with a frown, then turned back to Salamander. "We're going then, love."

He stiffened, staring at her. "Are you insane?"

" $Protego\ Totalum$ ," cast Tonks, her wand dabbing lightly at the air.

A few paces behind her, Simon was casting the same spell, and a few paces behind him, Charlevoix was putting her own wards up. A barrier against physicality was the best defense at the moment, layered to buy time. Twelve aurors and five fanatical criminals couldn't do much to stop that horde of Muggles, so they needed to delay them for as long as possible. Every minute that passed was another minute to allow reinforcements to arrive. With Time frozen – they'd gotten the warning, along with everyone else with a time-turner – this was the best strategy.

It was frustrating. On this day of insanity and emergency, the first responses had gone to the Ministry and to the Tower, and the second responses had gone... well, everywhere else possible, really. Now, even if they'd been able to contact the big hats who could countermand previous orders, there was no one left that they could even reach to help defend Hogwarts. It was *Hogwarts* and all they could find were seventeen wizards and witches to protect it! Nguyễn had gone to enlist the faculty and even the *prefects* to help, but a swarm of a thousand Muggles was marching on the school, only minutes away.

And now the Returned wanted to go cling to the Goddess' bloody skirts, taking years of fighting experience and those golden gauntlet weapons of theirs with them.

"We can't spare anyone. We need *ten times* as many. You're not going anywhere!" Salamander protested, bristling.

"We're going to help Hermione," Simon said, firmly.

"No, you're not," said Nguyễn, limping through the open front doors of the school, her voice fraught. "There are protocols for Imperius and Confundus infestation, and they're in effect. No one is going in or out of the Tower. The Terminus is following the letter of the rules, and no one is getting past the Receiving Room. And since you can't get in, you might as well stay here and help protect Ms. Granger's life."

This was a blatant lie, Salamander knew. The lockdown was over, and the Tower was probably the command center, like it had been during the One-Day War. But he said nothing, and didn't meet her eyes. They couldn't lose five battle-hardened combatants right now. Help would be coming, but there was fighting everywhere... they'd need every last wand.

To that end, there were nearly forty people following Nguyễn. Eight professors, Salamander saw with some relief. Competent help. None of them were from his own time, but he recognized most of them from one place or another, anyway. Slughorn, Sprout, Flitwick, Hooch, Sinistra, Vector, and Murkluk. He didn't recognize the fat one, but supposed he must be Professor Placela, the teacher they'd brought in to replace the proper Divination professor.

He was even glad to see the young adults who must be the prefects. Fifteen years old was essentially an adult in many ways, and they'd be able to at least keep themselves out of danger and cast some wards and jinxes. Fifth-years would have some

experience with Care of Magical Creatures, after all, and that wasn't so different from handling an angry Muggle. From the back lines, they'd be fine.

But there were at least twenty students who couldn't be past their fourth year.

"We can't –" Salamander began, glaring at one of them, and then he paused. "Where is everyone else? Where're Moody and the Tower aurors?"

"This is everyone," said Nguyễn. "The Tower was almost captured and all the most important people in the world are huddled up in there, safe, but there's so much going on... they're going to send help as soon as they can." She sounded bitter. "The Headmistress and two professors are guarding the students and activating more of the castle's defenses, but this is it."

You couldn't Apparate into Hogwarts. Any aurors sent elsewhere – to the Ministry, to Antarctica, to wherever – would be slow to return.

The Returned had already gone back to their preparations, turning their eerie hollow-eyed stares back to their work. They were laying traps along the path from Hogsmeade: Transfigured caltrops and blades, and patches of slurry-soft earth. The little goblin Returned – Og? Urg? – was pulling little metal boxes from a pouch at his waist, fitting them into the golden gauntlets he wore on both hands (unlike the others, who only had one apiece).

"We can help, sir," said one young man, a good-looking boy with dark skin and sharp cheekbones. "I can help." He sounded as though he were terrified, but his jaw was gritted.

"You're going to *die*," Salamander said, harshly. "We saw what was out there and it's a bloody *army*." Best to be out with it. Best for them to break now, rather than later.

"They know that," said Professor Slughorn, cutting in. His voice had none of its mellow roundness. It was cool and tight. "We all know that. Auror Nguyễn told us what we were facing. And she told us that there was no one else."

The sound of metal ringing on stone came from within the doors of Hogwarts, and a line of animated armor and statues marched faultlessly out of the school. They needed no direction and could endure disenchantment. Old magic, not used in a very long time, and well beyond anyone now alive.

"We're here to fight, sir," said the boy again. "I know it's bigger than us, but we can fight. We know things. It's..." He reached for words, and again Salamander could see the fear in his eyes. The fear that the young man was swallowing back like a stone. After an instant, the boy seemed to find what he'd been trying to say. "...it's no crime to reach beyond your grasp if you can see where you're reaching."

A handful of other students gathered behind the boy, and Salamander had the feeling that he was seeing through a glass darkly: a narrow view of a complicated story.

"Bravo," whispered Professor Sinistra.

"Well said, boy," said Salamander, grudgingly. "Well, we need to hold here. We need to hold until help can arrive. You can help. What's your name?"

"Lawrence," said the young man, raising his chin.

Salamander heard a rumble behind him. The Muggles were close. Professors and aurors were already deploying, many of them mounting brooms. Others took command of the students, putting them in the rear and giving them strict instructions. He turned around, and felt his stomach tighten. He glanced back at Lawrence as the boy was led away by Professor Slughorn, squinting at the lining of the young man's robes. Green. "You're a Slytherin?"

"Yes, sir," said Lawrence, turning back to the auror, and in that moment the fear was gone from his voice and his face, and he looked as calm as the morning. "A Silver Slytherin."

"They're coming!" shouted Nguyễn, her broom rising rapidly into the air to Salamander's left. "Nicomedius, get on the line!"

Salamander forgot his surprise, and got himself sorted.

By the time the Muggles appeared down the slope, the battle order was set. Behind the first layers of wards and shields, statues and suits of armor were arrayed, armed with their own enchanted weapons or whatever could be Transfigured for them. Nguyễn and a team of broom-mounted aurors and professors were already in the air, flying towards the enemy; they'd attack from behind and try to do as much damage to disable and slow down the attackers as they could. The rest of the defenders were in groups of three, arrayed just before the zig-zagging stairs that led to the castle's main doors, except for the Returned, who'd formed their

own broom-mounted, tight contingent off to one side, seemingly away from the main line of battle. The students were set on the staircase itself, in a position of partial cover where they could do some damage without being too vulnerable.

The fliers were out and off as soon as the Muggles were visible. The leading front of the unmagical was broken and staggered by the traps laid in their path. They weren't mindless, and took some care in their approach, but their determination made them seem more like ants than people: when a knot of Muggles tumbled into a hidden pit, caught or killed on the barbs within, their compatriots didn't even slow. The Muggles just kept coming. Some managed to shoot their guns here and there, where Extinguishing Charms from the fliers had left a gap, but even the rare impact fell on prepared shields.

As the Muggles drew in range, broken from their initial solid wave, wizards and witches began to lay flames and blades of crystal and other barriers in front. The Muggles pushed past and kept going, but their advance came at a cost of time and blood. Their injured were crushed underfoot. Scores died for every inch gained.

Salamander hurled curse after curse, and felt like he wanted to vomit. It was butchery, not combat.

At some hidden signal known only to themselves, the Returned swept away to the right, moving obliquely down the slope towards the Forbidden Forest. Most of the Muggles ignored them, even though the hollow-eyed fanatics continued to attack as they flew, lashing into the mass of the enemy with curses and conjurations. They opened up a second front, far enough away from the stairs to the main doors that the enemy was forced to either divide their attention or simply endure the attacks smashing into their flanks. Hammer and anvil.

The Muggles chose to ignore the attack, perhaps deciding that it was pointless to send part of their massed waves at the highly mobile Returned. Or perhaps the hidden wizard controlling them decided such. Or perhaps they'd simply gone mad, and were not capable of responding tactically. Whatever the cause, the Muggles just kept coming.

Before too long – indeed, after a sickeningly short time – they'd reached the first layer of wards. Ten hands began hammering

on the unseen barriers, then twenty, then forty. The Hogwarts shields responded, sparking lighting and fire into their attackers, but it just wasn't enough. Though they died in droves, there were hundreds more to take their place. Within a few minutes, the pressure of the smoking bodies alone was enough to break the shields, collapsing from sheer blunt trauma, like a wave crashing over a wall. Blood sprayed and foamed as the first shield warped and wept crimson energy, and then failed.

Salamander gave up on flame, which was doing too little damage and had no deterrent effect. He softened the earth instead, so Muggles were swallowed into sudden holes, drowning in liquid soil and crushing their allies beneath them.

He watched as the Returned began activating their gauntlets, pouring geysers of swelling, sticky foam into the mass of Muggles. It was effective, but short-lived, as those trapped were pressed down into the foam, and others began avoiding it. Less effective were bursts of wind or quantities of some stinging gas; neither did more than temporarily slow forty or fifty of the enemy.

But there were just too many. That was all. No failure of strategy and no surprises. Just hundreds upon hundreds of Muggles, pouring forward in a thick mass. Thousands upon thousands. A city's worth of men and women. More than should have been possible. More than was sane.

As more shields broke, the animated statues and armor began to step forward and attack. They wielded whatever weapons they'd been provided: one suit of armor swung a greataxe mechanically to and fro through Muggle flesh, while a marble statue of Vindictus Viridian swung a club of granite. The aurors and professors supported them, casting flames and noxious smoke into the front lines, while the students picked off those Muggles who broke past with the Sleep Hex.

The Returned poured fire into the flanks of the Muggles. Astonishingly, it seemed like they were actually using Transfiguration: transforming earth or flesh into thick clouds of acid or burning chemicals or poisonous gas. Despite everything, Salamander was shocked. That was madness – the actions of someone who didn't expect to live through the fight. But that was probably correct.

More than a thousand must have fallen already, Salamander thought numbly, looking at the heaped dead on the slope before him. He lashed arrows of steel through four Muggles, and then again through the ones behind them. He was beginning to feel burned-through and hollow, magically exhausted. They couldn't keep this up.

"Nicomedius," called a pleasant, silvery voice from his elbow. Salamander glanced to the side only long enough to see a corporeal patronus floating next to him. A cat. The Headmistress. "Help is coming. Ten minutes."

He lashed out with a wave of flame as one of the statues toppled over, smashed too often by a Muggle's iron bar. Two of the suits of animated armor were also down, and the Muggles had reached the second layer of wards and shields. Salamander spared another quick glance around him. Three of the fliers were down or dead. One of the professors had passed out from magical exhaustion. And he saw, to his surprise, that Lawrence was running away. He and a young woman had mounted brooms and were fleeing away from the fight and to the left, where the greenhouses and the looming shadow of *The Declaration of Intent* were visible.

Slytherins, he thought with disgust. Then he was fighting again, ignoring the black spots that were beginning to dance in front of his eyes.

"Hold the line!" he screamed. "Help is coming! Hold the line! Hold the line!"

### 

Miss Watson your runaway nigger Jim is down here two mile below Pikesville and Mr. Phelps has got him and he will give him up for the reward if you send. — HUCK FINN

I felt good and all washed clean of sin for the first time I had ever felt so in my life, and I knowed I could pray now. But I didn't do it straight off, but laid the paper down and set there thinking – thinking how good it was all this happened so, and how near I come to being lost and going to hell. And went on thinking. And got to thinking over our trip down the river; and I see Jim before me, all the time; in the day, and in the night-time, sometimes moonlight, sometimes storms, and we a floating along, talking, and singing, and laughing. But somehow I couldn't seem to strike no places

to harden me against him, but only the other kind. I'd see him standing my watch on top of his'n, stead of calling me, so I could go on sleeping; and see him how glad he was when I come back out of the fog; and when I come to him agin in the swamp, up there where the feud was; and such-like times; and would always call me honey, and pet me, and do everything he could think of for me, and how good he always was; and at last I struck the time I saved him by telling the men we had smallpox aboard, and he was so grateful, and said I was the best friend old Jim ever had in the world, and the only one he's got now; and then I happened to look around, and see that paper.

It was a close place. I took it up, and held it in my hand. I was a trembling, because I'd got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself:

"All right, then, I'll go to hell" – and tore it up.

— Huckleberry Finn, Mark Twain

## 

Godric's Hollow At the same time The same day

One goblin stepped out in front of their gathered army. He was small, but his bright-silver helmet had a proud tilt to it. When he leveled a spear at Godric's Hollow, making some gesture to his fellows, the blade was studded with a fat ruby, but the tip was sharp enough to shave the sun.

Basilisks hissed quietly, and the terrasque stood with obdurate stillness. Waiting for the signal to attack the wizards and consume their flesh and taste their blood. Waiting.

The goblin handed the spear to another, and raised the visor of his helmet. He had a sneer on his face as he stared down at the village. A shiver ran up the collective spine of the defenders of the Hollow. They looked at goblin silver and basilisk scale, and they knew despair.

The goblin removed a shining gorget from around his throat, and drew a wand from a simple leather holster at his side. He waved it in the air and touched it to his throat, saying something. Nothing happened, but sharp-eyed wizards divined he was attempting the Amplifying Charm.

It was a simple spell, but it took him ten or eleven tries to cast it properly. Still, considering it was the first time many of the wizards had ever seen a goblin cast a spell, it was a remarkable achievement. The goblin cleared his throat, and began to speak, his voice raw with emotion and thick with a Gobbledegook accent.

"I am Bilgurd the Marrowed. I speak for the Urgod Ur, work-leaders of the Great City of Ackle! I speak too for the Burgod Bur of Curd, the Malwirt Mal of Podhurt, the Salwirt Sal of the Freihammer Mons, the Curl of Shikoku, and the Curl of Waimate Wam, and the Curl of Singurd! I speak for the goblin nation!"

His voice rang out over Godric's Hollow, the assembled monsters, and the shaken defenders.

"We are goblins, and we do not forget!

"One thousand years ago, our cities were bright and proud with our will-work – the secret arts of transfiguration known only to us! Ackle was a city of marble and diamond, beautiful to behold. Wizards saw the will-work of the seven cities, and were jealous, and so men like Severus Hortensius took our wands by force! Goblins were banned from owning wands, and the seven cities became small and dark, and we do not forget!"

Bilgurd's voice was black with bitterness.

"Five hundred years ago, we were wandless, and we had to rely on our hammer-work and our wits! Yet still, wizardkind was jealous! Our goods were taken by force; Gringotts of London and Lurgods of Kochi were stolen from their rightful owners, and their gold heaped into wizarding coffers! We were robbed, and still today that gold sits in the vaults of wizards of noble blood, and we do not forget!"

Two of the dark wizards standing behind the basilisks and terrasque exchanged mocking smiles, their unease forgotten in their contempt.

"Three hundred years ago, wizards decided that their dominance and blood-thirst was not yet sated! Wizards – that people

that held elves in thrall and murdered Muggles and hunted centaurs for sport – these wizards feared reprisal from their victims! And little wonder! And so wizards closed themselves away from Muggles and decreed that no goblin could ever again roam free on the land! Wizards dared to lock away entire peoples in a bondage of secrecy so complete that few even question its justice! We have been bound by the Statute for centuries, though our Things have no voice in the Confederation that gives it authority, and we do not forget!"

A silverwork goblin helmet shifted to turn to regard the monsters nearby, and the shiny mirror of its brow shone like a lesser moon.

"Since time began, the mudwater wizards of the world have stolen from us – taken our will from us and borne it away in pieces. The fruit of our forges and the light of our souls, put on display or waved around like trophies, and justified through *illegal* and *unconscionable* contracts, as though any goblin could contract away his soul! Betrayal burns in every stolen suit of armor and every stolen spear, in every goblin-work mirror and every hoarded blade. Our hammer-work has been stolen, just as our power of will-work was stolen, and we do not forget!"

Bilgurd's shouts died down. He paused, then spoke again, quietly and with emotion.

"Goblins have honour. A new wizard spoke to us, of ancient name and great lore. The Archon, he called himself. The Archon Meldh. He knew that we had suffered, and spoke well to us. He spoke of wands, and banks, and prisons, and thefts. The Archon told us that he would give us back the knowledge of transfiguration that we once held, to do things that even the wizards could not do – to transfigure for days, not hours. The will-work of our ancient purpose. The Archon told us we would be free, too, and masters of our destiny and lives.

"Goblins have honour, and so we told him that we had allied ourselves with the Tower, and that he had treated us fairly. We told him that he had given us wands, and that we had been given a seat in the Wizengamot, and would soon have more, and that we were given all the healing arts in the Tower's power to give us. We told him that we did not doubt that wizards were changing, and that the world was changing, and that it could be different. We told him that, and he told us to weigh up all the wrongs and all the rights of our long history, and to ask ourselves: where did the balance lie?"

Bilgurd turned to face his own people now, and it was clear now, for the first time, that he had never been addressing the village of Godric's Hollow or the gathered monsters or their dark wizard companions. He was speaking to his own folk. And he spoke with passion, his voice ringing clear.

"Goblins have honour, and so we gathered in our Things, and we debated. We argued over the value of contract and good-will, and we argued over the very meaning of our lives. We argued over the inheritance we would leave to our children. We argued over what we might owe to our friends. And then we decided, and the seven cities took a vote."

The goblin's voice rose again, and now it was the roar of millenia.

"Goblins have honour! Goblins of Ackle and Curd! Goblins of Podhurt and the Freihammer Mons! Goblins of Shikoku and Waimate Wam and Singurd! The Tower is threatened! His people are in danger! Wizards have put out their hand to us and —"

One hundred goblins roared in unison, as bold as iron and fierce as brass, "We do not forget!"

They wheeled in place. They turned upon the monsters. They leveled their spears. And they charged.

## 

John Snow Center for Medicine and Tower School of Doubt (The Tower) Now

The Tower had dissolved into chaos when they found out that Hogwarts was under attack. In a manner entirely unbecoming to a room full of wise and experienced leaders, everyone broke away from what they were doing — sending messages abroad to keep information coming in; coordinating deployment of aurors and patrol-wizards and anyone else they could find; working to find

a pattern behind it all – and began shouting. It became even worse when *three different wizards* cast the Amplifying Charm and tried to cut through the chaos with simultaneous shouts of "Enough!"

It only stopped when Hermione Granger stomped her foot into the stone underfoot as hard as she could, smashing into it with a cracking boom.

"Quiet, please," she said. She turned to Harry. "I'm taking everyone who can hold a wand out there, now."

"Not everyone," said Harry. "Luna," he said, turning to Lovegood, who somehow still managed to look vague and aloof, "I need you to get Basil and Percy's brother. I have a job for the three of you... an incredibly important one." He didn't wait for a reply, moving to jab his finger at ten people in turn. "All of you – get to the Records Room! Each of you grab two drawers and pull them free. The incantation to release them is 'Fuzzy-wuzzy was a seventeen Manila.' Get them out of the Tower, somewhere safe – the RCP."

Harry turned to two aurors, seemingly at random. "You two. We're evacuating. Your job is to tell me when everyone is clear."

The room was silent. Everyone was staring, even those who'd been assigned a task. Alastor Moody had his eyes clenched, and he was leaning on the meeting room table. Hermione found her eyes filling with tears.

"Harry, what are you -" began Madame Bones.

"We're evacuating. Set up what we need in the Great Hall. Everyone who can – and all the aurors we have – go and fight. There's no more reason to stay. I'm bringing the Tower down. Then I need to consult with Hermione about something I'm going to do," said Harry, and his voice was as icy as the determination in his green eyes.

"And then," he added, as people gaped at him, "I'm going to the library. Now move!"



#### Outside

Salamander had seen Nguyễn die. She'd simply fallen off of her broom. He didn't know why. Maybe she'd passed out, or maybe something had hit her. But he'd watched her wobble in her seat mid-flight and fall, dropping in amongst the Muggles. She was dead.

Some of the students had fainted. Others were levitating professors or aurors up the stairs – others, too tired even to do that, were just dragging the fallen, physically.

Every lost combatant was a disaster.

There was only one layer of wards left. Salamander stood behind it, flanked by twenty others. Three fliers were left, reduced to weak curses and hexes. Everyone did what they could for as long as they could. They all fought as though it were the end of the world. Perhaps it was.

 $"Somnium! \ \ Somnium! \ \ Inflagrate! \ \ Phlogisticate! \ \ Phlogisticate!"$ 

"Phlogisticate! Somnium! Ventus! Ventus! Prismatis!"

"Stupefy! Stupefy! Stupefy!"

"Somnium! Somnium! Prismatis!"

They fell back. They were a tight knot of magic at the base of the stairs. Muggles smashed their weapons against Prismatic Shields. Salamander sustained his with his will. He had no magic left. He fed his spell with his life.

There was a shadow, he thought dully, as a Muggle brought a sledgehammer down on his shield. A shadow.

The Declaration of Intent was aloft, rising slowly from where it had rested near the greenhouses and floating towards them.

Another Muggle was beating on his shield with a pipe. It was an old man, Salamander saw. Thin-faced. Dressed in torn pants, with no shirt over his shrunken chest. Salamander blew him apart with a shower of gore. Thousands of Muggles dead. Always more.

Down the slope, Salamander watched the Returned charge. He'd seen them spend all of the charges from their gauntlets and cast spell after spell into the endless flow of Muggles. Now he supposed their magic was gone.

They swept into the side of the crowd of Muggles like a knife, leaning down from their brooms to smash their gauntlets into the heads of their targets. Then they pulled up – one broom short, Salamander couldn't see who. They flew in a tight circle, then did it again. And again.

An auror's shield gave. She died a moment later as three Muggles buried knives into her chest and stomach.

Salamander knew he should clear some space to move back, to maneuver.

If he dropped his shield, he wouldn't be able to cast it again.

He stayed.

He held on.

The Declaration of Intent was flying over them now, a squat for tress of stone gently soaring overhead.

Oh, Salamander thought, as his vision went black. That's where the boy went.

#### 

When The Declaration of Intent came crushing down on the entry stairs of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, it pressed into the rock, sending a shudder through the earth. It rose and fell again, and then again, deliberately and grandly. Three times it smashed itself into the stairs before it ruptured, exploding into a small mountain of shattered stone.

People died. Nicomedius Salamander was among them. So too were many, many innocent people, kidnapped and enslaved and whisked far away, to die in a war beyond their understanding.

So too were Lawrence Bradwian and Annabeth Dankesang.



Hogwarts endured.



The Unseelie arrived first, borne by flaming chariots. They found interest in the ruined bodies that littered Hogsmeade, strewn here and there, battered into meat. The horror-gaunts gave their strange cry of amusement, driving lejis before them, as they turned towards the castle of Hogwarts.

Dark witches and wizards followed, and almost all of them kept a distance born of stark terror from the Unseelie. Only two moved without fear ahead of their fearful compatriots. One trotted along with mincing step of madness. The other trudged with the hateful step of despair. Bellatrix Black and Limpel Tineagar made an odd pairing.

Perenelle du Marais brought basilisks and terrasque with her. She did not bother to hood the great serpents, paying their gaze no mind. The full-figured witch in her green dress walked among them towards the killing fields, and seemed lost in her own thoughts.

One individual came last, unheralded and unarmed, clad only in plain robes of grey, bringing no one and nothing with them.

From everywhere, the armies came to Hogwarts.

# www.chapter fifteen www.www

# **Antepenultimate**



Receiving Room, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry Now

This was a defining moment. Gregor Nimue knew that. Everyone was leaning on him to break protocol, and he was standing fast.

It was a shining moment, and it was a long time coming.

Considering his experience and skill, he should have been Terminus of the Receiving Room a long time ago. He had twice the lore and three times the brains of any other Tower Auror, and it was practically a crime that he'd been sidelined for so long. He'd spent years chafing under the command of inferiors, stuck on chizpurfle duty or some other nonsense – all because he'd had the bad luck to be on the Azkaban rotation on the night that veela-giant crossbreed dropped out of the sky on a phoenix and knocked the place flat. An entire detail of good and experienced aurors were dropped down to sentinel duty the very next week, and Gregor had been taking orders from idiots ever since.

And what was even better, the very week he was finally back in a decent posting – Terminus, a job with some real heft – was one more in a series of crazy weeks. The blastbombings in Diagon and Tidewater, the start of the Treaty of Independence, an attack by some worthless students with a hundred doxies, the One-Day War, the attack by Bellatrix Black, and now some sort of takeover attempt at the same time that everywhere else in the world was going to pot. Too many people had been burnt out or hurt or both, and so good old Gregor's career was finally finally heading back to the top.

There were protocols for things like this, for powerful wizards who might manage to evade security and put people under their control, and Gregor followed them to the *letter*. As soon as McGonagall sent word about a message she'd received, he'd given the signal. They'd rolled the shield and locked down the Tower, and no power on the planet could make him open it until he was satisfied that the Tower hadn't been compromised. That was the rule. That was his role. The Terminus was the first and last guard against attack – from *either* side of the Tower's golden doorway.

Injured wizards, witches, and Squibs arrived and were sent to nearby chambers in Hogwarts, stabilized as well as could be done by a skeleton crew of the less-skilled aurors. Gregor kept his best stationed near him – and that necessity became even more apparent when entire squads of foreign Hit Wizards and auror teams arrived. Some of the most famous battle wizards and duelists in the world appeared on the summons of the Headmistress of Hogwarts and the Tower and some American muckitymuck. The Boston Brahmins didn't even arrive stunned; they spun into existence fully awake and aware, which meant that they'd used an *illegal Tower portkey* that didn't have the security enchantments. Gregor'd need to report that – earn another point in his favor.

As the story became clear, he'd let out messages and he'd let in a handful of runners and representatives, but still: no one left. A strange and powerful wizard had tried to take over and failed... fine, a good story, but would it be any different if a strange and powerful wizard had tried to take over and *succeeded*? Lockdown remained in place.

Even when he heard that the Ministry itself was under attack, and that the dregs of the aurors who'd been sitting idle in Hogsmeade or some other Knut-ante place had spotted a crowd of Muggles, Gregor knew better. He did his job. Americans, Russians, Koreans, and seemingly a thousand angry British including all the most powerful people he knew were all putting pressure on him, and he did his job.

It was a shining moment, and it was a long time coming.

"Lift the lockdown, Nimue!" shouted Auror Hedley Kwannon, "It's been nearly thirty minutes! Don't you know what's happening out there?"

"Don't you know what protocol is, Kwannon?" snapped back Gregor. He was off to the side of the door, out of its line of sight, but he knew she must be fuming. One more bit of consolation: knowing one of the Tower's pets was being treated like everyone else for a change. He'd already heard that another one of them, that flinty Kraeme woman, had been badly injured.

If he found out that Pirrip had fallen off his broom and broken his neck while mooning after the Diggory brat-in-charge, then Gregor's day would be complete.

"You don't have to let them out, but you're going to let us in," rumbled the biggest of the three Chinese wizards who'd been pestering Gregor for the last twenty minutes. He didn't approach too closely – not with fifty Tower Aurors on alert, wands ready for conflict (from either direction).

And if this whole thing were a ploy and it was you lot behind it, wouldn't that just what you'd bloody want? Gregor thought. Although all things considered, it's still most likely that Mad-Eye is the one behind the whole thing, somehow. He smiled a mocking smile right at the Chinese Hit Wizard, although all he said was a courteous, "No, sir. Sorry."

Two of the Tower Aurors exchanged an uneasy glance, but didn't lower their wands. Gregor noticed, and noted who it was. Unreliable.

"You have every confirmation code and you have Patronus verification from five of us," shouted Kwannon. "That is the protocol!"

"I still have discretion," called back Gregor, "and I haven't seen anything th—"

"No. That's enough now, Nimue," said a new voice, with a tone of command that was leather-tough. Madame Bones. His former leader in the DMLE, before she leapt up four or five rungs to Supreme Mugwump and Chief Warlock. "If the Tower has been compromised somehow, then it's past proof and past solution. You'll end the lockdown right now. Innocent people are dying."

Gregor considered. She's right. And I've made my name. If this was a Mad-Eye test, then I've made my reputation. And if not... well, this will probably still be good for me.

"Fine," he said. And before he'd even said a word more, tense aurors were lowering their wands with a sigh. The sharper ones were in immediate, rapid motion: heading to the bunched-up crowd sorting itself into a queue to get through the narrow Tower entrance, or going the opposite way to the rest of Hogwarts.

Gregor turned to one of the aurors in charge of scanning. "We'll need to sort out who is available for assistance outside..."

But his voice trailed off as he watched a ripple shift through the witches and wizards around the Tower entrance. They cleared a path.

Hermione Granger strode through the path, out of the Tower. Her step was brisk and her face was tight. She had her wand out – and her other hand looked oddly pinkish, as though it had been sunburnt.

This was a shining moment, Gregor knew. The same person who'd broken his career would now reward him for keeping to the rules at the moment when it had been the most difficult, and when there'd been every reason to give in.

He stepped forward to meet her. "Madame Granger, I hope vou –"

The Goddess didn't even slow down. She walked forward like he wasn't there, and her shoulder swept Gregor aside like a curtain of iron as he tried to hastily get out of her way. He staggered backwards, met an obstacle behind one heel, and lost his balance. He landed on his rear, awkwardly.

No one took much notice – too many things going on – except for the few people near him (including the bass-voiced Chinese auror, who had stuck a foot out behind Gregor).

He watched the Goddess sweep through the room and out, and then she was gone, two witches right on her heels and dozens of aurors and others rushing in their wake, following her with grim faces. Almost before she'd vanished from the room, though, there came someone else – the only person, perhaps, who could draw even more attention than Hermione Granger.

"Cedric, take anyone not vital who can cast a Patronus," said Harry Potter, walking briskly up to the Tower entrance. He was wearing simple garments – trousers and a vest beneath plain robes. "Communications are now the most important thing you can do. We can bring reinforcements here quickly with Safety Sticks, but moving them after that is harder, so -"

"So we need to know exactly what threats are where, and now," finished the Chief Auror and Head of the DMLE, walking alongside and just behind the Tower.

Potter nodded, sharply, and then a look of uncertainty flashed over his face. His stride broke, and he halted. He was standing inside the golden oval of the Tower, looking out at the Receiving Room.

Gregor stood up and turned to the side, trying to follow the Tower's gaze. He glanced around the room. Nothing unusual now but a relatively plain stone room with the usual decorations – the tables of Dark Detectors, the shelves of chizpurfles, the few pieces of other furniture. It was crowded with combat-ready wizards, and injured people were arriving at a steady rate, but there were no apparent threats. There didn't seem to be any reason for the Tower to hesitate... was he nervous about any remaining danger? That didn't seem possible, considering how often Potter had been in serious peril. Just a couple of months ago, he'd nearly been blown up in Diagon, and just today there'd been an attempt to cast some sort of Imperius Curse on him. He is just a child, after all. A child who's taken charge of the world, but a child. With a stupid haircut, too.

Madame Bones stepped up from somewhere behind Potter. She said something too soft to hear, and then put a hand on his back and gave him a gentle but firm push forward. The Tower stepped forward and out of his eponymous facility, and took a deep breath. He closed his eyes. He looked pale.

Then the moment passed, and Potter was turning to yet another person walking with him – a blonde-haired witch – and telling her to get everything ready, and to remember everything he'd said.

Nimue found himself pushed to the side by several aurors, and then again by a scornful blonde wizard – was that *Draco Malfoy?* 

"You're the one who was Terminus and kept us here? Well done, you fool," sneered Malfoy. He didn't stop, but walked on.

Things weren't supposed to go this way. This wasn't fair.

"Good going –" "– you complete bollocks," said a pair of redhaired Hit Wizards with bizarre cheer as they walked by.

"I followed protocol!" Gregor protested. "I just did what I was supposed to do!"

"You did the right thing, Nimue," Bones said, staring at him. Her voice was cool. "What an odd time to begin such behavior, just when it most hurt us." Then she turned away from him, too, looking at another auror who'd emerged from the Tower behind her. "Madagascar, you're in charge here. Get everyone moving. Get everyone you can outside, to help Granger."

#### 

Harry stepped to one side of the Mirror, which sat as impossibly solid as ever, embedded in the masonry of Hogwarts as though it were a piece of interior decoration: a fancy accessory to the castle, rather than the most potent magical device known to still exist.

The Cup of Midnight might have been stronger, once. They hadn't been able to find much information about that ancient device, which came to them now only in scant shards, but Hopkirk's best guess was that the Cup had been the method by which the Interdict was enacted. Around the same time, the Cup was broken and Merlin lost his life and his time. Occam's Razor suggested that all three events were perhaps related, although contradictory legends told many different stories.

There was a time when Harry couldn't have imagined making a decision like that... a decision on behalf of humanity. On some level, of course, every little decision tasted of eternity. But to consciously choose a path for the future of mankind, to make a gamble in the name of human intelligence... well, that had been the fate of a precious few.

And now Harry was going to join them.

The scramble he'd inspired with his order to evacuate the Tower had caused something like a panic, especially when added to the chaos of the attacks and the tension of the lockdown. Healers and officials and researchers and diplomats and friends first tried to enter the Tower, only to find themselves turned back: Moody stood just inside, where the two main corridors split off, and roared orders. There were suddenly too few aurors, where only minutes ago there had been far too many, but those remaining worked to clear out the entire facility. The Records Room was emptied, desperate researchers were permitted a single trip to

retrieve anything they needed from the departments, and every last straggler was forced out.

At least one researcher fought back, recklessly, after his request to return and retrieve his personal Pensieve was denied. He was stunned and removed. But while there was a great deal of complaining and even some tears, most accepted the warnings without such a drastic reaction.

Probably a lot of them don't really believe that anything is going to happen to the Tower – they expect to be able to come back after the alarm dies down. They don't know that it's going to... well, I don't even know what will happen to it. Harry stared at the Mirror. It stood immobile: a fixed point of supernal obdurance. If it were possible to truly conceptualize the supermassive black hole at the center of the galaxy, this is what he imagined it would be like: potent beyond reckoning and more solid than existence. Not that he'd ever had occasion to see a black hole. His mouth twisted in a wry smile.

Harry looked at the golden circle of the Mirror.

He had to do this.

He had to make himself do this.

Kwannon kept most people from bothering him with their urgent pleas for assistance or exceptions. She blocked their path physically – or with wards when necessary – to keep his corner of the Receiving Room empty, off to the side of the Tower entrance. He was startled, then, when he felt a hand tug on his sleeve. He turned to find Auror Pirrip, looking sweaty but grinning broadly. He glanced over Pip's shoulder at Kwannon, but she was smiling, too.

"Yes?" Harry asked.

"Mr. Potter! You're never going to believe... the goblins, sir!" Harry felt a sick feeling in his gut. He knew what this was about, and celebrations were not in order.

Every round for countless rounds, wizards defected instead of cooperating. What did we expect would happen?

"Let me guess: they attacked, but we won." He sighed, and turned away, to stare at the Mirror again. "It's been building for weeks, now. Well, no, it's been building for years. And the frustrating thing is that it's impossible to even blame them, or feel happy about winning. It doesn't change anything, and it actually makes things *worse* in a lot of ways. I don't think moral culpability is heritable, but centuries of structural inequality and outright oppression can't be ignored for –"

"Sir!" interrupted Pip, putting a hand on Harry's arm again, his urgency overriding his patience and respect. "They're fighting with us – fighting for us! Everywhere! They've saved the Cypriot Hold and Beauxbatons. They've saved Godric's Hollow!"

That's... my god, that's better than we deserve. That's better than any of us deserve.

It was amazing. It was a touch of grace. It was a shining moment.

Harry felt his eyes fill with tears, and a smile spread helplessly across his face.

"Everything is going to hell, Mr. Potter," said Pip, smiling back, "but we're not alone."

"Sir!" said Kwannon, behind Pip, one arm raised to stop a panic-faced auror. "They need you! The Goddess is out there, but..."

Things must be bad and getting worse. And it was time. The Receiving Room was almost empty, except for healers. Almost everyone who could fight was gone, and everyone else was trying to secure themselves away with the students – down in the dungeons, he supposed.

Moody and a last team of aurors emerged, floating two stunned stragglers along in their wake. Moody gave Harry a heavy nod, his face sadder than Harry had seen it since Albus Dumbledore had been lost beyond time.

"Yes," said Harry to Kwannon. He turned back to the Mirror. And now he felt ready. "I can do this. But then we're going to the library, not outside. Let Hermione do her thing – I'll do mine."

He stepped in front of the entrance to the Tower – the pocket world of his creation. The world of his volition. He felt for his wand.

"Muffliato," he cast.

"Noitilov," he said. And the surface of the Mirror changed, and just like that, the John Snow Center for Medicine and the Tower School of Doubt was gone.

#### 

What a waste, Hermione thought, grimly. She pulled her broom up and away from the entrance to the castle. What a heroic waste.

The defenders could have done any number of things differently, if they'd been willing to rethink their situation or defy convention. They'd fought like they'd always fought: with incredible bravery but limited creativity.

The castle fell away behind her as she flew upwards, set on the steep hill that edged upon the waters of the Black Lake. The staircase down the hill was gone, bitten away halfway down by the teeth of rubble that were strewn at the bottom. The Hogwarts grounds, normally a gentle rise of grass from the main gates from Hogsmeade all the way to the castle, were a torn mass of detritus and the dead, still intermingled with the scrambling mass of people who were pouring in from Hogsmeade in an endless stream. There were thousands, perhaps tens of thousands. Perhaps more. She'd heard that a million people could fit within Tiananmen Square in Beijing, and tried to estimate based on that. Considering all the chaos and the impassable areas... how many people was she looking at?

She picked a portion of ground and did a quick Fermi estimate, counting the living and dead on that portion and extrapolating to the whole field.

Ninety thousand.

There was a dull thump from far below, and a line of silver smoke arrowed through the air. Hermione watched as it arced gently downward, and hit the wrought-iron apex atop the Hufflepuff greenhouse. The missile exploded. It actually did little damage, except for a multitude of broken glass. But she could see rifles and numerous simpler weapons among the crowd, too.

Well, and she couldn't believe she was thinking this and very carefully reminded herself of the moral equivalencies and the slippery slope of the thought but even so she still couldn't help but think, they are just Muggles, after all.

Hermione dipped her broom sharply, dropping dangerously quickly to the ground. She pulled up just short of the gathering aurors. Every moment, more were arriving from outside. She took a moment to assess who was there and what their known capabilities were. A formidable force, even against an army like this. And if they fought smartly, they could win this.

The Returned were there. Simon was missing. In turn, Hermione met the eyes of Urg, Charlevoix, Esther, Nikitas, Tonks, Susie, and Hyori. She didn't say anything, and neither did they. There was nothing that needed to be said.

"Brahmins and Rakshasa," she said, firmly, jabbing her finger at the elite American and Russian auror squads. "You're in the air. I want to know about everything that happens. Stay high. You're not fighting, you're keeping yourself protected. If you seen an opportunity, you tell the Jīngluò or the Three Treasures." She indicated the Chinese and Korean squads. "They're going to be working in teams, protecting each other and attacking. You'll be transfiguring things I'll tell you – dangerous things. Things you're never supposed to transfigure. But you're going to do it, because it's the only way to stay alive... and the only way to save countless other lives."

Hermione waited a moment, anticipating arguments or demands about her authority. But there were none – just confident nods and cool determination. They knew of the Goddess. They knew the reputation of the Tower.

She turned to the British forces. "Shichinin and Omega, you've the most experience fighting Muggles. Defend this ground. Half of you will be on the battlements... this is a castle, use the cover. I have more ideas – things we can do to stop this. Draco Malfoy and Alastor Moody will join you when they arrive."

Hermione wheeled her broom around and pointed at the horde below. "Thousands of people have already died, including dozens of our own. But what finally worked was a physical barrier. Use that. Hold them off, stay on the defensive. The Muggle news is full of these disappearances – we don't know how many we're facing. So your job is just to hold back the tide and keep the school safe. If you have to, retreat inside. Stay alive."

She gestured at the Returned, and they began mounting brooms.

Neville Longbottom called out to her as they rose. "And you... you're going after the source?"

"Yes," she said. "Stay alive." And then she was flying, the Returned by her side.

## www.chapter Sixteen www.

# Penultimate



Hermione had a moment to think as she and the Returned climbed through the air away from Hogwarts, zipping over the school grounds towards Hogsmeade. It was a short distance – a few minutes' flight – but she took the opportunity afforded her to think beyond the immediate tactical situation. Strategy, not only the demands of the moment, needed to dictate her movements. And right now, she didn't have any sort of larger strategy.

How could I? How do you fight an enemy that breaks all the rules of the game? Hermione thought to herself. The Three were attacking – Well, now it must be the Two, really, she thought, thinking about the unremarkable white stone that was sitting inside of a small, mundane iron box in the Headmistress' coat pocket. But Meldh had wrought havoc and almost brought the entire world under his control with one spell... It had taken an ancient artifact and years of planning to create a safeguard against that kind of attack, and even then it might have failed if things had gone a little differently. At that last moment, if Meldh had the wits or resources to draw up another spell from his ages of lore, there was literally no predicting what he might have been able to do to her or Harry – even with his throat missing.

The old books were full of fantastical feats and mighty deeds, and attempting to sort out the historical from the apocryphal was more a work of literary criticism than historical research. "Lord Foul" was said to have commanded dementors and basilisks and terresque, but was that a real spell of command that the Three might deploy, or simply a legend that the writer thought was appropriate for an infamous dark wizard?

Normally Hermione would be able to rule some things out -a secret spell from the past that allowed its caster to stop someone's

heart without the possibility of dodging or warding, for example. If such a spell had existed, it would have made the one who invented it into an unstoppable force. History would look different.

But according to Harry, Meldh had implied that the Three had been in hidden control of events for generations, which meant that they might actually *be* an unstoppable force.

"They're using all the powers of the old world," Harry had said, "everything that's always worked for villains like them in the days gone by. But we're going to use all the powers of our new world to match them, and we're going to beat them."

But unless they had some brilliant ideas very soon, she couldn't see how.

Hermione heard a dull popping sound from far below among the trudging mass of mind-controlled Muggles – no, people – and pulled up on her broom. The Returned matched her, and they rose higher yet. They were already too high to be under real threat from rifle fire, even if they hadn't been warded, but there was no point in risking it. She glanced around her, making sure everyone was with her and uninjured. Hyori and Esther rode on either side of her. Charlevoix and Urg followed them, staggered at different altitudes, while Susie, Tonks, Nikitas, and Jessie were spread out in a third, staggered row. Simon's absence was conspicuous.

Simon. My solid rock. Sweet, solid Simon. Gone now. Hermione wished she could have been there – to save him, to help him, even just to hold his hand.

He'd been the first one she'd saved.

It was still raining when Hermione began pulling open the cell doors. The walls of Azkaban had been battered, and a great jagged fissure had split one of the three sides to the prison; Granville had carried her through and they had landed within, and for the first time in centuries, the broken halls of Azkaban felt the cleansing cool of the rain.

Most of the cells were empty. Most of the prisoners were gone, transferred to the new Howard Prison or simply released. But there were still people here.

One door was stuck. Hermione forced her fingers around its edge, the stone cracking loudly through the patter of rain, and wrenched the door open. Another empty cell – no, there was someone here.

She stepped into the cell, and let gentle orange flame illuminate it. Granville made a small sound, shifting in position on her shoulder. It was a sound of remorse or admonition.

The person was lying on their side, staring up at the ceiling. Rotting alive, with black leprous streaks of infection spreading from great mottled sores, entwined maladies spread across a withered chest. As warm light touched the person's face, they slowly closed their eyes and turned towards her. What did they see when they looked at her – just a soaked teenager with a phoenix and a scared look on her face? Who did they think she was?

She reached out a reassuring hand to the person as she approached.

"My name is Hermione Granger. I'm here to help you."

And now he was gone. Brave Simon.

Her attention snapped back to the present as they passed the gates to Hogsmeade, and she saw new enemies. Not just the endless flood of weapon-wielding Muggles, but two other groups.

A large wedge of witches and wizards in robes was slowly, almost casually, making their way through the mass. They walked in good order right along the stone-paved path from Hogsmeade, as though they were merely a group of forty students returning from a trip to Honeydukes. The Muggles parted before them as though directed by an invisible force. Something to do with the spell controlling the Muggles, or something about the orders they'd been given, or... maybe these are involved in the control or can give directions?

Hermione felt cold run up her back as she recognized – even from this height – some of the enemy. Councilor Limpel Tineagar. Bellatrix Black, with one eye and one arm (her artificial arm, the Gripmain, presumably still lay in the vaults of the Department of Mysteries). Some of the strangers were markings on their robes that Hermione recognized as the sigils of Grindelwald's death squads, the Hírnökei; she could see the red sword of the Záh Kardja and the red hand of the Veres Kezek. No Grindelwald in his own person – a small mercy in this tide of nightmares.

And yet even this was not the end, for behind this infantry of dark wizards was a cavalry of monsters.

She recognized the basilisks. The enormous serpents were following a lone witch in a green dress, seeming to mimic her movements. As she walked, they swayed to match the swing of her hips, and their gaze was clearly fixed on her back to the exclusion of all else. The basilisks were at least fifty feet long, perhaps more; the portion of their serpentine bodies that they held upright was as tall as a two-storey Muggle home.

Behind the basilisks was another mass of creatures – terrifying things that could only be terresque. They had broad shells on their backs, rough as chipped stone, and moved on six stubby legs with shiny red scales. They were huge – ten feet high, with round black heads as large as a lion's, and great mouths that smoked with some sort of vapour. As they lumbered along, they resembled nothing so much as a mad cross between a tank and a turtle and a parade float.

As both groups came into view and as soon as she grasped what she was seeing, Hermione immediately reacted. They couldn't handle this – not with so few people. She yanked her broom to one side as sharply as she dared, almost colliding with Hyori before the Returned could match her change of heading. Should they be trying to transfigure protective goggles or something, in case the basilisks' stare reached them at this distance? No, no time, and they needed free wands. The important thing was to get back out of sight and warn everyone else. Luna already had one task, but now Hermione had something else for her, too.

The witches and wizards weren't mounted – strange, but in keeping with their lack of hurry in a time of war – and so there was a chance that Hermione and her people might get away before any conflict could begin. She heard a distant shout from below as they wheeled about, but the enemy wouldn't manage more than one or two attacks before the Returned were clear. My God... in addition to a seemingly endless horde of Muggles, we'll also be fighting the denizens of Howard and Nurmengard?

A bolt of green light streaked past, veering wide. It was joined by another, placed more accurately and blistering through the air between Esther and Charlevoix. A thick gust of steam blew into the group almost at the same time, but it was without force at this distance, and the Returned were putting distance between them and the enemy with every moment.

There was no point in engaging, but a thought did occur to Hermione – obvious, in retrospect. She slackened her pace just slightly, and brought her wand to her throat. "Sonorus," she cast, and then bellowed at the top of her lungs, "Egeustimentis Ba!"

There was an immediate response below, as four or five of the witches and wizards began firing on each other. A fireball erupted among the group, cast by one of its number. Hermione grinned, and leaned further into her broom, urging more speed. They still needed to prepare for the monsters.

An odd hooting sound startled her. It sounded like a giant owl—and it seemed far too close, as though it somehow cut through the rushing wind. Hermione jerked her head to the side and looked for the source, but saw nothing. She could see Urg looking puzzled, and knew she hadn't been the only one who heard it.

Then Susie fell out of the sky, tumbling off her broom, slapping at something that was wrapped around her head. Hermione only caught a glimpse of it as Susie tumbled away – a naked thing of skin and teeth, vibrating violently.

And then Hermione was diving after her, her broom vertical, arm stretched out and golden gauntlet reaching. She could hear Susie screaming – shrieking at the top of her voice, louder than a person should be able to scream, agony tearing out of her.

Shouldn't do this no time stupid stupid, she thought, in a confused jumble that didn't shake her from her course in the slightest.

Hermione *strained* forward, trying to force herself to go faster, to dive more quickly, to reach farther. Susie tumbled away in a tangle of robes and blood, beating at the thing on her face and chest until it fell away, tossed in the wind. The ground rose towards Hermione and Susie, surging up to meet them as they fell.

She reached and reached and

Got her.

As her hand clamped down on Susie's ankle, Hermione kicked herself savagely back, hauling on the front of her broom so fiercely that she felt the wood strain and crack dangerously in her grip. She pulled up into a swoop, the bottom of the arc dipping within arm's reach of a crowd of threatening Muggles, dragging them both back up into the sky without letting go of a drop of speed. The violent motion wrenched Susie badly, and Hermione felt something in the witch's leg give – the hip or knee – but Hermione had her, thank God thank God, she had her.

They rocketed forward, Hermione leaning forward and holding the broom steady with her left hand. With the other, she pulled Susie up, lifting the witch's lower body over the front of the broom.

But Susie was dead.

Her face and chest were a mess of bloody meat, ground and torn as though by some monstrous industrial machine. Her mouth was agape - a lifeless black wound in the shredded flesh.

Hermione's eyes burned with the wind and her rage, and she clenched her jaw. She leaned forward, though, gripping Susie in place. Stay focused. Susie could still be saved.

The rest of the Returned joined her moments later, swooping down to fall in line with her.

Hermione heard more hooting.

No no no what is that?!

Esther pulled even with Hermione, and leaned over. She grabbed one of Susie's arms, pulling on the witch. Hermione understood what she wanted, and helped, seizing the back of Susie's robes and lifting the witch from one broom onto the other, fighting with the other hand to keep their flight steady.

There was another hooting sound, and something collided with Esther, her broom, and Susie. The two witches were gone, as immediately as if they'd been struck from the sky by lightning.

Hermione wheeled in her seat, and saw... something. Not a physical thing so much as a flow of sensations. It was something like the use of wandless magic: the purposeful movement of particular ideas. But this was somehow visible, and moving, and malevolent. A collection of sensations, divorced from sanity and sense.

Large eyes. Black and oily. Wet.

White skin. Flaky, run through with spidering cracks. Ragged in places, as gnawed.

Long, thin limbs. Sparse flesh. Lumpy joint.

Mouth. Smile.

Smile.

And there were more, leaping up around them. Hooting with mirth. They were *so fast*; Hermione was on a broom at top speed and they were *leaping at her*.

Without word or order or request, Hyori and Charlevoix broke away from Hermione and the rest of the Returned. Hermione twisted to see once more, and they flew around and back, in a circle back to where Esther and Susie had fallen. Their curses flew as quickly as they could cast them, but the creatures were too quick and too inchoate. Even the spells that seemed to hit had no effect. They leapt at Hyori and Charlevoix, hooting, and the pair vanished, plucked out of the air.

Hermione turned back around, gritting her teeth again, and her hands tightened on her broom. She fought to stay calm – fought to stay under control.

Esther and Charlevoix. The French witch had once been nearly catatonic, breaking into screams every time she was separated from Hermione. Esther had been very quiet, too, for a time; injured deep within herself by betrayal and her own anger. But the two had found each other during this past year in some new way – Hermione hadn't pried. They were even leaving Powis – they'd just recently gotten a cottage in Godric's Hollow.

Hyori. An enigma, even to Hermione. Laconic and deadly serious, imprisoned for murder, but with some hidden depth that Hermione had never understood. She'd made a game of things in subtle ways, and her sharp eyes had always hinted at thoughts the witch had never revealed.

Susie. Lascivious and sarcastic, delighting in affecting cockney, alluding to a sexuality she used like armor. Like all of the Returned, she'd left some piece of herself with the dementors, but she was bravest of them all in trying to reclaim it.

Hermione, Tonks, Urg, Nikitas, and Jessie flew on, back to Hogwarts and back to help.

Not that Hermione could imagine what help would suffice. What could anyone do in this situation? What weapons did they have that would work?

And again: what did these damned monsters even want?

This didn't make any sense! Why was the enemy entering through Hogsmeade, and not right outside the castle – or for that matter, why not right *inside* the castle? They didn't know the limits of the spell, but Bellatrix had used it to simply appear within Hogwarts, so why not do that again?

For that matter, why go to war like this at all? Harry had said that Meldh had only said that "a great and fearsome god" was calling for "blood"... part of some larger plan to eliminate magic from the world. That last bit accorded with what Tineagar had said back in Tidewater. That seemed like years ago, now... Tineagar had claimed she was fighting to stop the world from breaking.

They were wasting resources, unless they had some hidden aim. Their plan had been for Meldh to take Harry's place, with Harry in some "new shape" as an enslaved advisor. But preparations for this attack must have started, at the latest, well before Hermione went to the Tower. The Muggle news, she'd learned, had begun reporting disappearances in the morning. So why were the Three essentially attacking each other? It couldn't be infighting or rivalry, since Meldh had known about it to mention to Harry. It was part of a plan. But she couldn't see what that plan's goal might be, in light of the Three's goal of ending all magic. Were they trying to start a war between Muggles and wizards? Or just trying to kill off as many wizards as possible? Or was it just a distraction from a trio of monsters who had no particular regard for the lives of others? And how would they react to the loss of Meldh?

Oh.

Hermione's broom wobbled as she suddenly realized something, letting go with one hand to snatch her bubbler out of her robes. She lay her will upon it, picturing Harry; he answered almost immediately.

"Harry!" she shouted, calling at the top of her voice to be heard over the wind, unwilling to slacken the pace of her speeding broom even a fraction, "Meldh was going to take your place!"

His eyes lit up, and she knew he understood: to the other two members of the Three, the world might not look any different from one in which Meldh had succeeded and was in control of the Tower. They might not have heard her use the counterspell, if they weren't near that group of wizards. They might still think everything was going according to plan.



It was an uncomfortable moment when Draco realized he wasn't in charge. He arrived in the Great Hall with Mad-Eye and Diggory at his side and twenty aurors in tow (and one Gregory Goyle). Longbottom and Bogdanova were there, and told him that Granger had left operating orders and then had gone flying off to do her usual routine (jumping from really high, getting in over her head, discovering she was actually a bit rubbish at magic, and resorting to punching things like a Muggle). Her plans were good ones, but they still needed someone in command. The Lord Malfoy (now the greatest of that name, one of the handful of people in command of the entire world) drew himself up to his full height and readied himself for the burden.

But before he could begin, Mad-Eye had already taken control from a perch on the rooftop over the great doors.

"You there, get back here – get on that roof, no need to be flying around!" he roared, pointing at one of the groups in the air. "Use the castle and hold this ground! Keep them back, but Hogwarts is stone from the ancients – use it! And for Merlin's sake, everyone put up a bloody bubble!"

Chastened, Draco tapped his wand to his head, casting, "Bullesco." He felt the uncomfortable feeling as a bubble swelled from one nostril, inflating until it encompassed his head.

They went to work.

It soon became clear that standard dueling tactics were useless. There were simply too many of the enemy, and those methods had already failed one group of defenders. It was simple math: even if every auror was able to kill a hundred Muggles, there would still be more.

Instead, they focused on attacks that affected a wide area – not those rare spells that could do damage on a large scale, for those were deeply draining. Instead, they used attacks on the terrain, and innovative Transfigurations.

The fliers dispersed from a height something called "sarin" out among the Muggles, far away from the castle. Within minutes, it began crippling and killing huge swaths of the enemy. At the same time, other fliers dropped large metal canisters that Mad-Eye transfigured; the blastbombs detonated into fiery explosions as they landed among the Muggle horde.

Closer by, defenders picked off those Muggles who managed to reach the top of the hill and the castle walls, and used the Butterball Charm to make it almost impossible to make the approach. Some still got close enough to attack with their weapons: they became targets, too. One fired a ranged blastbomb which leapt from its tubelike gun and blew up against the castle wall, as though it were conjured fire. It did but minor damage to the school, but it was dangerous nonetheless. A massed horde of Muggles, despite their limitations, were a fearsome threat.

It's like the ancient wars, the stories from old, Draco thought, with a tingle of excitement and unease. Muggles died in droves, and from a perch on a balcony above the great doors, Draco lashed out to protect everything he valued, fighting a war he had never really believed would come.

In only a few minutes, he was starting to feel sick. But there was nothing for it. He swallowed hard and leaned over the railing, twirling his wand, "Stupefy! Stupefy!" Two more Muggles fell back, stunned, dropping into a frictionless slurry of liquified stone and vanishing from sight.

A movement from above caught his eye, and he glanced up to see Granger coming back, streaking through the air at top speed. Half of her band of fanatics were gone. But it looked like she was unhurt, he saw with relief.

She dropped down from the sky and swooped to a stop near Mad-Eye on the roof, out of sight from Draco (on the balcony below) but within earshot. "Alastor, there's a force of witches and wizards on the way here. Bellatrix and that American witch, Tineagar, and at least thirty others, including some of Grindelwald's old bunch."

"But not Grindel himself," gruffed Mad-Eye. "Makes sense, since they tortured him into insanity twenty years ago."

Draco didn't even have time to be shocked by the news, as Granger went on. "There's worse… ten basilisks and almost as many rock-monster things – from the old legends, the terresque. And… and –"

Her voice ended in a strangled cry before she found her words again. "And something *else*. I don't know what, some sort of *creatures*. They're so *fast* and spells didn't *work*."

"Harry's in the library," replied Mad-Eye. Then he shouted at someone Draco couldn't see, calling roughly, "You lot, get down here!"

The Shichinin flew in from Draco's left, joining the pair on the roof. Draco turned his attention back to the battle as an explosion concussed the air, claiming another dozen lives, and picked off two more Muggles who'd separated from the pack and nearly reached the castle.

A few minutes later, the monsters arrived. Draco had never seen anything like them. Giant serpents – basilisks, he knew. Creatures the size of buildings, with six legs. They tore through Muggles like the people weren't even there, crushing them underfoot as they stormed at Hogwarts across the castle grounds.

Monsters... what did you even do in a situation like this?

There was nothing to do except handle one situation at a time, and wait for instructions. Three more Muggles reached the top of the slope, clambering on the partially-submerged bodies of their compatriots, and Draco took them down. One of them had raised a tube-weapon, but Draco thought he took him down in time.

The next instant, everything went black and pain, jumbled up in a riot of impact. Draco found himself staring at the side of the castle, lying on the stones in front of the great doors.

He lay there, ears filled with white noise, and tried to understand what had happened.

Draco rolled over onto his back, and coughed. It hurt abominably, as though something inside him was torn. But he couldn't stop himself, and coughed again, spasmodically.

He stared up at the roof of the castle. Granger and the Shichinin were in flight again, a tight bunch. They flew down to him, pausing in the air a dozen yards away.

No time for this, do your asinine plan, whatever it is, Draco thought, scornfully. Weakly, he lifted a hand, and flapped it in a dismissive gesture.

Granger nodded at him, something unrecognizable on her face. She turned and waved at one of the Weasley twins, Merlin knew which one, and pointed down at something on the ground, out of Draco's view. "Fred!" she shouted, barely audible through Draco's ringing ears, "You guys take those and get high! Wait for my signal!"

Draco put a hand to his forehead, and it came back red and wet. He felt dizzy and nauseous. Bile rose in his throat, and he leaned over to vomit. When he was finished, he'd barely straightened before he needed to throw up again. His legs felt weak, and he swayed in place, staggering to the side as he tried to stay upright.

A strong grip seized his forearm, held it tight, held him in place. Dazed, he looked to find an armored child holding his arm. No, not a child. A goblin, clad all over in shining silver.

"Rest easy, wizard," said the goblin, its consonants guttural. "We'll need you yet."

Draco couldn't quite understand what he was seeing. Something was in his eyes; he swiped at his face with the sleeve of his robe, blinking rapidly as something stung his eyes. His Bubblehead Charm was broken, he realized. He needed to get it back.

But for the moment, all he could do was fight to stand as the goblin let him go. It hefted a spear in its hand, and pointed it down the slope, to where the monsters were raging.

Draco held himself upright, and felt a moment's hope.

Then he heard the strangest hooting noise.

### 

A solitary figure in plain grey robes, unseen and unnoticed, watched the fighting.

It paused to flick its fingers through the air, whereupon a tracery of crimson light formed a sharp arrow, directing the figure's gaze to the castle itself and an unseen target within.

The figure picked its way carefully up the steep slope towards the Hufflepuff greenhouse, which was damaged and open. Where the way was inconvenient, the ground gently shifted itself, as though the earth itself was trying to be accommodating. The lone individual stepped delicately over broken panes of glass, and slipped inside the school.

It made its way to the library.

## \*\*\*\*\* Chapter Seventeen \*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

## **Ultimate**



Out of the night that covers me, Black as the pit from pole to pole, I thank whatever gods may be For my unconquerable soul.

### 

The oldest stories of magical war are full of glory and drama, wrought on stage in bright colors, and entirely unlike the reality of war.

As the vile goblins or villainous Muggles or vicious warlords swarm the field, awash in blood and villainy, the valorous Lord of Emerald calls upon an ancient ritual and the eldritch might of his Staff of the Seven Words, and sweeps aside the enemy with a single, cathartic gesture. Or if it's a different sort of tale, the goodhearted baron finds himself at a loss at the climactic moment, and only the wits of his clever majordomo suffice to trick the gloating foe into a magical vow – allowing a quibble in that vow, in the end, to bring that same foe to his ruin. Or the entire action between heroes and villains takes place in the uncertain shadow of some ancient power in the distance, and in the extremity of danger, it is only the intervention of thunder from on high that resolves the dispute in favor of Goodness.

It is not that the authors of these stories were naive or ignorant of war. In a world where scholarship and warcraft were so closely linked, it was often the winner of a battle who wrote the story of the fight. Instead, a sort of *wishful thinking* prevailed in these narratives.

Real war is a horror.

#### 

All of the defenders had fallen back within Hogwarts where possible, barricading the doors on the three sides of the castle not protected by the lake. They found battlements and windows and balconies, and rained down destruction on their enemies. Outside, a smaller few engaged in different sorts of combat, fighting with growing desperation.

Oddly enough, Hogwarts was not ideally suited for battle. The school was an ancient sanctuary of arcane lore, raised up when the world was wilder and magic was mightier, but it had seldom ever been directly challenged. Despite all probability and the disruptive nature of magic, there had not been a violent change of regimes in Britain since the time of Merlin, when the Wizard's Council was established – the riotous Thing that preceded Merlin's Wizengamot and the world's Confederation. Only two villains had ever dared to attack the walls of the castle-school, and they had met swift and sure ends. An outside observer might even say, on balance, that magical history was suspiciously tidy.

Despite these limitations, however, the castle was a formidable fortification. And once the defenders were forced to fall back within its walls, they devoted everything they could spare to preserving their strength. It was all too apparent that, should the walls of the castle fail, it would be impossible to coordinate any sort of defense. There was no motte to which they could retreat, or even any internal system of defense beyond the unreliable will of the building itself. It was a single keep, and they could not allow it to fall.

They used every force and trick and power at their command, and the powers that be had called in every ounce of strength that could be spared from other fights.

In different corners and in secret places, there were portkeys held in reserve. Portkeys to Hogsmeade, portkeys to the Receiving Room or other places in Hogwarts, and portkeys to the Forbidden Forest. Most were illegal. All that could be found, were used. Too few came, for there were other wars and other battles. At the Ministry of Magic, a heroic handful had held their ground. At

Godric's Hollow, a force of goblins had met a troop of monsters in a clash that could only be called audacious. Sadder still were the calls that simply went unanswered.

It was hard to say if there was victory to be had on any front. Across the globe, much of the enemy had withdrawn or had spent itself, but even successful defenses had been ruinous. And not every defense was successful. Tidewater was cold and lifeless. The Court of Rubies was bloody and dead.

But where there were warriors to answer and means to travel, they came to Scotland. They came to the defense of Hogwarts and the Tower, the center of a global war and the thoughts of all. From America and Russia and Korea and China they came. From the Free States and the Sawad and Cyprus and Cappadocia and Norden they came. From France and Germany and Hungary and Chile and New Zealand they came. From everywhere they could, they came.

And those in a position to know gradually came to understand that there could be only two outcomes here, as day reddened into dusk and nightmare hordes met castle wall:

Either Hogwarts and wizards would survive this night. Or they would not.

### 

Hermione could hear Edgar Erasmus screaming. At some point, the pompous wizard, engaged in aerial battle high above, had been toppled from his broom by a gust of wind. When he fell, a goblin took the opportunity to dart forward and bury a spear into the man's belly. The spear had already claimed the life of a basilisk, and now an acid venom was wracking Erasmus' wound. He howled with agony, eyes fixed wide and face red, clutching at his stomach and writhing, legs slopping and flopping in a puddle of liquified stone. Most of the hill on the east side of the castle had been made into a ruin of shattered rock and enchanted soil. There were precious few Muggles left here, but the ones that were present could barely make their way forward through the devastated terrain... and most of the ones that managed were cut down by the careless and indiscriminate attacks of giant serpents

and unliving creatures of rock, who did not differentiate between friend and foe.

Edgar Erasmus was in very much the wrong place, and his screams of agony spoke of that mistake. This was no place for humans. This was a primeval battle against horrors.

And as she heard him scream, Hermione Granger found herself thinking, *No time for mercy*, and – to her shame – not even knowing what she meant by the thought.

Shuddering, she brought the axe in her hand down a third time, and the head of the terrasque parted from its body, falling free. Its mouth fell open to let a cloud of stinking vapor escape, and the heavy carcass dropped to the ground with a crash that knocked nearby Muggles off their feet. It landed on Hermione's right foot. She barked a short cry of pain and instinctively yanked herself free, leaving behind at least one toe but keeping her footing. She turned to look for a new target, keeping her gaze low as she scanned around herself.

Off to her left, she saw another terrasque as it savaged someone – Muggle or wizard or goblin, Hermione didn't know. The creature was almost impersonal as it rent the body in its jaws into gorey pieces, holding most of it down with one of its six legs and methodically tearing away with its sightless lion's head of black stone.

She felt rather than saw the basilisk as it struck at her, and she lunged to the side, chopping down awkwardly with the axe. The goblin silver sank into the enormous serpent – a glancing blow. The blade sliced its way free and off to the side. Before she could move, one of the basilisk's coils or possibly just another basilisk collided with her back, swatting her with the strength of a freight train.

For a moment, Hermione lost track of things.

When she found herself again, she was on her rear, sitting with her back to something hard. She jerked her gaze back down to the ground. As if fighting giant monsters wasn't hard enough you can't even look at their eyes or else you die, she thought, dazedly. Erasmus was still screaming.

She heard the clank of metal boots – it was that trio of goblins who'd just joined the fight, Hermione realized. The ones who gave her the axe. She glanced at the sound, cautiously.

One of them was in full plate armor in a medieval sort of style, while the other two only wore breastplates and helmet. The armor was silver and gold and brass; some pieces were bevelled and decorated with engravings, while others had simple and clean lines. All three carried shields. For reasons that Hermione didn't fully grasp, all the goblins now had shields, even when it made it difficult to wield their chosen weapons.

She felt stupid, as if she should understand why, but that didn't help.

A green bolt came from a defender on the battlement above her and streaked out of view down below. Hermione was glad someone on their side could still cast the spell; she hoped they had hit a basilisk. Her own wand was in its holster. The axe had proven more effective.

She reached behind herself to feel the stone of the castle. Hermione had damaged it, cracking it with the impact of her body. If it had been mundane stone, she'd have gone straight through it, she thought; the stuff of Hogwarts was barely chipped. She found the edge of a stone and pulled herself up.

As the goblins charged past her, she looked at where they were going, scanning the torn and smoking ground carefully until she could see the giant curving form of the basilisk in her near-peripheral vision. Then she launched herself forward, following the three goblins as they charged. Two of them raised their swords, and one of them set a spear-butt in the crook of his elbow. All three of them raised their voices in guttural cries she couldn't understand.

A gleam of silver – her axe. Hermione snatched it up in her golden gauntlet as she ran. She heard the basilisk hiss, and saw a flash of movement as it struck. One of the goblins hurtled past her, broken.

The other two kept charging, roaring like heroes. She joined her voice to theirs, and followed them.

#### 

Draco couldn't move his right arm. Much of it had been torn away, removed with great gouges by one of the dog-like things that

were racing around, tearing apart victims. He couldn't quite get a grasp on them – they weren't properly visible, but just seemed like smears of insane nonsense. Rough impressions: Wide mouth. Sucking discs of teeth. Pale eyes of blue cataracts. Knotty muscle.

What was left of his arm hung limply from his shoulder, as though it weren't even a part of him. At least the potion had stopped the bleeding. Kept him alive. That ugly little American had given it to him. Hig. The fellow was down the hall, with Gregory Goyle. At a different window. A different defense.

They'd managed to kill three or four of the things. The Killing Curse worked, and maybe other curses as well, Draco wasn't sure. They moved so quickly, leaping around faster than anything could move, faster than anything should be able to move, and their every touch brought bloody blight to their victims. Wards and shields could stop them, but when they struck even something as doughty as a Prismatic Sphere, it was as though they hit with the force of a dragon. Draco had thrown up a ward to deflect one of the human-shaped monsters from entering through the window he was defending, and the blow it had dealt his spell had brought him to his knees. He hadn't fallen, but only just. He could feel the magic positively drain out of him.

Draco lifted his wand, held it in Ochs. There were some Muggles below, but they were thin on the ground. And in light of the other creatures, they seemed quaint with their cricket bats and knives. None of them had guns or explosives, and so they weren't worth his attention.

The sun was setting, and all the light was red. It would be night, soon.

A flash of motion leapt past the window, and Draco heard a scream from somewhere.

He leaned against the curved side of the window. He wanted to fall to the ground. He wanted to weep. He wanted to sleep.

But he would not. Some things were stronger than sleep or weakness or death. He would fight.

Then he heard a hooting sound, and this time he was too slow with his shield. Before he knew what exactly had happened, he was on the floor before the window, and something was on him. He'd lost his wand, it was gone, he couldn't do anything. It was one of the flying ones, and it was on his shoulder and one side of his chest

and he felt pain ripping and he heard a wet sound of flesh tearing and the crackle of bone splintering and the pain was killing him he screamed he screamed he screamed he screamed he went away for a moment and remembered

"Draco," Harry said. "Thank you for coming. I... well, thank you."

"What do you want, Potter?" Draco said, staring at the other boy. Potter had his face all screwed up, brows furrowed, as he always looked when he was about to be unbearably earnest. Looking at him made Draco feel sick – a deep and bitter disgust that tasted of acid.

Potter closed his eyes. "I want to make you a promise. A promise about your father. I want to -"

"Harry Potter," said Draco, his voice a dangerous hiss. "Be very careful what you say next." He could feel the acid on his tongue, but even more, it was burning in his veins. The rage and hatred. The things that made him weep at night, as he forced his face into his pillow and sobbed with great wracking cries. The things that made the presence of his mother a cruel thing, because they were very nearly strangers and his father was freshly buried. The things that made him so eager to hurt someone, these days. "Be very careful," he repeated.

Potter hesitated, opening his eyes to look back at Draco. Green eyes, filled with compassion. Draco wanted to spit in them.

"Listen," said Potter. "I've been thinking about what I owe...
about the shape of things, and the degree to which my own arrogance
and blindness have hurt others. And you'll understand more about
that, soon, I think, but..." He paused, looking at the ground. "Draco,
I want to make you a promise. A promise to try my hardest to
do something. And I don't want anything from you in exchange,
not even your friendship. I want nothing from you. This isn't
about you. It's about... terminal values." The other boy stopped
again, seeming to think about how what he was saying might sound.
"About the things that are the most important in the world to me."

Draco could kill him. They were alone, and no one knew Draco was here. He had a knife, and Potter wouldn't expect that.

"Draco," said Potter, "I am sorry your father is dead. Truly and absolutely. With all my heart." A flash of something came across the boy's face — regret, somehow. "But I have seen impossible things. Magic is an impossible thing — or rather, it is all possible things, which is pretty much the same thing. It's brought... Hermione is back, and magic has made the space between death and life, which was already not very wide, into something that seems so small. Magic is..." Potter closed his mouth, shaking his head. "Sorry, I'm not saying what I mean. I'm not saying this very well."

Potter folded his arms, and hugged himself. Draco stared at him.

"I... Draco, I don't know how to say this. If it will seem insulting or crazy or what. So I'm just going to say it and hope you know that I mean it," the other boy began again. He raised his eyes, and met Draco's gaze.

"I intend," said Harry Potter, "to spend the rest of my life working to stop anyone from dying again – everyone's father and mother and son and daughter. And I intend to bring back those that have died, through whatever ritual or spell that needs to be invented to cross that last remaining gap of time."

"Draco," Harry said, "I promise to try my hardest for the rest of my life to try to bring back your father."

And there was an instant, right then, when the Lord Malfoy very nearly murdered the Lord Potter for toying with his heart.

But Draco stopped himself, and stared into Harry's eyes which did not leave his own.

And he saw something there. He saw steel, and something harder than steel. He saw a will that would brook no obstacle and tolerate no barrier. He saw the diamond-hard will that had brought back Hermione Granger and Draco didn't know how but he knew that had been Potter and he saw an honour that bound this boy to a path. He saw a promise that was stronger than sleep or weakness or death.

"Will you help?"

Draco's wand was in his hand. It was still in his hand.

He was there and he was alive. Something was attacking him. One of those things was attacking him. It was killing him. He didn't want to die. He wouldn't die. He couldn't die. Because...

Because he wanted to see his father again someday.

And some things were stronger than sleep or weakness. Or death.

"Avada Kedavra!" he cast. The thing on his shoulder vanished, dissolving in a blaze of green light that burned away the inchoate blur of murderous sensations.

He slumped back to the stone, gasping.

The world was hazy and dark. Draco blinked, rapidly.

"Sir!" A voice. "Sir, hold on, I'm here!"

### 

Pip jumped as the Bloodfoot Curse rippled across the rough slates of the roof towards him. He lost his balance as he landed, one foot sliding on a tile, but caught himself with one hand. Bellatrix Black laughed at him.

This was bloody deja vu, really.

The fight had been going on for what seemed like hours. They had been moving to the roof, to try to use massed volleys of the Killing Curse against some of the more insane-seeming monsters that had come calling at Hogwarts tonight, but what had begun as three tight, tactical formations had dissolved into chaos as some of the enemy took the fight to them. A flaming chariot had burst from somewhere sideways of reality, drawn by a horse of fire, and it had left madness in its wake:

Ten witches and wizards with bloody sigils of hands and swords on their robes.

That skinny American witch from the Council of Westphalia, looking spidery and sour.

And that bleeding bitchy bint Bellatrix bloody Black.

Pip felt how a Gryffindor in the library must feel: lost and upset. Bellatrix was missing an arm and an eye, and she was still a better duelist than he was.

To his left, Madame Bones was fighting the American. That should have been a brief contest, but somehow the Westphalian was managing to hold off the Chief Mugwump, fighting with unimaginably queer new spells and with a sad grimness. Mr. Diggory was already unconscious, having coughed himself into unconsciousness after receiving a blast of Rotlung in his face.

To his right, Mad-Eye Moody and three other aurors were fighting the Grindelwaldians. Wait, didn't they have a proper name? Something Hungarian and unpronounceable? No matter. Despite being outnumbered two-to-one, the good guys were winning. Pip couldn't even follow some of the things Moody was doing. At one point, Pip could have sworn he'd actually seen one of Moody's stunners turn in mid-air before hitting its target.

That had left Pip and Kwannon to fight Bellatrix Black, which seemed insane since didn't they *already know* how that would end after last time? But there was nothing for it, and so they fought, and Bellatrix was laughing again.

Maybe one of the defenders in the air would be able to help. Pip knew that one of the American auror squads, as well as the Shichinin. They had their own enemies to face, but this was *Bellatrix Black*.

Kwannon raised a shield to buy them some time, but Pip remembered the last fight – he raised his own, too. When a Breaking Drill eradicated Kwannon's barrier, the curse – following the first one almost immediately, impossibly fast – burst against Pip's redundant shield. And both of them were quick enough on the dodge to avoid the Killing Curse that blazed at them within an instant.

"Better!" shrieked Bellatrix with a laugh. "Dancing dollies!"

"Lagann! Stupefy!" cast Pip, at almost the same time that Kwannon shouted, "Stupefy! Lagann!"

Bellatrix twirled in place, cackling, and let her shield dissolve as she dodged. She had another raised almost as quickly as Pip could have blinked, and *then* she flicked her wand in a way that Pip didn't recognize. A stream of yellow liquid burst out at the gesture, spraying from nowhere.

Caught without any idea of what the curse would do, or what shield would be appropriate, Pip did as he had been trained: he dodged again. Kwannon, trained by the same person (the curse-casting blur just behind them, in fact) did the same.

And Bellatrix anticipated it. When Kwannon threw herself to the side, a Slow Blade of Unusually Specific Destruction was waiting for her. It exploded violently.

Kwannon was thrown bodily away, and off the roof, and she was gone.

And it was at this moment that Pip wished he were a different sort of person. Someone important. A noble, or a brilliant researcher, or a seer. Or even just someone truly special. Because he knew that truly special people wouldn't die. Not this way, not after so much. Not at the moment when it mattered the most, when failure would mean the death of Alastor Moody and Amelia Bones and so many others.

He'd seen the plays. Bloody hell, working in the Tower had been like *living* in a play. Utterly impossible things happened all the time when necessary. When the really special people were in danger, even if it was from things like the Killing Curse... well, somehow, it worked out.

Philip Pirrip was just his mother's son. He was a decent auror, and a hard worker. He could say that about himself. But in that moment, as he leapt to his feet and tried to think of what to do next, knowing that he'd already fought this battle and had lost as though he were a Hufflepuff toddler... well, he just wished he were someone else. Someone special.

### 

In the fell clutch of circumstance I have not winced nor cried aloud. Under the bludgeonings of chance

My head is bloody, but unbowed.

### 

Hermione saw her again. The witch in green. The one who'd been with the monsters, walking with them, *controlling* them.

Hermione dragged her axe free of the basilisk's head. It smoked with venom. So too did the golden gauntlet on Hermione's right hand. There was a greenish tinge to both metals, now. Hermione shook the axe, and gore splattered to the ground. Where the ichor fell, the ground began to bubble and steam.

The witch was standing in front of one of the walls of the castle, and she'd sunk her hand into the stone. A terrasque stood motionless beside her, obedient as a great stone dog, as the witch in the green dress dragged her hand downward. Like a knife sliding through butter, she cut a long rent through the stone of Hogwarts, kneeling as she brought her hand all the way to the ground. Then she pulled her hand free and straightened.

This must be one of them. One of the Three. One of the leaders. The enemy.

Hermione pulled her bubbler from her robes. The back of it had been crushed in, and the decorative clamshell case was falling apart, but it still worked. "Boys?" she said.

"We're here," came the voice of one of the Weasley twins.

"'Boys,' " scoffed the Russian witch with them.

"Be ready and watch for the high sign," Hermione said.

"You got it," replied another twin, cheerily.

Hermione put away her bubbler, and steadied herself. Then she attacked.

She shouted no challenge and no warning. She simply threw her axe at the witch, as hard as she could. It flashed through the air, whistling as it flew.

The terrasque intervened, lurching into motion, and the axe bounced off of its side, the handle hitting the creature's rough red shell.

The witch turned to face Hermione. Her face was serious, but her eyes were bright. The terrasque shifted out of the way, lumbering aside.

"Hello," the witch said. There was a husky accent in her voice. "You are Hermione Granger. You are quite magical, and quite powerful." She raised her hand. "And I think your time is done."

Hermione already had the Elder Wand in hand, and she charged.

#### 

A figure in plain grey robes walked the halls of Hogwarts, unseen. It moved with some uncertainty – as though it knew its destination, but not the exact path. But it found its way to the library before too long.

Harry Potter didn't see. He had a bubbler in hand, and was giving urgent instructions.

"- no, it's not enough to say the word. You have to ... you have to find something within yourself. You have to produce a deliberate will within yourself, like you were casting wandless magic."

Harry Potter was standing at one of the library windows. A strange sort of Muggle device was set up there – a tube mounted on a tripod, pointing up at the stars. Two aurors stood on either side of it, maintaining shields across the window against any intrusion. The floor was covered in chalk markings, repeatedly rubbed away and redrawn.

This was not the Archon Heraclius Hero, perfectly reshaped into a facsimile. That was obvious. How strange. Harry Potter had won, somehow. It was beyond belief, but it had happened.

The threat personified stood there, unaware and vulnerable, and the figure studied him. Just a boy, really. The crux was still just a boy. So dangerous to everything and everyone, the age-old threat to life resolved by time's lens into this single person, and it was just a boy.

The figure permitted himself a smile.

### 

Beyond this place of wrath and tears Looms but the Horror of the shade, And yet the menace of the years Finds and shall find me unafraid.

### 

The Unseelie had gathered in a tight knot outside the western walls. They were pulling someone apart, and that person was screaming. Impressions of black eyes and wide, wet mouths moved delicately and deliberately, causing pain as if it were an art.

It was horrible, but it was a respite for the defenders.

No, not a respite, Draco thought. An opportunity.

Where was Moody? We need to take advantage of this, right now.

He shoved himself away from the wall that been supporting him, and brandished his wand. "Expecto Patronum."

A silver krait undulated on the stone before him, moving gently.

"Go to every wizard and witch on this side of the castle and on the battlements," Draco commanded it, and he bent his will to making *that* a thought of peace and happiness. "Tell them to find me near the entrance to Gryffindor Tower. We are going to strike."

Before the snake was gone, Draco had fumbled his bubbler out of his robes, and was contacting everyone he'd seen who was still answering.

Outside, someone was screaming.

### 

When Gregor Nimue and Harry Madagascar both slumped to the floor, as suddenly unconscious as though they'd been bludgeoned, Harry knew that the moment had come.

He turned around, and saw a middle-aged man in plain grey robes. A little out of shape, with a small paunch. Taller than average, but somewhat stooped. A face heavily seamed with care, and green eyes. Ancient, ancient green eyes.

"Are you him?" Harry asked.

The man smiled, softly. He had a kind face.

"Yes, Harry Potter," he said, in a voice that was mellow, and deeper than Harry expected.

### 

Pip had lasted only a few minutes more, and he suspected that was only by Bellatrix Black's cruelty.

"Silly billy boy," sang the insane witch, "and now such fun!"
She had captured him casually, whipping the Incarcerating
Curse at him amid a torrent of attacks.

He lay there, helpless.

He had to watch as she turned on Moody, who was backpedaling away, trying to find a way to create some space. Only one auror still stood by his side against five of the Hungarians, and curses and shields were appearing and disappearing and flowing and sparking out with such rapidity that it looked more like a magical dance than intelligible combat. But there was nowhere to retreat to, and no way to create room or escape. Now he would have to have to watch. Again.

Bellatrix Black shrieked her mad laughter and struck away Moody's shield. Then again as he produced another one, but despite the desperation of his motions he still had to fight Grindel-wald's soldiers. They redoubled their attacks, and Moody reached the edge of the roof, and had no more room to retreat.

Bellatrix paused, sighing a deep and happy sigh, and giggled once more. She raised her wand.

"Bellatrix!"

The cry came from above.

"Bellatrix Black!"

It was otherworldly.

"Bellatrix Black!"

It was enraged.

"Bellatrix Black!"

It was magnificent.

### "BELLATRIX BLACK!"

It was Neville Longbottom.

He came from the sky. He didn't land, exactly – rather, he plummeted to the roof in a swooping dive, so steep that it seemed as though he would simply crash straight through the slates, but Longbottom pulled up at the last minute dead even with the slates, alighting and walking without even an instant of

transition. He stepped forward and the broom clattered to the roof and Longbottom was already attacking, once twice thrice, as though gravity and timing and all the laws of possibility were mere formalities that he'd chosen to discard. Tall and terrible, the Lord Longbottom moved like the wind.

He attacked Bellatrix, and it was a thing of beauty and glory – choreographed, as if it had been practiced every day for years. High feint drawing a shield, which put him into position for obfuscation, and which in turn flowed seamlessly into three glowing offensive bolts. It was a series like any auror would learn... but rather than two or three spells in sequence, Longbottom attacked without ceasing, a rhythmic and timed flow of variety and passion. He switched from low attacks to broad ones, raised wards and then shattered them with surprising new offensives, and stripped away Bellatrix's defenses with a hurricane of attacks.

In an existence that threatened to become overcrowded with the unbelievable, Pip still found room for astonishment.

Bellatrix laughed; high-pitched, insane. "Silly little do—" she began, but a flurry of attacks cut her off, and she was forced to defend herself. "Silly bi—" she began again, only to again be forced to bark out a shield of crystal and dodge away from danger.

"You -"

"Silly bi-"

No one could be standing after attacking endlessly, relentlessly, unstoppably, but Neville Longbottom never broke his stride and never broke his sequence. One spell followed another, one attack followed another, one shield followed another. No openings, no weaknesses, no opportunities, no respite.

Bellatrix Black's laugh broke. She lashed away attacks and raised wards and cast curses, but she was not fighting a wizard. She was fighting an elemental force.

And every taunt and every joke and every insanity was cut off by some new attack. Every word broken by offense. Every moment under siege.

"That's -"

Longbottom advanced without pausing, never breaking stride. He was discarding his humanity, and doing it despite eyes streaming with tears. "No -"

"You -"

And finally, Bellatrix's mad smile cracked as she desperately ducked the hundredth attack, and she shrieked with a voice full of fear, "Stop!"

And like a wrathful god, Neville Longbottom, a thousand feet tall and burning with brimstone, roared in return, "That's what they said to you! Avada Kedavra!"

### 

Hermione's duel with the witch in the green dress was a strange thing.

The Goddess charged, wand raised, already casting. The enemy sneered, raising her own hands, and lightning surged between them.

The Elder Wand took it from the air.

Hermione's attacks fell uselessly against the witch's shields, which barely glowed a gentle silver as they absorbed one curse after another. The witch's attacks found no purchase, for the Elder Wand moved of its own accord, assisting its true owner, obliterating magics as though they were a child's whisper.

Hermione closed the distance, and they fought. Spells fell on shields. Spells fell on wand-wards. The duel was a storm without wind.

Almost as an afterthought, the Goddess crushed the head of a terrasque with her golden gauntlet, which carved through the creature with the burning fury of basilisk venom. But she could gain no traction against the witch in the green dress, who evinced neither strain nor dismay.

"Foolish monkey," said the witch, her voice punctuated by the wordless thrusts of her hand which sent green light and burning flame and sharp crystal cascading into Hermione's wand-borne defenses. "Didn't you know there was only ever one outcome, here?"

"I did," said Hermione, panting. "And so now would be good, gentlemen."

She lashed out at the witch with every ounce of belief and faith and grief, and the enemy's wards glowed bright under duress.

Hermione's other hand landed like a titan's hammer immediately afterwards, a crushing blow dealt with a troll's strength.

At the same instant, there were two sharp cracks, almost simultaneous. Twin gunshots, fired from above.

The first rifle shot shattered the witch's shield. The second passed through her stomach.

Perenelle du Marais screamed, and it was loud, and it was long.

#### 

Draco looked over his troops. Perhaps a hundred wizards and witches. Weary, ragged, wounded, crammed into the small room where the Gryffindor stairs met the main hallway. Three watching at the windows, where the horror-things were pulling apart their victims. He clutched his ruined arm with the other to stop it from swaying – he was swaying, bloody hell. No, this would not do.

Unbreakable honour.

The Lord Malfoy forced himself to straighten up. Black shapes danced in front of his eyes, and for a moment everything went dull and far away, but he held himself upright. He held himself like a Malfoy.

His face was out of control. Draco mastered it, arranging it how he pleased: a cold look of confidence. His body was a tool, his to wield.

His voice. Before he spoke, he felt the blood in his mouth and throat. No. He swallowed it back, swallowed the bile and blood. Cleared his instrument.

"We're attacking. A massed attack. The enemy is gathered together. They're not afraid. They should be."

"We'll die," offered Reg Hig. Not opposition, but resignation.

"We might. But we are already dead. This way, we have a chance.."

No, this is... no, it's weak. The stuff of desperation and stupidity... last resorts persuaded no one. Damn you, Draco, focus on their weakness, not ours. Where are you? You are the knife: Cut.

"Listen to me, all of you," Draco said, and he put steel in his voice. "I won't pretend to believe in everything that the Tower

believes. I won't tell you any pretty stories about the way the world could be. Listen to me when I tell you that we need to act now to protect the way the world *is*, and everything that's in it. Listen to me when I say that magic exists and it is precious, and we need to protect it.

"I am not the sort of person they call 'good,' "he said, and now the steel came of itself, and he stood even taller, and he heard his father's voice in his own. "I am the sort of person who gets results. Against all odds. Against a united country and a united world, I have gotten results. Because there are things that are more important than you or me or even this bloody school. There are things more important than our blood or our very age. There is magic in this world, in every wand here and every soul, and they will crush it if we let them."

He raised his wand into the air, and it glowed with a fire he knew glowed in his own eyes.

"So when I say to you that now is the time and when I ask if you will follow me, know that this is our best hope, and that we will win. For there is something greater than goodness and greater than even these odds, and that is us!"

What arrant nonsense, thought the Lord Malfoy, as he spoke honeyed lies.

A hundred wands rose in response.

And from high above, there was a new sound. Many voices, raised in a single call.

### 

"Who are you?" asked Harry, lowering the bubbler. He left it open, Luna listening on the other end.

"Merlin," answered the man, simply. He watched Harry, arms casually at his side.  $\,$ 

Despite everything, Harry felt himself shiver at the name. He knew that it might well be a lie – certainly it was the lie he'd have chosen, in this man's place – but it could also be true. It was more plausible than any of the other possibilities, if the law of parsimony was any guide: Merlin applying a secret, guiding hand, working to prevent the doom that he'd foreseen... well, it broke no rules of time travel and required no additional elements.

Harry had anticipated other possibilities, of course. Albus Dumbledore, trapped beyond time – that could well have put him in some ancient era before the Mirror was made. Or Garrick Ollivander, whose familial presence in Britain had been suspiciously unchanging for most of wizarding history. Or Harry himself, returning from a future where they'd mastered all knowledge, acting to ensure the realization of that future. Or some random, unnamed individual, hidden perfectly from sight throughout all time and legend.

But ultimately, what plausible candidate made sense, other than the one who had famously acted from the start to try to limit magic and preserve the world?

"You're here to destroy me and save the future of the world," Harry said. He kept his voice rigidly formal. "And for that, sir, I respect you. It is even possible that —" his voice faltered as he remembered J.C. Kraeme's bloodied body, the death of Hermione and Granville, and the hundreds of thousands who had already died today, but he pressed on. "It is even possible that you have done the right thing."

Merlin nodded solemnly, his smile fading from his face. "Then you understand."

"I do," said Harry. For a moment, he felt the absurdity of the moment. This was a moment that might spell the difference between a world of magic and advancement, a world where death could be defeated and Dumbledore could be retrieved, and... and a different world. A darker timeline. And all of that was riding on this simple, clumsy conversation.

"But," Harry went on, as Merlin raised his hand, "your map is wrong."

Merlin didn't lower his hand, but only tilted his head. Just slightly. An invitation.

"You must have known of Albus Dumbledore – perhaps you even knew him, somehow," said Harry. "I sometimes wonder if he was the wisest man I've ever known, or merely the bravest. He ransacked the Hall of Prophecy and used his knowledge of the future to guide its shape. He didn't believe prophecies could be truly averted, I think, and he might have been right. In retrospect this seems obvious, but people like Tom Riddle spent years trying

to avoid one prophecy or another, and they always failed." Harry shrugged. "I've never heard of a prophecy that was simply wrong. And if my readings are correct, you agree with him."

"So you know this, then: I, Harry Potter-Evans-Verres, will tear apart the stars."

Merlin nodded his head, slowly. His eyes were amused and curious, but they held a fundamental flatness. Harry couldn't imagine what that might be – some jadedness from such a long life, a precommitment to ignore all persuasion, or something beyond his ken – but he had no time to worry about it. He pushed forward, and felt his thoughts begin to catch fire.

Once upon a time, a lonely little boy had gone to a strange school. He was a prophet of new ideas, and saw things in a new way – he was the needle's point of a black slash that cut from one entire civilization into another, bringing the force of thousands of years of accumulated knowledge to bear on a point forged by trauma into diamond strength. And yet not a single jot or tittle of that had mattered, in the end. So little of the boy's cleverness had actually been brought to bear. His beliefs were the hard uphill way, and even a prophet was not immune to easy answers.

It was not until the end that the boy had grasped the real meaning of his own beliefs, and had ascended. Rationality was *winning*. Harry's mind blazed like an inferno. He raised his hand.

"First." He held up a finger. "Only two people are known to have ever mastered all the wizards and witches of the world. Both, I think, did it for a good cause. But consider that for all your power and your age, I have done what you did... and I have done it without force, and by granting life and power, and I have done it in only seven years. I am your equal in this respect, and if you underestimate me now, then think about the fate of everyone else who has done so. Think of your ally, Heraclius Hero.

"Second." He held up another finger. "Events are already in motion to ensure that magic and humanity survive. The Tower is gone, and the Mirror which was the door. It has found a new place." High above us, Harry thought. Six hundred kilometers high, so that its field of view encompasses the whole planet. "Some friends of mine wait there – waiting to find out whether I live or die. I will not tell you their instructions. But know that we all lie within the mirror now.

"Third." He held up a third finger. "You have several times attempted to disrupt my designs. You arranged for the destruction of my first facility, killing my friend in the process. And this very day your ally tried to enslave me. And yet I am here, and he is gone."

Harry's mouth grew firm. He met Merlin's eyes for a long moment, and then moved those three fingers: thumb poised against forefinger and middle finger. Ready to snap.

"So think. Stop and think. You have a map in your head – a mental map of reality. As you move through the world, you can trace your path on it. You can tick off events as you come to them; that's how you know your map matches reality. When you're surprised, it's not because reality is wrong... it's because your map is wrong. When you realize that, you have two choices: you change your map, or you get lost."

Merlin stared at him, and all vagueness and flatness was gone. In its place was the raptor gaze of someone who was beyond death and weakness, who had weighed human life and discarded it when it interfered with his will.

"Consider whether you have been surprised by events. Consider whether this is unfamiliar ground. Consider your fallen allies. Consider your derailed plans," Harry said, and his voice was soft. "Stop and think, and consider: do you want to keep moving in this direction? Or might there be other surprises waiting for you?"

"I will give you the same chance that Lord Voldemort – that Tom Riddle – was given, before I took his life. I will give you the same chance that Meldh had, before I took his life. Stop now, and go in peace.

"Or I will end you."

Harry didn't waver, and he was not afraid.

And it wasn't because he knew of some ultimate sanction or greater plan.

And it wasn't because he knew that Hermione would save the day with some impossible feat.

And it wasn't because he had faith in something greater than himself.

Harry did not waver because this moment laid bare his heart, the white-hot line of humanity at his center, slashing through the black arc of Tom Riddle and cutting through every obstacle in his way. Harry did not waver because he had tested all things and held fast to that which was true, and he had set that truth in service of the good with every last ounce of strength and will and might.

And for Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres, that was the purpose of life.

"Well?" said Harry.

From outside, a woman screamed, long and loud. The scream of a dying woman.

Within a moment, another cry joined with the first: the sound of a hundred phoenixes, their call like the birth of a new world.

### 

It matters not how strait the gate, How charged with punishments the scroll, I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul.

— "Invictus," by W. E. Henley



Merlin studied Harry closely.

And turned.

And left.

# Interlude mmmmmm

## **E**pilogue



έσχατος έχθρὸς καταργεῖται ὁ θάνατος.

The Tower
June 1st, 1999
Three weeks later

Hermione gave herself a moment to look around the room, moving from face to face. So few familiar faces: Percy Weasley, Amelia Bones, and Dolores Umbridge. Percy was smiling confidently on her left, while Amelia and Dolores were engaged in whispered conversations with their neighbors.

Many more of those present were relatively new, either to her or to the Tower. He Jin of the Court of Rubies. Per Aavik-Söderlundh-Ellingsen, on mission for the nobility of Europe. And others: a Westphalian appointed by Hig, who was now unchallenged in his dominance over the surviving rump of the Council; several wizards and witches from various strata of the Confederation, chosen as representatives-at-large; a goblin who was present in the same capacity, nominally representing Beings; a domovoi of Russia sent by the Thunderer on behalf of the Slavic tradition; and wizards from Nigeria, Dunedin, and Chile.

It was almost a parody of oligarchy, with stronger states and Things trying to cement their local power. The small nods towards democracy would have been pathetic if they hadn't actually represented progress.

Every little step is important, but there's still so much work to do, thought Hermione. Proportional regional representation for wizards; similar representation for Beings and some sort of system for Muggles; a federal system to incorporate adversarial interests; strong backing for select NGOs for science and healing... and so much more. She could almost see the future stretching out ahead of her, in all of its strangeness and complexity.

It might have been disheartening if Hermione hadn't been so eager to get started. There were so many lives to save, and she was in a position to help without a minute of delay. She smiled. Not one more minute.

All right, then. Time to do a little dance.

"Thank you, everyone, for coming," said Percy. "You should all have an itinerary, but I have extras if you need them. If you don't mind, we'll begin with introductions, and then we'll lay out our current status and our future plans."

"There is much we need to do," broke in Per, ignoring the orderly start of the meeting and the offered itinerary, his face haggard and serious with urgency. Percy looked mildly annoyed. "We must begin immediately to work on our defenses. The Muggles and the monsters and the other things... we must plan for their control."

He Jin cut in after the Norden diplomat, leaning forward and pointing out in calm and clipped words that the strange blurry monsters with fishlike eyes had been spotted in Ulan Bator a day ago, and there was no telling where they might go next.

The Westphalian agreed, nodding along with the mandarin and adding, "Our resources are a fraction of what they were, and it's taking everything we have simply to maintain the Statute of Secrecy. And that's not even mentioning the villains behind it all – the ones Reg called the 'Three.'"

"Yes," said Hermione, rising up from her seat slightly. The others quieted, and attention focused on her. "You are all absolutely right," she said, and she put force behind her words: cold steel. She pressed her lips tightly together, then gave a small nod, as though in confirmation of some inner resolution.

"Our current situation has become untenable," she continued. "If another attack arrived, we'd be wiped out. There is one member of the Three at large, assuming we have not fallen prey to misinformation in that regard – I can imagine a clever group

adopting a misleading name – as well as a small army of Unseelie and many other threats. Even with the help of new allies," and she nodded to the Curdite who was there on behalf of the goblins and other Beings, "we have barely been able to hold things together. Thousands and thousands of people and goblins lost their lives on Götterdämmerung, and we are vulnerable as never before."

"Then now is the time to take hold of the Muggles, as our enemy did, and as we once did in old times," said the Russian domovoi. "We must command their numbers for our own." The New Zealand representative nodded her head, vigorously.

"Yes," agreed Hermione once more. Amelia and Dolores ended their hushed conversation, turning to look at her with shock and disbelief, and even Percy turned to stare at her. "I know that for many of you, this will be unimaginable, but I agree: it's the only way. The world has changed, and all of us have seen things happen that we never could have believed."



Elsewhere.

At the same time.

Limpel Tineagar's face had been frozen into an unpleasant expression of dismay and pain. Reg Hig was reminded of the stories of how the Eleusinian Mysteries had punished its enemies, petrifying them into living statues and then enchanting their limbs so that they could be adjusted into humiliating positions. It seemed petty to today's scholars of history, but its effectiveness couldn't be discounted – the Mysteries had maintained their hegemony over all of the Mediterranean for generations.

Not that they could do much, here, he thought, looking at Tineagar's maimed body, floating in the air in front of him, stunned stiff. One arm cut away at the shoulder, the other at the elbow. He'd heard that Amelia Bones had done this, in the last moments of a fight on Hogwarts' roof. He wondered if it had been punitive, necessary, or simply an accident of victory. Bones is not a cruel witch, but a new Eleusinian Mysteries has arisen. I can't ignore the implications of that, even if I am a part of it.

That last thought was some comfort, at least, he thought as he looked at the broken body of the betrayer, floating along at his wand's command. The great merchants and old families of Tidewater had been murdered, wiped out of life as thoroughly as if they'd never existed, but those Americans that were left would be an equal part of the new world. When the Council of Westphalia rose again – and that Thing would rise again, even if Hig had to spend the rest of his life rebuilding its ranks and its strength – the Americas would no longer be in the shadows, jockeying for leverage within the Confederation.

"Councilor Hig, sir," called a voice, and Hig looked up, returning from his reverie. It was the head of the DMLE, young Diggory, and four others. One was an auror that Hig recognized, but not the rest... they looked nervous and unsettled. Ranks were thin all over, and Hig supposed these must be new recruits or patrolwizards pressed into more heady service than that to which they were used.

"Director Diggory, hello," said Hig.

"Hullo," said Diggory. The young man looked haggard, but somehow that made him look even taller and more handsome. His expression was solemn, perhaps due to their surroundings. The atrium of the British Ministry of Magic still bore scars and ragged wounds on every wall and surface. The basics had been put back in order, but it would be a long time before the cosmetic damage could be repaired – and even longer before the memories would fade. Hig thought of Tidewater again, and shuddered.

"Here is my delivery," said Hig, gesturing with his wand. Tineagar's body floated between them gently, as though wafted by the wind. "Good riddance. Have your people strip her mind, and if there's anything left when you're done, tell her that her home is gone."

Diggory didn't reply, watching Hig with a sad expression. He gestured to one of the witches with him, and she cast her own levitation spell on Tineagar, taking over from Hig.

"I'll be headed back later tonight," Hig said, "after taking some time to try to get together some people."

"Checking up on friends?" Diggory asked, as he stared down at the frozen face of Tineagar.

"No," Hig said, shaking his head. "There are some expats of the Americas here in Britain. From all over... Chile, Brazil, the States, Canada, *et cetera*. I'm going to touch base with a few of them and see if they'd be amenable to coming home."

"Make sense. I'm sorry about what happened."

"It could have been worse," Hig said. "Salem escaped without a scratch on a single student, thanks to the goblins and centaurs, and Houston and Buenos Aires only lost a handful. And we'll rebuild. Everyone, everywhere, needs to rebuild." He gestured broadly around the atrium, as though to illustrate his point.

"We'll be here to help."

"Thank you," Hig said, and sighed. He shook his head. "Sorry, it's too easy to be gloomy, these days. All is well with you?"

"As well as can be expected," Diggory said, nodding. "I lost some friends and a cousin, but everyone lost someone. It's been too busy to really think about it."

"Make sure you make time for yourself – to keep a clear head," Hig offered. "In fact, maybe you want to have dinner tonight? Take your mind off things?"

"Actually," said Diggory, a bit sheepishly. "I have an engagement tonight."

"I heard rumors about a long-sought romance. I suppose sometimes persistence pays off, eh?" said Hig, smiling gently. A signal to the young man: levity is okay, even now with what happened in Tidewater, I won't be offended.

Diggory shrugged. "What can I say?" he asked. "We've all been through so much, and sometimes a person comes out the other side a bit... well, bolder, I guess. It'll be new and probably fun, and worth giving it a chance, and anyway..."

And Diggory glanced with a smile over at the group that had accompanied him, where Pip was standing guard. "...he *did* save my life."

Pip noticed their attention. He smiled hugely and gave them a little wave. Then he returned to his work, straightening himself up and returning his attention to Tineagar... though she was hardly in a position to escape, even if she were somehow to wake, and though it didn't seem as though any amount of dutifulness could erase the smile that was plastered on his face.

"Well then," said Hig, and now his smile was rather more genuine. "I hope you have a good evening. I'm sure I'll see you soon, Master Diggory. Let's hope for the best of luck – in all our new beginnings."

When Reg Hig left the Ministry of Magic, he found himself oddly optimistic. Despite all of his common sense and despite everything he knew of history... he let himself believe that things might get brighter. Things might get better.

Isn't it pretty to think so.

### <u>^^^^^^</u>

"Muggles are an existential threat," Hermione said, firmly, looking around at everyone at the meeting table. It was a new piece of furniture, without the scuffs and broken edge from Hermione's demonstrations of anger three months ago. New like everything else in this new Tower. "Götterdämmerung showed that to everyone, even skeptics. Harry had some strong beliefs on this, as you know, but I think we need a new plan. The Statute of Secrecy made us vulnerable, since it encouraged us to separate ourselves and gather together into little enclaves. There was a time when wizards and witches lived among Muggles, usually ruling them, and it would have been impossible to try any sort of magical genocide. We need that protection again – the protection of Muggles."

"Madame Granger," said Amelia, and her voice was harsh. "I am surprised to hear this from you. You used to moderate Mr. Potter's approach, but now you sound more extreme than he ever did. What is your idea – that we attempt to seize control? It's not even practical, even if it weren't a gross departure from our ideals. We are so few... do you imagine we could dominate the Muggles when they have as many cities as we have people?"

"We have been intervening strategically for years," said Hermione, coolly, standing up. "On a small scale, even a handful of wizards can effect incredibly quick change at a minimum of risk."

"I hardly think a few Hit Wizard squads are good evidence," objected Dolores. "And you *know* what they're like."

### 

Elsewhere.

At the same time.

"This seems like the perfect moment for sniping," said Neville, in a hopeful whisper. He scrunched himself forward enough to see over the rim of a huge spool of copper wire that was currently hiding him from sight, then ducked back down. "Yes, sniping it is. For sure."

"If we did that, then –" said Fred, cocking his head to the side.

"– wouldn't he be dead?" said George, cocking his head to the other side.

"No, I just need to snipe the gun out of his hand," said Neville. "That can be healed."

"Then there would be the blastbomb only to explode, I think," said Bogdanova, peering around the corner for a moment. She pulled her head back and turned to Neville with a mocking smile. "Which means all of our problems here would be gone very shortly... yes, you have convinced me."

"I can snipe his other hand, too," offered Neville. "Then he can't blow up the bomb."

"This might be one of those situations that can't be solved with sniper rifles," mused George, contemplatively.

"Although now that we say that out loud, it just sounds silly," contemplated Fred, musingly.

"We can use the Extinguishing Charm on the bomb. That will stop any detonation," said Neville. "Then the sniping."

"Snipe the hostages, as a distraction?" suggested Bogdanova. Her appearance may have changed with rejuvenation, but her attitude certainly hadn't been affected.

"Enchanted bullets, that's the ticket," said Fred.

"Zip around to both hands, whammo, knock him back and to the left," agreed George.

Neville turned to squint at George suspiciously, but the Weasley twin only smiled serenely. Neville sighed, and crossed his arms with a scowl. "Fine, fine... the same as always, then."

"Don't worry, Nev," said George, consolingly. "You'll get your chance, someday."

"There will be another time the world is about to end, and then you'll just nip in and snipe the arch-villain just in time to save everyone," said Fred, nodding.

"Happens all the time," said George.

"Definitely not a unique opportunity for awesomeness," said Fred.

The twins were grinning, now. They reached across to each other, and each tapped the other on the head. With the sound of a cracking egg, they vanished into Disillusionment.

Bogdanova waited a second, then leaned around and tugged on Neville's earlobe, affectionately. "They're not wrong, you know," she said, her tone softening. "Who knows what may happen? Think about other things of that day."

"I know," Neville said, sighing again as Bogdanova lifted her wand and tapped herself on the head, vanishing from sight with a wet crackling noise. "And I'm grateful, of course. But still... the sniping..." he said plaintively.

"Oh, come on," the invisible Russian witch said, and her voice was fond. "Let us go. There's a girl in the pond that needs rescuing."

Neville grinned, and Disillusioned himself.

### 

"This is good," said the domovoi, who obviously approved of the plan. Several others joined him in that attitude. Per, Percy, and Dolores looked doubtful. Amelia looked hostile. The others seemed to have reserved judgment.

He Jin cleared his throat, delicately, and asked Hermione what she was proposing.

The fast reverse.

"We have already seen the success of making our rivals into our allies," said Hermione, gesturing at the Curdish envoy. "So we need to do the same with the Muggles. We need to turn a threat into an asset... potentially the biggest asset we could ever have. We need to eliminate the Statute of Secrecy and present ourselves to the world as a magical people. It's a risk, and we'll need to be careful, but remaining isolated has proven even riskier."

Nearly everyone seemed confused by what she was proposing, except for Amelia. Her expression softened, and displeasure was supplanted by surprise. "You're not proposing mastery at all. You're proposing the *modus meli*."

"Open and free, and as equal as we can manage," confirmed Hermione. "Not hiding from them, not ruling them, but living with them."

Per spoke up, cautiously. "If you will excuse me, that seems to be an idea with a very interesting goal, but one with too many problems. It is impossible."

"There are so many problems that it's staggering," Hermione allowed. "Every Muggle government will see magic as a weapon, so there will be a risk of global warfare – in addition to the constant threat of kidnapping or blackmail. There are also different aspects of magic that are incredibly dangerous to the untrained, but any Obliviator can tell you how hard it is to completely eliminate information from a Muggle population... which is why nearly every aspect of our magical world can be found approximated in folklore and legends, even today. And of course, there's every possibility we'd face a return to the days of witch-hunts and inquisitions... especially after recent events."

"But you believe you have a solution," Amelia said, quietly, speaking over the murmurs of the others.

"It is possible that the Mirror of Noitilov can be used to alter the terms under which our world operates," said Hermione. "It is also possible that the Goblet of Fire can be used to bind people without their conscious knowledge, if it will recognize a proxy in terms of political representatives. It is also possible that some of the new spells we will acquire from our two captive members of the Three – or even one of the ones we already possess – could be used once we have mastered them to manipulate even a global population. But we may not need to resort to any of these, if we devote ourselves as one to this goal and find different solutions. There are many others, including mundane strategies like wand control. There were only one hundred and twelve wandmakers worldwide a month ago, and there must be many fewer now. We kept the entire world in an imperfect ignorance for centuries surely if we really try, we can manage a transition without too much damage."

Percy was staring at her, eyes wide. He'd realized what she was saying – her *true* message – before anyone else. But he didn't seem angry. He seemed awed.

"It might be hard," Hermione added. "But sometimes the hardest things – the things that seem the most impossible – are the things that most need to be done. The first step to finding a solution is rejecting the idea of impossibility. Then you just take the first, hard, scary step."

### 

Elsewhere.

At the same time.

Nikitas Seyhan knocked gingerly on the door to the cottage at Külek Boğazı. There was no answer. Nikitas frowned and turned around, glancing behind himself to where Tonks, Jessie, and Urg were watching. Tonks smiled and nodded, miming a knock. Nikitas turned back around and knocked a second time, more loudly. He knew he should be nervous, but really only felt a distant discomfort.

"Hello?" said a voice in the local Greek. The door cracked open, slowly.

"Is this the Seyhan house?" said Nikitas, in the same tongue. He felt like he was in a dream.

The door swung open, and a big bluff man stood there. He was bearded and florid, and his eyes were wide.

"Nikitas? You've come back to us?"

### 

Dolores said something first, in a syrupy voice that was unusually quiet. "Ms. Granger... the Mirror, and the Goblet, and the new spell... aren't these all things you could have already done? Couldn't you have... Did you?"

He Jin was out of his seat, glaring at Hermione as though his eyes were capable of murder under their own power. The Westphalian had gone pale. Per was looking rapidly around him, not having yet understood but too afraid to ask. Hermione stood and stepped away from the table, and walked to the room's window. Dramatic pose at the window, put my silhouette against the sky. Like so. She looked out and down, at the clouds rolling beneath the Tower as the building lightly floated along, borne up by the salvaged Aa-Khem of the Shafiq. The scarab statues had been recovered from the wreckage of The Declaration of Intent. The new Tower, still only a fragment of its future self, was buoyed up in the sky: unassailable, invisible, and puissant.

The people in this room represented enough power and influence to sway the Confederation. They'd fought a global war together, and now faced new challenges and a new world. They'd been forged out of a disparate and violent assemblage of fractious Things, and could now be united.

Fear could do it. She could threaten most of them. They might seek her death and plot against her, but they'd obey. She knew that Draco would do it that way, if he were in her position. A cold and intimidating speech, leveraging all his power and influence, and enlisting the weak as his enforcers.

Persuasion could do it. She could convince most of them. They wouldn't be wholly won over, and might later change their minds, but they'd agree. She knew that Harry would do it that way, if he were in her position. A bold and inspirational speech, changing as many minds as possible, and backed up with redundant plans to handle anyone who was recalcitrant.

But she wasn't Draco and she wasn't Harry. They'd each stepped away from these things, perhaps permanently. She was Hermione Granger, daughter of dentists, goddess. She was standing at the crux of things, and she knew the right thing to do.

Fear was limited. Draco had been afraid all of his life, in one sense, but he'd still found the courage to face the worst and overcome it. A single lever was all it took to overturn fear.

Persuasion was limited. Harry had spent years railing against insanity and irrationality, hurling evidence and reason against dull walls and burning with frustrating when they failed. He sometimes couldn't see the way the world was, out of eagerness to see it the way it should be.

Hermione knew that wasn't how you led people. It wasn't how you changed minds. She had led the Returned, and she knew why.

She had led soldiers, and she knew why they'd followed her on the battlefield. She had led the people, and she knew why they wanted to touch her hand and worshipped her.

Hermione had died twice, and she knew what she'd followed back to this world. She knew what people would follow.

They followed the light.

Far below, all around the Tower, she could see bright spots of crimson glory. She heard a phoenix call, as though it saw her, and heard another answer.

Hermione turned around, and smiled, and began to speak. She brought her own special gift. She brought hope.

### 

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Yesterday.

"It just seems unlike you, is all," Hermione said to Harry, watching him curiously. She opened a satchel and looked inside, but the extended space within was still empty.

"I think my part in this is over," Harry said, shrugging. He was silent for a moment as he finishing bolting down the Vanishing Cabinet inside of the spherical silver ship, then he stood back and surveyed his work. He nodded approvingly, and turned back to Hermione. "And I'll be within reach, from time to time. I might need help."

Hermione frowned. "You'll need a lot of books, and you might get lonely, but as far as we can tell, there's no limit to that Cabinet. You don't even really need to 'go' at all, since you could just as easily live here and check in on your ship once a month. So this is really you taking a sabbatical from everything. And that's fine, but I think I'm the one who's going to be asking you for help. Be ready to pop on through, the first time I encounter an insuperable problem."

"Well, see, here's the thing," Harry said, leaning down with a silver wire rack so that he could affix it to the interior of the ship. "You remember all of my work with Luna, looking into the nature of magic? Magical theory has come quite a ways since we started to systematically eliminate possibilities. And we found some pretty amazing things when we looked at the brains of people casting spells. We never did have enough of a chance to discuss it, I think," he mused. "Anyway, I pretty much have just one strong hypothesis now. And it fits with what we know about Merlin, and explains a lot.

"Spoken magic and wandless magic look almost the same when you see how they're expressed. BETs and POSTs and all the rest in specific patterns, even though the interference each spell generates might be completely different. The same effect, the same patterns. It's not a far inferential leap to conclude that the pattern is a command, like you might give to a computer. If you're magical in nature, then something in the universe knows to pay attention to that command.

"Now, it's possible that it's just the nature of the universe that specific electrochemical patterns in our neurology trigger complicated phenomena. I've read weirder theories. But that opens up a big question: why are we the only ones?

"It's the Fermi Paradox on an even bigger scale. There are so many planets where life could evolve, out there in the universe. And the existence of magic means that a lot of the normal answers probably don't work. Distance and difficulty don't seem like they could possibly matter once any magical civilization is advanced enough, and some of those lifeforms that probability suggests must exist would end up being magical, just like humans.

"Now, there's a lot of possible explanations. Maybe magic makes it even more difficult for life to evolve than we thought, somehow. Or maybe there are magical barriers we don't know about, blocking us off.

"But then I think about Merlin, and what he was afraid of, and how he... well, he backed down, when it came down to it."

Hermione's jaw had dropped open and she'd forgotten to breathe since Harry had said the words "Fermi Paradox." He continued on.

"I didn't present him with very much new information, when it came right down to it. He must have already known Meldh had been defeated, and they'd been watching me so they already knew the other things I said. And I told him that prophecies always come true, but I learned that from a book that *quoted Merlin*. So why did he go?

"Maybe he's just biding his time. Maybe he's seeking a way to neutralize our advantages. Maybe he was just suddenly persuaded.

"But someone that powerful with that much lore and prophecy..." Harry shook his head. "I'm not sure about that. Because I'm thinking of what Merlin's goal might really have been, and about a thing called the Great Filter, and..." He paused, then continued. "No, I think that —"

"Wait," interrupted Hermione. "Just wait. Because I think you're about to tell me that you think the British wizard Merlin is an alien from another planet, sent here to watch us or guard us or something. And that maybe aliens invented magic? And that is..." She frowned. "Just... no. Put a pin in that. I can't handle that right now."

Harry grinned. "I imagine a computer somewhere, advanced beyond our furthest dreams, that fulfills commands to users it recognizes. And we just happen to have matched that pattern in the wierdest way. But all right. Another time, then. Or until it becomes more urgent."

Hermione was silent for a long period, while Harry continued packing away supplies. Lots of redundancies and failsafes, since this was a journey into the unknown. He'd be pushing against new limits and uncertainties about all sorts of materials and spells.

After a while, the witch spoke again. "How do you know that this will work? And where to go?"

"Prophecy," Harry said, shrugging. "Which is the only way I can even do this, since I know I will succeed someday. Eventually. I just need to head to the Scorpion and the Archer... Scorpius and Sagittarius. Something is locked beyond return along that path. Just by coincidence, that's also where astronomers think a black hole is situated, at the center of our galaxy. So that's where I'll go, and we'll see if that's where Dumbledore is now. If it's where Atlantis is now. If it's where all the things locked beyond return are trapped outside of time. It's inconvenient and crazy, but sometimes so is the world."

"How far is it?" asked Hermione.

"26,000 light years or so," answered Harry, grinning. "Although I expect to find faster ways to travel than the speed of light."

"I feel as though we're saying goodbye," Hermione said, and her voice trembled a little. "Which is stupid, because you'll probably be back for lunch next week, once you start to need someone to talk to. But you really are leaving."

"I'm leaving," Harry said.

"And you're leaving me in charge."

"You're in charge," Harry agreed. "Oh, I have three things to give you! Might as well give them over now."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a milky-white stone. "The Spirit Stone. The last of the Deathly Hallows. Yours now in truth, along with the others." She accepted it, wordlessly. It was also reportedly a Horcrux of Voldemort. A research project: how to break those ties.

He tugged on the fingerless glove on his right hand, pulling it free. A pained expression passed over his face, but he didn't hesitate. He offered it to her, and again Hermione took it.

She glanced at his other hand, at the decoy glove he always wore, but he smiled a wry smile. "No, I'm going to hang on to this one. I discovered something useful about it, recently. No, the third thing is a ritual. It's a sacrificial ritual... a dangerous one, but an important one. The most important one, really."

"You... wait, what?"

"It was one of the only things I could think to do, at the end. I couldn't fight, not really. And I only knew one thing that had impressed anyone in the Three. A ritual that he saw in my mind, one I'd never actually done. I had it in my mind, all the principles — I'm really not sure how to explain it, it just works out somehow, when you're inventing a spell — and Meldh had told me I was being stupid not to use it." Harry pulled a folded parchment from his pocket, carefully, and handed it over to her. "I still think he's wrong, and I'm still not sure if it's the right thing. But I did use it once. To fulfill a promise. I picked a star that seemed least likely to have any negative consequences... a Bok globule that would only have existed as a star for a few thousand years, as best I could figure."

Hermione took the parchment. She didn't know what to say... didn't know how to react to a succession of surprises that seemed too great to be borne. All she could think was a single sentence, a miraculous sentence that embraced the multitude of stars scattered throughout her mind's eye, each one now with a name: We can save everyone.

She smiled gently. Her eyes were wet.

### 

Malfoy Manor

The small family accepted no visitors, and seldom left the house.

It was a strange, new way to live: as though ambition were sated, as though ambition had reached its natural end. Surely, it was temporary – for the gnawing of desire never rests for long – but for a time, the family wanted for nothing. They were together, and they were content.

Sometimes they played music, or had long conversations, or spent entire afternoons in cooking elaborate meals. But often, they simply sat with each other in silence. It was a happy and full silence where nothing needed to be said, because everything important was known.

From time to time, Draco would close his eyes and hold them that way for a long time, before opening them again. As though testing what he was seeing.

But nothing changed, and every time he would open them again, Draco would see his father anew, holding his mother's hand.

He smiled gently. His eyes were wet.

### 

Somewhere beyond Earth and everything else we know. Somewhere in the darkness of space.

Soon.

Harry took a deep breath, and then let it out, slowly. It sounded very loud inside of his ship.

He held the glove from his left hand, and examined it with a smile. He touched the curved fragment of the Cup of Midnight that was bound there. A decoy he'd worn for years, to balance the Stone of Permanence. Impervious to harm and enchantment and damage, and always close to him.

He pushed hard on the underside of the smooth piece of pottery, twisted it to the side, and then pushed down on it. There was a small click, and the piece of broken earthenware slid upwards, revealing the round aperture to an extended space sheltered beneath.

Harry set the glove on the floor of the ship. He reached over to pick up a book from a small shelf where he'd placed it earlier, and then stepped into the glove. It drew him in, delicately.

Finding his way past all of the traps and security precautions had taken him weeks. Removing a substantial part of a mass of tungsten had taken almost as long, since he'd needed to be extremely careful. In this, after all, he was entirely alone.

But he'd done it.

He sat on a small stool, and smiled. "Hello, Professor. I brought a book, and I thought I'd read to you today."

"That would be acceptable, Mr. Potter," said Voldemort.

"It's called *The Feynman Lectures on Physics*, and it's one of my favorites."

"Is it long?"

"Yes."

"Then begin at your leisure, Mr. Potter."

Harry didn't begin right away. He just looked at the box for a moment.

He smiled gently. His eyes were wet.

### Interlude mmmmmm

### Analysis and Chanks

### ~~~~~~@*~~~~~*~~~~

I really enjoyed Harry Potter and the Methods of Rationality. HPMOR excelled in its characterization, its intricate plot, its careful phrasing and riddles, and in its use of dramatic tension and catharsis. I loved the way it took aspects of the original Harry Potter and extrapolated them out into a world and timeline, using reasonably pessimistic expectations to establish a small set of premises and then draw the logical conclusion.

Some of the scenes I found particularly affecting were the following:

- Chapter six, where Harry talks about a childhood trauma when he felt unsafe, and we can feel that the author has shown us something very real and raw to him;
- Chapter sixteen, when Harry has his first Battle Magic class and virtually the whole of the story is set in motion in a compact and subtle way;
- Chapter forty-five, when the first Patronus 2.0 is cast and we read Harry's mental *cri de cœur*; and
- Chapter eighty-one, the courtroom scene in which we learn everything we ever need to know about the awesome majesty of Minerva McGonagall.

When I set out to write Significant Digits, I tried to honor everything I enjoyed and admired about HPMOR. The result is bound to be unsatisfactory for some people, because not everyone was fascinated by those same elements. Further, I was very specifically not trying to mimic the original story. To imitate another author's voice and recreate their patterns over an entire

work would be very difficult and not very fun, and I had no taste for the attempt.

I wanted to write a story about a changing world — the *whole* world — as all the ambitions of the characters played out and met their difficulties. I wanted to write a story about the realization of the rationalism and humanism to which Harry aspired. I wanted to write a story about extravagance: extravagant planning with layered redundancies, extravagant characters whose passion led them to discard the literal and logical conclusions of their own beliefs in favor of still-greater pursuits, and extravagant events befitting the process of optimizing the world.

I wanted Significant Digits to answer some of the questions that had lingered with me. These were big questions, and even in three hundred thousand words, I couldn't completely answer all of them – but I did answer some. What was it like in the larger world of Harry Potter, outside the confines of the school? How would magic and magical races have shaped history and the hidden events behind them (ignoring the well-meaning but utterly insane history of canon)? How could the continued existence of this world be explained, given the elements we knew to be present?

Lastly, of course, I sought to tell a story with interesting characters and events that follow a rationally-unfolding plot, both at simple levels and in intricate mental leaps. There were many twists that everyone solved, some that only a few grasped, and a few that no one at all predicted. This has been an amazingly intelligent and creative group, and it was a considerable challenge to find the right balance. Congratulations are due to those individuals who guessed some of the biggest twists and puzzles, most particularly Reddit user /u/psinig, who identified the Second of the Three.

In some respects, I have succeeded. In others, I have failed. I was certainly overly ambitious, and should have given myself twice as long and twice as many words. These limitations cramped plot development, curtailed events, and required me to rely on implications in some regards. But I do believe that I accomplished much of what I wanted to create, and that I have done one more thing besides: left room for others. There are other stories to be told. I'll write some of them, but others have begun their own: \*Orders of Magnitude\* is a prequel that's already begun.

There's a whole big world to play in.

There's a lot I would change now, even though I'm pretty happy with the story. It's my first work of this length, and my first work of serial fiction, and naturally there are all kinds of changes I would make in hindsight. I became a better writer over the course of this past year, and a more critical thinker. I should probably have cut back on some of the secondary storylines, in retrospect, since I didn't have time or room to do them justice.

There is one chapter, though, that I would not change and that I am utterly happy with – a chapter in which I did every little thing I wanted to do, and yet somehow arrived at something that was even more than the sum of all those parts. Chapter Fourteen, Azkaban, is everything for which I have aimed, and will continue to aim in my fiction. I can recommend that chapter to you, at the least, with a full and proud and happy heart.

As for the rest, that's for you to decide.

Gratitude is due to many people.

Writing the story would have been quite literally impossible if it weren't for the extraordinary efforts of 4tom, go\_on\_without\_me, pa55word, and a final editor who wishes to go unnamed. Their tireless willingness to sweat the small stuff despite unreasonably short deadlines, challenge poor phrasing or poor ideas, and cheer on our joint successes was extraordinary. This was their story and their accomplishment, too. Thank you all.

Readers and commenters have provided an enormous amount of support and constructive criticism, both of which have helped me improve as the story continued. I have been writing for a long time, but this is the first thing that's ever gotten this kind of response, and a large part of that was that the community of HPMOR fans is so creative and clever and kind. Amazing individuals improved my website, fixed up the subreddit, donated a laptop when I complained about a green tint on my screen (!), and put together PDF and EPUB versions of the text. Thank you all.

Generous patrons on Patreon provided a real reason to keep going when things were hard. While I frequently remind people to consider their priorities before donating to a writer, it's also true that money is the unit of caring. Patronage provided a message of support and very real assistance that could not be explained away as courtesy or indifferent politeness. Thank you all.

Eliezer Yudkowksy wrote something genuinely new and good, and inspired legions. And I certainly wouldn't have begun the story at all if it hadn't been for his gentle encouragement and reception when I first posted a snapshot of my ideas. Thank you.

Nothing would have been possible, or worthwhile, if it hadn't been for my wife Lizzie. She walked with me in the woods while I talked about ideas. She proofread all the early chapters. She took the cover picture. I know that there is some ineluctable grace in this world, because I know her. Thank you.

My next story will be the *The Consolation of Conquest*. It will begin in about a month, and updates will come at a more reasonable fortnightly basis. Please subscribe to my mailing list or RSS feed or subreddit to receive updates.

Thank you.



## 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.
- **Alþing** The fortress-like headquarters of the Council of West-phalia, the Alþing (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.
- Lectenberg, 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; Lectenberg, 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 Alþing.

- 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 Alþing, 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.