



SIGNIFICANT DIGITS

A continuation of Harry Potter
and the Methods of Rationality.

By Alexander D.

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

My thanks to 4t0m for his copyediting assistance and George Steel for the design and production of this edition.



Contents



Contents	iii
Arc One: Thesis	1
1 Frontloading Mysteries	3
2 Buffering Conflicts	17
3 Resolving Differences	29
4 Established Patterns May Have Little Predictive Value .	47
5 A Matter of Perspective	67
6 George Jaxon	85
7 Aitiai, Diaphorai, and Alethestate Prophasis	97
8 Morse Four	113
9 Boxes	125
10 What Is Beautiful Is Good	141
Goblins	153
11 Any Advantage	161
War	173
12 Opposition	185
13 Pip's Day Out	207
14 Azkaban	227
Glossary	255

Arc One



Thesis

MIRANDA

O, wonder!

How many goodly creatures are there here!

How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world,

That has such people in't!

PROSPERO

'Tis new to thee.

— William Shakespeare

Frontloading Mysteries

Still, Reg thought, it certainly made sense to use a tried-and-true method. History showed the wisdom. At the height of the Reign of the Eleusinian Mysteries, Sulla the Fortunate marched on Rome and took power by force, wresting it from the Optimates in the name of the Muggle masses. He ruled with absolute power. Forty years later, a successor did the same thing, championing the

Muggle cause in the Senate and seizing power by force. Twenty years after that... well, you get the picture.

All else equal, a winning move would stay a winning move... until and unless you changed the rules. That's why the third successor of Sulla the Fortunate had quietly murdered all of his opposition, and had launched centuries of tyranny. Augustus Caesar had decided to change the rules, and he had done so with admirable effectiveness.



Reg stood from his desk chair, walking to the fireplace. He stamped his foot on a bright-green bellows at the fireplace entrance, barely breaking stride as he stepped into the flare of green flame and said, "Westphalian Council."

There was a brief moment as he walked from the travel room into the council chamber itself. For obvious reasons of security, the Floo network was not connected directly to a place of such power and discretion as the Westphalian Council's meeting chamber, or with the offices of any of the councilors.

Walking into the chamber, through a shower of Thieves' Downfall, Reg saw that there was only one other councilor present, sitting behind one of the tiny desks. Limpel Tineagar was a gangly woman, and she always looked a trifle silly folded up on the little chairs of the meeting chamber. As she leaned forward to peer at a parchment, her limbs seem to be too long and thin. Limpel resembled nothing so much as a robed spider.

"Reg," she said warmly, "how are you this morning?"

"Very well," he replied, walking down the tiers until he was on the level below her. He was almost a foot shorter than her, and if he had tried to take advantage of a rare opportunity to loom over someone by standing next to her, it would have seemed ridiculous to them both. Power should not be obvious.

"I assume you've heard of the French capitulation?" she asked, her tone less cheerful. "The cowards fall, one by one."

"That is why I am here," he said. "We must call a meeting, and we must discuss what the Americas will do. Inaction is no longer an option — not with Thing after Thing formally agreeing

to the darkest of rituals! If we wait much longer, then it will be too late.”

“A preview of your speech?” Limpel asked, her mouth twisting with amusement. She was a cynic, and had no native passion in her. “You rouse me with your stirring words.”

Reg frowned slightly, and leaned forward, putting his hands on her desk and looking at her with frank directness. He was not an intimidating man, he knew. Short and ill-favored, he had a broad face with a plum nose and dark eyes. The dense black stubble around his mouth was irregular and resistant to every razor and charm. He was not charismatic and he was not scary.

But he was very persuasive.

“It’s no joke, Limpel. Blocking the international statute only delayed Britain for a few years. Europe has now agreed to the Tower’s demands almost as a whole, saving only the brave Cappadocians. France has already begun putting in place the necessary procedures to comply with the treaty. Thus far, it’s only the harmless things — Healer’s Kits and all that — but it won’t be too much longer before Safety Poles are set up in Quiberon, Beauxbatons, Aix-en-Provence, and throughout Paris! Brainwashing available at the touch of a finger!”

Reg lifted a finger in the air.

“One Thing stands in the way: our council. We’ve been fighting this Atlantean nonsense for centuries, and we’re about to lose for good. History will mark down this council as the one that failed... unless we take a stand.

“I don’t know if you’ve ever noticed that, in an emergency, people in a crowd are slow to help. Someone gets hit by a Quaffle and falls into the stands, and everyone just stands back and looks shocked. No one in the crowd feels responsible — they’re just watching. But when there’s only one bystander, that person knows that it’s on them. They have to intervene. And that’s us, now. That’s the Westphalian Council. We’ve spent years fighting for the rights of nonhumans and Muggles! We sent dozens to fight Grindelwald, and after Boston, we sent dozens to fight Voldemort. We’re the only ally of the goblins that hasn’t already sold their souls to this new Dark Lord.

“It’s us. We’re it. And if we fail, then that’s the end of everything. Goblins in chains, Muggles start dying by the

millions, and Westphalian Council becomes one more footnote at the bottom of the page, reading, 'Also destroyed in 1999 was the Westphalian Council, a once-important American wizarding union.'

Limpel's smirk had left her face, and she was solemn. "You're right, of course. Sorry."

"No need for apologies, Limpel," Reg said, shaking his head and leaning back. "Just give me your word that you're with me. The next Dark Lord has risen, and we need to stop him. There is no one else... we are the battle line, here in this council."

She was nodding now, her mouth tight.

"So this isn't a speech, Limpel, but a request," he said, looking her in the eye and speaking with the earnestness of an honest man. "Will you help me stop Harry Potter-Evans-Verres, before he destroys the world as we know it?"



"You smile too much, 'Harry,' " Hermione Granger said to Nymphadora Tonks, lightly. "For anyone who knows the real fellow, it's a dead giveaway. You should spend more time looking serious or thoughtful. Alastor says that it's important to put yourself in the right mood, and so when he's being Harry he just pretends everyone else in the room is a child. He says Harry acts that way anyway, and it helps him be the right kind of condescending."

"Mad-Eye Moody says the meanest things I've ever heard *anyone* say about someone that they love like a son," Tonks said. She was running her finger up and down the lightning-bolt scar on her forehead. "It would be cute if it wasn't exactly as creepy as everything else Mad-Eye does."

Hermione shrugged. "I think it's sweet, really."

She pushed through the swinging wooden door as they exited Prestidigitation and Practicals. They were already being stared at, the moment they stepped out into Diagon Alley but that was okay. That was useful.

Hermione and Tonks-as-Harry made a beeline for the Safety Pole that had been fixed in Diagon Alley nearly two years ago.

Their pace slowed as word spread. The Goddess was well-known and often out in public, but the Tower rarely ever left Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry. To see him, you normally had to be either incredibly important or incredibly ill.

Harry was essentially in prison, Hermione reflected, as she gingerly moved through the crowd. He was trapped in his rooms at Hogwarts, forced to send magical doppelgangers to major events. If an official envoy insisted on meeting him in person, and that encounter seemed likely to require Harry's unique gifts, then that envoy simply had to come visit. As it turned out, this was better for everyone, on all counts. Harry was still not known for his social skills. There were other benefits, too. For example, the arrangement made it impossible for anyone to pressure a fake-Harry into an on-the-spot decision.

Ordinarily, Harry himself might have been the one to point out the advantages of being forced to confer and consider on any major decisions — of being pre-committed to that deliberation. It was right out of Schelling's *The Strategy of Conflict*, after all (page 30, her mind automatically supplied).

But Harry couldn't actually understand the whole concept, as she'd discovered when she'd tried to talk to him about it. Once he'd gotten important enough, he'd simply stopped wanting to leave the safety of Hogwart's. His Unbreakable Vow wouldn't permit him to "take any chances" with the destruction of the world, and at some point he had begun to consider that there was a small chance his presence might be necessary to save it. It was a very small chance, but it was a chance. He was too unique, perhaps — the single point of failure in too many possible systems. Hermione knew that this was why he did so much teaching. She had never felt the same constraint, though, despite her similar Vow. Was that humility on her part... or realism?

"Unbreakable Vows," Harry had said, when she had tried to encourage him to grapple with the situation, "are very effective. They don't work like genies in stories — I'm bound by the terms of the vow as it was meant, I think, in a way that makes me do my best with it. So while I understand what you're saying in the abstract, I don't *want* to want to leave Hogwart's or evade the Vow. Sorry."

It was sad. He was his own jailer.

Automatically, Hermione was smiling radiantly and giving small nods to people. At this point, basic public relations were on autopilot for her. It was easy. Her beauty helped. Maturity would probably have evened out her features anyway, but she also got a teensy-weensy bit of help from the dark ritual that had infused her with the unearthly magnificence of a unicorn. Plus, she'd been a world-renowned hero for several years now. As the old adage (and Sunshine Army slogan) had it, "Practice makes perfect."

"Thank heavens for you," a young woman said, reaching out to touch Hermione's arm. The woman looked to be something like thirty, but she stood with self-conscious straightness. She was probably one of the healed. Hermione nodded at her graciously, and eased by.

The prickling sensation in her arm began a moment later.

She glanced down, and saw a streak of something granular and colorless. Hermione's head whipped around, and she scanned for the young woman. Gone in the crowd. The prickling had already become a burning, and she even thought she could smell smoke. Some of the people nearby, already pressing close (which is how this happened, she thought) were backing away, their wands coming to hand and fear coming to their faces.

Hermione ripped the sleeve off of her robe, and scraped some of the substance off her skin. As she did so, she heard Tonks-as-Harry casting spells, waving her wand and calling, "*Protego Totalum! Evanesco! Cave Inicum!*" But there didn't seem to be any further immediate danger, and now the surface of Hermione's arm and robe were both burning with an oily black smoke. Even scarier: it didn't hurt that badly.

She plucked out her own wand, and spared a moment for the Fresh-Air Charm; a mint-scented breeze ruffled up around her and swept away the smoke. Keep the crowd safe. And she had to keep them safe from their own panic. She knew she was just being silly, and that she was buying into her own hype, and that wizards were essentially immune to crowd crushing (there weren't ever enough gathered in one place outside of a Quidditch arena, first of all, and wizards were naturally tough), but she couldn't help herself: she hunched over her arm and raised her wand to her throat. "*Sonorus!*

Everyone, don't worry!" Her amplified voice was clear and strong, and accompanied by a reassuring smile. "Stay calm." *Your arm is burning, and you can't really be seriously worried about them. On the other hand, they don't regenerate and we have an image to maintain.* "Everything is all right." *It's a powder, not acid, and it doesn't smell like Faux Floo. Is this a distraction?* She glanced around. Tonks was next to her, wand raised, glancing back and forth from her to the crowd. The gathered wizards and witches were either frozen in place or backing away, with a few taking a cue from her freshening charm to put on Bubblehead Charms. No one was taking advantage of the disturbance to attack.

Almost too late, she saw the black knapsack lying on the ground at her feet.

"*Waddiwassi!*" The knapsack rocketed up into the air as Hermione cast the spell on it. It was an incredibly easy and quick spell to cast, a light tripping of syllables from the lips to the back of the mouth. Twice as fast as *depulso* and eight times as fast as *wingardium leviosa* — Hermione didn't know why anyone would use anything else.

With a cracking boom that sounded much like a thunderbolt, the backpack detonated.

Tonks-as-Harry turned to Hermione, even as the boom echoed around them and people were screaming, and hissed one angry word. "Malfoy."



Percy Weasley was maybe the best government employee imaginable, Harry Potter-Evans-Verres thought to himself. He watched the young man admiringly as Percy described the new accords reached within the International Magical Trading Standards Body. One could always find witches and wizards with the necessary competence and leadership, but it was so rare to find someone with actual *perspective* — someone who knew that unexciting things like standards for cauldron thickness really and truly mattered, and that a three percent increase in the cauldron failure rate meant thousands of Galleons in lost wealth (and perhaps even actual loss of life, if some poor potion brewer couldn't make it to a Safety Pole).

These attributes are why Percy was effectively in charge of the Ministry of Magic from his position as Senior Undersecretary to the Minister for Magic. He didn't think about outcomes in terms of narratives or story. He thought about them in more absolute terms: so many Galleons saved, people saved, options saved. Even better, Harry thought, Percy was absolutely loyal.

"...moved more quickly," the young man was saying, solemnly. "These larger Vanishing Cabinets — we're calling them Vanishing Rooms — do present a serious security risk, though. And there's a risk of splinching, with such a volume, if anyone is inside when the shipment goes through. You were absolutely right, though... we can move a thousand times as much now. It actually brings up an interesting problem. Apparently we're shipping *out* more than we're shipping *in*. It all comes down to..."

Reflexively, Harry considered if his appreciation of Percy's loyalty was a Voldemort thought, tuning Percy's report on trade deficits out of mind for a moment. Was it wrong to consider personal loyalty to himself as an inherently valuable trait in an ally? Perhaps it was, he thought. It was not consistent with how he valued his other lieutenants. Amelia or Mad-Eye would turn against him quickly if they thought he was corrupt or evil, and that was good. While obstacles in general wouldn't do him much good, experience had often shown that he tended to underestimate his own biases. Capable allies who could be relied upon to defy him, if needed, were invaluable.

Harry went to work, mentally, picking apart the thought and turning the instinct to his own use. In his youth, he had treated his mental simulation of Voldemort (his "dark side," he remembered with amusement) as a closed programming loop that would accept input ("*This is my problem.*") and output an answer ("*Try killing everyone in your way, maybe?*"). That answer would sometimes need to be rejected or modified in the face of contrary ethical guidelines, of course, but at its core, he had treated the Voldemort thought-patterns as an opaque sort of special reasoning.

That had been silly, and the huge disadvantages had become obvious after a year spent clumsily clomping around the intricate plans of two geniuses. He had acted with the absolute self-assurance and total obliviousness of a first-year psychology student,

and it was only thanks to the advantage of actually *knowing the future* that one of those geniuses had managed to succeed in saving the world (almost despite Harry's best ignorant efforts).

So, he had spent some time integrating the Voldemort simulation into his own psyche, and now routinely examined his thinking to critically assess his success. Sunlight is the best disinfectant, after all, and he would have been a fool to ignore Amelia's concerns ("Young man, if there is a Voldemort in your head, then you can either crush it into submission or we can carve it out. The choice is yours.") Harry glanced down at the ring on his finger, an unadorned metal band.

Harry returned his full attention to Percy, hoping nothing important had been said in the meantime and feeling a little shabby about having let his thoughts wander. Fortunately, much of the report had been for the benefit of others. Harry had already studied sufficient economics, but much of his council was still learning the essentials. The education was necessary, since economics were a weapon and a tool of state.

"...so this is actually to our advantage, and we may be able to use it as leverage." Percy concluded. He glanced around the room for questions, then settled his rawboned frame back into his chair. He was a striking young man, tall and thin with the vivid red Weasley hair and freckles. He had once been balding and bespectacled, but Harry had taken care of that.

"Thank you," Harry said, smiling. "It's always good to have another tool to use, should we need it." Truth be told, it probably was never going to be useful. It was hard to even say that a trade deficit was a bad thing for anyone involved, and that was especially true with an economy nearly decoupled from labor. But it might be a propaganda point, to be brought up in a negotiation or something.

"Now let us turn to the next item on the agenda," he said, glancing down at the parchment. "Amelia, you had Ms. Bogdanov and Ms. Covenant meet with their respective Muggle equivalents in the Medicines and Health Products Regulatory Agency? How did that go?" Ilya Bogdanov and Tilly Covenant were in charge of the Office for the Detection and Confiscation of Counterfeit Defensive Spells and Protective Objects.

“Not very well, Harry,” Amelia Bones said, rising from her seat in turn. She was a plain-looking young woman, with a square jaw and chestnut hair pulled back into a tight bun. She looked (unsurprisingly) much like Susan Bones, her niece. “Bogdanov didn’t give it a chance, and came to me to tell me that it was, and I quote, ‘a tragic mistake to think that Muggles should be in charge of any part of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.’ She specifically mentioned that the Muggles had proposed that anyone who tests magical devices should be blinded.” Amelia leaned forward and glared at Harry. “I told you that this would happen, Harry.”

Harry sighed. He’d thought they were further along than this. “The Muggles didn’t mean that the testers should be literally blind. A blind study is ju-”

“A blind study is a study where the examiners keep themselves ignorant of the origin of what they’re measuring, yes I know,” Amelia interrupted, curtly. “You know that and *I know that* but these witches weren’t looking for knowledge. They were just looking for an excuse not to change their minds.”

“Yes... ‘most people would rather die than think, and many do.’” Harry quoted. “But Amelia, we can’t just fire the heads of every office, just because they’re not working with us as smoothly as we’d like.” They’d had this argument before. Harry thought it was better to have the dozens of recalcitrant officials dragging their heels on the inside, rather than agitating on the outside. All the real troublemakers might have been decapitated in a single night, long ago, but that didn’t mean it would be a good idea to give some of wizarding Britain’s most prominent witches and wizards a direct reason to oppose the new regime. Amelia would have none of it, though.

“We don’t have to fire them all. But we fired Shackbolt, to make an example, and it wasn’t enough. How about we just demote some of this dead weight, instead.”

“And get around the Peter Principle? Hm.” Harry paused for a moment. “You have a point there, actually. Table this now, maybe, and we’ll work out the possibilities?”

Amelia nodded, just as the door burst open. Hermione and Tonks strode into the meeting room, clothes still damp from

rapidly evaporating Thieves' Downfall. Tonks looked furious, and as her hair lengthened into her typical shoulder-length, multicolored long locks, it framed a iron scowl. Something had gone wrong, it would seem.

Like all rooms in the Tower, the meeting room was an uneven quadrangle. It was an odd side-effect of the most important aspect of their security protocol, which required the entire Tower complex to be shaped as one giant triangle. It was strange, but it did mean that entrances could be particularly dramatic, which was useful for negotiations. The very shape of the room pointed everyone's attention at the narrow wall, where the open door framed an irritated Hermione Granger.



"Hello, everyone. Sorry for the rude entrance," she said. She glanced around at the group, which collectively represented most of the power of magical Britain, not to mention the greater part of Europe. Her eye paused for a second on Charlevoix, one of her Returned and a witch who had been instrumental in the recent French agreement. The excitable woman was almost out of her seat in alarm, scarred hands clenched on her chair. Hermione's glance communicated peace, and Charlevoix's face softened. Hermione turned to Harry, who had risen and was waiting patiently for her to speak.

"Harry," she said. "Malfoy just blew up a bomb in the middle of Diagon Alley. No one was hurt, but dozens could have been injured or killed. I know you have a plan, but that couldn't have been part of it. What is going on?"

She watched as he absorbed this information. Harry looked slightly surprised for a moment, and then his mouth pursed, and then his face relaxed.

"A Muggle device that casts *Deprimo*," murmured Percy Weasley to the rest of the table. Amelia Bones already seemed to know, as did a few others (like the Muggle Liaison), but most had seemed uncomprehending. There was quiet murmuring in response.

"Was any property destroyed?" Harry asked, seriously.

"No," she said.

“Thanks to Hermione,” Tonks said indignantly, from her spot behind the Goddess.

“No one was hurt and no property destroyed... was it a very small bomb? No, you took care of it. Did you put it into a pouch with an Undetectable Extension Charm, or something?” He looked thoughtful.

She shook her head. “No. Wait, would that even work?”

They both paused for a second to consider it, but he was the first to shake his head. “Not really, I don’t think... although it might contain the blast and direct its force out of the opening of the pouch.” He made a note on the margin of the parchment in front of him — an agenda to their meeting, she thought. “We should look into that.”

“Especially now that Malfoy’s started using bombs,” Hermione said, archly. “Harry, you look like you understand what’s going on, and that you’re not worried. That makes me worried. This is a new level, and it could have killed a lot of people. But you don’t seem to be taking it seriously. Just what is going on?”

Harry shook his head, reaching up to tuck a lock of his hair back behind his ear. She had noticed that he usually tied it back these days, but he’d left it loose this morning. Also, he was wearing Muggle clothes — a three-piece grey suit, with a blue silk tie. It looked rather well on his short and spare frame, but he tended to favor wizard’s robes, these days. Were these subtle signs of distress at his imprisonment? Maybe he — or his subconscious — was feeling the effects of the long confinement. She set the thought aside for later consideration.

“We’re at war, Hermione. You know that.” At least Harry no longer looked so sure of himself, although it was probably only because he was worried about her. “They’re going to keep ramping things up until they get a reaction, or until we capitulate on something.”

Cedric Diggory spoke up from the end of the table, his voice kind but firm. “And that doesn’t worry you, Harry?” The young Chief Auror looked skeptical.

“There’s a plan. We’re on track — two new Unspeakables arrived with reports just today, and there are new breakthroughs.” Harry looked around the room. No one looked reassured. “I know I’ve been saying that for a long time—”

“For years,” Tonks interrupted. She sounded frustrated.

“—I’ve been saying that for years, yes.” Harry smoothly continued. “But you have to trust me on this. We can beat Malfoy and the whole faction... it will happen.” His eyes moved from face to face, asking their trust. “There’s a plan. It has been extremely complicated and unbelievably secret, but very soon now we will beat Narcissa, once and for all.”

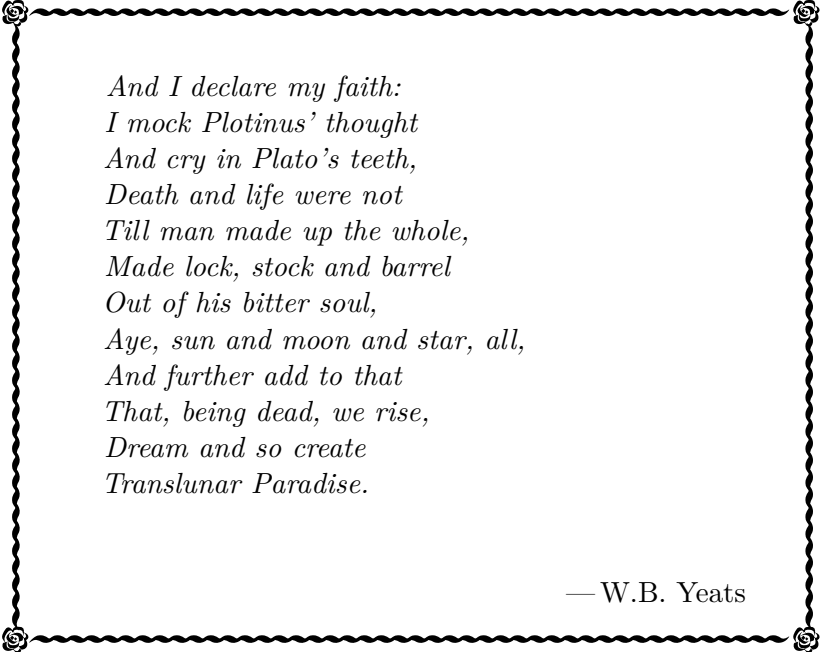


Sometime later, a young man with a lightning-bolt scar on his forehead sat down with a sigh on a small wooden stool. He was alone, and this room was private, admissible only to him. He could slump wearily without worrying about his posture. No one could see.

In front of him, on another wooden stool identical to his own, was a small black box. It was smooth and shiny, marred only by the pair of small hinges and the ornate lock that held its lid on. He stared at the box sightlessly for a while as he thought, letting his eyes glaze over and his mind wander.

Harry sat like that for a long time. Eventually, he blinked rapidly and returned to himself. He spoke to the box, quietly.

“I’d like to talk. But I won’t let you out.”



*And I declare my faith:
I mock Plotinus' thought
And cry in Plato's teeth,
Death and life were not
Till man made up the whole,
Made lock, stock and barrel
Out of his bitter soul,
Aye, sun and moon and star, all,
And further add to that
That, being dead, we rise,
Dream and so create
Translunar Paradise.*

—W.B. Yeats

Buffering Conflicts

Hermione stood in front of her. Returned with her hands clasped in front of her, her face neutral.

“Welcome, everyone. And welcome especially to Charlevoix, who is joining us here for the first time.” She nodded at Charlevoix and smiled, then grew serious again. “We have some important things to discuss, and I’ll need your help with them.”

“First of all, we’re going to talk about France and what this means for everyone’s safety. Where are we going from here? How can we help? We want to save lives. And that includes Cappadocia... how can we save lives there, too? We have some news on that front, in fact.

“Secondly, Narcissa Malfoy has begun attacking using Muggle weapons. She went after Nymphadora Tonks and me two days ago, as I am sure many of you heard. The bomb she used didn’t hurt anyone, but that doesn’t mean that the next one won’t be more successful. We’re all going to have to study up on these things and learn about them.

“And last of all, there will be tea and cake. Make sure you thank Hyori, who brought it for us all.”

She sat down, and turned her attention to Charlevoix, who rose and stepped forward. The Returned met at the grounds of Powis Castle, on a wide stretch of grass. The only thing there was an enormous section of a fallen tree. Most of the tree had been carted away, some years ago, leaving only this part, and some thoughtful groundskeeper had sawn out a rough wedge with four turns of a chainsaw. It left a comfortable and rustic seat on which Hermione was sitting. The Returned conjured or brought their own chairs. Powis Castle rose into the sky nearby, beautiful terraced gardens surrounding it like the setting of a jewel.

Tonks had once asked why they didn't meet in the castle itself. Hermione had answered her with a proverb of real estate: you always want to buy the ugliest house in the neighborhood. The building was beautiful, and you can't see that from the inside.

Charlevoix spoke, her voice soft and touched by a French accent. She wore robes of light blue and a plain silver necklace, and she looked exactly like your aunt. It was a mysterious property she had — she even looked like the aunt of people who'd never had an aunt, or like the aunt of someone whose family was tall and Scandinavian (instead of short and brunette). It made Charlevoix something like maternal to all, while still being distant. And then there were the scars, of course. As she stood before the gathering, they were visible along her fingers - knotted tissue that still looked pink and angry. She had no fingernails.

"Thank you, Hermione." They didn't call her 'Goddess' to her face, thankfully. The whole situation had been hard enough to accept as it was. "It is my pleasure to be here, finally. I have been glad to contribute." She paused uncertainly.

"Have there been any problems back home over the Treaty for Health and Life?" Hermione prompted, helpfully. Technically, they were supposed to be operating under Robert's Rules of Order. But she'd given up on the whole 'the speaker recognizes' and 'motions' thing after it became clear that it was just a facade. While the Returned were intelligent and passionate, they ultimately deferred to her on every opinion and strategy. It was a humbling experience, and pretending otherwise was cruel and pointless.

"No," Charlevoix answered. She relaxed a little as she spoke. "There was some difficulty in obtaining enough Healer's Kits for Paris, but more were soon shipped through with Vanishing Rooms. And I have had owls from all over France to tell me that Safety Poles are already in place. More than a hundred people have been restored since the treaty was signed."

Hermione thought about that number. France had something like fourteen thousand witches and wizards, they'd calculated. It was fewer than might be expected, given France's larger population than Britain, but there were many good possible explanations for that. Harry probably already had someone investigating. One

hundred people might seem like a lot in only a few days, but probably many of them were injured or critically ill. Really, this meant that something like fifty people had chosen to be restored of their own volition. And since she was usually too optimistic about these things, the real number was probably forty. She made a mental note to check and see whether or not she was correct. Calibration was important.

Charlevoix's soft French accent continued. "It has been a very good start, I think. The Ministère de la Magie was very charmed by the whole process, and by your gifts, Hermione. Ministre Isidore has been making speeches about saving lives, and about justice. He even said *pas une minute de plus* — not one minute more — although I do not think he meant it that way."

There were small smiles from many of the Returned. That was significant, since they were a group not given to large displays of emotion. While they were all healthy and young (of course), most of them had a hollowness behind their eyes, and joy rarely seemed to touch them.

"And... so that is where we are, I think." Charlevoix concluded. Perhaps she wanted to end on a high note.

"Thank you, Charlevoix," Hermione said. Why was it that the way Charlevoix spoke Hermione's name made it sibilant and beautiful, while Hermione's own attempt at the French witch's name sounded like she was murdering the syllables with a banjo? "This is all very good news. But while we should be happy about it, the Tower did remind yesterday that it raises our profile even further. On the next trip we make, we are going to have to be even more careful. You are helping me, and that makes you all targets."

Esther spoke up, an American witch. "And you as well, Hermione."

"I'm not worried about myself," Hermione said, smiling wryly. "Having died before, I have no intention of repeating the experience." It was actually twice, now. But that would only worry them. It was not as though they could possibly be even more protective of her, after all. "But it does bring us to Cappadocia, and some bad news. There might be more lives to save. I recently heard that there might be a Dementor-guarded prison there. Urg told

me about it when he was delivering gauntlets to me, and it might explain why they rejected the treaty.”

In another gathering, this might have brought about murmuring or questions. But the Returned were silent and intent. They were listening. They were human beings who had been touched by the absolute, and it had left them changed.

“Simon isn’t here today. He’s off investigating that rumor, along with Urg. I think we’ll find out very shortly if it’s true. Dementors are difficult to hide. If the rumors are true, we’ll be making plans and moving very soon.” Hermione glanced at Charlevoix. “*Pas une minute de plus*, right?”

Charlevoix nodded. The scarred fingers of her right hand flexed, and curled into a fist.



Not every major world event was caused by witches and wizards, no matter what pure-blood activists might assert. Unfortunately, Reg knew that those fanatics flattered themselves into thinking that Muggles were basically animals, who could never have done anything important on their own. Over the years, he’d read completely serious books arguing utter nonsense. He’d read that the evidence showed that Plato had been a wizard, since the language and ideas of free Transfiguration matched his writings (heaven forfend that wizards might have copied a Muggle’s choice of terms!). He’d even read an argument that a wizard had caused the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius with a careless *Tarantallegra*, which was almost offensive in its absurdity (simply from a magical standpoint).

That being said, a wise man looked behind the headlines for a hidden hand. Recently, numerous American Muggle charities had found unexpected luck in fundraising. There didn’t seem to be a pattern to the organizations chosen — a foundation for promoting “critical thinking,” a legal society that worked to preserve the wetlands — but it had been the talk of the Muggle newspapers for months. Reg prided himself on being well-informed, so he sought out all sources of information — not just *The Mercantile*, *The Daily Prophet*, *The Quibbler*, and other newspapers, but even things like *The New York Times*, as silly as that might be. Most

of it focused on the tedious minutiae and trivialities of the Muggle world, but real news often lay behind the inanity.

He explained it to Limpel as they sat in his home and waited for a portkey to be delivered. Fat, overstuffed couches and armchairs sat squat on the hardwood floors in the Hig parlor. A grizzly bear loomed in a frozen roar nearby, preserved as a statue with the perfection that only magic could achieve.

“It’s a big move, Limpel. He’s setting up his own power base in the Americas, using Muggles as pawns. These charities have gotten millions of Galleons in donations in a way that can’t be traced.” Something about ‘laundry,’ which hadn’t really made sense. That was one problem with the Muggle news... one fact led to another and another. It took hours to completely understand any single story from their bizarre world. Hiding the origins of money as a metaphor for clothes cleaning, which they did using devices that they had in their homes, and which devices were seemingly large drums, but not *musical* drums... impossible. You had to cut yourself off somewhere, or else you’d be awash in useless information.

Limpel nodded. She was reclining in her large chair, arms crossed. The outline of her sharp elbows were visible through the sleeves of her robes. Her face betrayed momentary discomfiture. “Millions of Galleons? The Council’s whole budget is only two millions, that’s so much... no, you must have checked. All right, that’s odd. But what is the advantage to this power base among Muggles? What’s the point?”

“That’s the rub,” Reg said. He ran his hand absently over his face and chin, listening to the whisper of skin on whiskers. “It’s a completely new tactic, first of all, so it’s unlikely anyone else has put these pieces together. It’s never been done before, and so it slipped right by everyone. I bet if we checked back in Muggle newspapers in Britain, Germany, France, Italy, Bulgaria, and other places that the Tower and Goddess have taken control, we’d find the same pattern. Remember that I’m predicting that, Limpel, without having checked.”

“All right,” Limpel said, skeptically, her thin face pinched. “I’ll remember. But even if you’re right, that doesn’t mean that it has anything to do with the Tower — or even that it’s a bad thing. Maybe he’s just being charitable.”

An intelligent and perceptive person who just enjoys being contrary as a matter of personal pride is an invaluable companion, Reg had found. They were terrible at parties, where they'd corner you and argue about the exact color of dog you needed to chase away a nogtail or the precise temperature you needed to melt steel, but essential for intrigue.

"Okay, you're right. I can't prove it's the Tower. But these are huge amounts of money. From what I read, the budgets of these charities increased by tenfold or a hundredfold. The total amount, just in the Americas... it's as though..." He struggled for a moment, beetling his brow. "Just imagine how we would feel if someone donated eight million Galleons to the Westphalian Council, Limpel."

"I'm not arguing influence, Reg. You could buy my left buttock if you gave me a million Galleons. But what's the point? I feel as though you're telling me that you suspect that the Tower is recruiting an enormous army of ants. Yes, that could hypothetically be dangerous, and yes, given what we know about him it's unlikely he'll use it for good. But even the biggest army of ants is still just an army of ants, and we have a Scouring Jinx for a reason." Limpel shrugged and smirked. "The Tower doesn't seem stupid. I don't know why you think he's wasting his time on this, or what you think he expects to gain."

"Ants or not, they're still people, and they have all sorts of devices. More to the point, there's literally billions of Muggles. And just look at your reaction! Not only does this not seem plausible, it wouldn't worry you even if you knew it was happening." Reg wagged a finger at her, dark eyes intent. "Doesn't that just seem like the sort of thing he'd do? You've read the books about him, don't pretend that you haven't. The Muggle devices, the businesses, all of those things came from this same odd angle. Who else would spend this kind of money, and on idiocy like swamps?"

"Yes, Muggles don't worry me. They're people who deserve to be free, but that doesn't make them a threat. A boggart doesn't worry me, and that doesn't make it a serious threat, either. Appearing harmless usually just means you're harmless Plus, if the Tower wanted a Muggle army, then he'd be buying soldiers, not saints."

“He already has the Goddess and her damned army of ghouls. This buys him influence. These organizations are all over the Americas, and they’ll be expanding offices and making purchases. It’s the perfect cover for any number of other moves, like building his own bases. It’s a lot easier to snatch someone from Boston if you’re local.”

He rose from his seat, walking to the window. “The snow is thick, Limpel.” He turned back to her. “It has been for months, now. It seems harmless, as it builds with every flurry. And it’s only snowflakes. Even a thousand snowflakes piled up are meaningless. Ah, but billions of them? They hide so much, and they can be so cold.”

Limpel was no longer smirking, although she still seemed skeptical. “I don’t quite believe it, Reg. The Muggle world of money has always seemed to be opaque to me, especially whenever you’ve tried to explain it. I suspect you don’t know quite as much as you think. You did, after all, try to tell me about a business that pays other businesses to give them their bad loans, and somehow makes money this way. So don’t be so confident you’re on the trail. But I will say... it is indeed worth examining further.”

There was a knock at the door. Reg walked to answer it, glancing at the Whosit Clock on the wall near the entrance. Its hands pointed to “New Visitor” and “Expected.” He turned to call back to Limpel. “The portkey is here! Make yourself ready.”

He opened the door. A friendly young man in cheap grey robes smiled up at him, and said, “Hello, Mr. Hig. Adams Couriers, with a delivery for you, sir. A portkey.”

Reg accepted a canvas satchel from the courier, touching his wand to the man’s own. There was a spark of silver between them, as the delivery was certified true and accurate. “Thank you, young man.”

As Reg moved to close the door, the courier spoke up. “Have a good trip, sir! Going on vacation?”

Reg glanced back at the man and shook his head. “No, I’m afraid not. I’m going to Britain. I’m going to war.”



If I eat this sandwich, could it end the world?

Harry sighed, and bit into the sandwich. It could, actually. That was the problem. He was an imaginative man.

By eating this sandwich, I am incrementally increasing the demand for wheat. While unlikely, it is possible that this slight increase in demand causes the price for wheat to tick up just enough that it rounds to another whole Knut or penny in some local market. Multiplied by a whole seasonal crop, that could make the difference between someone paying the rent on their fields or becoming insolvent. A small child, brilliant beyond measure, watches his family become bankrupt and becomes embittered and angry at the world. In fifteen years, he gets access to uranium by ordering thousands of smoke detectors.

Or worse:

If I threw out this sandwich, it probably would get Scourgified away by one of the aurors. We don't yet know how magic works, and it's possible that there is a finite amount of magical force being expended by the universe. The casting of that Scourgify might be the last bit of power necessary to power the mystical future machine that would prevent the total entropic heat death of the universe.

Or even worse:

I take a bit of the sandwich and start to choke. My wand is caught in its holster, and I left my pouch by the bed. No one is here right now except the aurors, and I'm far enough that they might not hear me. There would only be one place to go for help, and even the security protocol might hypothetically fail if I miscalculated...

No. Harry swallowed uncomfortably, his mouth dry now. This was ridiculous. He was positive it was ridiculous. It had to be ridiculous. He couldn't prove how, exactly, but he must know on some level that these infinitesimally small probabilities couldn't be allowed to hijack every possible decision. If he didn't know that, with some reasonable level of certainty and in his best judgment, then he would not now be eating a sandwich.

The Vow was an elegant spell. It didn't rely on some objective meaning of the terms, since there could never be such a thing as "objective meaning" when speaking of human communication. There was always *différance* — a gap in the bridge between intention and understanding. Even *Legilimens* wouldn't serve, since it was only a shallow dip into another's mind.

No, the Vow relied on his own best efforts at interpreting and fulfilling the meaning the Vow, as he understood it. It didn't even work from his conscious reasoning, but at some more fundamental level. More effectively than any of Harry's best efforts, his Unbreakable Vow let him rely on what was truly his best judgment, free of biases or heuristics. He could be fooled or mistaken or simply too stupid, but no amount of self-deception was sufficient to overcome its power. If he thought an action might end the world, he could not do it.

The unsettling thing, though, was that it apparently did not indulge itself in the contemplation of those events that had a very small likelihood but infinite disutility.

Harry had discussed this with Hermione. She had quoted Blaise Pascal, saying, "Wherever the infinite is and there is not an infinity of chances of loss against that of gain, there is no time to hesitate, you must give all." And she had been right — it was Pascal's Wager. Logically, any known possibility of infinite sorrow outweighed all other finite considerations.

It didn't actually work out that way, though. The horde of tiny infinities had not swamped him and starved him to death.

It was even worse, though. It wasn't even necessary to fabricate fanciful and tortuous chains of events: he had killed before, and he saved countless lives. How had he changed the possible futures? How many of those possible futures now led to doom?

"I vow that I shall not by any act of mine destroy the world. I shall take no chances in not destroying the world. If my hand is forced, I may take the course of lesser destruction over greater destruction, unless it seems to me that this Vow itself leads to the world's end and the friend in whom I have confided honestly agrees that this is so. By my own free will, so shall it be."

This morning, Harry had healed a baby with spina bifida. The boy had been born with a malformation of his spine — myeloschisis. During development, part of the neural tube had been left folded and protruding. On the infant's back, just where the gentle curve at the bottom, had been a red-raw sac, greenish with infection. It had troubled him to see, for he only did the actual healing for a small percentage of the Tower's visitors. Usually, he only came by afterwards.

There had been a need, you see. There were many healing charms and potions in existence, but some diseases were too rare and unusual. They brought these unluckiest of the unlucky to the Tower. They also brought the old, in a flood that gradually lessened over time. They brought the dying, yanked from miles away by Safety Poles. The tide of injured humanity came from all over Britain and Ireland and Scotland and Wales, and as the years passed they were joined by German wounded and Italian elderly and Scandinavian sick. Soon there would be French people being brought to the Tower, being healed and restored by new and secret “special techniques” in one of the wards, and then touched by the miraculous Harry Potter. Harry Potter, who made sure to visit every single one with a kind word and a comforting hand on the shoulder.

The Tower staff had developed systems, and improved on them daily. There were specialized spells they’d developed further at the Tower, to heal through free transfiguration. It had rarely ever been done, since it was ordinarily quite fatal. There were some fixes that were possible, of course... you could, in theory, transfigure a tumor away and off, and then heal the resulting wounds through other magics. But such injuries usually had well-developed magical cures. So the cleverest and most trusted witches and wizards worked with Moody and Atul and Minerva (when she found the time) to devise a systematic way to restore the world.

And so this morning, he’d touched his wand to the baby, and had wordlessly cast the Inspection Charm. The interior of the child’s body opened before his mind — a wizard’s parlor trick, used to find hidden compartments in desks or some such stupidity, which they’d turned into an MRI. Harry knew the human body with profound intimacy. The ivory knobs of vertebrae, the fatty sheath of myelin, the layered bore of arteries. They all had their place, and he reshaped the child and sculpted him anew. The delicate tracteries of nerves and fibres joined above and below, and the whole covered in flesh.

The mother would be grateful. She would send him something — a message, some money, a token — and treasure him in her heart, for now her child would live. And how would her life change? What would the baby do, now that he’d been granted life? Would

he do something, discover something, invent something... to destroy the world?

The Vow gave him no special knowledge. He couldn't know that his choice to save lives or to end lives might not lead, in any instance, to the destruction of the world.

Harry had sworn to take no chances, quite literally. How was it that he could sit here on this stool and eat this sandwich, and not be paralyzed by the minuscule chances for disaster inherent in every action? Why could he ignore the risks, when he had sworn to ignore no risk?

Was there danger there? He was already ignoring the possibility that his positive actions could bring about the destruction of the world, if in some roundabout way. His mind had rejected the most stark interpretation of his oath. So what was the worst-case scenario? If his judgment was sufficiently compromised, on the deepest of levels, could he fool himself and the Vow?

How deeply was he really bound?

Harry chewed his sandwich, and thought.

*No time hath she to sport and play:
A charmed web she weaves alway.
A curse is on her, if she stay
Her weaving, either night or day,
To look down to Camelot.
She knows not what the curse may be;
Therefore she weaveth steadily,
Therefore no other care hath she,
The Lady of Shalott.*

*She lives with little joy or fear.
Over the water, running near,
The sheepbell tinkles in her ear.
Before her hangs a mirror clear,
Reflecting tower'd Camelot.
And as the mazy web she whirls,
She sees the surly village churls,
And the red cloaks of market girls
Pass onward from Shalott.*

— Alfred, Lord Tennyson

Resolving Differences

Cappadocia was not a very peaceful country. Three times in the last twenty years, it had gone to war with one of its neighbors, the island of Cyprus. This was something of which Hermione was acutely aware, since the last war had only been two years ago, and British witches and wizards felt an extremely strong bond with the Cypriots. The *Daily Prophet* had run stories about the sufferings of the beleaguered Cypriots, and the treacherous dealings of the Cappadocians. It was all very suspicious, since tiny Magical Cyprus mostly spoke English and was dominated by several wealthy and influential wizarding families, while sprawling Magical Cappadocia had few cultural bonds with Britain and considerably less money. Barbarians versus the elite made for good copy. Harry controlled *The Prophet*, she knew, so it was odd the paper had been so uncritical. She supposed he didn't micromanage.

Actually, Hermione considered, since most Cappadocians spoke Greek as well as Arabic, they couldn't really be said to be "βάρβαρος." That nasty term had been used by ancient Greeks to describe those who *couldn't* speak Greek. It was onomatopoeia for what the Greeks had thought foreigners sounded like: bar-bar-bar-bar. Maybe she should write a pseudonymous letter to the editor, pointing this out, the next time the country hit the headlines.

Hermione gripped her broom tighter, increased her speed, and glanced around at the warband. Simon and Charlevoix were flying next to her, while Esther and Susan were below. Just above and

behind her, Hyori and Jessie rode their own brooms, faces tight. She might need to write the letter soon. Somehow she thought Cappadocia would be in the news very shortly.

She looked down at the ground racing by below. Stone pillars sprouted up from the windswept rock below — the fairy chimneys. Tall and smooth, they studded the ridges and plateaus, looking for all the world like the frozen fingers of some trapped race of giants. They were natural formations — not ventiform, as the wind-whipped dust that swept past them might suggest, but worn away by years of cracking frost and whittling rain. Hermione looked away from them, leaned forward, and squinted ahead. Those white hills, there... yes. They were close. She raised her right hand and gave the high sign, and Hyori and Jessie peeled away from the group, swooping along a different path.

The fortress of Göreme, situated near the Turkish town of the same name, was protected in three ways.

First and most importantly, Göreme's existence was a secret. The best way to protect anything was to make sure that no one knows it exists. If you are unscrupulous and willing to use Obliviate, you could keep something very secret indeed.

Second, Göreme was inaccessible. It had its beginnings in a cave complex used as a Christian church during the eleventh century. The church remained, though it was now known as the Limon Kilise — to describe the sour feeling in the belly one experienced when visiting. The long and narrow passage through to the larger set of natural caves, on the other hand, had been erased by the Butter-ball Charm (which turned stone as soft as butter). Göreme was now surrounded by solid rock, and the depths of the fortress reached two hundred meters beneath the dust of the surface.

Third, Göreme was guarded by an army. The Exarchate of Cappadocia (which had no place in Muggle history, however important it might be to the course of magical events) did not station pairs of aurors or teams of Hit Wizards. Göreme was military, and its Dementors were weapons, and its guards were soldiers.

Cappadocia was not unique in the wizarding world for possessing a specialized army rather than relying on policing forces

or militia. While the Peace of Westphalia had established the idea of an explicit “magical state,” and the establishment of the International Confederation of Wizards pushed these states into formal organization, numerous personal fiefdoms persisted well past the end of the nineteenth century. It is true that political pressures, like the International Statute of Secrecy, and social pressures, like increasing education and Quidditch, did much to consolidate these pockets of autocracy into the same oligarchies that ruled much of the world. But nonetheless, some modern oligarchies and all modern autocracies had standing armies.

Truth be told, it would be difficult to say whether the Exarchate of Cappadocia was dominated by the sitting Strategos, or if the wealthy *sakellarioi* simply established new figureheads at regular intervals. Either way, it didn’t matter to Hermione. Political reform of this (literally) byzantine country was secondary to another concern: the Cappadocians had Dementors, and they fed prisoners to those Dementors to keep them manageable. And that was not acceptable.

Hermione pulled up on her broom, slowing down, and the rest of the group matched her deceleration. She came to a stop, and pointed one finger at an uneven plateau of rock, far below them. “There. Bubble up, everyone. *Bullesco*.” The Bubble-Head Charm sprouted from one nostril in its disturbing way, a single small translucent bubble swelling in the span of a breath until it encompassed her entire head. It wobbled a bit before settling into place. The other four witches and wizards did the same, ensuring they would have a supply of fresh and dust-free air.

Alarms would be going off in Göreme about now. She didn’t know exactly what their response protocols were, but they had an immense number of jinxes overlaid on the area. No Apparating, no Time-Turners. There was an Anti-Disillusionment Charm (a term which gave her linguistic heartburn). Further, there was a charm to prevent broomstick enchantments from functioning. It didn’t extend to this height, so as not to betray their position to a chance passerby or intruding Cypriot, but all of these jinxes limited their ability to respond. They could certainly be turned off, but what use was a precaution if you dropped it at every moment of alarm?

It was difficult to guess what they must be doing down there, deep underground, glued to their Foe-glasses. They had probably

sent for aid. Were they confident that they were safe, unreachable down under all that stone? *Diffindo* did a great deal of damage to rock, but it would take long minutes for such a small attack force to blast their way down.

They didn't know enough to be afraid of 9.8 meters per second per second.

Hermione reached into the pouch at her waist and groped around for a second. She felt her nails scratch into something, and hoped she hadn't just damaged something important. It was one of the most annoying things about alicorn fingernails... even if she kept them nightmarishly short, they could still accidentally scratch things if she wasn't careful. Super-strength and claws might sound cool, but fingernails were definitely not designed to work like an animal's talons. It was embarrassing to accidentally ruin furniture, and it was annoying to pick the resulting detritus of stone, metal, or wood from where it would get embedded.

When she found the sextant, she lifted it to her eye and sighted through the eyepiece. The bubble around her head jiggled under the pressure as it warped. She found the horizon and adjusted the declination of the index, clicking it along to the proper minute and second. She checked the measurement, then checked her watch, and lastly checked that she was directly over the big white rock. Then she clicked her wand right next to the aeronautical sextant's index bar, and said, quietly and repeatedly, "*Finite. Finite. Finite. Finite. Finite. Finite. Finite. Finite. Finite.*" She paused, then cast the spell ten more times for good measure. Her targets were enormously large, but also rather far away. She'd probably missed with most of those — no reason not to be sure, since the spell took so little effort. She was canceling her own magic, and so she cast the easiest and least powerful version of the spell and needed to put very little of herself into each iteration.

There was a long pause before the first beam of depleted uranium hit the rock beneath them.

Hermione could feel the impact in her inner ear as the roar of sound and air and dust blasted into the five mounted witches and wizard. They were quite high up... but then, it was quite an impact. Harry had told her about the idea, gifted to him by science fiction (*The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress*, by Robert Heinlein, her brain

automatically supplied). Set high enough, the impact could have had the force of a nuclear weapon. But that would have required Muggle technology, which didn't work in the presence of magic (and it would have been overkill).

The whole thing was complicated enough. It had initially proven impossible, no matter how exact they were and how many calculations they did, to actually hit the beams with a *Finite* to end their Hover Charms. They'd tried attaching huge sheets to the beams to act as bigger targets, but they'd only acted as parachutes to drag the beams away from the necessary spot. The only way Harry and she could get it to work, after much experimentation, was to glue long threads of transfigured Teflon to their transfigured beams. The many threads were insubstantial yet easy to hit.

After the first beam hammered into the stone — once they knew it was working, but before the next ones struck with their own blasts of sand and dust — Hermione and her Returned clumped together and Susan cast a *Prismatic Shield*. They watched the next four beams hit in close succession. One was badly off target, but as far as she could see, it had missed to the north, rather than to the south. Hermione was willing to destroy the Limon Kalise if she had to, but she'd rather preserve it. It was an excellent representation of Byzantine Christian architecture and art.

The best Muggle bombs couldn't penetrate much deeper than sixty meters or so, even the ones currently under development, Harry had said. Well, nuclear bombs could do better, but that was out of the question. It didn't matter, anyway. They didn't want to penetrate and murder everyone.

They weren't trying to crush the wasp's nest. They were trying to shake it up enough so that all the wasps came out to play.

Metal fell from the sky like the wrath of an angry deity. Each concussion had reached them even beyond the *Shield*. Göreme was no hardened facility, like the Muggle military bunkers Harry had discussed with her with such pleasure. There was no anchoring or precautions taken against impact. It was essentially just a set of buildings constructed into natural caves. It would be very susceptible to some vigorous shaking.

They waited a few minutes, remaining still and in place. After a while, a green bolt of light streaked out of the rock below. It went

the wrong way and vanished into the sky, nowhere near Hermione or her Returned. It had been shot blindly. A clever idea in its essence, undertaken by some desperate and vicious soldier, but the odds of a blindly-aimed curse hitting them were microscopic. She noted the trick down in her memory for later consideration.

Figures appeared on the ground below. Twenty or thirty, perhaps. The witches and wizards inside were using their portkeys to get outside to face the attackers who had just rattled them with a half-dozen serious earthquakes. An instant later, curses began pouring up and at Hermione and her tightly-packed crowd of convenient targets. Susan dropped her *Shield* without needing to be told, and they all separated and began dodging.

Hermione had thought that the soldiers would be coming on brooms, but they didn't seem to have disengaged that jinx. Odd... that left them as distant infantry fighting an air attack. Perhaps they didn't feel threatened, since the Returned were high enough that neither side could really effectively aim? No, that didn't seem credible... they'd just had their secret military base smashed by mysterious metal rods from the sky. They would definitely be feeling threatened.

Hm, a powerful attack or jinx that they were readying? Or were they just too rattled to get their act together?

She shrugged, and gave the high sign again. The Returned began reaching into their own pouches, scooping out pots, and dropping pot after pot. The pots were padded or altered in all manner of ways, the legacy of a school project that both Hermione and Harry had done when they were ten ("Class, we are going to be trying to figure out how we might drop an egg from the roof without the egg breaking. Please look at the first page of your worksheet packet...") There were some with small parachutes, some with inflated bladders, some with thick padding, and many others.

To be honest, it probably would have been better to actually test these first, and see which ones worked the best. Then they could have copied those. But this way had been much more fun. When Hermione had gone to Tesco for crafting supplies, Harry had given her a list as long as his arm, and she was fairly sure he'd spent all night on his six designs.

Esther, on the other hand, had looked at them as if they were crazy and had just cast a Charm. She'd been done with her six pots in sixty seconds. Philistine.

Many of the pots smashed with great force onto the rock, seeming like some direct and pathetic bombardment. One landed directly on a wizard, but exploded into flinders and dust when it hit an active shield. A few others landed with such ease and grace that she bet they weren't even cracked, and so they had no effect.

Others, though, were simply smashed open. And the young Mandrakes that were awoken from their warm and comfortable napping in the dirt wailed in protest.

It was a common Muggleborn trick, she had to admit. People who entered the magical world after growing up in the more safety-conscious mundane life of Muggles were frequently astonished that there were so many dangerous spells, plants, and creatures, much in the way that few pureblood witches and wizards who'd seen the accident statistics could understand the use of automobiles. To the Muggleborn, it was immediately obvious that these deadly things could be used directly as weapons.

She'd read a dozen books about why this was a foolish idea. In the first place, the scream is easily warded by an adult witch or wizard. Further, they only scream when awoken, so you must awkwardly go to battle with a fairly obvious large container, making surprise difficult to achieve. Even further, Mandrakes take most of a year to fully mature. Until then, their scream will merely cause unconsciousness. There were many other spells that could be cast that did not require most of a year of preparation and a large flowerpot, and which could not be blocked by numerous trivial charms. The plant had its uses, but the practical ones were almost universally as a potion ingredient.

Mandrakes and chainsaws made poor weapons, and for much the same reasons.

All of those caveats were true, and all of those scolding books were wise. But if you wished to attack from beyond wand distance, unexpectedly, and with the intention to stun?

Bombs away.

Hermione had no intention of making this a fair fight. As long as you controlled the battlefield, you controlled combat, and she'd

come prepared for an aerial war. They had tricks upon tricks upon tricks. There were a thousand different clever things one could do quite beyond normal magical dogfighting. If she could eliminate most of the enemy like this, before they'd even had a chance to take to the air, then this fight would be short and safe.

They'd run out of Mandrakes. Hermione peered down, squinting. From this vantage point, it was hard to tell, but only ten or eleven soldiers still seemed to be moving. It was time for

falling

It was time for falling, apparently. Hermione's broom went dead as a stone between her legs. Ah, she mused, letting it tumble away from her fingers. That's why they didn't turn off the jinx. They were just working on making it stronger. Clever defense, she didn't know you could do that. Two overlapping fields, perhaps, with one usually off? The wind whipped her robes against her face as she fell. How long? Seconds.

Hermione reached to her wrist and slapped a bracelet there, hard. Never fight in the air without a backup.

Hm. Beater Bastion not working. She slapped it again.

It was a safety device meant for Quidditch, and it was supposed to be reliable, but she couldn't help but notice that she was still plummeting.

She twisted in the air, scrambling for her wand and looking for one of the Returned. There was no one... getting closer to the ground now... a few seconds... no, there, Simon, if she could just... no, damn, where'd he go... there was Esther but Stunned, no no... have to move, can you swim through the air?... turn turn turn, there he is there wand up and YES "*Arresto Momentum!*"

He vanished from her sight, jerked away as his descent rapidly slowed.

And that was the last thought Hermione had for some indeterminate amount of time.



She could see. Her eyes had already been open, so she hadn't needed to do that. But she could see. They must have just healed. She felt nothing. That would be her spine, broken. Lucky, lucky. This would be much more unpleasant, otherwise.

Not sure how long she'd been out. A minute or two, probably. She'd fallen quite far, but wizards were resistant to blunt trauma generally - some quirk of magical inheritance. Also, Hermione was a troll/unicorn woman, and rather hard to hurt.

Hermione couldn't stop herself from blinking the blood out of her eyes, but remained still otherwise. She couldn't see anything. Unluckily, her face was pressed against a large rock, and it entirely blotted out her view. She listened, instead, and waited for her body to finish healing.

"Τι συνέβη [What happened]?" A male voice shouted. A female voice called back an answer, but was too far away to be audible. No mandrakes could be heard, so the soldiers must have killed the exposed ones.

She heard a slight crackle as her neck healed, the bones pushing themselves to where they were supposed to be, and drew her breath sharply as the pain of her body screamed through her. An inarticulate shout tore from one of the soldiers nearby — so she'd been seen. Well, nothing for it, then.

Hermione jerked one leg in front of her and pressed against it, spinning herself into a sidelong roll. There was a wash of heat along her back as she did — a missed curse. Nausea assaulted her with the motion, but she ignored it. Her leg wheeled over her spinning body and impacted the rock, and she levered herself up onto it. The spin improbably became a vault, and she landed on her feet in a crouch. It was an act of fluid beauty, and it still seemed unreal that she was capable of such effortless grace.

Fourteen men and women in Cappadocian robes (sharply pointed sleeves, swooping long break in the fabric in the back) stood before her, their attacks halted for the moment now that she was motionless. She'd counted badly, or they'd already restored several of their number. She only saw one of her Returned: Simon. He stood nearby, arms raised. She'd saved him, but all of his emotion was concentrated in anger: the fleshy Scot was scowling at the soldiers. He'd been disarmed. That was smart. But neither she nor he had been Stunned. That was foolish.

The other Returned were not visible. They had probably hit the ground hard, and their emergency portkeys had broken with the impact.

Her own wand was probably somewhere around here. No matter. The soldiers were watching her warily. They were surprised but not awed, so maybe the fall hadn't looked as impressive as it had felt. Still, she gave it a try, speaking in clear and awkward syllables: "Θα πρέπει να παραδοθούν. [You must surrender.]"

There was an absolute and complete absence of contemptuous laughter, scornful retorts, or other displays of bravado. Instead, several of the soldiers glanced at one of the tallest among them. Considering the offer? There were no marks of rank visible, and Hermione surmised that this man, who was watching her edgily, was some sort of unofficial leader among the group. He had an impressive chin — broad and cleft. Could a fantastic chin make you a leader among men?

Whatever thought process had gone on in the man's mind did not end in Hermione's favor. She could see it in his eyes, once he'd decided. It was disappointing. They must know her — some of them had even probably seen her in the flesh before, since she'd visited Cappadocia a dozen or more times — but she and Simon were disarmed and Hermione was a bloody wreck. Hermione thought she must not be impressive enough. She'd better work on her image some more. The more fights she could win without actually fighting, the better. It would make eliminating all the Dementors that much faster.

The man aimed his wand at her again and shifted his feet. Other soldiers picked up on the same cue as Hermione, but as they all made ready to fire, she already was diving to the side and plunging her hand into her pouch. Curses flicked over her and behind her as soldiers barked their spells. One curse — a Severing Charm, maybe? — opened up her back as it struck her squarely. She didn't know how badly — she was already on her feet, dodging and flinging a glass orb the size of her fist at the soldiers.

Big-Chin was a quick thinker, and his wand flicked to the side to track the orb as it flew at them. "*Reducto!*"

The orb shattered well before it reached them, the glass (actually a perfectly and wondrously thick hollow borosilicate glass sphere, courtesy of transfiguration) detonating as its pressures were released. Big-Chin and another soldier, the closest, were staggered by the explosion and the wash of warm air that swept

over them all. Simon, unarmed, had dared only cover his face with his hands. He'd known what to expect, and took advantage of the distraction to immediately slap the small of his back with one palm. He disappeared with a wet sucking sound as his portkey was broken and activated.

Hermione dropped to a crouch as the soldiers opened fire again. She rammed her right hand into her left forearm, below the wrist. Curses flickered overhead with coruscating light. One brushed her leg, and she lost feeling in it. Even as she went sprawling, though, she was already ripping a slender and gorey wand from her left arm, and casting another Finite with bloodslick fingers. She didn't have to aim the spell. The air in the sphere had been quite concentrated.

If she'd been evil, she would have transfigured acid, though it would have been trickier with the pressure pump and chamber they'd used. This was just water. Water, water, everywhere. In a drizzingly thick cloud around them, in their mouths (tasting of dust), and in their lungs. Even worse, they'd all taken a few panting breaths over the last ten seconds or so, respiring transfigured air from what must have seemed like a small bomb.

In the lungs of Hermione and fourteen other witches and wizards, the alveoli which clustered like grapes along the bronchioles had transferred oxygen into their blood and bound it into red blood cells which raced down capillaries and arteries. The oxygen was immediately put to work throughout the body in every living cell, producing ATP in a trillion mitochondria all throughout their flesh.

In an instant, though, a significant percentage of that oxygen had just been reverted back into water.

And that was the last thought Hermione had for some indeterminate amount of time.



She could feel. She was on her hands and knees, her fingers buried in the rock in front of her. She was blind and deaf. But she was alive and conscious.

Hermione rested for a moment in the sudden peace of deafness, then pushed back onto her heels and rose to her feet. It was not

difficult; this one hadn't even hurt. Some percentage of the cells in her body had just died. The exact number was hard to even guess, but she didn't imagine it could have been much. Half a percent?

As her vision slowly returned, along with her hearing (for now, mostly a high-pitched whine inside her head), she revised her estimate. All fourteen of her opponents were either writhing in gasping agony... or lying still and grey.

Wasting no time, though she was a bit unsteady on her feet, Hermione plucked yet another object from the Pouch of Poorly-Conceived Weapons Intended for Bombardment. She trotted quickly from body to body with the device, which was a potent relic from ancient and bygone days: a chrome money-changer. It had once dispensed coins for a train conductor.

At each body, she clicked the changer over them. A coin dropped onto them, and they vanished with a wet sucking sound. Off to be saved, off to the Tower, off to the only man in the world who could heal these injuries.

The changer made a wonderfully satisfying sound each time, though she didn't dawdle to enjoy. *Ker-chak. Ker-chak. Ker-chak. Ker-chak.*

Along the way, she found her regular wand and put it back in its holster. The still-bloody Ultimate Ulna (she was proud of the name) went into her pouch.

When she finished, she stopped and looked around. Hermione was alone on what had once been a rocky plateau but which was now a shattered moonscape. They might actually have cracked Göreme open, from the look of the mighty crevasses that still smoked from the impact. Her robes were ragged and burned and slashed, even soaked through with blood in many places. Her wounds were gone: in just the past few minutes shattered bones had pulled together, a deeply slashed back injury had knit closed, and billions of detonating cells had been transfigured back into life. No Dementors, though. There must be more soldiers, holding them in their pen. The pen where they were fed.

This had been poorly planned. She knew better, too. When you are making a plan, look at each step, and ask yourself: how can this go wrong? Once you have done that, and satisfied yourself with the answer in each respect, ask yourself a second question:

what two things can go wrong at the same time? Always plan for two independent failures.

She'd planned for the bombardment to fail, or how to handle a broomstick failure, or if the enemy found a way to target them in the air, and everything else. But it hadn't been enough. All of the first line of her warband had been taken out in the first engagement (though they had come to no permanent harm) because the broomsticks had failed and their safety net had failed. Not paranoid enough, she murmured to herself with annoyance. Alastor will be disappointed.

Hermione plucked her wand from its holster, and readied herself. Then she expected the Dementors to come to her. It took no effort, for it seemed the natural course of events. *I am here. I am waiting.*

Come and get me.

Before her, two score of black and indistinct shapes emerged slowly through the blasted stone. They were hungry and evil and wrong, these wounds in the world clad in ragged cloaks. They were her great enemy, and there was nowhere in the world that they could hide from her. She would hunt them all down, unless they took her now. Hermione willed that thought out at them like a weapon, and if someone had been watching at that time, such as Hyori and Jessie (who flew in a wide circle out of range of the fortress, waiting for green sparks to summon them), that person would have seen a fierce joy in Hermione's eyes. She had died twice in these past eight years, and she had made death her dearest foe.

She raised her wand, and opened her mouth to cast.

And then her world was flame.

She wasn't sure what had happened. In some conscious part of her mind, she knew that the soldiers who had been guarding the Dementors down in Göreme must have portkeyed to the surface once their charges had escaped, and that they had turned some spell of fire upon her. But that thought was beyond her at the moment, because there was fire hot on her face and burning her burning her. Fire, that could hurt her quickly enough to incapacitate her. Fire, which had killed her once already. She shrieked as her flesh seared.

The Dementors were already there, and she felt their presence like a stain of hate that saturated her, even as the fire roared

around her and devoured her. They were close enough and numerous enough that their presence began to consume her. The touch of their evil felt like despair, and it whispered into her mind and it sucked away at her marrow.

Hermione fell to her knees, and knew dimly that she was dying once more. The thought beat down on her as though it had great black wings, pulsing down and driving her to the ground.

She would burn and she would die.

She would burn and she would die.

She would burn and she would die.

But

But there were things to be done.

She was on fire and Dementors were eating her and the soldiers would kill her *but there were things to be done*.

Hermione rose to her feet, staggering. She shrugged off the hatred that sucked at her soul with a sheer effort of will. She *defied it*, and gasped something through a burning throat, and then raised her wand once more and shouted her spell past pain and smoke. Her voice was inhumanly powerful, alight with passion and flame.

“Expecto Patronum!”

Heat swirled around her, crackling in her hair and turning her robes to ash around her. She ignored the flames, though the skin on her neck and arms reddened, cracked, and charred. She ignored the soldiers who poured fire on her. Her world was her wand and her spell.

And so it was that Cappadocia came to know why she was called the Goddess.

For the white light that came from her wand was no white mist and no argent animal. It was not even the shape of a silver human being, though none of the witnesses would have expected that.

Hermione's patronus was the noonday roar of the full sun. It was bright beyond measure and glorious beyond words. With its puissance, she was ineluctable and divine.

Barely visible through the squinting eyes of the onlookers, forty Dementors shuddered in place.

Their substance ruffled as though in a strong wind, their black cloaks billowed back into shreds and threads, and they and their despair ceased to exist like a candle had been snuffed.

Hermione lowered her wand.

The flames died away, though her robes hung in smoldering and ashy rags around her. Her body was a mass of pain, but that was temporary, and was already beginning to fade. It slid away from her awareness more slowly than before, but the charred flesh was bubbling back into skin and replacing itself. She plucked at a locket around her neck to free the chain, so that the piece of gold-and-green jewelry wouldn't stick uncomfortably inside the healing wound. Then she raised her wand to send up red sparks — there were prisoners to rescue — and turned around with a searching glance. Who had been burning her?

Ah, over there. That had been the trouble. She saw two Cappadocian soldiers, collapsed and motionless. They'd been badly burned, as well, but had lacked her advantages. It was a dangerous spell, the sort you'd normally bring to bear on an army of Inferi rather than one lone woman.

Hermione Jean Granger, the Goddess and the sworn enemy of death, sighed to herself, pulled a chrome coin changer from the pouch on her belt, and started saving lives.



Deep in Whitehall lies the Ministry of Magic, from which every aspect of magical Britain's government and bureaucracies are officially run. Deep in the Ministry of Magic lies the Department of Mysteries, where magical research is conducted and the most esoteric problems are investigated. And deep in the Department of Mysteries lies the Hall of Science, in an immense chamber that once held the collected prophecies of the nation.

In the Hall of Science, five witches and wizards huddled around a magnificently long hickory table. Mafalda Hopkirk, Dolores Umbridge, Luna Lovegood, Basil Horton, and Nemeniah Salieri thought they had just made a great discovery.

They verified their preliminary result. Horton, a sturdy-looking older wizard with the physique of an athlete gone to fat, raised his wand and cast, slowly. "*Lumooooos. Lumoos. Lumis. Lums. Luums. Lumos. Lumoos. Lumis. Lumos. Lumos.*"

The spell, cast with the worst imaginable skill, only took on the tenth try. Horton's pronunciation only vaguely approximated the

necessary syllables and his wandwork was abysmal: when he had performed the very slight and simple dip of the wand necessary for the spell, he had waggled his wand as though palsied. It would have been embarrassing, had it not been intentional.

The spell was one of the weakest known. When cast this badly, it yielded a barely visible soft yellow glow. It was an extraordinarily slight bit of magic.

Horton held his wand next to a thin golden rod. The half-meter rod was mounted to a bulbous and unworked lump of obsidian. It had been sunk deep into the crusted grey rock-rime on the lump's top. The rod vibrated in place, gently, as the wand approached.

Lovegood and Umbridge looked at each other. Umbridge's lips were pursed. She did not entirely approve of these experiments into the workings behind the Trace, the charm that detected underage magic. But there were interesting possibilities for control here. She nodded shortly to Lovegood, and the two of them stepped to the other end of the table and picked up a grey metal lattice thickly interwoven with green vines. There were no roots to the vines, only many tiny leaves.

In unison, Lovegood and Umbridge set the lattice over the rod-and-stone device. Horton did not alter the exceedingly soft glow of his spell, yet the rod stopped vibrating. Everyone involved looked at each other in satisfaction, although perhaps only Luna Lovegood truly understood the importance of what they had discovered.

*'Twas I, my lord, that gat the victory;
 And therefore grieve not at your overthrow,
 Since I shall render all into your hands,
 And add more strength to your dominions
 Than ever yet confirm'd th' Egyptian crown.
 The god of war resigns his room to me,
 Meaning to make me general of the world:
 Jove, viewing me in arms, looks pale and wan,
 Fearing my power should pull him from his throne:
 Where'er I come the Fatal Sisters sweat,
 And grisly Death, by running to and fro,
 To do their ceaseless homage to my sword:
 And here in Afric, where it seldom rains,
 Since I arriv'd with my triumphant host,
 Have swelling clouds, drawn from wide-gaping
 wounds,
 Been oft resolv'd in bloody purple showers,
 A meteor that might terrify the earth,
 And make it quake at every drop it drinks:
 Millions of souls sit on the banks of Styx,
 Waiting the back-return of Charon's boat;
 Hell and Elysium swarm with ghosts of men
 That I have sent from sundry foughten fields
 To spread my fame through hell and up to heaven:
 And see, my lord, a sight of strange import, —
 Emperors and kings lie breathless at my feet;*

— Christopher Marlowe

◆◆◆◆◆ Chapter four ◆◆◆◆◆

Established Patterns May Have Little Predictive Value

The family of Nikitas Seyhan had spent generations in the Taurus Mountains at Külek Boğazı, watching the pass through the peaks from among the rocky crags. It was harsh and cold at Külek Boğazı, and there were few Muggles (or, as Nikitas knew them, “Μύγαλοι”) around. The Seyhans and the few nearby families had very specific concerns, such as caring for the kneazles, ensuring there would be sufficient food, and guarding against giants. They did not live glamorous lives, and had little contact with the outside world.

In a world where every witch and wizard can Floo and Apparate and portkey and Vanish on a moment's whim, this isolation might seem strange — if not downright stupid. “Why,” we might ask, “do these foolish people not just travel to a nearby city and catch up on some of the modern advances?”

The Seyhans would have stood to gain a great deal, had they educated themselves. There were numerous simple spells that would improve the Seyhan lifestyle. Uncle Alexis would not have to spend night after night resealing the kneazle pens if he just knew a few simple wards: he could sleep the dark hours away in peace after a simple *Duro* turned the walls into stone (let's see a kneazle try to get out of *that!*). And Nikitas himself would have found life much more pleasant with the trivial spell of *Lumos* — no more glowstones, just a simple light. *Lumos* had been known

in Cappadocia for two hundred years by now... get off your κάλος and go learn something, Seyhans!

A more careful person, of course, might point out that all the magical forms of travel would require enormous and risky investments of time and money. Should one of the Seyhans attempt to locate the nearest wizarding town, far away, based on rumor from Uncle Alexis and an old book? And once there, do they beg in their mangled Greek (and no Arabic or Turkish, so good luck there!) to be given resources and a whole magical education for free?

Yes, it is possible that Nikitas Seyhan and his family might have improved their situation. You might mock them for their failure. But it would have been difficult and dangerous for them to make the attempt, and it is better to light a candle than curse their darkness, you incredibly insensitive ass.

Anyway, the facts are this: Nikitas Seyhan was only vaguely aware of requirements for secrecy, the presence of a larger magical world, and the existence of the Exarchate of Cappadocia. And so it was somewhat bewildering when he was arrested by a team of three wizards and witches (a team that might be called an “auror trio” in Britain) on charges of breaking Clause 73 of the International Statute of Wizarding Secrecy.

We will dispense with the Greek and move forward in translation, but the conversation went something like this:

AUROR #1: [Bursts through the door, wand raised. Protective amulets drip from his modern robes] Attention!

NIKITAS: [Strangled surprise]

AUROR #1: [Sternly repeating himself] Attention!

AUROR #2: [Entering behind him] What is it?

AUROR #1: They are not coming to attention.

AUROR #2: Attention!

UNCLE ALEXIS: What?

AUROR #1: You see?

NIKITAS: Who are you? What do you want?

AUROR #1: Finally! Barely makes sense, though. ‘You want what it?’ Idiots.

AUROR #2: We want you to come to attention.

NIKITAS: What?

UNCLE ALEXIS: What?

AUROR #1: Be quiet, at least, if you won’t act properly. Which one of you is in supposed to be in charge of the kneazles? You are in violation of Clause 73 of the International Statute of Wizarding Secrecy, as written and empowered by the righteous and good Strategos of the Exarchate.

NIKITAS: What?

UNCLE ALEXIS: What?

AUROR #3: Enough of this. It doesn’t matter, let’s just get it done. They don’t even understand. Stun that one and let’s go.

And they took Nikitas Seyhan, and accused him of allowing a kneazle to break loose and run free in Çiftehan, where dozens of Muggles had the chance to observe the bizarre, catlike creature. This particular kneazle was a big red one, knee-high, with long and drooping ears and a brownish streak on its back, and the Seyhans had certainly been aware that it had gotten free. They’d been counting on its long whiskers and significant meat, and had been saddened on its escape (and, they thought, his inevitable snowbound death).

Nikitas never really understood the proceedings. Every aspect of the trial was beyond his comprehension. Frightened and confused, he shut down, rather than risk making things worse for himself (or harming his family further). This was viewed as stubbornness or defiance or stupidity. A man shouted at him from a high seat in a room that was warm and close, and he sat as still as a stone. Nikitas had no wealth or power. He was not related to anyone important, and he had no allies who could cause any trouble. His only protection was a system of justice that had seen no major reforms in a hundred years. Naturally, his fate was sealed.

It was a big red wax seal. It was affixed to Nikitas' death warrant.

The investigation and verdict were all technically true and in keeping with the law, and it would be false comfort to tell oneself that the only thing at work was the corruption of the ignorant. There had been moments of real compassion. One *sakellarios* had even spent a few precious minutes reaching out to the magistrate involved, to ask for leniency. But there were good and solid reasons that ensured Nikitas' verdict.

For one:

Honoured delegates of this Confederation of Wizards, even the Supreme Mugwump can attest to these numbers, as he has verified them himself! The noble Exarchate of Cappadocia has enforced the Statute with extreme zeal, even going so far as to condemn these three prisoners to harsh sentences in the last five years! We take it more seriously than most, and so it is flatly ignorant to suggest that the son of our righteous and good *Strategos* would receive anything but strict scrutiny! Those who would make such accusations in these hallowed halls would be well-advised to look to their own affairs, and abandon such calumnies!

For another:

These look just like the real cards, see? Look at the picture, see the good movement? Fudge is doing the same gesture on his card, the exact same way. I took this myself and made my own copies. Didn't even take that long. We can do this for all of them. I'll wrap them up for you, here hand me that. Heh, look at that donkey in the paper. Face like my ass. Twelve years, they gave him. Did you hear the one about the Arab who got twenty years, and when he got out, all he remembered was his mother-in-law's name? Hahaha! Yeah, mine too. No, give that here, wrap it tight.

So it goes. The road to Hell is paved with reasonable responses to individual incentives.

Nikitas went to Göreme. The Dementors would feed on him. They had to be kept quiet, but hungry. The Cypriots had been making noise lately, and war might be on the horizon.



It is dark. A man is speaking, hoarsely.

“Οχι... όχι... όχι... όχι... όχι...”

It has been twelve years.

“Σκότωσε με... σκοτώσεις... σκοτώσεις... σκοτώσει εμένα...”

He knows how long it has been. They feed him at intervals, and the knowledge of the passing time is one of the things that stays in his head. He knows that many things did not stay in his head. Monsters are eating him. They are eating him.

He rasps again.

“Οχι... όχι... όχι... όχι... όχι... σκοτώσει εμένα...”

It is dark. Monsters are eating him. He knows there are other things besides the dark and the monsters. There is also coldness, and stone, and metal, and footsteps, and the wooden platters stacked into a short pile that slowly melt into a grey puddle in the corner. Is there ever anything in the platters? He can't remember. They decay in only a few days, and there must be a reason that the people bring them to him and then stack them there, but he can't remember what it is.

“Σκότωσε με... σκοτώσεις... σκοτώσεις... σκοτώσει εμένα...”

He used to say different things, he knows. He can't remember what they were. It doesn't matter. He only has these now. He says them.

“Οχι... όχι... όχι... όχι... όχι...”

It is dark. Monsters are eating him. He speaks when he can. When he has the strength. It is a request. Maybe they will do it. Maybe if he asks.

“Οχι... όχι... όχι... σκοτώσεις... σκοτώσει εμένα...”

No... no... no... kill me... kill me...

Twelve years with no changes that he can remember. He knows there might have been changes that he has forgotten, and he knows that he has forgotten so many other things as well. He can't remember what he has lost, though.

It is dark. Monsters are-

What? What? There is a loud noise. It is so loud. It's like the world is shaking in the hands of some great deity. Everything shakes, and the rocks underneath him rear up and shift. One slides out of the wall, and then another. The second one lands on his hand. It is very heavy, and he chokes on his own breath. It hurts.

A little time passes, and then there is more shaking. The stones beneath him jump and he is thrown around. He doesn't move very far, because his hand is still pinned. His hand hurts very much, now, but that doesn't matter. It is just pain. It doesn't matter, because it is still dark, and he can feel that there are monsters near. And they are eating him.

More time passes. He says nothing now. He is waiting to find out what will happen. There is something in him, like waiting for something that is not pain. He can't say what that might be. But he is waiting.

There is a change, now. Something else is different. He is still exhausted and cold and in tremendous pain, but that does not matter because something is different. For so long, for so many years, there was a presence in his chest and head. It was a strong but gentle hand, holding him close, cradling him into an intimate embrace and lavishing him with long, tender, toothy kisses that scraped his soul. Splinters came away from his raggedness. They were prised free and consumed and savored. He had lost bits of himself.

That touch is gone.

It is hard to understand, since there is nothing to which he can compare it. There had been the touch of bony hatred, as there always had been, and then it was gone. It is still gone. And he knows that. He knows that it is gone and he is not being eaten. He isn't forgetting.

He was being eaten, and now he is not. Existence has been upended: the unstoppable flow of life, which moved from one pain into a worse pain, has reversed itself. He cannot feel surprise. There is not enough left of him to feel surprise. He is stripped and broken, the marrow licked clean from his soul. Whatever is left cannot quite grasp this event. A law of life has upended. He is not being eaten.

Time passes. He does not reckon it. He is waiting. Could he move, if he wished it? It does not matter, since he does not wish it. He lies there, hand crushed, and waits. Such a curious thing, to know and remember that a good thing has happened to him. He has a bruised and shallow mind, and cannot hold much more than this marvel. A good thing has happened. He is not being eaten.

He hears voices. The door to his cell opens, and with it comes light. It is warm and yellow, and he feels it on his skin. A woman has the light. It is coming from her wand. He sees the woman. She is beautiful. He has nothing to which he can compare her, but she is beautiful. She has a tight smile on her face, and she has brown hair that falls in curls to her shoulders. She says something, though it is nonsense to him, and her voice is music.

More people are behind her, speaking more nonsense. He does not move very much. He watches the woman. The others are also beautiful, but they are not like her. She moves to him, and he feels her push open his jaw and place something soft in his mouth. It is sweet — he knows it, though he cannot remember it. He stares at her. She touches his cheek, frowning, and then gently strokes his throat. He swallows. Sweetness.

At some point, the others had moved the stone off of his hand, and had done things to him. The pain is gone from it, although it had never mattered very much. It had only been pain. He is not being eaten, and what else could matter but that?

Then there is a sound of metal — *Ker-chak!* — and sudden darkness.



Pip had been an auror for only a year, so he knew very much how lucky he was to be assigned to the Tower. His mother had wept with pride when he'd told her... not even cried a little, but out-and-out bawled. He hadn't even known what to do, so he just stood next to her and patted her on the back, and said, "Now Mum... now Mum..."

She had turned and clung to him and wailed out something about being so proud of him, and how he would be working with the most important man in the world, and how his father would have been so proud had he not been killed for trying to protect his students, and how Pip was turning out just like him and it was wonderful. Finally she had just clutched him close and said, "Dear Phillip, dear dear dear Phillip, I am so... oh, dear Phillip!"

He knew that she had never been happy these last six months. She was scared for him. He'd been on the three-week Nurmengard rotation. Now he'd be in the guarded clinic compound that was

almost literally the safest place on the entire planet, located in an impregnable school and staffed with the best healers history had ever known. The whole situation was basically a mother's dream. She might *actually* have dreamed this, come to think of it.

Not that he hadn't earned it, mind you. He had worked himself like a shaggy bobbin to get his NEWTs, pulling *four* Os and an E (stupid Herbology). Pip hadn't rested on his laurels — two tries to get into the training program! — but had done a proper Hufflepuff and slaved away until he thought his wand-waving fingers would fall off.

Hard work had paid off. All those hours twiddling away with Transfiguration had gotten him noticed, pulled off assignment and put in the Tower. Younger than anyone else, as far as he knew, and wasn't that quite the thing! Every auror here had to be particularly expert at Transfiguration, and he'd been one of Professor McGonagall's star students thanks to many late nights and strained nerves, but this did her proud. He'd owed her his gratitude (it was proper strange he couldn't just pop down to the rest of Hogwarts to tell her in person, but rules was rules).

He'd make the most of it, now that he was here. He'd put in the hours again, and eventually he'd get noticed by Mr. Diggory or Mad-Eye or even Madame Bones.

Pip stood sharply next to the Tower entrance, doing his best to look both intimidating and invisible. His companion on this shift, J.C., was managing both effortlessly. He could learn a lot from her, really. How in Merlin's name did she achieve that look of fierce attention and profound boredom? It seemed like a contradiction in terms.

A steady flow of healers and their levitating subjects flowed in and out of the Tower's wide entrance, an ornate doorway worked through with gold. Fairly quiet day, so far.

"Hello?" A man and woman stepped hesitantly through the entrance, peering about curiously. Pip's wand was already in his hand, but a look through the passage behind them showed that the aurors on guard were holding up today's handsign. All was well. Pip glanced at J.C., and she just jerked her head at the visitors.

"Hello, sir, ma'am." Pip said, brightly. "I hope that your trip was pleasant, and that the security precautions didn't overly inconvenience you."

The woman gave him a chilly glare (odd bird... skinny and pale), but the man smiled good-naturedly and said, "Oh, it was a bit inconvenient, but I suppose it's all understandable, isn't it?" He was a short and lumpy-looking fellow, with thick black hair that sat in random licks along his oily scalp. Nice enough, though.

"Yes, sir. That's why we aurors are about. The Ministry has assigned us to keep an eye on the Tower and make sure that the important work here is not interrupted. Not a wisp of air gets in without our say-so, sir." Pip was justifiably proud... and it couldn't hurt to emphasize the security. Reputation could be the most useful shield of all, as Madame Bones frequently said.

"I'm sure, I'm sure," the man said, looking around. He didn't sound convinced. They'd just gone through the main entrance of the Tower, from the Receiving Room in the upper bounds of Hogwarts. Perhaps he hadn't seen enough to be impressed, or maybe he was just a gorky little fellow who didn't know enough to be properly awed.

Travel to the Tower was an exceedingly simple matter for the large population that it served these days: touch any Safety Pole or break any Safety Stick, and you went right to the Receiving Room. It was a safe and smooth trip, since the devices were crafted by the most skilled enchanters available on the planet, but it also left you unconscious. If you were conscious on your arrival, which sometimes happened through the usual magical quirks (werewolves and anyone with giantish blood were, for whatever reason, immune to the *Stupefy* laid on the devices) then a friendly team of aurors would assist you with that difficulty. Bottled swarms of chizpurples and a few dozen Dark Detectors aided the defense team.

Thus far, though, none of the more esoteric precautions had ever seen any use, and they were not widely known. A few werewolves and one half-giant had needed manual stunning and Obliviation, but really it was only Mad-Eye Moody himself who had really tested the matter. He made a habit of trying to break into the Tower and assassinate Mr. Potter. He made an attempt on every odd-numbered day. Security was very high on odd-numbered days, and *extremely* high on even-numbered days ("This'll be the one!").

This gentleman, then, had really just touched a portkey, been Stunned into unconsciousness, and then woken up after a friendly

and professional auror had scanned and tested him two or three dozen times. He just didn't know enough to be impressed. The only really visible security would have been the Thieves' Downfall in the passage from the Receiving Room.

"You have a meeting, sir?" There were often meetings, and often with the most important of people. It was rare for visitors to be complete strangers. Many Ministry officials came for advice and assistance, though the Tower wasn't actually an official part of the government, and the healers and "scientists" were all well-known (though frequently checked).

The man smiled again. "Ah, yes. I am Councilor Reginald Black-Horse Hig. This is Councilor Limpel Tineagar. We are here on business for the Council of Westphalia."

Pip looked over at J.C. She had a mirror in front of her, and she was reviewing its display. After a few minutes, she looked up at Pip and nodded. He turned back to the visitors, and said, "Right this way, sir."

As the three moved down the quadrangular halls, Pip gave the most cursory of tours, out of courtesy. His mother had raised him properly, and she had always said, "Be nice to everyone, since you don't know who can help you later." And of course, it could only help the Tower himself when it came to meeting with these two. If they were allowed to be here, then it could only be assumed that it was permissible to see a bit around. Might as well show off the amazing work being done. Nowhere else in the world was there so much magical might and ingenuity, except *maybe* the Ministry of Magic.

"Mr. Potter's meeting room is just down here, sir. A lot of interesting work being done on the way, though." Passing a wide side passage, Pip gestured at it. "That's the Conjunction Conjunction... they're working on pushing the limits of Gamp's Law, figuring out the exact point at which something can't be conjured." Pip understood the basic idea, although he'd also overheard complete gibberish like "isolating variables" and "conceptual limitation." But whatever their silly jargon, it would be *ruddy* useful to be able to conjure up a glass of firewhiskey whenever you wanted!

"And here's the Extension Establishment. They're doing amazing things with boxes that are bigger on the inside." Although,

for whatever reason, their main activity seemed to be making thinner and taller extended spaces. A cute bloke who worked there sometimes stopped to chat with Pip, and apparently had been very excited that they'd refined the Undetectable Extension Charm to create a small box which had internal dimensions that were too narrow to even fit your hand but as tall as a building. Might be useful to hold a lot of parchment, Pip supposed.

The last department they passed on their way to the meeting room had an open door. Pip and the two Americans could see inside briefly as they walked by, and Mr. Hig jerked to a stop. Inside, two goblins were dipping golden gauntlets into vats of bubbling black liquid, holding their faces back to keep their long noses away from the rising fumes. There was a stench of sulfur, but it didn't seem to bother the diminutive, well-dressed goblins.

Mr. Hig spoke, saying with surprise, "There *are* goblins here."

"Yes, sir," Pip said. "There are twenty or twenty-two who work in Material Methods. But if you'll come right this way...?" The two Americans followed him, Mr. Hig frowning fiercely. Did he not like goblins? Not that Pip really blamed him. All sorts of goblins and centaurs and veela and hags and house-elves had sent emissaries or representatives or the like. Merfolk had even visited, in big glass tanks of water. It made Pip uneasy, perhaps because he'd always been afraid he wouldn't be able to hack it as an auror, and that he'd end up working in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures (not that he had anything against them... times had changed, and everyone deserved respect, he reminded himself).

As they arrived at the meeting room, Pip showed them in. Mr. Potter was already in the room, and he approached them. His hair was back in a ponytail, and his robes were formal but unmarked. Mr. Potter's closet doubtless had much more impressive regalia — Wizengamot robes, the robes of a Hogwarts professor, whatever a "scientist" wore — but he generally wore either these plain robes or his Muggle clothing. Mr. Potter gestured at Pip when he was leaving, indicating he should stay. Pip stood along the wall, opposite from the other auror on guard and inwardly glowed. He was getting noticed!

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Councilor Hig." Mr. Potter said. The two men shook hands. "And you, Councilor Tineagar." He

shook hands with her as well. They walked together to the meeting room table, and Mr. Potter sat in his usual spot, in front of a few folders and parchments.

“Yes... so, here we are again.” Mr. Hig said, settling into his chair.

Mr. Potter looked surprised at the greeting. To Pip, who had spent a great deal time around Mr. Potter these past few weeks and who was now quite proud of how well he knew the Tower, the expression looked slightly too pronounced. Mr. Potter was wearing his emotions openly, even exaggerating them a bit. “I am not sure that anyone has been in quite this situation, actually, Councilor. We agree on almost everything, and yet we seem to find ourselves in opposition on some small matters. It’s why I was so eager to meet with you.”

Mr. Hig leaned back in his chair, speaking pleasantly but breezily. “I think you might overestimate how much we have in common, if I can be frank, Mr. Potter.”

Mr. Potter smiled. It didn’t touch his eyes. “Councilor, you have spent years working for the protection of Muggles, goblins, and every other sentient creature. That has not gone unnoticed, and you have made many powerful enemies, both here and in the States. You wouldn’t have worked so hard and sacrificed so much unless you clearly believed in the cause. You must know, at this point, that I do, too. Can we not count that as a point in common?”

“We both do say the same things on that score,” Mr. Hig agreed. “In fact, I went to visit several of my allies in Britain earlier today, and I found one of them many years younger, and all of them speaking so highly of you that one might have thought you were Merlin reborn.”

“I hope I haven’t stepped on your toes. But our research here, and the programs we offer in tandem with the Treaty, give us quite a bit of persuasive power. What matters is not who gets it done, but that it gets done, correct?”

Mr. Hig shrugged carelessly. “Yes. But to get down to brass tacks, I have noticed that some of the things you’ve been getting done have been a bit unusual.”

“Unusual?” Mr. Potter asked, raising his eyebrows.

“‘The Center for Applied Thinking.’ ‘The Hinton Foundation.’ ‘The Southern Wetland Preservation Society.’ ‘Habitat for Humanity.’ ‘The Trevor Project.’ ‘The Union of Concerned Scientists.’” Mr. Hig said, then waited. The silence stretched long. Mr. Potter’s expression didn’t change. He folded his hands quietly in front of himself and said nothing. Finally, Mr. Hig added, “I’ll say it, then. These are just a few of the organizations in which you’ve recently bought a leather-lunged voice.”

“And if I had? How would you possibly object to charity?” Mr. Potter asked. His voice was even, but there was a hint of wry amusement.

“These donations come from a single hidden hand, but I know that it is indeed you. Your face is all the confirmation I need. You are buying influence among the Muggles. You are buying people.” Mr. Hig was speaking with sharper words now. Pip listened and watched, fascinated. This was going to be just like one of the stories!

Mr. Potter shook his head. “Then perhaps you have a point of difference here, indeed, since I happen to believe that charitable giving is a worthy pursuit, if you have the means.”

Mr. Hig smiled now, rough black stubble surrounding the expression on his unshaven mouth. “What a remarkably noncommittal statement. Maybe we should turn then to your moves in the trade of magical items?” This next suggestion — accusation? — came with a renewed sharpness to his tone.

Mr. Potter smiled, now. It was open and friendly, and his body language shifted to accompany it as he spread his hands before him. “Maybe we can return to that, later? I’d prefer we speak of our political goals, where we might find fewer disagreements. Some people who study these matters have found that it is easier to be pleasant and reach an accord once two parties have addressed matters of common ground. If we begin with these small matters where we disagree, then we—”

“They are not small,” Mr. Hig said, cutting Mr. Potter off.

Pip was astonished that he’d ever thought this nasty little man was pleasant.

“This is your government, and everyone knows that. If you do not actually run it, you own it in all but name. Every major

political opponent you have ever faced in Britain is now dead or in hiding,” Mr. Hig said. “And that government has not just doubled inspections of magical trade, it’s increased them *tenfold*! The pace of international trade between the Americas and Britain has crawled to a halt! Many powerful wizards and witches in the Council have their money in such ventures, and you are aiming to gradually strangle them into penury. We are known for our magical devices, just as Egypt is known for its alchemy and Britain is known for its culture of wandwork. In other words, you’re trying to diminish our greatest strength, while your own thrives. It is a crude and ineffective move, but that doesn’t make it any less intrusive. You’re expanding and want to clear the way, and I have caught you clear at it. The question is only: what do you want? Do you wish to dominate us, or do you intend to own the Americas right out?”

Mr. Potter’s smile grew wider. “Ah. Well, if we must.” He opened the folder on the table before him. “It does occur to me that I heard that some businesses have been having trouble in the Americas, lately. Let me name some companies, just so I know we’re speaking of the same ones? ‘Queevel’s Quills?’ ‘Musical Merchandising Unlimited?’ ‘Erato Publishing?’” With each name, he turned a sheet of parchment. Mr. Hig’s expression had become a bit fixed.

“These companies,” Mr. Potter continued, “all have something in common. They’re all yours, and they’re all being held up with inspections, lately. You presented a general problem, but really this complaint was tailored to your own needs, not that of your nation.”

“Not one fleck of gold has-” Mr. Hig started, in indignant response.

Mr. Potter continued as if he hadn’t heard. “Not that you own them, or anything so crude. But it has been observed by some friends of mine that they take your orders. I don’t know if it’s a favor-based economy, or what.”

Mr. Hig snorted in derision. “Is that all? I assure you, that while business may look simple to someone who does nothing but meddle in politics and bizarre researches all day, there’s such a thing as working in concert for the benefit of all.”

“Councilor,” said Mr. Potter, “the only things working in concert are the Quotes Quills produced by Mr. Queevel at your direction. Each one has a hidden Protean Charm on it. I can only assume that the other ends of those Charms are linked to quills under your management. Every British wizard or witch — anyone in the world, in fact — who buys one of these quills is producing a secret, remote copy of every letter, every receipt, and every love note they compose.”

“Nonsense,” Mr. Hig replied, his lips pressed tight.

“Musical Merchandising Unlimited, on the other hand, makes generally dreadful novelties for different musical acts. I have seen one such novelty... a plate with the promotional image of the group ‘The Weird Sisters.’ It’s a cute device... you sing the first half of a lyric, and the plate sings back the second half of the line, with music. Rather annoying unless you’re a teenaged witch, of course, but even more annoying is the fact that the Open Ears Charm that’s necessary for the plate to function never seems to turn off. Oddly, it seems as though the plate is always listening, and broadcasting the conversations it hears to someone else’s ears. Hard to detect. Useful, though, if you’re the sort of person who values information.”

Mr. Hig said nothing, now. Ms. Tineagar was trying hard not to react. Her jaw was taut with anger.

“Erato Publishing makes books. Mostly short ones about famous wizards from around the world. There’s one about Gilderoy Lockhart, for example. I think I have it somewhere in the office. Well-written, especially the action sequences. When Lockhart fought the vampires, my heart was in my throat.” Mr. Potter’s dry tone of voice made that seem unlikely to Pip. “There’s even an extensive little quiz in the back. You fill it in, and it uses numerology on your name and the personality questions to tell you just how much you’re like Lockhart. Are you 90% similar to the vampire vanquisher? Or just 15%? Curiously, though, the enchantment seems to be recording all of the answers and names somewhere, although it’s devilishly hard to trace exactly where.”

Mr. Potter closed the folder in front of him, and continued, his voice turning cold. “Mr. Hig, when you entered, you said we’d met before. That’s clearly not true. If we’d ever met, you never would

have kept trying this sort of thing once you knew I was in charge.” He tapped the folder with his index finger.

There was another long silence. At length, Mr. Hig’s face, which had stiffened and become slightly red to match his plum-like nose, relaxed. He glanced over at Ms. Tineagar, then back at Mr. Potter. Finally, he spoke.

“Oh, I know you. I know you to your core,” Mr. Hig said, leaning forward, his dark eyes glittering. “For I have listened.

“I have heard of a baby whose parents were murdered, and who was famous from infancy for having defeated one of the greatest Dark Lords of history. How did he do it? Why, his mother’s love protected him. How curious that the mothers of Timothy Ghent, Salubria Sintheread, and Geoffrey Bones did not love their children. Lord Voldemort had no trouble with them, or their babies. What unloving and unnatural mothers.

“I have heard of a child who acted and spoke as an adult, and who knew eldritch magics that were not only beyond his age, but beyond any other wizard in known history. This child’s words and confrontations are chronicled in significant detail, often verbatim, by newspapers and books. This child even led armies in play-acting fights with the tactical skill and clever Muggle tricks that might be expected from someone who had lived much longer than he. This child even *frightened Dementors*. I might think these incidents and events exaggerated, had I not examined many of the events myself with the aid of significant monies and a Pensieve.

“I have heard of the tragic death of one of this boy’s early rivals, a young girl who had dared defeat him in those play-acting battles and who had dared excel beyond him in scholarly pursuits. She had tragically died a most terrible death, you see, a victim of that same Dark Lord whom he had defeated as an infant, and who had apparently returned.

“I have heard that this boy was also present during a confused and unwitnessed later incident in Azkaban, when the most abhorrent and evil of that Dark Lord’s servants was taken from that prison — again, with no witnesses ever actually seeing that Dark Lord, who escaped while aided by a Muggle device of considerable scientific advancement. The Dark Lord was not known to have ever used such devices before that time, interestingly, nor known

to have had any power over Dementors. And Bellatrix Black... why, she has vanished as completely as if she were dead in a ditch.

"I have heard that this young man was present at some amazing confrontation on a dark night, resulting in the mass murder of some of the most powerful witches and wizards in Britain as well as a Hogwarts professor and leaving behind gruesome severed hands, said to be those of that Dark Lord, and many unidentifiable ashes. So many obstacles vanished for the young man that night, including Lucius Malfoy... and Albus Dumbledore, one of the greatest heroes of this or any age. And his rival reappeared, returned from the dead and now become one of his stoutest allies.

"I have heard that the young man's rival has the ability to command and destroy Dementors, those darkest of creatures and powerful weapons under the control of others. And that she went to Azkaban at his bidding after the Ministry of Magic balked at his orders to shut down the prison and release the criminals. His rival defeated every auror, destroyed every Dementor, freed every criminal remaining, and razed that prison to sand and ashes. And now she and her army of fanatics act as a law unto themselves, and none can stand against them.

"I have heard the rumors that this young man has, in the years since, shown the power to heal injuries beyond the capabilities of St. Mungo's or the Russell Center. Lycanthropy, vampirism, missing limbs, and the darkest of curses. What is more, the young man and his healers have the power to grant new youth, a skill beyond that of any other. It is an amazing new method of Transfiguration, I hear, and one of his most prominent healers took an Unbreakable Vow in public to attest that it could not be copied beyond the walls of the Tower. This has not prevented some hushed-up tragedies around the world, as others attempt to emulate the young man nonetheless... all unsuccessfully.

"I have heard that this young man is the secret ruler of Britain, controlling through proxies the proceedings of the Wizengamot, the lesser courts of inquiry, and every action of the Ministry of Magic. The streets are filled with those who are newly young or newly healed, and all of them changed in body and spirit — remade into new people — and all of them eager to assist this young man in any way they can. This young man has changed

his country, and is now working to extend his reach in countries around the world.

“I have heard that no fewer than eighteen individuals have died within the Tower. They were *not* severely injured, *not* mortally wounded, *not* on the brink of death. I have read testimony and seen with my own eyes the memories that show *at least* eighteen people *dying* here and passing beyond the Veil. And yet those people were returned from death and restored to life, and they walk the world, youthful once again and completely healthy. Remade. Something only whispered about in the darkest of rituals. And my goodness, do they speak highly of the Tower and his kindness. They’d do anything for him.”

“I have heard so much more. So very much more. And it puzzles me that *so* many seem *so* deaf.”

Throughout it all, Mr. Potter sat silent and stone-faced, listening carefully. Word piled upon word, and accusation upon accusation. Pip could barely believe what he was hearing at this point, Merlin knows... it was outright insanity. Every little fact and weird thing was being spun around on its rear. This American was playing it all up so that it seemed like Mr. Potter was evil, rather than the greatest hero since... well, since Merlin! Pip felt like he was going mad. He knew better than to twitch a muscle. This was craziness and rudeness, but not violence. The other one — Ms. Tineagar — seemed almost as shocked as Pip, gaping at her companion.

Pip felt sick to his stomach, as though someone had grabbed his guts and wrenched them with a nasty tug. The most honoured man in Britain — probably the world! — and this hairy slug was saying he was Dark? He wanted to grab the idiot and shake him and tell him, *Listen, you bloody fool, this fellow here has saved more lives than anyone else in history!*

The worst of it was that it made sense, for a second, when he heard it. For just a moment, he’d believed the American, because when all the facts were *twisted* like that, it fit. It was like a line drawing he’d once seen. At first, it had looked like a snake, sinuous body twisting and mouth gaping. But other people saw a phoenix, swirling in fire with feathers spread. And the funny thing was that if you looked at the drawing the right way and *thought* about it the right way, you could make yourself see the phoenix.

But it was crazy. Pip was an auror, trained and trialed — though new — and he knew a great deal about Dark Lords. They ruled with pain and terror, and they couldn't help but look the part. Dark rituals corrupted your soul even as they gave you power. It was one of the fundamental laws of magic: as above, so below.

Trolls and Dementors and flesh-eating slugs were all vicious creatures, and they took pleasure in causing pain as they acted out their natural urges. And sure enough, they were ugly and foul to the eye; the thick mucus of a flesh-eating slug was a pallid yellow that stank like spoiled meat, and you knew in an instant that it was dangerous. Other beings, like giants, were crude and angry but not obviously malicious, and so they were unpleasant and fearsome but not as hideous in appearance.

Pip wasn't stupid, of course. There were a lot of perfectly nice people who smelled or who were ugly. But you simply couldn't get away with Dark Magic without it affecting your looks or your aura. You-Know-Who was proof enough of that: pale and noseless and gaunt, as Pip had heard. Harry Potter, on the other hand, was a normal-looking bloke in dark robes, his hair tied back to expose the famous scar. He had glasses, and green eyes. And he was the Tower: Pip had personally seen him heal dozens of people, and not a single person whose life was saved by anyone in the facility left without a smile and a kind word from Mr. Potter.

"And so," Mr. Hig said, settling back in his chair once more, "you can see that I have been listening, and that I know you very well indeed. You have overplayed your hand — you have been too provincial. If one is caught up in all the drama of it, it might slip by. But over the sea, we have enough perspective to see the full picture. And every single bit of evidence, every jot and tittle, points to one conclusion. And now that I can look into your eyes, I can see it confirmed. I can see the coldness that I saw once before, one foggy night in Nottingham. It is the coldness of an evil soul.

"You are subtle, but not subtle enough, and now you are undone. I have taken precautions before coming, and soon the whole world will stand against you. For I know you well.

"Lord Voldemort, you are discovered."

*Ich möchte meine Stimme wie ein Tuch
hinwerfen über deines Todes Scherben
und zerrn an ihr, bis sie in Fetzen geht,
und alles, was ich sage, müßte so
zerlumpt in dieser Stimme gehn und frieren;
blieb es beim Klagen. Doch jetzt klag ich an:
den Einen nicht, der dich aus dir zurückzog,
(ich find ihn nicht heraus, er ist wie alle)
doch alle klag ich in ihm an: den Mann.*

*I would swirl out my voice like a wide cloth
to cover the shards of your death
and then rend it until it was torn to shreds,
and everything I'd say from then on would
wear, shivering, the tatters of this voice;
if lament were enough. But now also I indict:
not him who wrenched you back out of yourself,
(I can't find him, he's like all the others)
but, in him, I accuse them all: all men.*

—Rainer Maria Rilke

◆◆◆◆◆ Chapter five ◆◆◆◆◆

A Matter of Perspective

Councilor Hig is a brave man, but not a stupid one, Harry thought to himself. He is convinced that I am Lord Voldemort and that I took control of the infant Harry Potter on October 31st, 1981, and it is a more than plausible theory. That was essentially Voldemort's plan, once upon a time, when he had intended to rise to power as David Monroe. From the outside, Hig's insights are not only a possible interpretation of events, but actually the most likely interpretation.

The truth was that Voldemort had performed a ritual of ancient and arcane power on a child, and in the process destroyed his own body and copied much of his mind into the child's brain. To an external observer, this explanation of events requires too many new assumptions to work. Councilor Hig is simply applying Occam's Razor, and in the process revealing one of its disadvantages as a heuristic.

The accusation was hanging heavy in the air while Harry thought. He didn't feel rushed. This wasn't the first unjust *j'accuse* he had faced (and it wouldn't be the last) and he knew it would actually be suspicious if he had a ready answer. He had budgeted a half hour for this meeting — no need to hurry, yet. He let himself look astonished, which was easy enough. It was, after all, very surprising that anyone would stroll into the stronghold of a villain's lair and say such a thing.

Reg Hig glared at Harry. His companion, Limpel Tineagar, had overcome her initial shock, and was sitting very still and very stiffly, as though she were surrounded by fragile things.

What advantage does he think to gain by calling me out?, Harry thought. *We're in private here, so he's tipping his hand without*

getting any benefit of publicity. I could have him killed without anyone even knowing what had happened, if I were Voldemort. And if he's clever enough to deduce the most probable version of events and to see a pattern in the charitable contributions, then he's clever enough to really have the insurance he claims. On the other hand, he didn't reach the correct conclusions about my origins or about the purpose behind the charities, so he has his limits. What is his insurance? Well, what are his strengths and patterns? He specializes in magical information technology, and has built his power base on that advantage...

Is he working with the Malfoys? No. Among other reasons, he probably hates them, given the contrasting beliefs on blood purity, "lesser creatures" like centaurs, and so on. A letter, left with someone? "If you are reading this, I am already dead..." No. He has too high an estimate of my cleverness, given that fantastic speech he just gave, and he knows how easy it would be for a villain to circumvent that.

Ah. I bet he is trying to record or broadcast this conversation. Thus the speech and the goading and the confrontation... he wants a confession from my own lips. What Dark Lord could ever resist gloating about his plans in private, after all? A lot of unknowns and moving pieces here, though... call it 6 to 4, 60% confidence. And if true, that means I must also increase my estimate of this man's bravery, since it implies he is willing to sacrifice himself (suicide bomber? not a violent man, assign it a small probability). Did his recording device make it through the Receiving Room? Only one in twenty magical devices of one sort or another made it through undetected, based on their prior results... conditional odds would be 5 to 100, then. Hm, multiplying my prior with this I get 30:400, which means that taking the search into account, the probability of him successfully recording this conversation is 30/430... something like seven percent, I think. Call it ten for pessimism. Not negligible, but not enough for immediate action to stop it.

So... we have the situation. Now: what do I have, what do I want, and how can I best use the former to get the latter?

"Councilors, do you mind if I show you a memory from my childhood?" Harry said, rising from his seat.

"What?" Councilor Tineagar said, startled. It was, he thought, the first time she'd spoken in the meeting.

Hig said nothing, watching Harry closely. Neither he nor Tineagar rose from their seats. Damn. This was so delicate, and so much could hinge on these moments. They couldn't afford to alienate the Americas. Hig was so suspicious, and what was worse, he was *right* to be suspicious.

Harry put himself in Hig's place, thinking, *What would I do, if I were him — motivated by pride and his specific moral considerations, not constrained by fear — if I were trying to broadcast this conversation and Voldemort wanted to change the subject before I'd gotten a confession? Hmm... He must think that this is how Voldemort is going to kill him. 'Here, lean over this large cauldron and let me show you something... your death, fool!' He won't move unless he has no further choice, since he wants better proof than simply his assassination. He's trying to force a confrontation.*

As so often, they faced a Prisoner's Dilemma. How could they arrange to cooperate?

The thought process took only a second. It was impossible to simply promise someone they were safe, since it could be interpreted as apophasis (if you're saying they're safe, it implies you've contemplated otherwise). He had to pre-commit to warding them, and do it in such a way that he gave Hig a weapon to use against him in case he defected. If he made it far more costly to defect, in an obvious way, then they could be more sure he wouldn't take that option.

"Auror Pirrip, Auror Kwannon," Harry said, turning to the two aurors in the room. "I wish to show these two delegates a memory in my Pensieve. I would like you to accompany us, and keep them safe, particularly. They are exceedingly important people, visitors from the Council of Westphalia, and absolutely no harm must come to them. There have been times when assassins have used the cover of an accident to disguise murder. So we shall treat any accidents that happen to these delegates, who have come here only to assist their people and all the peoples of the world, as deliberate and unforgivable attempts on their life."

Technically, he wasn't supposed to give them orders. He was a private citizen. No one ever paid that illusion any mind, though. The point wasn't the order, anyway... the point was the careful and explicit elimination of the idea of a justifiable "accident."

The experienced Auror Kwannon gave the briefest of nods, trying to disguise her mild contempt for the instruction. She'd been an auror for more than a decade, and she was one of the ones Moody had judged as suitable to come on board as a Tower guard when they first began (he didn't "trust" her, *per se*, but then Moody trusted no living wizard). Kwannon didn't need to be told to be suspicious of all accidents, since that was her default mode. Harry had seen her work, and it was intimidating.

Auror Pirrip's face became serious, and he gave a firm nod with was probably meant to be a grim set to his jaw. This one was practically fresh out of training, with the credulousness of any new law-enforcement officer, and Harry would probably have gotten the same response if he'd demanded that Pirrip guard a cucumber sandwich with his life. Still, you needed new eyes willing to ask the stupid or obvious question, and Pirrip wasn't afraid of looking silly. He was also trustworthy, brave, and a whiz at Transfiguration. Funny, Harry and Pirrip were about the same age, yet such different people.

Harry looked back at Hig and Tineagar. Tineagar was looking to Hig; the decision was his. And Hig was still hesitant. Curiosity was having its effect, of course — the man thrived on information — but he'd had a plan in mind when he came in to confront Harry, and he was loath to abandon it. Yes, he might be somewhat convinced that he wasn't in any danger, but that didn't yet make him ready to step aside from his preconceived plans. He needed... something more.

Harry paused.

What would Dumbledore do?

"You wound me, Harry. Do you not at least realise that what I have told you is a sign of trust?"

Dumbledore would stop trying to pull levers. He'd lay his heart out, raw and vulnerable. This is a brave man, and a good man. Treat him like one.

Harry looked Hig in the eyes, and spoke quietly and directly. "Councilor Hig, you are mistaken about me. You are wholly mistaken about me. I wish to show you some proof. You will come to no harm. Please, sir. Come with me."

Slowly, Hig rose from his seat, followed by Tineagar. “Very well, Mr. Potter.” The American’s beetle brow was furrowed, and his face was wary... but he had agreed.

Harry led the way from the room. He chose a route that would lead them past a couple of chosen research centers in the sprawling (and ever-growing) Tower complex.

They walked past the Survey Station, first, as they headed down the featureless and evenly-lit grey stone corridors. The Survey Station was an outgrowth of another research project, which was an attempt to develop a simple battery of spells to reveal a variety of health problems that were not addressed by modern magical medicine (detecting the alleles that could give someone’s offspring Tay–Sachs disease, for example). It had become apparent along the way that detection magic itself was woefully inadequate, and was (like most magics) a huge kludge. Harry had tasked the trio of wizards working in the Survey Station on improving at least one aspect of that shortcoming, by developing or refining or researching spells to detect discrete elements. He’d set them the goal of being able to detect a single mole of any element. Three weeks later, one of them had finally come to him to ask, “A single mole *in what volume of space?*” and Harry had put that person in charge.

It looked very studious and very benign, as they whisked by the entrance. Just three people taking turns scrawling on slates and pointing their wands at a big glass tank.

They also passed by the Advancement Agency, the first research station he’d set up. They had a single mandate, but the scope of it meant that they had the largest staff of anywhere in the Tower aside from the clinic. Harry had told them about the special wards and magics laid over the Tower, and about the “new techniques” in Transfiguration that allowed for safe free Transfiguration of people, and he had given them a direction made possible by these advances: “Improve *homo sapiens*.” Twenty-eight wizards and Muggles worked in the Advancement Agency, and the experimenting alcoves were quite a sight to see. But the main room of the station was, again, just another gaggle of people speaking in hushed tones and consulting weighty books.

This walk through the compound, along with the walk to the meeting room, sent important messages to the visitors.

1. *Look at all these normal-looking people doing harmless things!* There were no walls dripping with blood or chairs upholstered in mermaid skin. While useless as an articulated argument, the normality of what they saw would soothe their suspicions further.
2. *Look at all these witnesses!* Everyone feels safer in a crowd.
3. *Look at all these vulnerabilities!* All of the witches and wizards they saw could be corrupted, blackmailed, persuaded, spied upon, and otherwise used as a tool by any future attacks from the Westphalian Council. Harry knew this, Hig knew it, and Hig knew that Harry knew that Hig knew it. This would be doubly effective if Harry's hypothesis was correct, and many of their faces were being recorded or broadcasted right now.

Publicly, there were twenty-five research centers in the Tower. This was the most that Harry felt he could manage. By the time they gained enough autonomy so that they no longer required so much of his personal direction, his available time would be even further reduced. Or at least, that was the plan, as they brought more and more of the magical world into the Treaty. These days, his time was very tightly-scheduled and filled with emergencies, but he still had seven or eight hours out of every thirty to devote to his own pursuits. This was probably the sweet spot, and someday he'd look back on such luxury with fondness: enough power and resources to begin to make meaningful global change, but enough time to enjoy himself in his off-hours.

There was also a twenty-sixth research center, named X. Only Harry ever went there. It was hidden, accessible only by complex wards and riddles, and was filled with intricate golden devices. None of them did anything except function as ever-more-elaborate alarms, though... the twenty-sixth room was just where Harry went to read. This precaution had only ever ensnared one spy, but it was worth it just so that Harry could have at least one peaceful sanctuary.

No, the real secret wasn't X. The real secret was Room 101. And besides him, only Hermione and Amelia knew of the entrance to Room 101. In fact, so far as he had any reason to suspect, only

the three of them — and perhaps Moody, you always had to count him — even knew about the existence of Room 101, and its small black box. Security through obscurity.

They'd arrived at the Records Room. It was one of the places where Harry's sensibilities had not won out, and it had been built in the fashion of wizarding libraries. The relatively small stone room had a low-hanging ceiling, almost every meter of which was covered with half-sized ebony doors. Except for one corner of the room, all of the walls and the floor were also covered in the doors. They had arcane, miniscule labels on them, written in crabbed handwriting. Should a researcher open one on the ceiling or floor, a charm swept them into a separate room with wide-stretching shelves, well-lit by glowglobes and supplemented by comfortable armchairs. The goblins needed stepladders to get to the ceiling doors.

Harry had shouted at them when they'd "found" it all built the way they wanted. "There are doors everywhere!" he'd shouted. "Why not just make it a bigger room, and put all the doors on the walls?! What about when people fall through one of the doors on the floor? And why bother making specially charmed doors that suck you in on the ceiling — you could spend less time and effort just making doors *that you can walk through!* And haven't you ever heard of a card catalogue?!"

As it happened, they had not heard of a card catalogue, and they did not understand his insane Muggle building sensibilities, and this was the proper design for the personal library of a Grand Sorcerer, and that was that.

Regardless, it gave neither Hig nor Tineagar any pause when they saw it, and they followed Harry without hesitation to the un-doored corner, where a Pensieve stood on its stone pedestal. The aurors trailed the trio.

Harry turned to the two Americans, and sighed. "It is difficult to prove that I am not Voldemort, particularly if you think all of my current efforts to save lives are an elaborate front. Anything I show you now could just be some sort of elaborate ploy, chosen specifically to fool you. But I do think there is one sort of memory I could show you that will convince you that I am not Lord Voldemort.

“Councilors, I believe that sentient life is the highest good, and preserving and perpetuating that life is my dearest goal. Voldemort held all life in disdain, from what I have heard... almost all people bored him, and formed no part of his utility function — that is to say, he assigned them no value. I think that the Muggle scientific method is the noblest and surest path forward for us all, while Voldemort was famously scornful of Muggles.” He thought for a moment, and added a third difference. “And, Councilors, I love some people dearly. As far as I know, Voldemort had no love in him.”

Harry held his wand to his brow. He found the memory he wanted, wincing a little as he recalled it. Then he pulled it free, using the wordless twisting motion needed to cast the unnamed Pensieve spell. Harry felt the memory slip away from him like the last tenuous moments of a fading dream, and saw the silvery liquid hanging heavily from the tip of his wand. He sighed, and placed it gently into the waters of the Pensieve. It swirled about, and a light mist began to rise from the wide metal bowl, showing that a memory was present in the device.

“There is another very large difference between myself and Voldemort, though, Councilors. He was mortally concerned about his dignity, and I have always been dignity-impaired. Voldemort would not tolerate appearing ridiculous. And so I will show you this, Councilor Hig, even though it may cost me a great deal of your respect. This is a memory from when I was younger. I believe it will prove to you *absolutely* that I am not Voldemort or any kind of dignified Dark Lord.”

He stepped back, and turned away, his face already blushing. Hig looked at Tineagar for a moment, a look full of meaning. Harry assumed that there was some kind of communication going on between them, something along the lines of, “If this melts off my head, be sure the Alliance gets these plans, you’re my only hope.” Then Hig leaned forward, and put his face into the waters of the Pensieve.

This device could really stand to be optimized, Harry thought to himself as he stood and waited. This can’t be the best arrangement... a big washbasin into which you dunk your head? We’ll have to see exactly how wide and deep the waters need to be, before

memories cease to circulate and transfer. If the water just needs to cover most of your brain, we might be able to make Pensieve headbands, instead.

They all waited, awkwardly watching the back of Hig's head as Pensieve-mist rose around it.

"Pardon my ignorance, but did you go to the Salem Witches Institute, Councilor?" Harry asked Councilor Tineagar, abruptly, while they waited.

"I attended the Russell Center, actually, Mr. Potter. I was Dux Litterarum of my year, as it happens."

"I have never had the pleasure of visiting, unfortunately. I have read of it though, and admired what I read. There is much to be said for the apprenticeship program — working a trade while you learn. May I ask what you specialized in while you were there?"

"Floo connections. We have several different networks that compete, plus private networks. It's different from how you do it here." She hadn't relaxed even slightly. Still: progress, if not perfection. More than one international alliance began with small talk.

"Mm. I like the idea of that sort of private competition in theory, but it seems like the free market would be particularly merciless in the process of sorting itself out. Floo injuries can be very unpleasant, and by the time people switched to the better network, the price paid for that information could be measured in terms of lives."

"There are minimum standards for safety, and there's an official bureau assigned by the Magical Congress to do inspections. Have you considered that perhaps competition between networks would work better than a single central authority to promote safety? If I hear that Greater Boston left someone splinched out of a toe, then I'll pick the Other Light without hesitation. But if some junior assistant undersecretary in the British Department of Magical Transportation makes a mistake with your connection here, where do you go? Nowhere, you just cross your fingers and hope they fire the fool."

"You make a good point. But there's a better way to settle this than argument. We can—"

“What in the name of Mukwooru’s toe?!” Hig spluttered as he jerked backwards, staring at Harry in confusion and alarm and (it appeared) mild disgust.

“Ah. Yes.” Harry said, grimacing. “That was what my parents would call the ‘Salamander Incident.’”

“But... but *why*?! Those poor people...” Hig stammered.

Harry shrugged. “In my salad days, when I was green in years, I was rather too creative and too bored and too clever. Everyone recovered, I assure you. No lasting harm done.”

Hig sat down on the floor for a moment, plunking himself down without ceremony next to the Pensieve. He tugged his robes around his knee where a fold had gotten caught. The motion was half-hearted; the man seemed stunned. Harry didn’t blame him.

Tineagar turned to the Pensieve, but Harry cleared his throat loudly and stepped to it with a quick step, dipping his wand into it and retrieving the memory. “I think,” he said, “that I’d prefer that as few people see this as possible. Apologies, Councilor.” Harry looked at the viscous gobbet of glowing silver. “Really, I see a lot of appeal in just destroying it, but we only develop our psychic muscles with hard times and oppression.” He brought the wand to his forehead, and returned the memory to its place with a reversed twisted of his wrist. He grimaced.

It took a bit, but Hig recovered himself in impressively short order, rising to his feet. “Mr. Potter, I have no words.”

“It was part of a contest between myself and two other boys, you see.”

“And the —”

“Inside the walls,” Harry answered, promptly.

“But the —”

“Bought in Hogsmeade.”

“Well,” said Hig heavily. “You are not Voldemort. He would not have allowed this to be known about him.”

Not true, Harry thought. If it served his purposes, and it was worth the price, he would allow himself to be ridiculous. It would have seemed a high cost, but heading off a worldwide rebellion would be worth it. This man does not fully appreciate the extent to which Voldemort’s public persona was a facade.

“Indeed, I am not Voldemort. I oppose his purposes at virtually every turn, and you and I are natural allies, not enemies.” Harry

folded his arms, but showed a small smile. The tension and the antagonism between them was entirely dispelled.

“No,” said Tineagar, interrupting the two of them. Harry and Hig turned to regard her. Harry was mildly surprised — had he been too friendly with her, and dispelled a mystique that would have kept her quiet? — but Hig’s gaze was sharply attentive. She continued, “Reg says that you are not Voldemort, given what he has seen. I will abide by his judgment on that score, though it is suspiciously convenient for you, Mr. Potter. But *everything else* he said was true, and all the other patterns we have discerned remain.”

She folded thin fingers into each other, and met Harry’s eyes with the look of a raptor at hunt among its natural prey. “You may not be the Dark Lord Voldemort, but that does not mean you are not the Dark Lord Potter. The fact that Reg’s theory is wrong does not prove that you are a good man.”

Hig gathered himself noticeably. By all accounts he was a passionate man. He’d once stood alone in the chambers of the Council of Westphalia, Harry had heard, and argued for an end to the official persecution of centaurs (which had still been registered as Dark Creatures in the Westphalian laws at the time). It took three weeks for deliberations, but by the end, this man who’d stood alone had convinced a full majority of the Council. And while much of that was politics and cleverness — holding back his solid allies, like this Councilor Tineagar, from joining him until he needed some momentum — you just couldn’t do that without some fire in your belly. It made him liable to large shifts of emotional stance. Harry saw, now, why Hig had brought Tineagar with him here. She was a partner who was not given to being caught up in events, rather than a minion.

“Limpel is correct.” Hig said. “The owl is not white, but that doesn’t make it black.”

“True,” Harry admitted. “But this is, I hope, a foundation. I hope to persuade you, in time, by showing you the ways in which you are wrong. You think I am raising the dead by dark rituals? Meet Ms. Hermione Granger, who has been my dearest friend for years, and have a conversation with her. She is no Inferi, and no monster. You think I am controlling those that we heal here? Let me show you the clinic, so you can see some of the lives we save.

“I have shown you a hidden secret, and made myself vulnerable to you.” Hig nodded. Harry continued. “I have cooperated, even though it leaves me at greater risk if you choose to defect, because we are at a beginning here together. A beginning is the time for taking the most delicate care that the balances are correct. We have laid something between us, and we can build upon it.”

Tineagar held his eyes, then nodded curtly. Hig nodded as well. After a moment, he made a noise in his throat, clearing it. “We can begin building now, in fact... in some small measure. You have shared a deep secret, knowing that it could be used against you. I respect that, as a measure to demonstrate trust. I can only tell you now that I am sorry to say that your secret, and that memory, may have already gone further than you wished.”

Harry felt a shiver run down his spine. He suppressed the temptation to blurt out, like a child, that he knew what Hig was about to say. There was no need for him to demonstrate his cleverness, and it was stupid to show off. He was no longer a child.

“We wished to ensure that the world could stand against you in the same way they stood against Grindelwald, and the best way seemed to be to unite everyone behind unequivocal evidence before any more harm was done. And so, I am sorry to say, we both are wearing rather novel buttons.” He tapped one of the buttons on his robe’s collar. “Everlasting Eyes. Quite a new innovation. We had them made specifically for this meeting, and we wanted something you could not easily defeat. We had heard of the magnitude of your defences. Thus, everything we see and hear has been sent out from here to a small group of Councilors that we wanted as witnesses. And that might include the, uh, Salamander Incident.”

“Well, thank you for telling me. I hope I can rely on your discretion?” Harry said.

“Yes, Mr. Potter, you may. We will not betray your confidence, and I will take every measure necessary.”

Harry nodded. “How did you get them past our security?” An auror should have detected them, or a Probity Probe, or at least the bottled chizpurples.

“We have been paying attention to you and your enemies here in Britain,” Mr. Hig said, and Harry allowed himself a smile. “We

have noticed your use of Muggle devices, as I mentioned, and have looked to them with the attention they deserve. Muggles are benighted, and they merit our care and stewardship, but perhaps even we defenders of their rights had allowed ourselves to underestimate their cunning. Cleverness is everywhere in nature. The first wizard to enchant a broomstick, in the dark depths of old Germania, must have looked to birds as their inspiration, after all.”

Too many of Harry’s erstwhile allies held this same “magical man’s burden” view of things. But it was a correctable error, given time and influence. No wizard scoffed at Muggles once they’d seen the still beauty of the stars, untrammelled by air.

“The Everlasting Eye is a ‘passive bug.’ It’s not an insect, though,” Hig said, smiling. Harry repressed his own expression. “A ‘bug’ is a Muggle device for listening in, and a ‘passive bug’ is very difficult to detect,” Hig continued. “I first found out about the gimmick through an amusing linguistic coincidence, but that’s not important now. The important thing is that it doesn’t have electricity in it. It’s acting like a dish resonating the cavity, and it gets its power from electricity being sent all through the air right now. There is a camera with it, that gets its electricity from the same source. Not a trace of magic — not even a Charm of Perfect Function — and yet it works well despite dense magics surrounding it, unlike other Muggle gimmicks.”

Both of the Americans looked very proud of themselves, notwithstanding their evident lack of understanding of the principles involved. The camera part of the device was probably useless here, for example, since it did have its own electronic components. Still, a passive capacity resonator was a clever idea. Blast out a strong enough signal of the correct frequency, and you could probably drown out any magical interference and get a clean audio signal. And however superior he might feel at listening to that stumbling explanation, he should remember that this could well have worked, under other circumstances. His own familiarity with much of modern technology and his grasp of the correct terminology didn’t count for much if it didn’t actually help him *win*.

Harry said only, “This is a new device. Perhaps the special spells laid over the Tower which permit our improved Transfigura-

tion will interfere with the broadcast? Many of them would have been unknown to you when you were testing this gimmick.”

“Perhaps,” Hig agreed, sounding doubtful.

“Regardless, I appreciate your confidence in telling me. It would be an unpleasant surprise, otherwise. It is an exceedingly clever gambit.” Harry turned and indicated the corridor out of the Records Room. “Will you permit me to show you around the Tower some more?” Harry glanced at his wristwatch. “We should stop by the clinic, first, and then perhaps the Ypsilanti Yard.”

The rest of the visit went well, although Harry couldn’t say they’d ever let their guard down, or that there’d been much more progress. Councilor Tineagar, particularly, was often watching him with suspicion. Councilor Hig, at least, was caught up in absorbing everything he saw and heard. The three had parted company on better terms — if not friendly — and at least some of the rhetoric from across the seas ratcheted down in tone. Outright conflict, at least, appeared to have been averted.

Progress really had been made, and all it required was some momentary humiliation on Harry’s part. He considered it a wise investment, and thought things were going very well, indeed.

It wasn’t until the next week that the first bomb was owed to the Council of Westphalia, wrapped in the elegant silver and green paper of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Malfoy. The diminishing tensions did not suit everyone’s purposes, perhaps.



As far as the Muggle world knew, the Turkmenian Mandrake, or Loschtak (*Mandragora turcomanica*) was extinct. Even most witches and wizards thought that this useful tuber had died out seventy years ago, when one of Grindelwald’s death squads, the Záh Kardja, burned Borley Rectory to the ground. The “Sword of Záh” had been infamous for their completeness, after all.

The species was not entirely extinct, however. Certain corners of the world still harbored a few plants, and among them was the Department of Mysteries. They were a valuable and rare commodity. The common mandrake was grown everywhere in the wizarding world; extracts of the root were often used in different

sorts of potions, and the pulped fibres were employed by paper-makers to produce paper suitable for magical portraits. The Turkmenian mandrake, on the other hand, could be occasionally used to temporarily coax information out of an unstable ghost. Such a property had infrequent but useful purposes, particularly for the purposes of law enforcement. The Unspeakables would sometimes, under conditions of great secrecy, thus produce for an inquiring auror a steaming mash of boiled mandrake. The steam could solidify a ghost's bonds with the world, for a time, and permit questioning.

Six years ago, many new requests and orders had begun pouring into the Department. What began as a trickle — after the famous return and final defeat of Voldemort in 1992 and the establishment of a new order — became a torrent eleven months later, with a dozen requests being issued on the day after Walpurgisnacht in 1993. They'd been required to rededicate the Hall of Prophecy, now called the Hall of Science, and a program of research had been prescribed, guided by new personnel. There had been a long new list of ethical guidelines, many of which had been extremely bizarre. And there had also been a call for any hoarded artifacts which might serve specific purposes. Madame Bones had spent two days in hidden halls with the Line of Merlin, to assist the search.

One such purpose had been the ability to sustain the human mind outside of the body. In the most impenetrable bureaucratic jargon imaginable (“...notwithstanding all other requests beyond the aforesaid or any others that might arise *inter alia*, the party of the second part shall in the instant case and with regard to all appertaining items, substances, phenomena...”), the Department was tasked with attempting to fulfill this request. Any possibilities were to be written up in triplicate and owed to the Headmaster of Hogwarts. This destination went a long way towards explaining the request: the power and density of the magics surrounding that school, and the insane events which often occurred on its grounds, had often spawned bizarre requests of the Department.

Dumbledore, for example, had once asked them to produce from their vaults the Seventh Hammer of the Shona, stating that he wished to destroy a rock of unknown provenance and import with utter certainty.

This time, the Unspeakables wrote up descriptions of various possibilities, after three weeks of research. And after a tedious process of discussion, deliveries, and deliberation, Harry Potter had finally asked for the delivery of several whole Turkmenian mandrakes. A year later, he'd asked for the delivery of eight more. And as far as the Unspeakables were concerned, that had been the end of it.

*O house which is a ziggurat, grown together with
heaven and earth,
foundation of heaven and earth, great banqueting
hall of Eridug!*

*Abzu, shrine erected for its prince, house which is
the holy mound where pure food is eaten,
watered by the prince's pure canal, mountain,
pure place cleansed with the potash plant,
abzu, your tigi drums belong to the divine powers.*

*Your great wall is in good repair.
Light does not enter your meeting-place where the
god dwells, the great assembly-room,
the assembly-room, the beautiful place.
Your tightly constructed house is sacred and has no
equal.*

*Your prince, the great prince, has fixed firmly a holy
crown for you in your precinct
O Eridug with a crown placed on your head,
bringing forth thriving thornbushes,
pure thornbushes for the susbu priests,
O shrine which is the abzu,
your place,
your great place!*

—Enheduanna

George Jaxon

The description on Hermione Granger's Chocolate Frog card was as follows:

Also known as “The Goddess,” Granger is one of the world’s leading proponents for the Treaty for Health and Life. She is also famous for her resurrection during the final defeat of Lord Voldemort in 1992, and her resulting ability to destroy Dementors. In her spare time, she teaches at the Tower School of Doubt.

Hermione flipped the card over, and looked at the picture of herself. She recognized the look she was trying to portray in the moving image: she'd named it "demure strength." It began with a strong and direct gaze looking out at the viewer, and then her chin lowered as she dropped her eyes down and just to the right, two locks of hair falling alongside her cheek. Then it looped again, as she lifted her face back to the viewer.

The infinite loops of magical photography were fascinating. She had posed for this photograph, of course... it was part of her carefully-managed public image campaign. The message was deliberately modeled on the “cult of the virgin” of the first Queen Elizabeth: *I am supremely powerful but not scary*. But even if the magical camera had a long exposure time — or however it worked — how did it fill in the “second” part of the loop, where she looked back up at the viewer? It wasn’t just a reversal or rewind, which meant that... what? Did the camera *create* its own imagery to make a coherent looping picture?

She made a face, and put the card back on her desk. Hermione had maybe thirty copies of the card. Apparently whenever a child anywhere in Britain (or Australia or New Zealand) got an extra copy of her card, they were sending it to her. This didn't make any

sense at all, and yet her personal assistant kept finding them in Hermione's mail, often accompanied by a childish letter (Hermione had read one: "dear Miss Granger: I admire you for these reasons: you are brave, you do whats rihgt, you kill Dementors. And those are the reasons I admire you. Sincerely, Hosea Hussey").

As she went to her wardrobe, she mused over what the card might have said, if she had been given the opportunity to write the description herself. *Hermione Granger, the nineteen-year-old daughter of two dentists from Surrey, is famous for her vigilante attacks on the national property of five different magical states and her pivotal role in various plots for world revolution.* She picked through the hanging robes as she thought, looking for something appropriately formal. *Miss Granger is part unicorn and part troll, combined in a way that makes absolutely no sense unless you've read a lot of comic books.*

Hermione pulled out a long, pale blue set of formal robes — essentially an elaborate ball gown interwoven with charms. This set had a plunging back and short, pointed sleeves. It would send a subtle message to the right onlooker, while still looking cute enough. She smiled, then frowned when she noticed her nails. The polish had come off, and they had returned to their entirely too shiny and bright natural state. Sighing, she put down the robes, and grabbed the polish from the vanity.

She felt responsible for the deaths of some magical and truly wondrous creatures, and it was hard enough on her conscience that she felt guilty voicing any complaints. Two unicorns had died for Hermione, even if she hadn't been in a position to object either time, and it seemed like sacrilege to feel anything but gratitude. She didn't feel quite as badly about the trolls, much less the dragons, lethifolds, or other Dark creatures (and *to hell* with the Dementors!), but she would never dishonour the memory of those unicorns. Or Granville. Her mouth tightened, and her eyes burned for a second, but she ignored it and finished her nails.

Once they'd dried to a suitably dull sheen, and she'd dressed and put on her necklace, Hermione stood in front of the standing mirror. She examined herself critically. The shade of blue was light enough that she did not appear too pale (her slight tan was eternal and unchanging), and the shape hugged her form tightly

enough to be appealing, but not so tightly as to be embarrassing. Time to go.

She grabbed her overnight bag, then went up the stairs and out through the hatch, which smoothly opened for her. Stepping lightly out of the drawer, she emerged from the trunk and glanced around. Quiet in the house. That was normal. She checked the door. Wards and warnings were still in place, and a single hair was still stuck where she'd placed it last week (not her own hair, of course). No one had been in. This room was dusty, though... she had better clean up when she had a chance. Not now, though.

For now, Hermione was simply on her way: she stepped to the other side of the room and opened the light chestnut Vanishing Cabinet that stood there. She closed the door only for a second, and when she opened it again, she was looking at a different room, though there had been no sensation of change. Then all she had to do was Apparate (destination, determination, deliberation) out of this second rented and well-secured flat, and she was in Hogsmeade. Relatively easy, considering how much security these precautions provided.

Most witches and wizards would not routinely use a Vanishing Cabinet or Apparation during their daily routine this way. The risk of splinching was not great, but if you roll a hundred-sided die enough times, eventually it'll land on one. But Hermione didn't have to worry about that. Her body knew the shape it was supposed to be, and continually transfigured itself into that shape. Even if she was splinched during her commute, thanks to a small flaw in the Cabinet or lax concentration during Apparating, the worst that would happen was that she might lose a few liters of her grey blood.

Only a few things could hurt Hermione. Serious curses could damage or incapacitate her, but she was immune to most lesser hexes. They couldn't be exactly sure why — it was either her continuous transfiguration or the curative properties of her blood — but she just shrugged them off. She felt the Jelly-Legs Jinx as a moment's tremble in her knees, and *Immobulus* just made her joints stiff. In lab tests, acid also hurt her, and prevented her from regenerating the wound for ten or twenty seconds.

But fire was the most serious danger, and that included an unfortunate number of offensive spells. There were twenty-three

common attack spells that used flames or great heat, and forty lesser-known, regional, or particularly difficult others.

Hermione's body had been imbued with the magical nature of both a unicorn and a troll. Trolls had tissues and bones that were magically reinforced. Assuming that trolls were the creation of some vile wizard in a past age, this property was probably what allowed them to attain their great size (up to four meters) without bursting their blood vessels or cracking their femurs. They also continuously transfigured themselves, presumably into the shape dictated by their DNA (it wasn't a single stable pattern, since trolls had natural life cycles).

Unicorns, on the other hand, had a magical aura of innocence and purity, as well as blood suffused with a powerful life-affirming effect. It didn't actually regenerate damage, but even the most grievously wounded person would clutch to life if they imbibed the blood of a unicorn. And of course, unicorn keratin was enchanted to have a tensile strength beyond nearly any other material.

It was still a little odd, even after all these years: she, Hermione Granger, was supernaturally strong and fast and graceful, thanks to otherworldly muscle function. She had an aura that inclined people to think well of her, and which made her seem innocent and pure. She could not be poisoned, nor affected by disease — she never even suffered muscle fatigue since harmful metabolites were transfigured out of existence. She was resistant to most damaging magics, and healed immediately from many others. Even fire or acid could only temporarily harm her, since anything less than complete incineration probably wouldn't sever her body's grasp on life. *Avada Kedavra* would presumably still kill her, and Fiendfyre had already done so. But overall...

Well, she was a superhero. It was kind of a huge responsibility, but at least she was able to help a great many people. And today, she was off to the States, to investigate a bombing that was said to have been the work of Narcissa Malfoy or one of her guerilla-fighting miscreant allies. Let it never be said that her life was boring.



“Harry, you know something about this, and you’re not telling me. No, even worse... this is part of some plan. You’re pulling strings here, and I don’t know what’s on the other end. And you’ve been different lately.”

“I’m the same as I always have been.”

“No. You’re different. It started when you sent your parents away. I’m sorry, I know you don’t want to talk about it, but-”

“You’re right. I don’t. It’s hard for me think straight when I think about that, so please don’t make it harder.”

“All right. I’m sorry. But you’re keeping secrets, Harry.”

“Sometimes I have to do that, even when it comes to you.”

“For my own good? Or do you just not trust me anymore?”

“Hermione, I honestly think you could do everything I am doing, only better.”

“Then why won’t you tell me what’s going on?”

“I just can’t right now. You need to be out there, doing what you’re doing. You’re saving people. I can’t do what you do. So please... trust me.”

“... all right, Harry.”



Charlevoix and Esther were already waiting for Hermione in the Ministry of Magic Atrium. It was midday, and the crowds were dense, and the two witches were standing next to the Fountain of Magical Brethren so that they could be easily seen.

The Atrium was a fabulous room, and it was thoroughly representative of magical splendour... in a fairly mundane and unimaginative way. In Hermione’s opinion, it had the same problem as most of the rest of the wizarding world’s decor: it had no central message.

Was it trying to be dignified? It was certainly big enough. Plus, the ceiling was a rich blue, and the floors were dark polished wood.

Was it trying to display affluence? The walls were lined with gilded fireplaces, dozens of offices were visible through huge panes of crystal all along the walls, and there was that huge golden fountain.

Trying to send both messages meant that the expensive parts looked gauche and the dignified parts looked silly. If it had been anything like a priority, Hermione would have dropped a word in the right ear about it, and advised them to tone down the amount of gold covering every crenulation on the wall. As it was, the place was a bit embarrassing. It reminded her of Horace Slughorn, last year at the Yule Ball, when he'd had gotten so woefully drunk on red currant rum that he'd asked her if she wanted to join his "Slug Club." Yuck. *What a git he was*, Hermione thought, as she approached the two Returned. She waved at them, and felt her face overtaken by a broad smile. Her Returned were such wonderful people.

Charlevoix smiled faintly in return, upon seeing her "Goddess." Hermione had barely had a chance to speak to the French witch since the attack in Cappadocia; the Returned had only met at Powis once in the week since, and that meeting was preoccupied with discussion and planning for the care of the seven people rescued from Göreme. One of the seven had only been undergoing the torture there for a few weeks, and a couple of days of rest and chocolate had sufficed before he was ready to go home. The other six had been severely Demented. What was worse, the families of three of these had already insisted that their loved ones be sent back to them, even against Hermione's strongest-worded advice. That still left three to be nurtured and counseled, however.

Esther was watching Hermione and those around her intently. As Hermione paused to greet and give a radiant smile to several witches and wizards waiting in line to Floo out, she could almost feel Esther's gaze crawling over these strangers, looking for trouble. Hermione was grateful. She'd read about people in public office feeling angry or stifled in such a situation, insisting gruffly that their overprotective guardians leave them in peace (like in *Executive Orders*, her brain automatically supplied, that dreadful Tom Clancy book that Harry made you read as a how-not-to-do manual). But that was foolish. When you agreed to do important things, you made yourself a hostage to fate. It was unkind to pretend otherwise.

Hermione anticipated that Esther would also be helpful in other ways on this trip. The witch was not only alert and protective, she was also an American and a symbol of goodwill. Her

presence in Azkaban had been a matter of controversy for some years; she had been tried and imprisoned for breeding sphinxes, which was entirely legal in America, but a serious crime in Britain. When she had been freed, there had been an unalloyed message of gratitude issued by the Magical Congress (a body that acted essentially under the direction of the Council of Westphalia, which had controlled a majority of its seats for the past century). It had been an early stroke of good fortune.

Esther had dishwater-blond hair that she kept in a close bob, and deep hazel eyes. Like Charlevoix, there was a hollowness behind those eyes.

A Dementor's presence was a strange kind of agony, Hermione knew. It wasn't exactly a physical pain. A Dementor seized upon emotions and thoughts that fed the ego or sustained the self, sucking them away. The sensation was entirely novel. It was generally described as a "sucking" because you could feel yourself becoming *less*, but there was no actual physical experience. And after a short time, the feeding became deeper. Positive memories help us define ourselves in the world, and Dementors were ragged holes into which those memories were drawn.

Eventually, victims were left catatonic, as their deepest parts were consumed, as though maggots had hollowed them. They lay in place and suffered, remaining alive through some unknown mechanism of malice (a victim might last months with little or no food) until an infection or heart attack took them.

With the Tower's assistance, the physical damage could all be repaired, even the plaques that developed in the brain. Gentle assistance could then help the Demented begin to rebuild their minds and personalities, using a threefold approach of direct counseling, gradually lengthening visits to positive environments, and exposure to normative values through fiction (*Huckleberry Finn* was helpful). Hermione had even created a protocol for assisting victims after her experiences with Azkaban, and worked to improve it with each successive set of the Demented for which she cared.

Those who had been exposed for a shorter span often suffered only minor damage to their senses of self, and could return home after a period of recuperation. Even some long-term victims were

welcomed back home, where they usually received good care and might eventually recover.

Some committed suicide as soon as they left the program, despite Hermione's best efforts. It tore at her, but there was only so much she could do to prevent it — unless she wanted to make them prisoners again. Harry said that each person had the right to decide how much sorrow they could carry with them, but it was a point of fierce disagreement.

Some had never regained full consciousness, their limbs plastic and their gaze empty. Most of these were in St. Mungo's. Hermione still had hope for them, and often considered the problem.

And then there were the others: the ones who had no home, or no longer wished to be there, or who wanted to devote their lives to fighting the horror they had endured. They had all been restored at the Tower, so they were young and fit and healthy, and they lived active and full lives. But they had a form of post-traumatic stress disorder to which there could be no comparison. Not that she would minimize anyone's tragedy, but the Demented had been spiritually savaged to a preternatural degree. Death had touched their hearts, and it left a hollow that might never be filled.

Hermione gently gave the shake-and-slide to get past the last few strangers eager to meet her. It was a method she'd developed from watching a Muggle Member of Parliament make his way through a crowd once: smile beatifically, grasp their right hand in your own and pull them into a handshake, then put your left hand on their right shoulder as you move on past, setting them beside you and allowing you to keep going forward. She greeted Charlevoix and Esther with a cheerful, "Good morning!" The two witches each had their own bags with them.

They smiled, and Hermione felt a pang in her heart. She loved them so.

"It's time to go home," Esther said. "I'm nervous. I don't remember that much of it."

"I have never been to the Americas," Charlevoix lilted. "And neither has Hermione. So they will show us around and explain things. No one will know."

Hermione nodded. "Yes. This might end up just being public relations. The bombing was yesterday, and Harry told me last

night that they'd already cleaned it up and begun their own investigation. There might not be anything for us to contribute." She turned for a second, to lean down and hug a boy who was staring up at her with awe in his eyes.

"What investigation?" Charlevoix asked. "It was the Malfoys and their group of no name."

Hermione shrugged, straightening back up. "They still have to be sure." *Because they think it might be a false-flag attack from Harry, designed to gin up animosity against his enemies*, she thought. *Come to think of it, I don't know that's not true.*

Would he tell me, if it were?

"Let's go," Esther said. "I don't like this crowd."

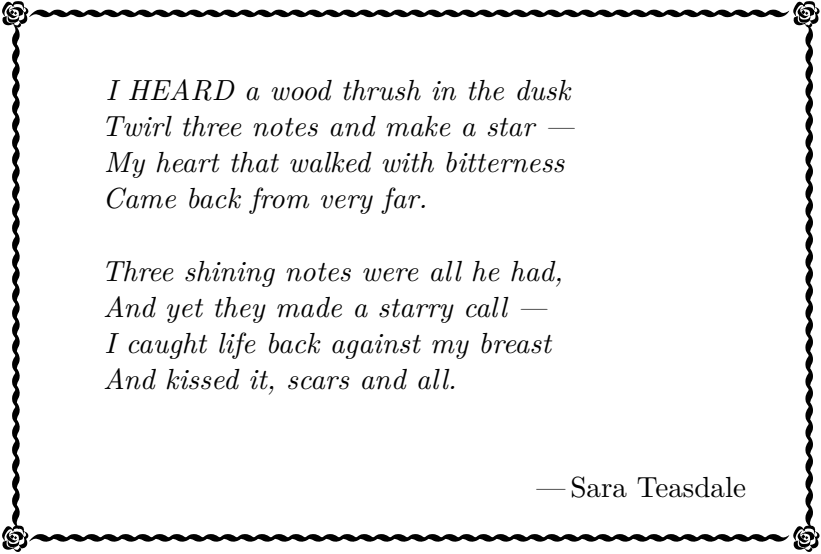
Hermione reached into an outside pocket of her overnight bag, and pulled out the intercontinental portkey that Harry had given her. It was a short piece of milled copper, with a few divots and a bright blue stripe in the center. Different design than most British portkeys, which were usually wooden. This probably made more sense, actually... it was less likely to trigger by accident, and had an obvious purpose. She'd mention to Harry that they should probably copy this for the Safety Sticks, in case he hadn't thought of it.

"Hold on," she said. Charlevoix scooped up her bag from the floor, shouldered it, and took Hermione's. Then the two witches each grasped one end of the portkey. Hermione took hold of the center, and squeezed her fist. The portkey bent, and there was a sudden lurch yanking them all to the side. Not the left side or the right side, somehow... just: to the side. It was powerful and violent, for this was quite a distance to travel.

Charlevoix and Esther landed easily on their arrival; the two Returned spun back into existence in Boston with the practiced ease of veteran travelers. Hermione barely noticed the landing, whirling *fouetté rond de jambe en tournant* for a single turn, her eyes already alert to their surroundings.

They were in Boston, and the sun was just rising. Rosy-fingered dawn stretched over the concrete reception platform on the roof of the Alping of the Mystical and Benevolent Council of Westphalia. Councilor Limpel Tineagar was waiting for them, her arms crossed. She was tall and perhaps overly thin, and her mouth was twisted in a small and bitter smile.

“Hello, Miss Granger, and welcome to the United States of America. Fine morning for a murder investigation, isn’t it?”



*I HEARD a wood thrush in the dusk
Twirl three notes and make a star —
My heart that walked with bitterness
Came back from very far.*

*Three shining notes were all he had,
And yet they made a starry call —
I caught life back against my breast
And kissed it, scars and all.*

—Sara Teasdale

Hítiai, Díaphorai, and Alethestate Prophasis

And Merlin ondswered in his drede, “Pat we may not come to the fate of Atlantis, which has passed out of þis world to nought, I shall seal alle away. Ac even þis lechecrafte, pestilence and blessyng both, shall not suffice. Manne moste wax in kunnyng.” And whanne þei hadden herd the princeps incantatorum speke þus, þei were trublid.



“Every loss is a tragedy, but particularly someone with a bright future ahead of them. How long does that sort of advancement usually take, if you’ll forgive my ignorance?” Hermione asked, following her. Charlevoix and Esther trailed them both.

✻ 97 ✻

would be unusual, but not impossible.” She pushed open the door. “Tarleton had promise, and his murder is a terrible thing.”

The mailroom of the Council of Westphalia was a blackened ruin. Hermione looked around. It was rather like a puzzle. Those lattices of metal wire, crumpled and torn, must have once been owl cages. And that meant that the crooked metal poles had been owl perches, where they waited for immediate replies. Two fireplaces were mostly undamaged, although the Floo Flounders next to them were both destroyed. The Flounders were like small bellows on the floor, which dispensed a set amount of Floo powder. It was slightly safer and considerably cleaner than using manual pinches of the stuff, especially for children and the elderly. It was also more convenient, since you didn’t need to keep a stock in the house. You couldn’t do the fancy tricks with them, like tossing a whole handful of powder on the fire and using it for communications, but how often did you really need such a silly means of communication? Hermione wanted one, herself.

Hermione took a step into the room. The stone underfoot had been swept clean or *Scourgified*, since there was no broken glass and little rubble. Hopefully someone had examined it first, although she doubted it. There was no forensic instinct in the magical world — just a general sense that the untidiness should be immediately fixed. For generations, careful cleanliness had been one of the things that distinguished wizardkind from the rest of humanity, and so it was still a deeply-abiding tradition.

Well, that was okay. She had never expected to just walk in and discover some hidden clue, anyway.

“Someone else saw the package as it was delivered, I suppose?” Hermione asked, stepping further into the room and examining the floor. It was scorched, but less than she might have imagined. One area in particular was quite blackened.

“Yes,” Tineagar said, stepping in after her and standing just to one side of the door. “That’s how we know it was from Narcissa Malfoy, that vile imperialist bitch.” Hermione glanced back at Tineagar, and saw the American witch’s face was angry. *Upset at the loss, or upset at the affront?*

“And you know the Malfoys? Did you know Lucius Malfoy, Narcissa’s husband?” Hermione asked, gently.

“We exchanged curses, upon a time.”

Hermione nodded. Tineagar had been one of those sent from abroad during Grindelwald’s War and the Wizarding War. “Even before that, though, Lucius was a problem. For thirty years, he controlled a majority of the British delegation to the Confederation, and they were a constant thorn in our side as we tried to scale back some of the restrictions on Squibs and Beings. For years, it was the Americas and the Ten Thousand against the European coalition when it came to the emancipation movement, fighting over the votes of the delegates from Africa, the islands, and the Sawad. Malfoy helped keep most of Europe united around the status quo. He’s the reason why it was legal to *hunt merfolk* for so many years.” Even nearly a decade after the man’s death, Hermione could hear the anger in Tineagar’s voice.

“Matters are different, now,” Hermione suggested. She did *not* mention the awkward fact that the vote for an International Statute for Health and Life had also failed, in large part thanks to the opposition of that same American-Eastern bloc. But the Confederation had dismembered a dozen international restrictions on Squibs and Beings, so there had been some progress in the right direction. Harry had even, at Hermione’s urging, begun planning out a campaign to give different Beings seats in the Confederation itself, although that wasn’t yet public knowledge.

“Yes... the, ah, *incidents* of 1992 and the establishment of the Tower changed the positions of many Things. Egypt and Kenya, for example, switched their votes on the merfolk issue right after it became apparent that there were going to be no more bribes.”

Hermione bent to one knee, tracing a finger through the light layer of soot on the floor. “I’m not sure if we should be happy that their true position is the moral one, or unhappy that money could change their minds so readily.”

Tineagar crossed her arms, and just made an inarticulate murmur of assent. Hermione turned her full attention to the crime scene.

Observations first. No theories, no guesses, no imagination. What do I *see*?

Owl cages and owl perch over there... some long tables, mostly undamaged... one table in pieces and quite blackened... floor has a

settled layer of soot on it and a small amount of loose debris... large numbers of empty and unmarked cubbyholes along another wall... ceiling seems mostly unmarked, although it was hard to say if the grey stone had been made dingy... some sort of dried brownish stains over in one corner, looked like blood... fireplaces undamaged but Floo Flounders destroyed... various supplies still in evidence with stacks of parchment, bottles of ink, and a pot of Floo powder on one fireplace mantle... the destroyed cages and perches for the owls were also sooty but otherwise unsoiled...

“Almost done?” Tineagar said from behind her. The American witch was clearly unhappy that Harry had requested Hermione’s presence with such vigor, or that her fellow Councilors had agreed to the gesture. Or maybe she (and they) had assumed it would just be a token visit. “Not much to see, I’m afraid.”

Hermione looked back at the American, whose pinched face looked displeased. “There’s quite a lot, actually.”

Tineagar shook her head. “We’ve already done all the searching that can be done. Scrying, spell-trace, all the usual. But we found no surprises. No destructive spells were cast here, and no one Apparated or portkeyed out after the attack. You can see the Flounders were destroyed. This damn Muggle device had no magic at all... it was like a Dungbomb, but with fire and force. For now, we’re calling it a Blastbomb.”

I’ll just write that down with my Writingpencil on this Parchmentnote, Hermione could hear Harry say in her head.

“Did you go back further and check?” A question that was vague nonsense unless you already knew about Time-Turners. Hermione assumed that Tineagar was aware of them, given the rather nauseating amount of information that Hig and his allies commanded, but information hygiene was an important habit.

Tineagar shook her head. “We’re time-locked here. It’s not to prevent this sort of thing, actually. I’m not sure if you ever heard of Albrecht Perel?” Hermione shook her head. Tineagar continued. “Well, in the sixties, there was one particular wizard who would go back an hour in time whenever he wished to prepare for a difficult turn of debate. When challenged on any point of rhetoric, he would spend an hour revising his speech, mustering supporters, and extracting relevant promises from allies. The end

result was that he would smash through his agenda every time, since everyone was already committed to supporting it and the opposing arguments had already been defeated. When others started trying to do the same thing, then the stakes went up... participants were going back in time over and over, to try to out-prepare with information from the future. As I understand it, the transcripts from such meetings stopped making sense... just a jumble of foregone conclusions describing rhetorical battles that had only existed in implication. One of our seers went mad, screaming about a loop with only one side.”

Tineagar grimaced, her upper lip hunching near her narrow nose. “Eventually, Albrecht tried to break the stalemate by going back six hours, then having an assistant try to take his notes back another six hours to conduct an opinion poll. Albrecht, the assistant, and three bystanders were all wiped from existence like a smear of ketchup... and we locked time in the Alping. That is the purpose of that precaution... to guard the sacred integrity of debate.”

“Not the worst reason I’ve ever heard,” Hermione commented, walking over to the long tables on the other side of the room, which probably would normally have been in the center of the mailroom.

“Found anything of interest yet, Ms. Granger?” Tineagar asked. “While I appreciate your efforts in this, especially since it was one of Britain’s radicals at fault, I’m not sure there’s anything for you here.”

There was a significant edge of suspicion in Tineagar’s voice. *Is there any way to reassure her that I’m not here to spy on them, but to look into this bombing? They must think I just want to snoop.* Hermione couldn’t think of anything. She’d certainly been whisked here without much of an opportunity to look around, and the passage of air along the hall had suggested that at least a few of the walls had been illusory. And while her reputation was impressive, there probably wasn’t anything to suggest to the Councilor that Hermione would have better powers of investigation than what they could have mustered already.

“I’m not sure yet. I think it’s important to just look at everything and ask questions and think a bit, first, before you try to start figuring things out,” Hermione said, touching the table in

front of her. It had nothing on it but a light coating of more soot. Not scorched... it looked like the settled soot from smoke. *They came in here and cleaned this place immediately, otherwise the Scourgifies would have carried all of this away. But if this Tarleton had only been working here for two years, then he wouldn't have been entrusted with anything all that secret.*

A mailroom that was filled with material sensitive enough to scour away before the smoke had even settled but which was unimportant enough for a relatively new employee to handle?

That didn't make any sense.

I notice I am confused.

Ah. I see.

"Some things here don't make sense. And that's because this was not a mailroom for ordinary correspondence," Hermione said, turning to face Tineagar. "It was a processing center for intelligence."

The other witch didn't seem to understand, so Hermione clarified using more specific language. She kept her voice pleasantly neutral. "Councilor Hig and several others here at the Westphalian Council have numerous information-gathering devices, all over the world. This was one of the places where you sorted through some of that information... parchments people were writing that looked important, conversations that sounded interesting." Hermione thought for a second, then amended, "Or at least, Tarleton's job was something to do with that. He could also have been payroll for them, or something."

Tineagar's face soured. "Ms. Granger, this was a mailroom, and I'll thank you not to make a joke out of the death of one of ours."

"If I had to guess, I'd say that probably the second or third thing that your people did in here was to clear away all the parchments and letters, right? Run in and see what happened, check to see if you can help Tarleton, and then go through here with a Gathering Charm and *Scourgify* right away. That's why everything is still covered with soot and these little flakes of ash, even though all the paper and detritus from the blast is gone. But Tarleton had only worked here for a couple of years. If the parchments coming through here were that important that they

needed to be cleared away immediately, before anyone could see or steal them in the confusion, then he wouldn't be allowed to see them."

Hermione pointed at the wall of cubby holes, then at the ruined owl cages. "A lot of information was coming in and out of here, to be sure. But highly confidential owls go right to their recipient, not to a room like this. At the Ministry back home, this sort of room is for processing and sorting generic inquiries or complaints... nothing you'd want to obliterate immediately."

She turned back to Tineagar. "But the Council does have something that the Ministry doesn't have... many ways of gathering information that produce a flood of parchment. Shopping lists, fan mail, and conversations about tea — plus the occasional important letter about a secret plot. So why have a low-level employee sort through secret parchments? Well, when you have a thousand secret parchments a day, you *have* to use low-level employees. They're just instructed to sort through and kick anything that looks important upstairs."

Tineagar was shaking her head. "None of this is important, even if it were true. You're not here to seek out the way the Council operates or to spy on us." Her voice was tight with anger and what may have been apprehension.

"I'm not here to spy on you, you're right," Hermione agreed. "And I'm sorry if it seems like I'm getting into your business." She approached Tineagar, her steps light but her eyes intent. "But just this month, a bomb much like this one nearly killed me. It sat in a satchel as close to me as you are now, and if I'd been a few seconds slower..." She gestured at the scorched floor.

The American frowned again, and spoke with acid tones. "Yes, I read about that. As I recall from the papers, the Malfoy faction has been giving you quite a lot of trouble."

"Ever since 1993. They've been underground for six years, and we've had disappearances over that time as others have joined them. Narcissa and Draco are clever and resourceful... they've broken into Gringott's and they've burgled the Department of Mysteries at the Ministry, and I never would have thought either of those things were possible. And they've never stopped trying to bolster their support... publishing newsletters, threatening Beings,

and generally being a dangerous nuisance. It's been hard for us all to handle." Hermione felt her voice become a little strained as she spoke.

She dangled from the edge of the roof, her shoulder aching and her wrist caught tight in the grip of a white-haired boy. "He's going to come help me, but first he's going to *Luminos both of us, there's no way he wouldn't. You have to let me go. Do it, do it, Draco, do it, you can beat him yourself* we have to win Draco!"

Hermione blinked rapidly for a moment. "So quite a lot of trouble, yes."

"And how many friends have you lost?" Tineagar asked, glancing pointedly at the corner, toward the brownish stains. She clearly knew the answer.

"Some people injured and many scared, but this is the first time they've actually taken a life," Hermione admitted. "They had never even tried anything like this until this month, with their attempt on Harry and me in London. I was — am — surprised that they've resorted to this. I thought that Draco had become a different person than the boy his father raised. I honestly could barely believe that he could have wanted to take the life of any bystander." *Much less my life.*

"It is indeed very unlike what I know about the Malfoy clan's behavior. Lucius would never have resorted to something this crude, or this pointless, as abhorrent as he was. This murder seems to serve no purpose except to terrorize us." The last sentence was heavy with meaning.

Does she mean... ugh!

"Indeed," Hermione said. "It is a vicious and violent crime, and you will be driven straight into the arms of Harry Potter and the Treaty for Health and Life, especially since he also attempted to attack me. We have the same enemy, let's fall into each other's embrace." She was disgusted, and let it show as she glared at Tineagar.

She thinks this that Harry or I arranged this and the other bombing attempt, to try to make a common enemy (the thirty-fourth strategem of Zhuge Liang, her brain automatically supplied: Inflict Injury on Oneself to Gain the Enemy's Trust). But if we intended that, would we be this stupid about it?

“Maybe you’re not so crude, either,” Tineagar grudged. “But then what was the point of this? I see no reason to murder a promising young clerk, no matter what parchments were here. There’s no political power to be gained by this... no one has been intimidated or frightened in the slightest. The witches and wizards of the Council are mostly made of stout stuff, but even the cowards would be ashamed to yield in the face of such an obvious tactic. If a vote were held on your treaty today, the results would be the same as yesterday.”

Tineagar stepped to the door and through it. Charlevoix and Esther peered from either side of the frame into the room, to check on their leader. They had remained so utterly silent that Hermione had almost forgotten they were waiting. She smiled at them both a bit wryly, then looked back to Tineagar. “Councilor, I have the same questions. Let us work through them together. *Cui bono?*”

“ ‘Who benefits?’ ” Tineagar asked. “Only the Tower, I should think. At least some of magical America will reflexively side with him against his known enemy and the purported attacker, Narcissa Malfoy.” She halted in the hall. Maybe just being in that room made her uncomfortable. Not because of Tarleton’s fate, but because of what it implied about her own vulnerability. That would be normal.

“Granted. But that’s what the Tower himself would call a ‘first-level deception.’ And you’ve met Harry... can you honestly say that he would be this dumb or this sloppy? If he was planning some sort of bombing campaign, then I can assure you that there would be no clumsy casualties and you would not be able to figure out his plot this easily.” Realizing what she was saying, Hermione quickly went on. “But even more to the point: Harry’s entire goal in life is to stop people from dying. If you only knew how greatly he cares for every human life, you could never think this of him.”

“Then you think this is a second-level deception? We are meant to suspect the Tower, by the bomber’s design? That seems too cute by far. And given that the Tower is as subtle as you say, the natural conclusion is that this is a third-level deception, is it not?” Tineagar shook her head, and then started off down the hall, leading the way once more. Hermione followed, and behind them both followed the two Returned.

This woman contradicts everything you say. “Then let’s get more information. Can I examine the body? Bombs are made of specific kinds of chemicals and metal shells, and sometimes certain principles of science can be used to trace their origins.”

“The family has claimed it. His identity was verified down to the curve of his soul by his friend and fellow clerk, hired at the same time and intimately familiar with the boy — not someone who could be fooled. It was not a death doll or any other simulacrum.” Tineagar turned a corner in the corridor, around to... another featureless corridor of grey stone. Why were so many magical headquarters built of grey stone? Was that material particularly easy to ward, or was it just the lingering effects of medieval architectural trends?

“Curve of his soul?” Hermione said.

“It’s just a saying from a story here. We’re sure it was Tarleton, and his body is gone.”

“Hm. I wonder... who was first into the room, after explosion? Is that something you can tell me?”

Tineagar paused for a moment to glance back at her, then continued on. “Two witches named Sybil and Cynthia were first, one after the other. They work in another mailroom, nearby.”

“Is it possible to view their memory of what they first saw?” Hermione asked, hopefully. “There might be a clue that was wiped away.” *And I noticed something, and I need to confirm it.*

The American came to a full stop, and turned around. She was tall and thin, and she drew herself up to her full height. Her voice was arch with irritation. “I am not going to drag one of those poor girls out of their home after they just saw their co-worker murdered yesterday, and ask her to dwell on that memory.”

Hermione folded her arms and looked up at Tineagar. Behind her, she could hear Esther shift slightly in place. Ever-ready Esther. “Councilor, a man is dead, and you’re still worried about what I might see.” She raised her voice to speak over Tineagar’s immediate protests, continuing, “I know this is upsetting, but the Muggles have discovered a principle as inviolable as Gamp’s Law. It’s called Lorcard’s Principle, and it says that every contact leaves a trace. Your fingertips leave behind oil or tiny skin flakes on whatever they touch. A bludger leaves a small fibre of leather

when it hits a player.” In point of fact, certain impervious magical substances left no trace that could be discovered, but that could itself be revealing.

Tineagar had subsided somewhat, but she was still scowling. “A clever criminal leaves no clues. And what do you expect to see... a scrap of cloth caught in the package, which turns out to be from my sleeve?”

Hermione blinked rapidly for a moment in surprise. *Oh*. Was Tineagar now worried that she thought it was a false-flag attack by the Council? She’d missed that. Maybe her scornful words had been too effective, earlier.

“No,” she said to the American. “It honestly never occurred to me that you or Councilor Hig could have had anything to do with that. Now that you mention it, though, it becomes obvious that there probably is at least one Councilor who might benefit by this. Sorry, I’ve been too focused on things from my perspective... foolish of me.”

Hermione met Tineagar’s gaze, and weighted her expression with every ounce of conviction that was within her. *This woman must know and believe that we are allies in this*. Hermione’s eyes had a message. It was a message that had won over countless others to her cause, and helped inspire a dozen to devote themselves wholly to her command. That message was *I am become the world, destroyer of Death. Join me*.

“A man was murdered here,” Hermione said. “Let’s find his killer and punish them, and use every scrap of resources at our command to make that happen.”



Thanks to security concerns and personnel issues that Hermione could completely understand, Hermione, Charlevoix, and Esther were sent to wait at Franklin’s Nez, a tavern popular with magical Boston. It was a homey place of whitewashed brick walls, heavy oaken tables, and enormous mugs of butterbeer. It also did a side business in recreational Pensieve-use, or “bobbing.” It was an expensive form of entertainment — a Galleon per go — because Pensieves were expensive and worthwhile memories even moreso. Hermione assumed that there were probably more illicit versions

of the same sort of establishment, that catered to less wholesome demands than memories of skydiving or fighting a giant. There was at least one such place in Britain, or so she'd guess from a sign in Knockturn Alley ("Billie's Bobbing Bubbies").

She drank her butterbeer and spoke quietly with her Returned. She avoided talking about the investigation — prying ears everywhere — and they didn't speak very much about the States or the Americas, either. Hermione knew that it made Esther uncomfortable. She'd been born in Texas, but remembered little that was pleasant about her former home.

They spoke about magical theory, instead. Charlevoix was interested and Hermione loved discussing the recent research, and it was something to take Esther's mind off of their surroundings.

"It is insulting, though — rude, you know? — to say that these things are not branches of magic," Charlevoix said, shaking her head. Her accent put a French edge on every sibilant sound. "Herbology and magizoology... this must make so many angry. It is something I cannot understand." The witch absently plucked at the silver necklace around her throat with her ruined fingertips.

"I heard that Lord Longbottom introduced a resolution to ban pink in the Wizengamot, as revenge," Esther said.

"Neville definitely didn't do that! But you're right, I think it irritated a lot of people. Umbridge's paper might not even have been worth publishing, since it was just sort of a reclassification of things, rather than anything backed up by experimentation." Hermione shrugged. "But that's where the Tower School's thoughts are, these days, along with the Unspeakables working with them." The fact that people routinely used "Tower" as an all-inclusive term to refer to the school of higher learning, the medical clinic and research center, or Harry himself, could be annoyingly ambiguous, but everyone made do.

"I don't see the point," Esther replied. She sounded a bit distracted.

"If all magic is essentially just enchantment or transfiguration, with everything else just being the exploration of some property of already-existing objects like the stars or plants, then we might be actually getting closer to figuring out how magic works at its basics. How does the brain combine with some physical manipulation of

the environment to cause changes... even ones that violate physical laws of Muggle science? And it's rather clever to think of potions as just a form of enchantment." Hermione smiled in spite of her efforts to remain calm. While Umbridge's paper had been more of an act of provocation than a usual advance, the whole topic was *fascinating*. She actually knew Harry had gone even further, and was talking about possible theories for a single magical interaction at the heart of everything. It was all fluff and science fiction right now, of course, until they could support any of it with evidence.

She wondered for a moment about Harry. What was he doing now, trapped in the Tower? Trapped into *being* the Tower? Making someone's healing permanent? Working on the slice-boxes? He seemed to spend more time these days in private, from what she'd seen. Perhaps too much, since she'd noticed him looking a trifle haggard at times. He'd changed.

From behind Hermione, there was a thump and a whoosh of warm air. She saw Esther tense, and Charlevoix raised her eyebrows. Hermione turned to see Councilor Tineagar approaching them, accompanied by a sweaty-looking man with black hair who was certainly Councilor Hig. Hig looked flustered and unhappy, but he still smiled when he saw Hermione.

"This must be the Goddess I've heard so much about! Your patron swore up and down that you would set my mind at ease about any doubts I might still have about him. It's a pleasure. I'm Reginald Black-Horse Hig." Hermione rose from her seat with a motion as fluid as sublimation itself, shaking the man's hand. His face was stubbled with coarse black bristles... he must have been too busy to shave. Not surprising, with recent events.

"I'm sorry we have to meet under these circumstances." She gestured at her two companions, who had risen from their seats, as well. "Councilor, this is Odette Charlevoix and Esther Price, two friends of mine."

Hig was a smart man, Hermione noted. He didn't ask any of the questions that he must have had for the legendary Returned, but simply gave slight bows to the two women. Harry had been impressed with Hig, even as he described the man as "badly needing to read Montesquieu and Orwell if he was going to have any hope at all."

“So you think you can figure out some clues that we could not, Limpel says. Certainly recent advances in transfiguration from the Tower show that Muggle science can bring benefits I’d never have imagined. So we brought something for you, as you requested.” Hig gestured at Tineagar, and the witch produced a phial that glowed a faint silver. Her face was still sour. “I’ll be interested to learn what good you think this might do.”

“I am skeptical,” said Tineagar, as she offered the phial. “But I learned a long time ago that others may see things I do not, and I admit you’ve not yet given me any reason to distrust you.”

“My mother taught me to check in every crevice and corner before giving up. I hope I don’t disappoint,” Hermione said. It had been a lesson in flossing, but it was still good advice. She accepted the phial without further ado, and the entire group moved to one of the two smaller adjacent chambers, in which stood a Pensieve.

She poured the memory into the waters of the device. Thick white vapor welled up, and images began to swirl in the Pensieve. She dipped in her face.

The scene was chaotic from the moment it began, confused and cloudy in the way of any Pensieve view constructed from only one participant’s memories. A pair of women, faded and ghostly like overexposed film, ran down a hall of the Alping towards a door. Black smoke was pouring out from under the door into the hall, but the women ran towards it anyway. One of them — Sybil or Cynthia, Hermione didn’t know — snatched open the door and ran into the smoke. Hermione’s Pensieve-self was swept forward into the billows of blackness, and for a moment she could see nothing. But then she saw the first woman running in towards a mutilated body, bloody and blackened and lying in one corner. The other just froze in her tracks and began screaming. Owls were streaming out the open door, leaving behind their ruined cages. Many lay dead. Hermione had a long moment, then, when her Pensieve-self could turn in place and look closely around the room. Some spots were indistinct or faded into nothing, but a majority of the room was visible. There were some additional clues about the bomb — useful things to tell the Americans, at any rate. She could see a metal cap lying near the blasted table where the bomb had been opened, first off... this had been a bomb sealed into a pipe. Any

Muggleborn Brit who paid attention to the news knew something about that, so Hermione at least knew the basic concept. The only other fragment she noticed was a brownish metal thing with two little wires sticking out of it. She didn't recognize it, but it was something to note.

She paused and to stare at the detail she'd noticed earlier. It was the same. And the implications, when she reasoned through it... Her stomach turned, and she felt sick.

With a mental and physical effort, she pushed herself out of the memory, and straightened up from the Pensieve. She stood blinking for a second, then looked at Hig and Tineagar, who were standing by, impatiently.

"That was... terrible to see, Councilors. I'm..." She felt ill, and she paused for a second, staring at the floor. Esther was at her side in a moment, one arm slightly extended in case her Goddess needed help. "I'm sorry that happened to you and yours. I'm sorry that... happened at all."

"Ms. Granger, are you all right?" Tineagar asked, gently. Seeing Hermione's reaction must have driven some sympathy in her. "Let's go back and you can have a seat. I watched that myself, and you're right... it is terrible to see. We need drinks, I think. Many drinks."

"Yes," Hermione said, taking Esther's hand in her own. "But there is at least some good news. I can tell you some things about the device, I think. I think it was a thing called a 'pipe bomb'... an amateur device."

But in her head, even as she spoke, all she could think was: *Oh, Harry... no...*



Note: You possess all necessary information to solve the puzzle.

*America how can I write a holy litany in your silly
mood?*

*I will continue like Henry Ford my strophes are as
individual as his automobiles
more so they're all different sexes.*

*America I will sell you strophes \$2500 apiece \$500
down on your old strophe America free Tom
Mooney*

*America save the Spanish Loyalists
America Sacco & Vanzetti must not die
America I am the Scottsboro boys.*

*America when I was seven momma took me to
Communist*

*Cell meetings they sold us garbanzos a handful per
ticket a ticket costs a nickle and the speeches were
free*

*everybody was angelic and sentimental
about the workers it was all so sincere you
have no idea what a good thing the party was
in 1835 Scott Nearing was a grand old man a
real mensch Mother Bloor the Silk-strikers'
Ewig-Weibliche made me cry once I saw the
Yiddish orator Israel Amter plain. Everybody
must have been a spy.*

America you don't really want to go to war.

— Allen Ginsberg

Chapter Eight

Morse four

May 1st, 1238 c.e.

7:34 p.m.

Cottage of Ignotus and Cadmus Peverell, Sontag, Britain.

Here translated into modern English vernacular and stripped of the lies of idiots.

“Antioch will not accept this,” said Cadmus, leaning back in his chair. He was huge and hairy. Sitting there with no shirt, the light of the fire made the blonde hairs on his arms and shoulders and chest glint as if they were golden wires. He clasped his hands over his big belly, and made a deep sound of discontent at the thought of his brother’s anger.

“He’ll have to accept it,” Ignotus said from the hearth, where he was sitting on a small stool. “He has no choice. We’ve done our best.”

“He’ll be upset, and it will turn to fighting. It always does.” Cadmus wasn’t afraid, but it tore at his heart when he had to fight with his older brother. By tacit agreement, they didn’t use wands, and the bruises and breaks were quick to heal... but he knew their mother would have wept to see it.

“Antioch only lashes out when he thinks he can change things with his fists. But nothing can change magic itself. Or at least, we can’t. Too much has been lost to us; too much lore has been forgotten. A perfect cloak cannot exist. To try to make one would kill the enchanter, and I have no wish to die.” Ignotus stared into the flames, his eyes distant as he spoke. “And if he tries to hurt you again, I’ll leave.”

“That would make him happy,” Cadmus said, bitterly. And indeed, years ago he and Antioch had come to blows over Ignotus’ presence.

"Once, perhaps. Not now. He knows that he could do little without me." Ignotus was not boasting. It was nothing but the truth to say that he was the greatest wizard in Britain. The research of the two Peverell brothers had been fruitless until they were joined by Ignotus Hand.

Cadmus was silent for a time, and the two men stared into the fire. At length, the bigger fellow said, "You think we are in the latter days of the world."

"The middling days, yes. Our power wanes."

"Because the eastern ley has been lost, and the goblins have dared to take up arms, and the Cup of Midnight has broken? There have always been problems, and now is no different. Do not be so dour."

Ignotus wrapped his arms around his knees, and leaned down to rest his cheek on them. He was all folded up, and he looked weary. "Merlin damned us. Merlin has damned all the generations of men to come. All our lore is a fraction of the knowledge of our fathers, and so it has been now for five centuries."

"He had no choice... the world was doomed, else. You know the stories. And we have made great discoveries. The Spirit Stone—" Cadmus protested.

"Is but a pallid imitation of what the elders of Atlantis could do, without even a wand," Ignotus said. He no longer sounded bitter. Only wistful.

"You think Antioch's quest is impossible. You don't think we will reach the other side of death."

"No. I don't think we will."

"Prophecies cannot be wrong."

"They can be misunderstood."

"Then what do we do?" Cadmus asked, and Ignotus could hear the sympathy in his voice.

"I will go to the halls of the Council. I will lay down words and ask them to be sealed by stone and rod. We have been clipped by the Interdict, but there will be a time when wizards will defeat those bonds. Merlin failed in that much, at least, just as they of Atlantis failed before him. There is ruin in the future, and so it must be that men will rise again."

"What will you lay down?"

“I will lay down the path of one of the prophecies, as best we can figure, and tell them to seek the ‘*scorpion and archer, locked beyond return.*’ I will tell them that ‘*by this path shall death be defeated.*’ “Ignotus’ voice seemed to dim the flames, as though they were oppressed by the weight of the future yet to come. “And then I will come back here and we will return to work, together. And we will quarrel with your brother in the evenings, because he will insist on thestral hair even though it will not lie in warp with unicorn hair and other such foolishness, and you and he will fight and make up and fight and make up. And in time we will die. And the world will continue to lessen.”

Cadmus rubbed his belly thoughtfully. “We will be together, though?”

“Yes. We will be together.”

“Then everything will be all right.”

“I think it will.”



September 3rd, 1941

4:00 p.m.

Slytherin Boys’ Dormitory, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Scotland

Diary entry.

It’s not that I can’t win, but that I don’t know how clever to be. My opponent is an unknown quantity... what level is he playing at? When he lays a trap for me, is it a simple trick, or is he lying in wait for me to make the obvious evasion? If I decline to address the trap out of caution, am I passing up a chance for swift and conclusive victory? If I devise strategies to bring him into the fold with subtlety and poisonous gambits, am I wasting time and effort on a simpleton who could be broken with only a moment’s work? Imbecile or genius, marvel or moron?

I cannot abide chess, really. Why is it necessary? It is like a hall of mirrors, down which I see only my own reflection. Again and always, I am the only real player. It is monstrously boring. I know that this fellow will turn out to be another disappointment... easily conquered once understood. I do not know why I bother

with the advertisement. I do not know why I bother with this game. I do not know why I bother

Boring boring boring Even boring to write about All all boring

As though I were crushing underfoot Sometimes some fun in it at the start, crackle crunch and all that, bright feathers blood, aesthetic and visceral but no effort and no challenge Make a game of it Make art of it Do anything But it's just boring and boring I hate it

I need an opponent. Even at the risk of defeat, I want someone to match me. To strain and gamble and push myself against. Not this hill of ants that is this wretched globe. Someone with whom I wouldn't need to hold back or create a challenge. Someone to match with the fulness of my wits. Someone



March 12th, 1999

8:29 p.m.

Franklin's Nez, Tidewater, Boston

Hermione discussed what she knew about bombs with Hig and Tineagar for almost an hour. It was nothing that even cursory research wouldn't have revealed, but it would have been stupid not to take advantage of this opportunity to build more trust. She ignored her unsettled stomach and the whirl of her thoughts, and patiently explained the basics of chemical reactions.

The instant Hig and Tineagar left her alone with Charlevoix and Esther, though, Hermione turned to Charlevoix and said (*calmly, calmly, there are eyes and ears on us still*), "I was thinking about what you said before, and I think you were right. Would you please use the Knuts and call everyone to Powis, and then bring them all here? Use one of the spare portkeys."

Charlevoix showed no surprise, and did not protest that she'd never suggested any such thing. She simply nodded, and asked, "Everyone?"

"Everyone who isn't caring for the Göreme victims, I think," Hermione said. Without another word, Charlevoix obeyed. Before she'd even walked out of Franklin's Nez, she had her enchanted Knut in her hand and was squeezing it. Hermione felt the sister

Knut in her pocket start to grow warm. Turning to Esther, she reached into her pocket and drew out a small mirror, handing it to the other witch. “Please contact Harry and ask him to get us whatever he’s developed for the gauntlets. Securely, if he can.”

Esther nodded and took the mirror, walking to one of the Pensieve alcoves for marginally better privacy. Hermione knew she could do it herself, but she couldn’t face the prospect of talking to Harry.

She hoped she was wrong, and that this was all some terrible mistake or strange coincidence. That was still possible. No, it was probably even *likely*. What was more probable — that she had badly misunderstood some gambit or improbable chance, or that Harry was being evil?



March 12th, 1999

8:45 p.m.

*Alping of the Mystical and Benevolent Council of Westphalia,
Tidewater, Boston*

Hig leaned forward, squinting. This was clever. He usually played three or four games concurrently with different people, but this current correspondence game had all of his attention. His opponent was employing the Sicilian, but every move they’d made since fianchettoing their bishop had been an innovation, and the pawn storm was exhilarating. It was either crazy or brilliant — the game of someone with an unconventional mind. Hig could already see the flaws, of course... he was going to crush this dilettante without too much trouble. Let this opponent make any choice he wish, conventional or no: their wildness didn’t matter when all roads led to Hig’s desire.

He glanced at the level in the water clock. Not much time remained before he should return to work, although his dinner still sat untouched on his desk. So much to do, with the British in town and the bombing. Priorities, though... feeding his wits came first. Delightful!

March 12th, 1999

9:15 p.m.

Franklin's Nez, Tidewater, Boston

“Harry sent these, and said you and Esther knew how to use them,” Tonks said, putting a double handful of small metal boxes on the table, each one perhaps the size of a die. The chargers for the gauntlets. “So what’s up? I guess this is all hush-hush, but I thought this was supposed to be a pretty easy little jaunt for you out here — smile at the locals, wave your hands majestically, and all that. Harry was sitting in some new garden he’s just had planted, and he wouldn’t say what went wrong. Distracted by his new topiaries, I guess.”

“It got complicated, and Harry doesn’t know,” Hermione said. “Well, he might have guessed,” she added, “but I couldn’t tell him anything.”

“Did he do something stupid? I mean, besides growing that ponytail?” Tonks said, her eyes turning violet with delight at the possibility of intrigue.

“Maybe. Tell me if I’m going crazy,” Hermione said, sighing. Tonks could be trusted in every way, and she would think independently about this. Not that the other Returned weren’t also independent and intelligent, but they trusted Hermione with an absoluteness that brooked no disagreement about her moral or tactical decisions: they simply did not question her. When the group had formed, in those terrible months early in 1993, she had thought it was a coping mechanism — looking to their savior for some shred of certainty in an empty world. But enough time had passed... she knew that she was their lodestone, and that she always would be. Tonks was more normal, and not so awestruck, though she was still extraordinarily dedicated. She had joined the Returned as a pure volunteer, untouched by Dementors yet driven to a strange passionate hatred for the creatures that Hermione had only otherwise seen in Harry.

When she joined the Returned, Tonks had told Hermione that she’d visited the ruins of Azkaban in December, after Hermione had riven it to rubble, and she had taken the time to carefully spit in the ruins. Well, not spit, exactly.

“You’re going crazy. But we already knew that when you turned Cedric down,” Tonks said, leaning down enough to roll one of the chargers around with a click-click-click of metal on wood.

Hermione smiled, even as she reached down and carefully took the charger away before any accident could happen. “No, seriously.”

Tonks sat in the chair across from Hermione, and raised her eyebrows. She wagged her wand, and together the two of them began to cast. Thirty seconds later, they were alone in a blue haze and presumably had at least some level of privacy. Unless the chairs were enchanted, but probably even Hig wouldn’t have gone *that* far in order to eavesdrop.

Hermione frowned.

Once they were both standing and the chairs were gone (*you’re welcome, Alastor*), she sighed and began. After briefly relating some of the most important facts, she moved on to describing her conclusions. Her voice became a little more hesitant... she hoped Tonks would point out some huge and stupid flaw in her thinking.

“One of the first things I noticed when Charlevoix, Esther, and I went to look at the place of the bombing was that there was soot everywhere, but the rest of the mess had been cleaned up. It was pretty obvious that it had been *Scourgified*, but quickly — before the soot had settled from the explosion and before anyone was even allowed to investigate.”

“So something valuable in there, then. Private letters?” Tonks asked, her eyebrows greening as they rose in a question.

Hermione shook her head. “Those are sent right to their recipient, just like at Hogwarts or the Ministry. No, this was a sorting room for the information they get from their spying networks. They have the Quotes Quills that make copies, the band memorabilia that listens to conversations, the stuffed griffon heads that report how often they hear specific words, and other things. That’s a lot of parchment, and they need people to sort out the garbage from the useful information.”

Tonks made a face. “Wonder what they have of mine.”

“Anyway, I also saw a big pot of Floo powder on top of one of the fireplaces in there. That is pretty normal in a lot of places, but not somewhere with a pair of Flounders.”

"They're probably bugged, too."

"Hm... I hadn't thought of that," Hermione said, pausing. She thought for a moment. "But if they were, I'm not sure it changes my thinking. Anyway, I wasn't sure if that was just because someone was using the Floo after the bombing, so I managed to get them to show me a memory from one of the two sisters who were there first... Cynthia or Sybil Vane, not sure which one."

"Are they important? Is there a clue there?" Tonks asked.

"Just bystanders, I think. Maybe they'll provide a clue in the end, but they don't seem involved right now, at least," Hermione said.

"So you think someone Flooed out after the explosion, leaving the pot of powder behind — since you can't take Floo powder through the fire — which means... someone was stealing something, or escaping, or covering up a personal murder, or something," Tonks said.

"Well, Councilor Tineagar asked me to think about who benefits from this. She was implying that *we* benefit, since some in America are going to move towards us as a way to posture against the Malfoys. I wasn't sure that Magical America would be so quick to lose their head over a single act of terrorism, but Tineagar did have a point."

"But we *didn't* do it," Tonks said. "So was it the Westphalians? Did they bomb themselves? They didn't really lose anything or anyone important, did they? And I bet they're ruthless enough to sacrifice one of their own for this. Or was it just Narcissa Malfoy starting some new phase... remember we almost got blown up not too long ago!" Tonks threw up her hands, exasperated. "Who even knows?! This is crazy!"

"Well, wait," Hermione said. "It could definitely just be a blunder or miscalculation, or something gone wrong. But—"

"Maybe the Malfoys wanted to destroy something that was intercepted!" Tonks interrupted, as the idea struck her. "A spy-center... a conversation that was overheard, revealing their plans? No, this guy who was killed wasn't the final destination for that stuff, right... you said he'd been there only two years. And he wouldn't be the only one doing this... no, that doesn't make sense, sorry. But maybe this interrupted the spying?"

Hermione shook her head. "I doubt it. If you were managing their network, wouldn't an attack on one of your employees be exactly the sort of thing for which you'd plan? I bet they had things in place, and didn't miss a step. Councilor Hig is shortsighted about a lot of things-" *Like even the most rudimentary sense of ethics in pursuit of his goals.* "-but he's serious about information."

"So what, then?" Tonks said, a trifle impatiently.

"First of all, I think someone was sending parchments *out* of that room. That's why the pot of Floo powder was there: so someone could pass documents. You can't do that with a Floo Flounder. Things they wanted, or that they didn't want anyone else to know. So one possibility is that Tarleton was doing this, and whoever controlled him wanted to get rid of him. He could have been blackmailed, or he could have been a plant from the start."

Tonks nodded, slowly. "Okay... That does make sense. And that could have been either one of the Westphalians or the Malfoys doing that."

"Tineagar mentioned that she thought this seemed sloppy for a Malfoy. That's true, and it's something to take into consideration. Bombs are messy and uncertain, and if Tarleton had lived or someone else had opened it or it had gone off early or anything else, it would have left Narcissa and Draco's intentions exposed."

"The Westphalians, then." Tonks' eyes flashed red. "Then they blame it on us, by making it an obvious sham?" She paused a moment. "No... all of the same problems. Plus, there's no one but the Malfoys who have ever used Muggle devices like a bomb."

"There's one other person famous for such tricks," Hermione said, heavily.

Tonk's expression told the story of her thoughts. A moment of puzzlement, her full lips pursing. Then her eyes widened a bit, and her brow knit. And as she calmed and started to think about the prospect, her face relaxed and her complexion went peaches-and-cream.

"No," Tonks said, after a while. "I see your thinking, but no. Harry would never just kill someone like that. And it would be too obvious... he's been ranting about 'owling a hand grenade' for

years as his metaphor for blatant security holes... remember when Mad-Eye shouted at him to stop publicizing the possibility? To wrap up the attack he's *known* to have conceived in the colors of his *public enemy* and strike at the organization that *stood in the way* of the Statute? It's like a big sign reading, 'Harry did this.' "

"Level and levels," Hermione said. Nothing more seemed necessary; after a moment, Tonks gave a single short nod of her head in acknowledgment of the point.

"But the murder? Even if Tarleton was Dark in some way, I just can't see this. I saw Harry give instructions to some of the staff in Material Methods once, and he told them that the first rule, above all, was that no enemy could die — that a ten percent chance of death was still too high, since it meant that a weapon would kill one out of every ten people." She gestured at the chargers. "The gauntlets were all developed that way! And remember early on, in the first Tower, when we were developing the Safety Poles, and Harry told that auror, whatshername, J.C. Kraeme, our saying? 'Save one life, and it is as though you have saved the whole world?' That was *his* thought!"

Tonks crossed her arms, and shook her head, hair streaking with black. "I'm glad you called me here, because you're right... you *are* being crazy."

Hermione thought for a moment about how to phrase her response. Even with Tonks, information hygiene: there was only so much she should say. "Tonks, the spells Harry and I laid over the Tower—"

Tonks was already covering her ears. "Oh Merlin, don't tell me about them, I'll want to try it and I'll turn myself into a pudding or something!"

"No, no," Hermione said, smiling again despite everything, and putting her hand on Tonks' arm. "I'm not going to tell you any dreadful transfiguration secrets. But I can safely say that the spells would allow Harry to perfectly fake a corpse, the same way he perfectly heals people."

"Oh," Tonks said, calming somewhat. She'd probably been thinking of the hoary old tale of warning that so many magical parents told their children, to drum into them how dangerous it could be to innovate or to imitate those who were cleverer than

yourself: Rochelle the Ravenclaw, who tried to turn her cat into a dragon, and ended up turning herself into a troll (“Oh Kitty Kitty you are smaller yet, but oh Kitty Kitty you look so tasty!”).

“That makes sense,” she said. “Well then, o Goddess, what do we do?”

Hermione ignored the nickname, since she knew Tonks would just use it more if she protested. “Well, we have a few possible theories, and we’re not sure which one is correct. So we need to eliminate them. Investigate. Experiment. We send some people to check out Tarleton’s background, as best we can, and see if he was just an actor all along or if he started behaving oddly. We send some people to look into the friend who was hired at the same time as him, if possible. And whatever else we think of, that we can safely do. I’ll speak to the Westphalians — these inquiries make sense if we really do think it’s Malfoy, and I think I can sell that.”

“Got it,” Tonks said, nodding. “Esther will go with you. Simon and Charlevoix will look into Tarleton. Susie and Hyori will check out the friend. Jessie is taking care of a couple of the Cappadocians, and Urg wasn’t able to come.”

“And you?” Hermione asked.

“I think there are a few things I can do to help everyone.” Tonks said, and grinned toothily. But before dropping the wards and spells around them, she paused with a doubt, and her grin faded. “But what if someone just left that pot of Floo powder sitting on the mantel, just... by accident? Like maybe it was just a coincidence? What if this is less complicated than we think, with all these deductions and guesses all in a flurry?” Tonks asked. “Or even worse, what if it was Harry... do you really want to push this investigation so hard that you, um, *win*? And have to face him?”

Hermione sighed. “We’re investigating our friend’s possible involvement in a bombing, or maybe even two bombings. What investigation needs dedication more? I’d like ‘losing.’”

Chapter Nine

Boxes

And what are you saying, when you take your parents or grandparents to be “restored” or “rejuvenated,” or whatever euphemism we are using this week? You are saying this:

“Grandmother, come here. You are old and show your wisdom on your face, and that is not allowed. You have scars from your battles, and they are not allowed. You have rough edges and a special crinkle at the corner of your eyes, and they are not allowed. You disagree with the Tower and the tyrants who control us, and that is not allowed. Come here, so that we can make you into one of the dolls. We will change your face. We will change your eyes. We will change your mind.”

And when “grandmother” comes back to you, she will be changed indeed! She will be young and new... and she will be ready to swear fealty to the House of Potter.

No one knows what really happens when you send someone to the Tower, but there are dark whispers of the real truth. We are fed obvious lies about a new form of magic and an impregnable clinic and happy, bouncing babies restored to their mother's breast. But snap that stick and all we know is that you are made unconscious and obliterated, and they send someone home who is different in ways both large and small. No matter why they go — "rejuvenation," spattergroit, or a broken bone: they come back different. They don't remember some special memories that you'd shared; they have different habits and mannerisms; you catch them with odd looks on their face.

Is the Tower changing people to suit himself, or are the people of Britain being replaced with some new creation? Only the Tower can say, but his grip is tightening over the country and magical peoples everywhere.

—Excerpt from “Stop the Changes,” by Draco Malfoy.
Unbreakable Honour,
Vol 4 (1999), Issue 7



“This lovely has the Pentium III processor, brand new to us this month. Five hundred megahertz of processing power in here. That’s going to do just about anything you could want, especially if you have cable or DSL in here. And it’s bloody cheap — just 1,500 pounds. Usually for a processor this top of the line, we’d be talking two thousand or more on top of the cost of the rest of the PC. The video quality on this is amazing, and so are the graphics on your games.” Troy patted the cardboard box, fondly. He knew what this guy wanted out of a computer... the same thing all of these blokes wanted out of a computer, suddenly. They saw on the nightly news about the evil of the World Wide Web, and they wanted a piece of it.

Mr. Spoo squinted at the specifications on the side of the box. Troy could see that the young man had been on a bit of a spending spree. There were similar sorts of boxes stacked everywhere, labeled variously as: STUART AC/4232, Fisher SEN-TRON ARGUS@, HONDA EB3000C, and many others. An odd assortment of things, some of which Troy had never even heard. He did recognise the generators and portable breaker boxes, since the sides of their containers had little diagrams and descriptions. He even knew what the Netwell Foam was — soundproofing melamine, like his mate Sammy had in the studio. But he couldn’t even guess what an “ILX Lightwave TD6000” was. What kind of lab was this place?

More than a dozen serious-looking men and women were going around the dozens of boxes, checking things off lists, and having

hushed conversations. A blonde woman was supervising the process, when she wasn't staring absently at the wall. But it seemed like they were in some strange castle, all solid grey stone and flickering mounted lights — wait, were those shrouded *torches*? — and why would you ever want to set up a lab here? Was it some military thing with the SAS or something? Funny, he couldn't actually recall the route they took to get here...

"Looks good," Mr. Spoo said, jerking Troy's attention back to the young man, who had quite a distinctive scar on his forehead. "Do you have twenty in stock? With peripherals?"

Troy smiled widely. "I can do. And free delivery, as well, if you'd like."

Mr. Spoo shook his head. "No, thank you though. Our lab here is a high-security facility. We'll pick them up from you. Do you need a cheque on deposit?"



Harry was trying to put the situation with Hermione out of his mind, since he'd already decided that he was not going to be able to force his thoughts into any sort of useful pattern. Something about the Vow made it too easy for his mind to start moving in circles when it came to her, and he would find himself obsessively thinking the same few things over and over. It was like when he'd had those internal dialogues with mental models of different personalities, and he'd go around and around the same topic, wittily arguing with himself. In a situation like this, he'd already considered his options and made his decision, and further dwelling on it was an unhealthy choice unless he got new information.

To help him take his mind off it, he was planning the next phase of his fortress. Even better, he was planning where to put the *computer*. He was already elbow-deep into the box, pulling out the manuals and papers that were packed with it like hors d'oeuvres. He'd read every scrap of paper, soon enough. Because finally, finally, finally: electricity!

Harry had struggled with understanding the way magic interfered with electricity, right from the start. The presence of any spell or ward carried with it a variety of electromagnetic effects: visible light, radio waves, and even hard radiation. There didn't

seem to be any discernable pattern to the wavelength produced by an effect — *mobilierbus* produced a burst of microwave radiation, while the seemingly similar *mobilicorpus* produced a steady pulse of low-frequency radio.

There might be some uniting schema behind the phenomenon, but research had been slow. At first, he'd set up separate labs in Aberdeen to try to measure and record data, but the logistics were frustrating. The labs had to be designed with almost no warding, since spells cast over an area released a continuous diffuse interference — no amount of RF shielding or Faraday caging could help. But personnel with even the limited combination of scientific and magical knowledge necessary for the work were few at that time, and even fewer were trustworthy and powerful enough to operate without protective wards. Harry had to prioritize.

Once Lovegood had joined the steady stream of students in the Hogwarts' Science Program, he'd been able to delegate to her. She'd easily absorbed the two-year course of magical study that Harry and Minerva had put in place, and had moved on to the two years of scientific method and rationality with astonishing ability. Her upbringing probably had much to do with that skill: she'd been raised to be open to every new idea, even the outlandish ones. Much of science is the willingness to follow the data wherever it goes, and Lovegood had no attachment to convention.

Her fearlessness had been invaluable to Harry, since she happily agreed to one particular tack he'd suggested: an investigation into Devil's Snare and how it lived without sunlight. Many witches and wizards would have hesitated before working with the dangerous plant, but Lovegood had just absently agreed.

Much of the lifecycle of Devil's Snare made sense. It instinctively moved to snare and strangle anything that came into its reach, animated by a series of tough fibres running through each tendril that had supernatural powers of motion. After it had strangled or crushed its prey — typically small animals or larger insects — it dropped them. The corpses decomposed to provide valuable nutrients that the Snare needed in abundance.

The thing that didn't make sense, though, was that it was a leafy plant that *hated light!* Leaves were often adapted by nature into traps or weapons or protection, but there didn't seem to be

any reason at all for a plant that primarily grew in caves to have leaves.

Harry had made two guesses: first of all, that the leaves must gather something, if not light. Otherwise the most successful Devil's Snare would be the varieties that had few or no leaves, and evolution would have already eliminated them. Secondly, since Devil's Snare lived almost exclusively in magical gardens or magical areas like the caves in the Forbidden Forest, it must require ambient magic to survive.

It had taken Lovegood only a year to demonstrate Devil's Snare's powers of absorption, and only two years of magically-enhanced breeding before she and her team in the Hall of Science had produced a variant that was motionless and had a voracious appetite for background magical energy.

Devil's Snare had replaced photosynthesis with thaumosynthesis. It ate magic, perhaps the same way chizpurples did, and a dense mass of the plant would finally allow for the possibility of shielding electronics from ambient magics and their electromagnetic havoc.

And that meant that Harry could finally build the lab of his dreams. Shell corporations under his control made dozens and dozens of purchases — everything he couldn't Transfigure — and he spent hours on the wonderful tricky problems entailed in dovetailing magic and technology. Designing the Tower had been delightful from the beginning, when he'd sat down with a pencil and graph paper to replace the ruins left by his own folly. It was like being a boy of six again, creating the layout for his "dream lab" (no, Ms. Blaire, I will *not* design a "dream treehouse," thank you very much). But now the problem had challenges and joys on an entirely new scale. He'd bought his own *mass spectrometers*!

Harry already had almost everything in place. Soundproofing panels on wooden supports helped support and protect the thick mass of "Lovegood Leaf" (as he was calling the modified Devil's Snare) around the walls and ceiling of the long Pairing Partnership room. More Lovegood Leaf was under his feet, separated by corrugated metal, and the doors fitting into the entryways were backed with trellises, thick with plant matter. Magical air-conditioning units, buried in the walls and surrounded by their own masses of vines, vented fresh and cool air throughout the room, which would otherwise be musty with the smell of the Leaf.

The overall effect was a little unsettling, since even the modified Devil's Snare still occasionally twitched and rustled on the door trellises, but it was mostly insulated and sealed out of sight. Once every few weeks, they'd have to turn everything off and *Scourgify* away leaf litter from behind paneling, but Harry was very proud, nonetheless.

And a *computer*!

Before Harry had first gone off to Hogwarts — that is, the last time he had lived with his parents — his father had kept a computer in the study. It was something to be treated Seriously because it was a Considerable Responsibility, but Harry had spent some happy hours using the cutting-edge Windows 3.0 and even playing around with the more exciting commands of MS-DOS, the command-line which seemed to have a dangerous and sweeping finality to it.

Since then... well, there had been magic. Events had gotten out of control with a greater swiftness than even Harry could have imagined, and as it turned out, he'd left his Muggle life forever one morning at a London train station. He'd promised Mum that he'd never let magic come between them, that day... but it had. That hadn't been an unbreakable promise. It should have been, if there were any mercy in the world. But it hadn't been.

After a while, Harry realized that he'd stopped unpacking the computer, and that he was ignoring the gray plastic-and-metal device nestled within the cardboard. The manuals and warranties sat in a pile on the desk, unread. The joy had gone out of it, suddenly.

He sat back into the chair, sighing. This was unfair. It was childish and stupid to think that, but his brain had that silly inbuilt programming that demanded equal treatment relative to his peers. It even applied those demands to an impersonal fate. It had not been fair that he'd had to shut his parents out of his life, but life wasn't fair.

Harry needed to talk to someone intelligent. Not Hermione, and he'd already given Moody a new face and body only this morning, so Harry wouldn't see him until tomorrow (although Moody was a six-year-old girl this time, so Harry wasn't exactly sure about the appropriate pronoun).

At length, he finally sighed and rose to his feet, and went off to Room 101. He'd been spending more and more of his free time there, lately, even though that time had been getting shorter and shorter with the increasing numbers of the French using their new Safety Poles. And since the British goblins had agreed to put one in Ackle, too, he was soon going to be even busier.

But he really did need to talk sometimes, and there were occasions when he needed the advice of someone who was completely brilliant and utterly without scruples.

Voldemort might be a monster, but he was a valuable one. And a tame one.

Getting into Room 101 was not easy, especially since Harry hadn't been able to get any help in setting up the security system. Even though Hermione and Amelia knew about it, Harry had been insistent on setting up the protocols himself, without benefit of Hermione's brilliance or Amelia's staggering depth of magical knowledge. In theory, they probably would have agreed to be Obliviated afterwards... but Harry had shied away from the prospect of erasing any parts of their memories. He was sure there were some clever tricks that they could have devised to eliminate the more tedious aspects of his security precautions.

As it was, it took about ten minutes to get inside, including five minutes of simply sitting still and waiting. But eventually, he stepped through the portal into Room 101, ducking to pass through the simple and unadorned golden oval. Then he walked down the stairs, into the small stone room that held only two small wooden stools and a shiny black box.

It always surprised Harry, looking back with hindsight, just how stupid he had been. There had been a time when he'd thought it was a *good long-term plan* to keep Voldemort Transfigured into a stone on his ring. Even now, the stupidity of his thirteen-year-old self boggled the mind. Eventually, Moody and Amelia and he had gotten together and concluded that it was just not a good plan to keep the most dangerous Dark Lord of all time in temporary stasis right next to his mortal enemy *and* the most powerful magical devices of their knowledge. Apparent Obliviation, Transfiguration sickness, and missing hands were all well and good, but it was just a foolish risk when they had such incomplete knowledge of

the villain's plans and failsafes (all accomplices being dead or vanished). One bad afternoon might have meant the end of the world.

Even their second system had turned out to have a single unexpected flaw, and it had almost meant disaster. Only the barest of chances had kept Voldemort from escaping, clad in a new body. Walpurgisnacht.

Thus: the box and Room 101 and the new Tower. The best fortress and best prison that Harry and Moody could design. It was, as far as Harry knew, the most secure location conceivable.

Harry sat down on one stool, looking at the box. He still couldn't decide if it was stupid to store valuables in an obviously fancy box, or if it served as an important warning and double-bluff. Regardless, the box was impressive. Its sides were a shiny and sheer black, but every so often a shudder of russet-red would flicker in an intricate tracery across the flat planes of its sides, fading in the blink of an eye. The lock was heavy and ornate, with a circular indentation instead of a keyhole.

The box had no name, as far as Harry was aware, and it was a physical symbol of the insanity of trying to govern magical Britain.

He had asked for assistance from Amelia — he said he needed a way to safely store something that could not, under any circumstances, be stolen. She had gone to work on his behalf, and produced a solution in only a few days.

That solution had been annoying beyond belief, though, because apparently some of the Unspeakables had just disappeared into a vault in the Department of Magical Mysteries, and returned with this unbreachable magic box.

Everyone involved had patiently endured Harry's angry fit, as he lectured them: about how it was impossible to plan security if there were secret loopholes in every passage; about how he couldn't make optimal decisions if there were magical items of incredible power that no one had bothered to tell him about; and about how it was insane for things to be so convenient that there just happened to be a device that fit his needs at the moment.

Anyone who had spent more than a day around Harry had gotten used to the occasional lecture.

Hermione had finally reminded Harry, in her own kind way: that secure planning meant knowing your knowledge was imperfect; that there was never going to be any useful list of all powerful magics because that list would be astonishingly dangerous; and that the universe was not always as convenient as a story, but *sometimes* it was.

Anyone who had spent more than a day around Harry was profoundly grateful for Hermione's presence.

Voldemort was returned to his human form, *Stupefied* a few dozen times (with Moody casting a ceaseless stream of more-inventive and debilitating curses), and then his consciousness was transferred neatly into the soft fibrous tissues of several Turkmenian Mandrakes. Surprisingly, transferring a wizard's mind into a plant operated on well-established "Dark" magical principles of golem-creation or imprisonment, and Harry was actually able to just look most of the procedure up in different books he'd requisitioned.

Then it was into the box, and Harry took that alone into Room 101.

"Boy, you are a fool."

Harry's mind immediately returned to the present. The voice was familiar, in a painful way. Harry had been gradually growing used to it, as they talked for long hours, but it was still hard to hear. Not the actual voice itself, which was an undifferentiated male one of no particular import. But the tone...

Curt. Cold. And... well, not confident, exactly. Instead, there was an icy and thoughtful certainty behind the words that made confidence seem like the emotion of a lesser being. That tone didn't evoke a hateful enemy that might cut your throat: it was the indifferent knife in the enemy's hand, to which your blood had no meaning at all.

"You're getting your memories back, Professor," Harry said. He'd noticed small hints in their last conversation... troubled pauses and halting answers as they discussed the potential political moves in the Sawad. He honestly wasn't sure how he should feel about the development. He'd known it was possible, with the twin changes of a Horcrux 2.0 resurrection and a transfer into a lump of plant matter. And it made Voldemort much more

valuable. They'd had many long discussions, and he'd enjoyed having someone with whom to discuss his plans and designs, during those frequent times when Hermione was busy out in the world. And while even a Voldemort almost bereft of personal memories was still brilliant and inventive, a Voldemort with the experience of age and the lore of Salazar Slytherin was an infinitely better resource.

And infinitely more dangerous.

"Last week," came the voice from the box. Possibly a lie.

There was a long pause, then the voice came again, asking coolly, "The Ritual of the Sibyl?"

"Yes, Professor," Harry said. Their voices sounded loud in the small stone room. "I was not lying before. I am sorry... truly sorry... that things had to end up this way. But I will not let you out, even now. *Epecially* now."

"Boy... you think me your enemy. You think you have won, and that I am your pet monster, kept in your pocket, and that you have defeated the whole of my designs." The contempt was palpable, and it hinted at the subtlety that had laid plans within plans within plans.

It had been years, and Harry could no longer be really called a "boy." But the epithet was meant to diminish him, not describe him... and perhaps Voldemort was having difficulty truly understanding the passage of time. There hadn't appeared to be any cognitive impairment, but Harry's tests had been crude.

"Tell me how that is wrong, Professor... tell me how I have been stupid." Harry leaned forward on the stool, resting his elbows on his knees. "Because as near as I can tell, you are in a box, while I am saving the world. Ultimately, intelligence means *winning*, and I have won."

"Have you, now?" Harry could hear extraordinary bitterness in Voldemort's tone. Hm, what were the constraints on the sounds a magical artificial voice could produce, with no physical limitations like diaphragm or larynx? Harry would have to check and ensure that it stayed within a certain decibel level to prevent both subliminal messages and auditory attack. Constant vigilance.

"You think so much of your achievements, in these past few years?" Voldemort said. "I remember everything you told me,

when my mind was dim and shrouded, when I was new to my prison here. I know your position, and I am *oh so aware* of my own. But know this: but for a single stroke of intelligence at the cusp of matters, one graveyard night, all has gone according to my will. I have shaped you, prepared all things, and set every event in motion.” Though deprived of the power of Parseltongue in this form, Voldemort nonetheless practically hissed in spite. “I told you as much, told you exactly what I would do — told you how you would be brought to power. *This is not a story*, and can you possibly think that events have come to resemble my proposed plan in every detail by *purest chance*? You are a fool, and you never would think more than two steps ahead.”

Voldemort was nothing more than a voice from a box, but the Dark Lord used every ounce of wit and acid that he had, and his bitter words were thick with derision at Harry’s ingratitude. “You still think me your enemy, even though you sit on the throne I built.”

Seriously?

Harry raised his eyebrows in mild surprise. He frowned, and shook his head. “Professor, you can’t really think I’m this stupid. You can’t goad me into forgetting the graveyard, or Hermione’s death. What, will you pretend that you intended events to turn out this way? That you were just testing me, and in the end you would have relented? Or will you try to convince me that this your plan, all along — to be stuffed into a plant in a box?”

“Potter, prophecy spoke of *you* as the one who might end the world.” Ice and bile in the voice, and disappointment. “All of my ends have been directed at preventing that. No plan or goal matters beyond it — *could* matter beyond it. It seems I may have failed. But if I am to fail, I cannot accept that my brightest student is still so stupid that he cannot see the plain truth even after it has been *told to him!* Think about what would have happened, had you not interfered. Remember what I once told you, from a hospital bed.”

Harry remembered the moment well. After the trip to Azkaban. After he had first begun to doubt, and had demanded an explanation. His beloved professor had explained to him a plan to seek power: “*You are kidnapped from Hogwartss to public*

location, many witnessess, wardss keep out protectorss. Dark Lord announcess that he hass at long lasst regained physical form, after wandering as sspirit for yearss; ssayss that he hass gained sstill greater power, not even you can sstop him now. Offerss to let you duel. You casst guardian Charm, Dark Lord laughss at you, ssayss he iss not life-eater. Casstss Killing Cursse at you, you block, watcherss ssee Dark Lord explode - "

"And you thought," Harry said, now openly mocking, "that I would think Hermione's life was an acceptable sacrifice. You with your notoriously poor judgment of people. No, of course not... you had planned all along to bring her back to life in that graveyard, just stripped of her magic. Or will you claim that you knew that I would be able to grant her true resurrection, somehow?" His voice rose in contempt, now. Had he been so stupid, as a boy, to be fooled by this? Was it simply the power differential that had made Voldemort so convincing?

If this conversation had occurred under different circumstances, this would be the moment when "Professor Quirrell" would have done some extremely impressive bit of magic, or brought the weight of his authority and the respect Harry held for him to bear in some other way. How often had the clever Professor brushed off requests for explanation or guidance with a skillful bluff? It seemed so transparent, now.

There was a very long, quiet moment. Harry rose to his feet and turned away from the box. How sad and small and *stupid* this all seemed. There was a time when he could have wept at the betrayal he'd endured, but now he just wanted to reach back in time and *slap* his past self for being so short-sighted.

Voldemort had wanted to prevent the prophesied end of the world, Harry knew. That had been his most important goal. But he had also wanted a companion. Even after the events of Godric's Hollow, when the Dark Lord's hubris had almost been his undoing, he continued to feel that need and to harbor the idea that any real companion would need to be forged by fire into a truly *worthy* adversary and ally. Voldemort desired an equal, uncompromised by any ethical nonsense.

So he had put Harry into the crucible. Classes, mentoring, wargames, and death. Voldemort had put fire to Harry until the

boy glowed with rage and pain, and had worked to give him a new form with careful and cool hammer blows. To Voldemort, ethics were dross. He had wished to burn them out.

The journey to Azkaban had not only freed Bellatrix, but also tested Harry. Actually freeing someone from Azkaban would never have required Harry's Patronus or the absurd risks they underwent that night — that was just a convenient excuse that allowed Voldemort to put the boy in the forge.

If you really had wanted to free someone from Azkaban, after all, you wouldn't risk yourself. You just used the Cruciatus Curse on an auror at his home to find out which Azkaban guards were corrupt, wiped the memory of your source, and then held the family of one of the corrupt aurors for prisoner and demanded a Death Doll be exchanged with one of the prisoners. Voldemort had probably done it repeatedly, over the years.

But Harry had failed that test. He'd valued an auror's life — not just intellectually, but on such an instinctual level that his Patronus had stepped in front of a Killing Curse. So Voldemort had murdered Hermione, to push the boy beyond his limits.

Voldemort had smuggled in a monster, disabled every device and craft, and arranged matters in such a way that Harry would fail to save Hermione, but would come close enough *to blame himself*. Indeed, there was every reason to think that Harry had also been intended to fail in that combat, and that "Professor Quirrell" would arrive in a blaze of cursed fire just in time to save the boy — and just too late to save the boy's dearest friend.

Harry turned back to Voldemort, now, and spat a question, "Professor, now that all your plans are exposed and open to me, tell me: when exactly did you decide that I was no longer worthwhile? You became oh-so-terribly sick in June of that year — was it then? Or was it after you had to stop a centaur from murdering me — was that when I became too great a risk?"

The Boy-Who-Lived, who had torn possibility to pieces to snatch back his friend from death, who was now the Tower, who bestrode the narrow world like a colossus, glared at a shiny black box, and his eyes burned with a betrayal that seemed undiminished by the years.

"Or was it, as I suspect, when we spoke in the forest one night after you murdered Hermione, and you discovered that I had not

learned the proper lesson you wished to teach me? When you learned that I still held human life as a positive good in my utility function?"

"If it were you who had been killed by that troll, it would not even occur to Hermione Granger to do as you are doing for her! It would not occur to Draco Malfoy, nor to Neville Longbottom, nor to McGonagall or any of your precious friends! There is not one person in this world who would return to you the care that you are showing her! So why? Why do it, Mr. Potter?" There was a strange, wild desperation in that voice. "Why be the only one in the world who goes to such lengths to keep up the pretense, when none of them will ever do the same for you?"

And there was still silence for a while yet. After long moments, Voldemort spoke again.

"You are right." There was a long pause, and then a repetition... as though in astonishment. "You... are right."

Harry blinked.

"I do value the world, and I did fear you... feared what I had created. I do not pretend to care about human life for its own sake, since almost all of these loathsome idiots have no purpose or worth to their mewling lives. Nor do I pretend to care about Ms. Granger, who has the same inane affection for fools that you retain despite my best efforts. As though human life, of itself, is somehow an inherent good... as though we were children in a moralist's tale!" Somehow, entirely without any physicality, the words evoked contemptuous spittle. "But I do not apologize for seeking to preserve this world as a whole, even though it would seem I am yet at your mercy, boy. Remember the Vow you swore on my compulsion — no Vow to serve me or my interests, though that was within my power to demand."

"Is this where you repent, and seek redemption? Where I release you, as long as you take a Vow of my own design?" Harry asked. He honestly was amused, and rather incredulous.

"No, Potter," said Voldemort scornfully. A brief pattern of red light flickered across the surface of the box, and was gone. "You have locked me back in hell, and you have left me my mind, and I expect you know the consequences of those actions."

"Indeed, Professor. You are a threat... to me and to the whole world. I could not release you, even if I wished it. And I do not

wish it.” Harry rose from his seat, and walked away. This had not been the intelligent conversation he’d sought, but it had certainly been distracting enough. He had a computer to set up, though. “I’ll be back in a few days.”

“Potter!” The outcry was sharp, and had an edge of wildness to it.

“Yes, Professor?”

Silence.

“Professor, I know that this is torture for you. I’m working on a way to get you some entertainment... something to listen to and think about. I do not want anyone to suffer... not even you.”

Still silence.

Eventually, Harry mounted the stairs, and left.

What Is Beautiful Is Good

For the present we have only to conceive of three natures: first, that which is in process of generation; secondly, that in which the generation takes place; and thirdly, that

of which the thing generated is a resemblance naturally produced.

—Plato, *Timaeus*



Notice of Alterations in Practical Enforcement of the Guidelines for the Treatment of Non-Wizard Part-Humans in the Environs of Magical Britain *Ministry of Magic September 2nd, 1994*

This notice is to inform the public that the duly elected Government of Magical Britain has determined that all Veela, Centaurs, Merfolk, Goblins, Vampires, Hags, and Elves (hereafter Non-Violent Beings) within the environs of Magical Britain shall henceforth be held responsible for both the spirit and the letter of the Guidelines for the Treatment of Non-Wizard Part-Humans, as established by Minister Muldoon and revised by Minister Stump. These Guidelines state without qualification that Beings have “sufficient intelligence to understand the laws of the magical community,” and specifies that they shall “bear part of the responsibility in shaping those laws.” Non-Violent Beings shall henceforth be given opportunity to fulfill this duty.

Accordingly, measures will soon be taken by the Being Department, formerly a division of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, to liaise with representatives of different Being communities within the boundaries of Britain and begin the process of establishing formal guidelines as to the governance of those communities, and the procedures by which they will be represented by Tribunes of the Wizengamot. Inquiries regarding this process should be directed to the Being Division at the Ministry of Magic. Inquiries regarding the rights and responsibilities of a Tribune may be answered by reference to the Suffrage Decree of 1993 (Three Hundred and Twenty-Eighth Session); further inquiries should be directed to the office of the Chief Warlock at the Ministry of Magic. Every attempt will be

made to contact every sizeable grouping of the designated Non-Violent Beings and establish some system by which the franchise may be extended to them in an orderly manner.

Public postings of this notice shall be on display in the following locations: the Ministry of Magic, Diagon Alley, Knockturn Alley, Hogsmeade, Godric's Hollow, Dublin, Helga's Roost, Ackle and Curd, the Hogwarts kitchens and all Noble House manors, the Nutcombe Society, and the Salor Sprig in the Forbidden Forest of Hogwarts. Chatterlings with readings of this notice will be posted in the Black Lake and Loch Lomond.



March 13th, 1999 A small trunk, Tidewater, Boston

Now we find ourselves in a curious space, somewhere in the magical suburb of Boston known as Tidewater. This place is a small room with wooden paneling, warmly lit by smokeless candles. A large wooden table dominates the room, along with the chairs that surround it. A half-dozen gadgets sit in the center of the table: those wonderful but unreliable Dark Detectors. A trio of oval mirrors, mounted irregularly and filled with the indistinct faces of baleful foes. A brightly-painted red-and-white top, trembling in place every few moments. A mouthful of teeth, yellowed with age, set in a neat row on a metal stand. There's even a rare and unusual Aeolian Warp, a wooden sphere which made a constant but nearly inaudible whistle, powered by the presence of nearby life. Dark Detectors can be fooled, but it takes some trouble. There's no good reason not to have them around.

With the amount of warding on this small room, one would honestly expect some sort of change in the atmosphere. But there is no hum of power or staleness to the air — no goosebumps on your arm. To the mundane observer, there is nothing to show that every inch of this room is thick with wards to prevent eavesdropping or intrusion.

Perhaps we should say a word about this room, the Mobile Mary.

Now, it has to be admitted that Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres has many clever ideas. We might not say it in front of him, since it would be awkward, but he is an ocean away: we can

safely praise him without risking an uncomfortable silence. Even if Harry had spent his life in the Muggle world, it seems certain that his erudition, creativity, unorthodox approaches, and critical thinking would have led to some considerable accomplishments and innovative notions. But in addition to his native ability and the intellectual powers carved into him by a certain Dark Lord, Harry has also been able to wield the might of a whole worldwide Muggle civilization. So he has many clever ideas.

Not all of his ideas work, and not all of his scoffing is well-founded. For every instance in which he has thought to put a protective covering around a Time-Turner, there has been another occasion on which he went crashing full-tilt into Chesterton's Fence — so to speak — and looked quite silly. Chesterton's Fence is a useful principle suggesting that if you do not understand the purpose of something that seems useless or wrong or insane, you should probably take the time to find out the intentions behind it. It is unlikely that the thing in question happened by chance, after all. Harry has a hard time with this principle.

There are spells which create insects or birds or snakes, for example. And there are other spells which duplicate anything they touch at a frenetic rate. So why not, young Harry asked in his second year, combine these two principles to make a shield of living and expanding life to block the Killing Curse? *Avada Kedavra* cannot be blocked, but it does stop when it hits anything with a brain (tests are ongoing about how many ganglia are needed before a creature counts as having a "brain," but progress is slow: it's hard to hate fruit flies). So block the unblockable curse with a shield of tiny brains!

But of course, this doesn't work, because conjured creatures do not count as living for any magical purpose. And after Madame Bones and the hulking blonde woman named Alastor Moody had stopped laughing, they explained that neither they nor their predecessors in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement were quite so stupid as to miss that one. In fact, almost a hundred years ago the DMLE had devoted the efforts of a dozen aurors to trying to Transfigure living brain tissue as a shield; far more practical and in line with dueling tactics than a shield-swarm of birds, but it didn't work, either. Abandoned in 1930. So: a cute idea with the salamanders, young Harry, but no.

All that having been said, nonetheless Harry often does have clever ideas. The Mobile Mary is one of them — a permanently secure meeting room that can be carried around with you. The Returned have used it on occasion, when they might be observed and when there were enough of them to make it worthwhile. We can probably credit this particular bit of inventiveness to the Muggle spirit of entrepreneurship; wizards and witches are used to the same age-old buildings and communities and fortresses, and are perhaps too accustomed to living in a lesser age of magic.

This particular Mobile Mary has a metallic scent of sweat and excitement that the Fresh Air Charm can't quite overcome with its light minty breeze. Five witches, one wizard, and a goblin are all sitting at the table: Hermione, Susie, Hyori, Simon, Esther, Charlevoix, and Urg. All of them but one have a dullness to their gaze — not tired or even sad, but broken in a way not easily mended. Still, they are calm and pleasant as they all discuss the findings of their investigations of the bombing murder of one Tarleton Gest.

As you remember, Susie and Hyori had gone to investigate the victim's friend, Bill Kemp, the young man who had identified the body and who had been hired with him. Susie is a dark-haired and voluptuous woman, a hundred years of age and thirty years by appearance, who was once given two years in Azkaban for the unlicensed production of portkeys and trafficking in fraudulent potions. It was an unjustly harsh sentence. Hyori, on the other hand, a slight woman of Korean descent with long bangs before her eyes, was imprisoned for murder aforethought. The justice of that is in dispute. Both ladies are members of the Returned, servants of Hermione *Atrytone*.

Observe.



"There was nothing out of the ordinary about Kemp," Susie said. Hermione listened, leaning her chin on one hand. "Perfectly normal fellow, although not very polite. Could do with a bath or with a better quality of tobacco, perhaps."

"Stank," agreed Hyori, flatly.

“I went to that skeevey little potion shop here and bought a few bottles, and then knocked on his door as though to sell them,” Susie said. She rummaged around inside of one pocket of her robes to produce two bottles of sparkling amber-coloured Diamondraught, clanking them onto the table in front of her. “Used to do that sort of thing quite often, as a decent cover. No go, but Hyori was able to nip around back and check for wards.”

“None,” affirmed Hyori. She gave a little shake of her head to clear the tips of her hair from her eyelashes.

Susie nodded. “I chatted him up, standing a bit away since he smelled quite unpleasant. But nothing seemed off. We watched for a few hours, but there doesn’t seem to be anything there.”

“Sorry,” Hyori said, shrugging.

“Thank you, ladies. Do you think we should keep eyes on him?” Hermione asked. She didn’t have many people to spare, but she desperately wanted to solve this conclusively. The possibilities were so unsettling — even the possibility that *Harry*... well, she wanted this matter investigated to a certainty, anyway.

“Doesn’t seem worth it,” Susie said, looking thoughtful. “He’d remember a luscious bint like me, and Hyori, you, Charlevoix, and Urg stand out too much, and Esther is famous here. That would just leave Simon or Tonks, and I think we’d best have them with us if we get into a spot. Plus, it’s not like he’s going anywhere, so if we need to do, we can pop on back and get on him. He’s got a job and all, and if it’s someone all Polyjuiced they’ll probably keep their cover if they think they got away with it. So all’s said and done, no, I think we’d best leave him be and get on with it.”

Hermione looked at Hyori, who said nothing and only shook her head in agreement with her talkative companion.

“What did the Council say?” asked Urg. The warrior-goblin had a strong Gobbledegook accent, his native tongue putting a guttural rattle on the velar consonant sounds at the start of “what” and “council.” It was mildly distracting, but they were all used to it. He had only arrived an hour before the meeting, but they’d already caught him up.

“The main person in charge there, Councilor Hig, seemed okay with all this. He seems... well, he seems like he’s on our side, frankly,” Hermione said, pursing her lips.

Simon and Urg both started to speak at once, and there was a moment of politeness as they each paused. Simon continued, after a second, and said, "But the Americas helped kill the Statute when we tried to put it through!" The big Scot was irritated. All of the Returned had taken that defeat badly. It had no provisions against torture or Dementors, *per se*, but it would have been a step forward to their worldwide elimination. Not one more minute.

"Things change," Hermione replied. "From what I understand, he didn't trust Harry—" There were glances around the table among the rest at that statement; the Returned didn't trust the Tower very much, either. "—and he misunderstood what we do. But Harry said something that convinced them to reconsider him, and as for me... having met with him and Councilor Tineagar twice now, and spent some time speaking with each of them, I think they're coming around." Esther, who had gone along with her to the Alping, nodded.

She didn't say anything about her supernatural aura, which they all already knew might have had something to do with Hig's warming attitude towards the Tower and Goddess. There were defenses and alarms that experienced wizards could deploy to stop the influence of Veela or Hags, but there was no known way to defend yourself from the air of innocence and trust exuded by unicorns and Hermione alone. Unicorns had simply never been weaponized effectively or frequently, and so there had never been cause. It made her more persuasive, because people let down their instinctive defenses... she liked to think it made them more open to reason, and that it was only a supernatural equivalent to dressing well or wearing pleasant scents. It was the halo effect.

It was an old theory, and some psychologists (Dion, Berscheid, and Walster, her brain automatically supplied) had done detailed studies of the effect as far back as 1972, so it was old hat to Muggle science. Test subjects were told that their perceptiveness was being measured, and shown photographs that ranged in attractiveness. They were asked to rate the subjects of the photos in a wide variety of personality traits, based on nothing more than the pictures. In that study, and many replications along different lines, people had demonstrated a remarkable willingness to judge the virtue, intelligence, and sociability of complete strangers based entirely

on their appearance — and pretty people were often judged to be good, smart, and pleasant. The fairness of the halo effect was harder to untangle (maybe pretty people really did tend to be more pleasant, since people were more likely to be nice to them?) but it was hard to ignore its existence. Especially since Hermione's halo effect was super-charged. She always felt a little guilty about it, but she would have felt more guilty if she hadn't used it.

Hermione absently twirled her wand over her knuckles, twitching her fingers minutely to make it spin and dance, as she turned back to Urg and added, "I believe that representatives from Ackle might also have had something to do with his attitude... it is known that Hig stopped in Gringotts while he was in London, and I would bet he's taken steps to verify the good things he's been hearing about our work with Beings." *Hearing from his global network of information-filching devices*, she thought with annoyance. *I wonder how he listens in on the merfolk or the centaurs? Are there magical microphone fish? The Protean Charm doesn't work within extended spaces like the Mobile Mary, but there doesn't seem to be any range limit otherwise, but those Beings don't buy much of anything... what would he bug?*

Urg nodded in satisfaction. A goblin with a wand... he was a living symbol of the progress they had made, although he virtually never used it.

"Simon, Charlevoix?" Hermione asked. They had gone to investigate Tarleton's boarding house.

"The family had already cleaned out the boy's room," Simon said. "It looked like an anchorite's cell by the time we got there. We spoke to the landlord and neighbors, and some friends. Seems like he was just like the friend — nothing out of the ordinary about him. They'd both left school only a few years ago, spent some time abroad on holiday — the Caucasus, I think they said — and found a job with the Council when they came back. We didn't go speak to the family... it felt like it would have been too much." Simon was a thick man, with a chest like a barrel and curly black hair. His eyes looked tired and flat, as though a twinkle had been weighed down by sorrow, pressed out of existence like a stray spark.

Looking at Simon, Hermione felt a twinge as she wondered what might have been, if he hadn't been an alcoholic, or if the

wizarding world took that sort of thing seriously, or if he hadn't lost his temper in the Wizengamot. *Oh Simon, my Simon... what were you like? Were you a roaring and jolly man? Did you kiss your mum on the cheek, every time you saw her? Did you catch up a small dog in those big hands, petting its head with one thumb as you drank a cuppa in the morning?*

"You did the right thing, Simon," Hermione said. He looked back at her, and nodded, eyes flat. Charlevoix sat quietly, and seemed to have nothing to add when Hermione glanced at her.

"Well, that leaves us nowhere," Hermione continued with a sigh. "We should plan our second round of investigation... where can we best devote our resources? Let's list all the possibilities and try to be creative with our options, before we decide on any plan." She pulled out a notebook and pencil from a pocket of her robes, flipping to a fresh sheet. "As near as I can see, there are a few ways we can look at this. We can go back to the Alping and take a look at the bombing scene, and see if maybe we missed any pieces of the bomb on the first pass. We might be able to trace that back to its origin. I can review the memory of the bombing, as well, if Tineagar will let me." She started making a list, pencil scratching on the paper with a comforting sound of industriousness. "We can approach Tarleton's family, and look into his background a little more — maybe even examine his ashes. We can see about whether or not Hig might let us look at some of their intelligence from conversations nearby... maybe they have it sorted geographically or something." She paused. "He might not want us to do that, so we should also consider other options there."

She wrote quickly. The Returned were all silent, so she encouraged them, glancing up with a warm smile of fondness. "Come on, everyone. Don't worry about whether or not your ideas seem good or bad or silly or impossible, we're just coming up with all the options we can. I know that you c-can—"

A quiet bubbling sound inside of her mind interrupted Hermione, and she stuttered over the last word. It was the soft fizz of freshly-poured butterbeer, and not unpleasant. She put down her pencil and reached inside of her robes again, pulling out her pocket mirror. She held it up in front of her, saying, "Hello?" Just like answering a telephone, if a phone could ring inside your head.

An image of Tonks appeared. Well, the chin of Tonks. "Lemon sherbert, let me in!" she said, chirpily.

Hermione looked at Esther and nodded, and the American hopped up from her seat and went to the door, opening it. Tonks tripped in, smiling, her hair multicolored and her features in their typical arrangement. Probably not her native appearance, but it was the face she usually wore.

"Did I arrive at a good dramatic moment?" Tonks asked. "Were you breaking something and shouting about how we hadn't found anything, and shaking your fist at the sky?"

Hermione rolled her eyes and leaned back in her chair. "Did you find anything on your mysterious mission, which was doubtless silly and reckless?"

"I never get to make surprise entrances with all our security," Tonks said with a huff as she sat in one of the chairs and slumped forward onto the table, dramatically. She was in a flagrantly good mood, and so she'd clearly found something. "I'm going to start eating six meals a day until I gain enough weight to do a good Simon, and *then* I'll surprise you."

"Tonks." Hermione said, her mouth twisting into a smile despite herself.

"Well-o, well-o... I guess I did find something," Tonks said, tilting her head to the side to lie flat on the table, and examining the nails of one hand as they grew a centimeter. "I mean, if you're *interested* in secret mysterious meetings."

Hermione waited, patiently, the smile still on her face. Hyori crossed her arms, scowling.

"I followed everyone around," Tonks said, "And just watched for the people who were following you lot. Madame Bones always says that 'watching someone is a message to itself,' and so I watched for whoever else was watching. Once I found which of you had two people following you, instead of just one, I knew where to look more closely."

"...since you knew it wasn't just the Council following that person," Hermione said, slowly. Tonks nodded vigorously. "But how did you know the Council didn't just have extra people watching one pair of us, for whatever reason?"

Tonks looked enormously pleased with herself, and Hermione knew she'd been waiting for that question. The metamorphagus

smiled and said, “The shoes. Almost no one ever remembers to disguise their shoes properly when they’re out and about, being all secret and spying. It’s one of the things you only notice when you’re always looking at people to copy bits of them, like me. So when I saw one of the two spies in a pair of Twilfitt and Tattings’ court shoes, I knew something odd was up.”

Hermione was impressed. *A bit thin, but a clever way to find a new lead. Didn’t I read that in something about the Cold War? Either way, I’ll have to remember this.* Well, of course she’d remember it, since Tonks was going to revel in this triumph for months.

“After that,” Tonks said, “it was easy enough to follow that guy back to a little rough alley, somewhere near the docks. I don’t know exactly where, but I marked it down. And he went into a dingy little pub, and I went in after him, and saw him go into a back room behind a curtain. I could only get a peek into the room, but I could see what was what, right enough. Fancy door, giant gold doorknob, and three pedestals with fiddly things on them. Textbook secret entrance.”

Oh. Disappointing. “Tonks, we’re in Tidewater. The base rate for secret entrances — I mean, given where we are, any secret entrance is more likely to go to some club, or a Westphalian hideout, or even just a creepy place for randy old men.”

“That curtain you go through?” Tonks said. “Green and silver, decorated with a snake.”

Still not solid. A little sloppy. But suspicious. How do we go in? It’d be quiet to go in alone, or with just one person. No, that’s silly. If it’s not the Malfoy group, if it’s just a nogtail-fighting ring, then there’s no loss in going in force. And if it is the Malfoys — why hang up a sign advertising your secret hideout? — then it’s probably a trap (definitely a trap) so it makes even more sense to go in force.

“Tonks, take us. Charlevoix, contact Harry. Tell him everything we’ve done, and where we’re going. Everyone else: gauntlets on. If this isn’t nothing, then it’s probably a trap.” *If Harry is behind this, and he probably isn’t, then he already knows about this place. If he isn’t involved, then it’d be stupid not to have told him that we were doing a Light Brigade charge into a probable trap.*

They all stood up. Almost as one, they reached into robes or pouches and withdrew a golden metal gauntlet; Urg withdrew two. The gauntlets seemed to have no angles to them, except along the ridges of the knuckles; the metal of their composition was so shiny that it seemed to defy brute existence. They were loaded, the small boxes of their chargers embedded into the sockets in a line along the back of the hand. Their fit was impossibly perfect, and they flashed with imminent puissance.

“Save one life,” Urg rattled. They marched out the door.

Interlude

Goblins

1107 c.e.

Sugworn Sug, Ackle

All Acklish Gobbeldegook translated to modern vernacular English.

Haddad pounded on the door of Sugworn Sug. He was an enormous fellow, perhaps four and a half Roman feet in height, and the thumping of his fist on the wood shook the whole door. “Dodrod!” he called, pounding again. “Dodrod, open up!”

After a few grains, Dodrod finally loosed the knot and shifted the bar, opening the door. He was a smaller fellow than Haddad, but handsome as goblins reckon: short and finely-curved ears, a high nose, a dark eye, and skin like cream. “What is it?” he asked irritably, tucking his wand away in his shirt. He had been setting his house in order, and the interruption was annoying. He’d already lost track of which of his will-works he’d refreshed, so now he’d have to start from the beginning, unless he wanted his bed to suddenly revert to unvarnished wood in a few days. It was a tiresome chore, and he had to do it more often than those of greater will, and so he did not relish starting over.

“The Wizards Council has called a moot! The human Thing is gathering in London!” Haddad said, urgently.

Dodrod’s eyes widened as he lurched forward, seizing at Haddad’s collar. “You are certain? Why do they call a gathering? Is there war amongst them?”

The larger goblin shook his head. “No! Severus Hortensius has sent owls throughout the realm, crying against us! If there is war — it is against *us!*” Small sharp teeth gnashed, Haddad’s eyes were opened wide in alarm. “Dodrod, Hortensius is calling for our wands! He specifically summoned the Greek to the moot!”

Dodrod blanched, but shook his head. “Ollivander would never bow to such demands! She is a proud woman, and many owe her favors, human and sundry alike!”

“I do not have your confidence,” Haddad said, as Dodrod released his collar. “But either way, we need to come up a plan.”

“Yes,” Dodrod said, sighing. He stepped past Haddad, to the edge of his home platform. “They fear us.” He looked out over Ackle, and gestured. “They fear *this*.”

In its natural configuration, stripped of all Forms, Ackle would have been a plain city. It was large by any standard, with nearly three thousand goblins living within the mountain, but much of the true substance was harsh, indecorous metal and stone. The underpinnings of Ackle were hewn and true-forged to be unyieldingly strong, holding buildings level to cling to the steep interior walls. It was for safety’s sake, so that no combination of poor scheduling and weighty homes could lead to the collapse of the city. Many goblins willed their homes into structures that were not only beautiful, but also heavy, with vaulting marble walls and diamond roofs; these homes would have broken and fallen if they were set upon anything but stone and iron supports.

But Dodrod knew that few visitors might be aware of these facts — for why would any goblin tell them? — and so Ackle must have looked like a place of impossible wonder. Whirlgigs of weighted gems and gold swung in ceaseless patterns from elegant manors that glowed in the rock-sun’s light (itself a marvel of Vincian mirrors). The narrow streets, clinging to the side of Ackle’s mountain-within-a-mountain, were solid curving surfaces of pebble-surfaced granite, shot through with beautiful whorls of starmetal. The ceiling of native rock, the sheer drop of the vast Oublette below the city, and a few choice pillars were the only unworked places in the whole city.

It was magic, of course, but not incomprehensible magic. To be accorded a seat in the Urgod Ur, each grown goblin had to tend to a portion of the city, sculpting it with Forms and renewing the longevity of their work every few days. Naturally, there was some mild competition within the Urgod Ur as a result, and so the city shone like a glittering gold lode in the rough. It was a living representation of the fierce goblin spirit, for goblins put themselves

into whatever they created, from the heatless magma of the Jurg Hod right down to the trivial hand-forging work of Toggle Gol.

Dodrod tried to imagine Ackle without wands, or with those crude wands that the Welsh humans in the surrounding areas used. To him it seemed like the place would be a dark and dismal underground version of Tomen y Mur: clumsy stones and that Muggle stone-wax crafted into rough buildings, all thick with smoke and anger.

Haddad spoke with a snarl, thumping his hand against the luminescent emerald of the wall of Dodrod's home. "Our souls go into our works — what we make, is made of our spirit! Would they take that from us? Are they mad, to think we will permit it?"

"We won't permit it," Dodrod agreed. "We won't let it happen. We will leave the fortresses of the Fey and Gwent and Hortensius himself all in ruins, first. We will give them our wands as hot as new bronze, and quench them in wizard blood, first. And if that fails... we will try again until those wands break in our hands, and throw the pieces at them. We are a patient people."



1580 c.e. *Gringotts Wizarding Bank, Diagon Alley, London*

"And that is why, dearest Ug, I regret to say that we will be assuming formal proprietorship over the bank. It has been a score of years since the intercessors began working with you and your kind, here, and so there will be no damage in the transition. We must protect the bank — there are representations that we must make before the Wizengamot. While you have done a fine job, you cannot request examinations, you cannot request the body, and you cannot really function in this wider world of trade. This isn't just for the good of the bank, it's for the good of your kind."

Ug sat in stunned silence, quill in one limp hand, notes forgotten. Years and years of meddling and greed, and now they wanted to swallow it all up, as though they had put anything of themselves into the bank? He wanted to spit. He wanted to vomit.

Closing his ledger, Ug licked his lips, and spoke carefully. His mind was already racing ahead like a gol doll. So much hung

on this moment. So unbelievably much for one unprepared Ug Sugug, Chief Goldsmith. “You would assume title of Gringotts, as a group? Or on behalf of the Wizards Council?”

Alba laughed like a small bell. “Oh, on behalf of the Council, Ug! I won’t make a Knut off of this... I’m in it just like you, working as I’m told! Really, it’ll just be like before... you and me against them!” She leaned over the table to slide the official documents over to him, the seal of the Wizards Council visibly moving as it melted and re-stamped itself, continually asserting its veracity. “Each of the Grand Sorcerers has commanded, and so we must follow orders.” She winked, and it was repulsive to Ug.

He smiled, and chuckled. *Look at me, I am in on the joke. We’re good friends, and I am a fool who was happy to sign over half the coining-cost rights to you stub-toothed idiots.*

“Well then,” Ug said. “I will have the documents prepared. All the rights and responsibilities, everything to be transferred to the Office of Intercession, held on behalf of the Wizards Council, yes?” This was possible. Many of the terms under which Gringotts operated had been established at the founding of the bank, sealed by the fires of the Goblet to be eternally binding for as long as the institution should last. But ownership could be transferred; that was permitted.

“Yes,” Alba agreed, after a long moment. She was not stupid, of course. But she didn’t have the feel for Gringotts — the true weight of the gold, the true heft of the stone, the true heat of the dragons. The intercessors never went into the vault-catacomb. They sat in their posh office, rightfully the office of the Chief Curse-Breaker, and argued over numbers. But they had none of their soul in the stuff of Gringotts, and so they would never know the whole of those numbers.

“The terms will be all words and fluff, but I presume that the Office will take on all ongoing powers of enforcement, coining, curse-breaking, storage, and the like?” Ug said, lightly. Alba nodded, and Ug could almost see her salivate at the prospect. Ug didn’t know what part of the fees the intercessors received, but he guessed it to be nearly one in ten. Her share would be a fortune.

“And you will still want to employ us goblins, yes?” Ug said, and winked one black eye. As though these half-giants would deign to work the vaults themselves.

Alba laughed. "We couldn't even begin to do it without you!"
True enough.

He laughed along with her. "Then do you wish to pay stipends — no, of course not, what if business slackened and you were left to pay the stipends of five hundred goblins on the back of a trickle of income? Sorry, I was being stupid. You will, I suppose, wish to simply have the same sort of terms as before, but modified? You would take all other fees, and we would keep only the coin-fee?"

Alba folded her fingers in front of herself, and leaned forward, her face crafty. "The terms have been half the coin-fee for the services of the Council and its intercessors, my friend, and everything else for you. But now we'll be doing so much more work, making the decisions, running things, and working to protect the bank in the Wizengamot. You'll just have to do your duties and not have worry about *any* of that! I think it's safe to say that the Council will expect all incomes, and *perhaps* half of the coin-fee will be allocated to you and yours."

Ug sighed, shaking his head. "That will be hard to bear... even these past years under our current agreement, it has been hard to stay solvent." *Hard to bear... it's insane. The coin-fee might be one of our best sources of monies, but half of it wouldn't suffice for the entire goblin staff! That used to be the bribe they paid to these vultures, and now it would be all that was left to them?!*

"I know," Alba said, "but I can honestly say that you are so enormously clever for a goblin that I have absolute faith that you will be able to do this. Your ideas have been marvelous, at times."

For a goblin. Oh, this would not do.

"Very well," Ug said, heavily. He opened his ledger, and wrote some nonsense for a second, then paused. "Well, maybe this is an opportunity."

"Yes!" Alba agreed, enthusiastically (and slightly surprised). "You will have the chance to do all the things you never had time to do. You always said you wanted to go back to live in Ackle, and work in the forges of your mighty stone city. Now you can do that!"

"I meant an opportunity for all goblins, really," Ug said, smiling in a way that entirely failed to touch his eyes. "Maybe we should take no part of the coin-fee, either. All fees and income would be the Council's."

"I'm not sure..." Alba said, uncertainly. Doubtless she thought he was proposing that wizards run the Bank entire. Ha! As if they'd leave their will-work in the hands of the clipped clods!

"I mean, we can do other things than banking, as you know. I have often thought of opening up..." Ug said, trailing off. He interrupted himself, leaving her to wonder what fantastically successful new enterprise he was dreaming of building. He knew that her thoughts would be of taking control of that, too, one day. It was the way of their loathsome selves, to spread out and devour like insects. "Never mind. But perhaps my people could take only two parts in ten of the coin-fee? Would that be possible?"

Alba Greengrass, who must have thought that Merlin himself was addling Ug's mind, smiled softly. She'd just had the Chief Goldsmith agree to keep on all the goblin staff at less than half of what she'd anticipated paying them! "Oh, yes. I think that would be possible."

"We'd just want a few fees waived, in return. No coinage fee, no storage fee? Galleons will be tight in these initial years, as we work to start other businesses. We'd still pay for enforcement, contracts, and all the rest." Ug leaned back, and began to make a list. He wrote in a slightly larger hand than usual: - *Jeweler*. - *Silverworks*. - *Tinworks*.

Look at all these businesses we could start. And you can steal them, too, someday. You can try to take our souls there, too.

Alba looked pained, though Ug had no doubt she was inwardly rejoicing. "No fees on coin or storage? I don't know if I can get the Council to agree to that."

Ug put down his pen, and clasped his hands in front of himself. "Please, Alba? For me — for friendship, and all these past years working together?"

"Very well," Alba said, nodding solemnly and severely. "For you, I will do my best to make sure these are the terms."

"Thank you, dearest Alba," Ug said. "And please, don't hesitate to rely on us. Should the bank ever become insolvent, let us have it on oath that goblinkind will take it on our backs, once more."

"Of course," she agreed.

And to hasten that time, Ug thought, hate boiling behind his grateful smile, we will devote ourselves to scouring the world for

gold. Every scrap of it will be coined and stored, and the terms of storage have been sealed by the Goblet and cannot be altered. The cost of holding will increase year by year until it flows red over the Gringotts books, and you will pay it. And when you cannot, we will have back what is ours. And we will not forget.



No one knows the origin of the goblins, not even the goblins themselves. Urg the Unclean, who would lead the fifth and greatest of the goblin rebellions in Britain between 1720 and 1722 C.E., was fond of spreading the Shikoku goblin legend of the All-Opposer, who fell from heaven on a shooting star and laid waste with his rage, rending metal like paper and turning all that fell under his gaze into sand. The All-Opposer made goblins to be his servants and castellans, and Urg would shout in a roaring clatter of Gobbledegook that goblins had fire in their veins, and were born to greater fates than the mudwater humans.

Whatever their birth into this world, though, it is certain that goblins are patient and methodical by their very nature, and they are possessive to a fault. Goblins usually die before their grudges do.

It was two hundred and eighty-five years before Gringotts was returned to goblinkind, in 1865 C.E., after very nearly ruining the Ministry of Magic (which had assumed control upon the demise of the Wizards Council). Though Ug the Bloody had not known the term of demurrage, his people used it as a far-sighted weapon over the course of two and a half centuries, mounting the vaults of the bank high with gold that had to be guarded with proportionate precautions under the terms of the founding, an unbreakable necessity enforced by the Goblet of Fire. Costs grew incrementally with every passing year, and the wizards never could discern how the wealth seemed to be draining from them.

And other goblins waged war after war against witches and wizards. Twice over the course of a thousand years, they founded and sacrificed new communities of their kind on the altar of their ancient enmity. In the seventeenth century, Crad the Callow led the Curdish separatists of Caislean-i-Cahaenn in three separate and bloody rebellions, before they were entirely wiped out, while

Urg the Unclean swore ceaseless violence against all of humanity at the head of his independent Togrod Teulu in the eighteenth century.

If you cannot win and you refuse to lose, then *impose costs*.

After they lost the power of Transfiguration, forgotten when their wands were stripped away, the goblins found solace in device-making. They made great and terrible works, and their patience and care let them create items of unparalleled power. Goblins believe, perhaps correctly, that part of your soul goes into that which you create. You own it, ever after. Only such passion can create weapons such as the Sword of Ragnuk, which remains the most potent blade in existence (for it is not made of steel, but of the Form of war itself). Only such hate can make the Arch of Ulak Unconquered, the most perfect prison ever devised.

Knowing what we know, there is a question.

You have been for a long time in the darkest of woods, hounded by wolves and torn by thorns. For years, you have made your bed on rough boughs and breakfasted on bitter herbs. There has been no light, and you have suffered. You are made of patient anger, slow-burning but hot, and those coals are your only warmth.

Then ahead, there is a break in the darkness. Between one heartbeat and the next, you step out into the day, blinking in the cool bright morning. You are free. In an instant, you are made whole.

Will you forget?

Any Advantage

This is a war, and you must choose sides. And it is the greatest war, even beyond those fought against Grindelwald or Voldemort, since every fallen soldier only rises to serve as the enemy's slave. The winner will take all, and the stakes are so high that every old grudge or loyalty must be swept aside. Do you resent that we no longer fight for blood purity? I tell you here that it ranks as nothing in the larger picture; it is as important as a chesspawn on a true battlefield. Do you wish that we could go back to ignoring the Muggles, and pretending that they have not found their

own clever power? I tell you here that the most important thing in this war is to win, and to defeat the tyranny of evil I would take any advantage.

—Excerpt from “Allies Must Gather,” by Draco Malfoy.
Unbreakable Honour,
 Vol 4 (1999), Issue 9



The redcap is not Nature’s most perfect killing machine. It is not the second most perfect killing machine, either, nor the third. In terms of perfect killing machines, the redcap is somewhere down the list below not only the quintaped and every variety of dragon, but also such relatively workaday beasts as the shrake.

The redcap, which has a dim but malicious intelligence, resembles nothing so much as a grotesque human of between two and three feet in height. They are drawn to wizard blood and love to feed upon it, but are capable of surviving on a diet of slugs and sparrows. They invariably use crude clubs made from bone or wood, and dress themselves in woven grass. Redcaps are named for their hair, which they instinctively smear with blood and slick back into a high peak.

A young or sickly Muggle might have trouble with a redcap. An adult Muggle would find little danger from as many as two. Witches and wizards consider them nothing more than a mildly-dangerous nuisance, even when they attack in gangs of five or six.

It would take on the order of twenty redcaps, compelled to work together, to seriously threaten an adult magic-user.

But as for a horde of three hundred redcaps... why, *anyone* should feel threatened.



Hermione followed Tonks as the metamorphmagus led them to the alley at a brisk pace. Like the rest of the Returned, Tonks’ right hand was encased in a gold-shining gauntlet of power, but she was the only one who accompanied it with a grin, visible even from the

rear. Hermione, Charlevoix, Esther, Simon, Susie, Hyori, and Urg followed. The group of eight Returned were all wary, taut, and suspicious as they walked through the narrow Tidewater streets.

Perhaps there was no need to worry, at least out here, Hermione thought. More than one smiling face watched them pass by with approval, and they even received a ragged but enthusiastic huzzah from a trio of old men who stood under a gaslight. Hermione thought it was probably half her own presence, and half the presence of Esther.

The town-within-a-city of Tidewater was clean and colonial, with whitewashed walls and shining cobblestones. A sizable part of Boston's waterfront had been twisted into a knot centuries ago to produce this enfolded magical community, drawing upon the power of America's eastern ley line to power the fold, in much the same way that Hogwarts drew from Scotland's northern ley. Tidewater was nowhere near as impressive as Hogwarts, of course, and virtually all of those energies were wasted in the sloppy spellwork that had built the place. *But even this sort of wasteful work is beyond us, even with all the research done at the Tower*, Hermione thought. *Chargers and slice-boxes are clever enough, but can we really rebuild this sort of knowledge base?*

It wasn't a question of the raw power. It was a question of using it in the right way. The creators of Hogwarts had whipped their magics in and out of reality like a needle, pulling and folding a Scottish lakeside with the elegance of a master tailor. But if you couldn't ply your puissance behind a needlepoint, you were reduced to hammering one fold on top of the other, nailing them in place with crude might.

"No wizard, no matter how powerful, casts such a Charm by strength alone. You must do it by being efficient."

Her thoughts were wandering. Hermione snapped her attention back to the task at hand, chagrined at her own lack of focus. They were a visibly armed troop of British witches and wizards, marching through little-known territory to investigate a mysterious door decorated with the banner of one of their greatest enemies. It didn't matter how friendly everyone seemed... Diagon Alley had been friendly right up until someone had smeared her with acid and dropped a bomb at her feet. She flexed her left hand in its

gauntlet at the thought; the device felt snug and secure, but left her with such freedom of movement that it might have been made of silk rather than goblin gold. It was only a precaution — backup, if things went south — but it felt good to have it.

“This is it,” Tonks announced loudly, with virtually no discretion. The Returned were standing before the Armin Arms, which was indeed (as she had said) a “dingy little pub.” That was, if anything, a kind way to describe the establishment. The whitewash was grey, and the pub’s sign — a pair of masks, happy and sad — appeared to be actually rotting. In the Muggle world, it would look run-down. In the magical world, it was like a neon sign proclaiming the Armin Arms to be EXTREMELY SUSPICIOUS AND POSSIBLY QUITE DANGEROUS.

Two children in rather nice robes peeked from around the corner down the street, and whispered to each other. Hermione whipped a glance at them, face angry, and they vanished. This was no place for children.

“Let’s go in,” she said. They sorted themselves into a practiced pattern: Simon in front to take the door, everyone else in pairs after him (Esther and Tonks first), with Urg bringing up the rear. They scanned for traps, both magical and mundane, and then they were in through the door, swiftly and smoothly.

The inside of the Armin Arms wasn’t much better than the outside. A surprised-looking bartender stood behind a long bar made entirely of unpolished brass, curse-scarred with blackened welts of bubbled metal in several places. A long mirror went the length of the wall behind him. There were only two customers: surly and saturated men slumping at a battered table. The only clean things were the big rattan rug that stretched out wide in the middle of the room and the Slytherin tapestry that hung on one wall. The place smelled unpleasant: metallic like copper, but thick with the sickly-sweet smell of rot.

“Hello, gentlemen,” Hermione said, smiling. “Sorry about the drama... a bit silly, isn’t it? Just here to look around, if you don’t mind?” None of the three said anything in response, quiescent from surprise or alcohol — except for one of the drunks, who slid forward onto his face, flinging out one arm across the table and loudly passing gas. There was a slight tremble underfoot, as though someone had stomped on the boards. Strange.

“Charming,” Susie said, lowering her wand from the ready position. “Quick, someone hold me back. I must restrain my lust.”

Charlevoix stepped forward a pace, sniffing. “*Faites attention...* This is the stink of blood.”

“Rug,” Hyori said, gesturing. Catching her hint, Hermione nodded in confirmation. She glanced over at the witch with a quick smile of praise, and used her eyes to indicate the gaseous drunk. Hyori pointed her wand at him. Taking the hint, Esther and Simon covered the other two. Urg covered the door with two golden-gauntleted palms, moving to the side.

Within the instant, both “drunks” and the bartender were in motion. The first two tried to seize the heavy oak table in front of them and heave it up. Good idea, and faster than going for a wand, but too slow. Simon stunned his target before the man had done more than grab the table, and while Hyori’s first hex missed, her man couldn’t lift the table quickly enough on his own, and her second stunner swatted him flat.

The bartender ducked down, and Esther’s attack hit a bottle of firewhiskey instead, inflicting glowing red cracks in a spiderweb across the surface of the glass. The bartender reached over the brass bar with his wand, and blindly shouted a curse that Hermione didn’t recognize: “*Aplaniodin!*” Two dozen discrete rays of yellow light flared out from his wand like a starburst, solid beams of brightness that looked dense enough to touch. Half of them stabbed straight out throughout the room, stopping when they struck the walls, floor, and ceiling all around, while the other half were reflected in the mirror behind the bar, angling back at Hermione and her Returned.

One of the beams of light struck Simon, and another struck Charlevoix. They were smashed aside by the blow. Esther flung herself to the ground to avoid a beam, while Hyori inclined her head just enough so that another roared past her cheek and left her untouched. Hermione was already moving, stepping lightly from the floor to a chair to a table, barely even noticing her own deft steps. Before the curse had died away, she had launched herself into a curling arc over one of the beams, singing out a hex as she leapt the room. The bartender crumpled, wracked with a red glow.

Simon hauled himself to his feet within a few seconds, blood streaming from his nose and mouth. He'd been struck solidly in the side, but he must have hit the ground unluckily; it looked like his nose was badly broken. He was silent. Tonks went to check on Charlevoix, while Susie moved to Simon with her wand already in position for a scan. Urg kept the door covered.

"Esther, the rug."

Esther approached the broad rattan stretch in the center of the room. What wandless magic had been cast on or under it... *Spongify*? Wandless magic was difficult — it required holding certain thoughts in the correct way and thinking them into new "positions" — so it couldn't be anything too terrible. Their opponents hadn't been that impressive. *But what was that light spell? It instantly controlled the room and hit like an iron Bludger. I've never seen or heard about a curse that powerful and that fast.* She'd have to consult the Hogwarts library and a few people (Amelia, Alastor, Harry) but she was fairly sure that she would have remembered it. *Odd.*

"Hssss..."

A soft susurrus like a snake, and the rug shifted, flexing slightly from some pressure below. Hermione frowned. A serpent? Not very imaginative, even if the Malfoy snake fetish bordered on the embarrassing.

No. A low voice whispered a word, and the sound was wet. "Maschaechgo."

Susie had pulled Simon aside, and she paused just to cast an *Episkey* on his nose before turning back to the rug. Urg faced the space as well, both palms up. Hyori and Esther had their wands up. Tonks had overturned a table for cover, and was still examining Charlevoix to see if she should be keyed out to the Tower, or if she could recover.

Everyone was appropriately alarmed.

"Maschaechgo... maschaechgo." The voice smacked wetly again, and repeated the word. After a moment, another joined it, saying the same thing. Hermione didn't recognize the language.

Slowly, Esther backed away. The rattan rug flexed up a second time, and then slid off to the side, whispering its way along the floor, gradually revealing the black square of a pit. A single small

hand, the size of a child's, reached from within and delicately grabbed the pit's edge. Then the redcap pulled himself up, and Hermione could see his head.

It was like a horrible mockery of an old man, as though someone had seized the face of the creature and yanked the flesh in different and random directions. Twisted and corded flesh muddled together into something like a face. The teeth in the open mouth, which leered vacantly, were so white and so sharp. The hair was dark crimson, clotted back into a high peak with old blood. In the other hand was a bone club, wrapped with a twine handle.

Nasty creatures, but not too dangerous.

Another hand appeared on the pit edge. Then another, and another. Small malformed heads levered themselves up into view. "Maschaecho," one of them said, lips shining with spittle.

"Maschaecho... maschaecho... maschaecho... maschaecho... maschaecho... maschaecho... maschaecho..."

Dozens.

"No killing," Hermione said, and raised her wand again. They were horrid, but sentient.

"Save one life," Simon and Susie and Esther and Urg and Hyori said, in unison, and raised their own wands. They all drew closer, and set themselves between the pit and where Tonks was tending to Charlevoix with healing spells.

Save one life, and it is as though you have saved the whole world.

"*Stupefy!*" she shouted, and the battle was joined.



It is a well-established fact that, since the Peace of Westphalia, dueling tactics have dominated magical combat. The days of massed armies of Muggles led by a handful of wizards and witches passed into memory, and by the dawn of the nineteenth century there were few alive who remembered that style of fighting.

You might object at such a characterization, pointing out the armies of goblins, centaurs, and other creatures that wizards still matched themselves against. But goblins lost their wands a thousand years ago, and in their rebellions they made guerilla war

with cleverness and subtlety, never in standing fights. As for the centaurs and other creatures... well, let us be frank. It was never “war” when wizards and witches fought them. It was punishment... or extermination.

There have been surprisingly few exceptions to this general trend, particularly as dueling tactics have become highly refined and specialized. International magical warfare, crudely fought with massed wizards and witches, was nearly eliminated by the Peace and its fallout (the International Confederation, the Statute of Secrecy, etc). Even those Dark Lords and Ladies who defy convention and try to build slave-armies with crowd-control magics find no one willing to take the challenge. A team of Hit Wizards, sent on behalf of the Confederation by a member state, simply visits them alone, late one night. Even Grindelwald’s forces defaulted to dueling behavior, and he himself was only duelled into submission.

Lord Voldemort was one of those few who defied the trend, gathering crowds of Death-Eaters and leading them in attacks on other groups, controlling the battlefield and managing his soldiers from the rear. And though this was not well-known, he didn’t do this because it was efficient... he did it because he thought it was more *interesting*.

But once he’d introduced the idea again, and reinforced it in his guise of David Monroe with student armies at Hogwarts, it was only a matter of time before others realized the advantage to be gained. All of the world’s strongest witches and wizards had been carefully taught to duel, above all else. Dueling spells and tactics are precisely targeted and built around overcoming individual defenses.

You cannot duel an army.



“*Aqua Erecto!*” Esther called. She held her wand with both hands to direct the thick stream of water that blasted from its tip, and swept it through a line of redcaps. They went tumbling like ninepins, some back into the pit, but there were more to take their place. It seemed like an ocean of the vile little creatures,

climbing from the pit and on each other's backs and shrieking, "Maschaechgo! Maschaechgo!"

"*Ventus! Ventus!*" shouted Simon, his face still bloody, while Hyori snapped hexes at small groups of redcaps, firing off *Immobulus* as quickly as she was able. It was too slow... a dozen redcaps swarmed over the table she'd placed in front of her, bone clubs raised high and twisted faces alight with bloodlust.

"Rotgod!" declared Urg, leaping in beside her from an adjacent chair, one golden gauntlet raised. There was a pulse of power that throbbed through everyone's bones as the gauntlet unleashed a charger's contents at the sound of the goblin word, and a wave of sticky grey foam was ejected from the device's palm, sweeping over the swarming redcaps. It rapidly swelled, seething up into stiffening bubbles almost as large as the heads of the redcaps, imprisoning all of the swarm and a dozen more behind them.

The concept behind the foam was an old one by the standards of Muggle science, developed by Sandia Laboratories in America in the eighties; the patents had been easy enough for Hermione to retrieve in London. It was flame-retardant, it expanded to thirty times its own size once deployed, and it stood almost no chance of killing an enemy. If their faces were exposed, they would be fine, and a Bubblehead Charm could assist anyone in danger.

Cheered by the result, Hermione blasted redcaps away from herself and called to Urg, "Over the pit! Trap them inside!" She could fell them with a single spell or a single punch, but it wasn't fast enough; she'd already taken a dozen blows to the skull from bone clubs. The redcaps just kept coming, climbing over the bodies of the fallen and leaping to the attack. Why were there so *many*? She knew they'd just been sealed in the pit, but how had they gotten them in there in the first place? This was madness. She didn't want to have to kill the beasts, but she couldn't let them kill the three stunned wizards or any of her Returned.

Urg scrambled around the mass of foam-encased redcaps, keeping well away from the sticky, swelling bubbles. But before he could get in position for another attack, one of the beasts leapt onto the foam from the pit's edge, landing on the exposed chest of a kinsman, and then tackled Urg. He was small enough that he was sent sprawling, and he took a heavy hit from the creature's

club in the moments after the scramble landed. He lay motionless. Hermione stunned the redcap, and Tonks was already running to go rescue the goblin, but there seemed to be no *end* to the little monsters. More and more redcaps climbed out of the pit by the second, howling the word that seemed to be their battle cry.

“Maschaechgo! Maschaechgo!”

Six twisted little men threw themselves at Esther, and her surging column of water missed one. He brought his club down on her shin, howling with wet lips, and she staggered before she could bring her foot back to kick the creature away. The interruption in her attack let three more within reach, and only Hyori was able to save her, blasting the redcaps off of the American witch with wind. But with every moment the two were not actively fighting back the tide of horrid creatures, the monsters surged further forward. Hermione threw curses without a pause for breath.

They would lose this battle. Attrition would win.

“Everyone!” she shouted. “Foam the pit, *now!*”

In unison, as if they were marionettes, every Returned still standing cast *Ventus* to clear their front, and then raised their left palms, shouting their chosen activation words. Hyori failed to clear away all of her new attackers — three redcaps pounced at her legs, shrieking — but still managed to unleash her gauntlet, dropping to her knees as bone clubs smashed into her shins.

“수갑!” said Hyori, gasping.

“Stinkbubble!” said Susie.

“Muggle-goo!” said Tonks.

“Flandermoss!” said Simon.

“AquaCem!” said Hermione.

The foam erupted from five gauntlets as they each spent the contents of the extended space within a charger. The grey substance fizzed as it washed forward in a thick wave, and almost every redcap was swept back as the foam poured across and into the pit. It expanded as it went, forcing fat and sticky bubbles down into the hole. Hermione heard an unhappy wail of “Maschaechgo!”, barely audible over the sound of the foam popping and spitting.

“*Ventus!*” cast Hyori and Tonks at the same time, blowing the three redcaps clubbing Hyori’s stomach into the mass of foam. They tumbled away into the swelling grey mound which had sealed

over the pit, sticking to its surface and flailing their limbs angrily. Despite their twisted faces and the rotting blood clotted in their hair, they looked like nothing so much as flies trapped on fly-paper.

“*Immobulus!*” said Hermione, securing the last redcaps remaining. She reached behind and pulled a bone club from out of her hair, where it had been tangled, and irritably threw it into the mound of hissing foam. “Okay, Nymphadora, you might have found something interesting here, after all.”

Tonks glanced up from where she was working with Hyori, and said with a grin, “I’m not one to say ‘I told you so.’ Too humble.” She turned back to Hyori. “*Brackium Emendo. Cataplasma.*”

“Charlevoix? Urg?” Hermione asked. She walked over to the goblin, who was on his back, reclining on his elbows. Urg just grunted in response.

“*Ça va,*” Charlevoix said from near the door, where she was getting to her feet. “My ribs are nearly mended. Thank you, Tonks.” She went to check on the trapped redcaps, scanning to ensure that none were badly injured or dying.

Simon and Susie stayed on the alert while the injured were treated, stunning the occasional mewling redcap from time to time. Fractures and cuts and lumps were not much of an impediment to the magical, so it didn’t take more than ten or fifteen minutes. For a witch or wizard, “serious injury” was more along the lines of “all my bones exploded and my hair’s been turned into snakes.” Hyori, Urg, and Charlevoix were ready for combat — if a bit weary — in no time.

The bartender and the two “drunks,” on the other hand, were still stunned. Hermione searched the pockets of their stained clothing with distaste, and then sent them on to the Tower. *Ker-chak. Ker-chak. Ker-chak.* They’d had nothing beyond a few odds and ends, their wands, and a scrap of parchment with three crabbed words on it: “*Pest numbers book.*” Hermione pocketed it.

All right. Whatever is happening here, it’s clearly something big and secret and probably evil. There is absolutely no reason not to call in reinforcements at this point. Not from Britain... this is the time to bring in the Westphalians. If this is anyone but them, then we’re showing good faith. And if this place is their doing, then we’ll be able to snare more of them once they try to spring this exceedingly obvious trap.

“Simon, Susie, Urg, and Charlevoix — go to the Council and bring them here. Hurry.” *If they are intercepted or betrayed and captured, at least one will make it out to bring word. Strength in numbers will also discourage any attacks of opportunity, and four will suffice to hold our ground or (at the worst) cover an escape if we are discovered.* Hyori, Tonks, and Esther remained with Hermione.

Tonks went over to the Slytherin tapestry on the wall, and held it aside for the other three. “And here it is,” she said, gesturing within a room with a low ceiling that was completely empty.

“What?” Hyori said, looking around. She was still limping slightly, and she looked cross.

“*Aparecium*,” cast Esther, flicking her wand back and forth. A white paneled door with a golden doorknob in the shape of a snake’s head and three stone pedestals shimmered into view as the concealment was dispelled. Each pedestal had parchment and quill sitting on it.

“Told you so,” Tonks said.



On the first stone pedestal: *“Change my beginning, and subtract my end and all color, and chase me away for good.”*

On the second stone pedestal: *“Grindelwald’s fall less Urg’s fall less price of Tower’s rise.”*

On the third stone pedestal: *“What have I got in my pocket?”*



NOTE: I am aware of the flaws in this sort of security. Please think before pointing them out to me. Levels and levels.

NOTE: The foam used is based on the foams described in U.S. Patent 4,202,279 by Peter Rand.

NOTE: This will never be revealed in the story, and it’s probably impossible to independently deduce, so I’ll just tell you: “Maschaechgo” is the phonetic spelling for the word for “red” in one of the Native American Algonquin languages, Mahican. These redcaps were captured in the Berkshires in Western Massachusetts, nowhere near Boston, and they still speak the old language they crudely appropriated from the first humans they knew.

Interlude

War

Does the end justify the means? That is possible. But what will justify the end? To that question, which historical thought leaves pending, rebellion replies: the means.

— *Albert Camus, The Rebel*

Nurmengard, Győr-Moson, Hungary April 30th, 1945 c.e.

Reg Hig had been afraid all throughout the war against Grindelwald. It was a deep and abiding fear that sat in his stomach like a stone, soured his mouth into a grimace, and left him checking and re-checking the wards compulsively. But he went anyway. He was scared and he was always exhausted and he would sometimes vomit in nervous heaves until his mouth burned with bile, but he went anyway.

If he'd had a choice, he probably wouldn't have gone. But he'd been compelled by pride and ambition, and so he had volunteered with forty other Americans to join the war against the mad Hungarian. It was the only way he could have a future in the Council. Even at that time, he'd led a sizeable contingent of the egalitarian wing, but it was clear that no coward could ever rise to great power. His father's generation had proven their mettle against centaurs and giants in the west, serving as rangers over vast swaths of territory to enforce the Statute of Secrecy. But those days were past, thanks to vigilance and genocides. So in Hig's time, mighty heroes fought Dark Lords and Ladies. Gellert

Grindelwald was the darkest of Dark Lords anyone had ever seen, untouchable in his mastery and unstoppable in his cruelty. If Hig had failed to volunteer, it would have been a black mark on the family name.

But he was afraid, and had been since the moment he'd read about the Anschluss — when he'd realized the shape of things to come. And he'd known from the start, even then, that it would do no good to try to hide it. And so he'd owned it.

Before the raids and with every battle, he'd proclaimed his own terror to his allies. Hig had shouted out his fear, and then said he was going to fight anyway. If he could do it, then by Mukwooru's toe, they could damn well join him and fight by his side. Fear meant nothing, he would declare, and then he would roar out about all the things they were trying to preserve, and roar about the twisted villainy of Grindelwald's "greater good." He would roar for them to follow him, and then they would leap to their broomsticks and surge into the air and their hearts would sing with fire.

Today had been different.

After the plans had been made, and he'd shaken hands with Albus and Fu-min and Dominique and Astrid, Hig had turned to the Westphalians and Argentines and Brazilians, all of whom were now under his command, and he had said nothing. He'd just looked each of them in the eye in turn. When you needed to say something good and true — when you needed the best words — he'd long ago learned that each person had to write those words for themselves. Hig met their gazes, and looked at them steadily for a meaningful moment, and he knew that they each found their own song. And he had found that there was no longer any fear in his own heart. There was just a deep calm.

Even Limpel Tineagar had been solemn and appreciative today, and she was the most annoying witch he'd ever met. Normally, no plan was good enough for her, no leader was smart enough for her, and no speech was inspiring enough for her. He'd barely known her when they left for Europe last year, having spoken to the tall, half-blooded witch only during Council debates, and he almost wished that was still true. She took nothing on faith, and she never seemed to stir with a flicker of passion. But today she had clasped his hand and kissed him on the cheek.

Today they were all heroes, and that would be true even if they didn't see tomorrow.

Hig was flying at the rear of the ragged formation, high over Hungary. They'd started off in a neat V, but it had degraded to a shapeless mass as they struggled to keep up with Momo. Momo was the pacer, and so he had to keep up a steady and unflagging maximum speed on his broom. Three hours and twelve minutes of flight from their Austrian origin should bring them directly over Nurmengard... but only if Momo kept at top speed.

Clouds blew past, above and below. A dense floor of puffy cumulonimbus anvils and a wispy ceiling of cirrus scratchings. Hig wondered if you could practice *neladoracht* from *within* the clouds, and if so, what their fortunes would be today. This would be a day of beginnings and endings... but whose beginning, and whose ending?

They were something like twenty thousand feet above the ground, breathing easily and staying warm with magical assistance, but Hig was still relieved when Momo brought his broom to a swift halt. Most of the Americans overshot him and had to swing back around. They gathered around Momo, many flexing stiff fingers or shifting in their perches.

Two groups of six separated out from the rest, sorting themselves into Aleph Group and Beth Group. The others divided themselves into groups of twelve: Gimel and Daleth Groups. It was difficult to speak — something about the way the sound traveled through the intervening air between two Bubblehead Charms distorted it badly — but it had all been arranged beforehand at Dumbledore's direction. The Americans were here to destroy the Dogs, and so very much depended on their success.

At Hig's hand signal, all four groups shifted their positions and began swooping downwards in widespread formations, and the assault was on.

It took about fifteen minutes to descend. Several of them kept up protection spells, while others worked on keeping them as hidden as possible, while still others tried to pry a clear way through the detectors as they were encountered. They met success in all three tasks — not surprising, considering the assembled might of the American expeditionary force and their careful preparation for the day's attack.

Soon, Nurmengard was in sight, jutting into the sky at them like an accusing finger. The fortress was a single thick tower of black stone, square and solid, topped with a ziggurat. It was built into the face of a cliff, overlooking wide plains of grass. Giant natural statues of karst from Bükk sat lumpily in the fields around Nurmengard; the bulbous grey rock formations might normally have been beautiful, but in this context they seemed eerie and organic.

Hig's gaze was drawn to a sky-platform that hung in the air over the fortress. There was a guard, and Hig saw when the man noticed them. Curses rained down and took the sentry down, but not before he raised the alarm. That was all right, though. That was the plan.

Within a few minutes they were within a hundred yards of Nurmengard, and the guards — the Hírnökei — were pouring out. The four squads separated, moving to assigned places. Gimel Group and Daleth Group (Hig's own) engaged. They swooped in and out, diving as if they were Seekers, and dodged curses. The Americans concentrated on their defenses, working together to support shields. As was usual, each of them had paired off with an attacker in that odd instinctive way that happened during a battle, and the matches appeared to be even ones for the most part. Stunners whipped up and down, and a few found their marks. When the Americans were able, they cast *Deprimo* on the ground around their attackers, trying to disrupt footing and generate mayhem, and several of the witches in Gimel also began emptying out mokeskin pouches full of Bluebell Flames. The Hírnökei spent some time in attacking with *Fumos* and other gaseous effects, perhaps not realizing their attackers had Bubblehead Charms on or perhaps hoping to disrupt their vision, before settling down to more traditional stunners. They had the red handprint insignia of the Veres Kezek on their robes, so perhaps they were too used to murdering Muggles: the "Red Hands" had been last deployed to Poland, as far as Hig knew, and they had left that area a bloody ruin.

Meanwhile, Aleph and Beth went to the side of Nurmengard that rose straight from the cliff below. Hig saw them swoop away from the corner of his eye as he swerved his broom to avoid a curse.

No defenders could come out on that side to try to curse them, and there were no windows. As long as they kept very low and close to the wall, they'd be almost completely obscured. Nurmengard was magnificent and terrifying, but it was not originally designed to be a military base, and its design had shortcomings. Aleph and Beth were trying to take advantage of that to breach the fortress walls, as though they intended to storm the fortress by that route.

Fifteen minutes later, which seemed like an eternity of swerving and casting and screaming, Aleph and Beth Groups both flew back into sight, soaring up from below the cliff's edge to catch the defenders by surprise. They took down three or four, although that still left at least twenty.

This was supposed to be the signal for Gimel to disengage, but they'd already lost five of their number. Gimel's leader, Momo, shot out red sparks as he flew. He corkscrewed to avoid a cascade of curses from the duo of Hírnökei that he had been fighting, and the red sparks pinwheeled out behind him, flittering brightly. It was the signal for Daleth to take Gimel's place. Hig immediately broke off the fight, along with the seven remaining members of Daleth Group. From wherever they were on the battlefield, they flew to Nurmengard's roof.

There were still two guards there, firing at the attackers; Grindelwald was cautious. Hig and several others on Daleth flew up the wall, holding tight to its side. They were to the top and over the edge before the guards could react. One brandished his wand and shouted, "Állj!" Hig thought that meant "stop." He did not oblige.

It wasn't a pretty fight — at least one of the guards was unusually skilled, firing curses with remarkable rapidity, while the other guard was actually willing to cast the Killing Curse. Even in war, that was unusual, and despite outnumbering the guards four to one, Hig lost another of his soldiers before it was done.

Hig assessed Daleth Group quickly. Seven total, including himself. Almost all Westphalians, including Tineagar, Sammy Shohet, and three others. One Argentine had also made it to this point: a skinny and handsome bald man with a toothbrush mustache. Hig couldn't remember his name — the chaos had cleared it right out of his head. Didn't matter.

They were inside in moments. Dumbledore had been able to tell them about much of the layout — who knew how he'd found out — and so they knew that it was only a short flight of stairs down to a large and defensible storage room. There was a door, but it was unenchanted, and so Hig's group blew it apart and stormed in. There was no one else there, although surely that would soon change. The outside war and the diversionary attacks at the base of the fortress might have given them some breathing room to breach, but there was a limit to how effective that could be. It was the best advantage that highly mobile attackers could wield against stationary defenders, but the Hírnökei were here in force: perhaps the whole of the Veres Kezek and maybe another squad like the Záh Kardja, besides.

Hig, the Argentinian, and Shohet took up guarding position at the other door, reinforcing it and putting up hasty wards. Tineagar and the other four knelt and touched their wands to the fitted stone underfoot. They put their free hands on their neighbors' shoulders, so that the five of them were interlocked in a pentagon. They began casting.

Nurmengard was harnessed to a ley line, and that power fairly thrummed through the building. It was a mighty work, enacted by one of the most powerful wizards in the world and his ablest lieutenants, but it was also limited. Almost all of the ley energy went into the enchantments that prevented time-turning, apparating, and any transfiguration of the fortress walls. It was a seat of power and a prison... but it was no Wizengamot or Qufu. It had weaknesses.

There was shouting from the other side of the door in angry Hungarian. “Dögölj meg! Rothadjanak ki az anyád szemei!” Hig didn't understand much of it... definitely ordering him to die like an animal, and something about his mother. Curses smashed into the door, along with disenchantments. The wood glowed red in spots, and blackened in others, but Shohet countered with a Flame-Freezing Charm, and Hig put up another *Colloportus*. They needed to hold for at least a few minutes, but it was just going to get harder with every second.

“Guests are knocking!” Hig shouted at the quintet kneeling in the room behind him, as he froze the door hinges in place with

Immobulus to stop a Hírnöke from blasting them free. There was no reply, and he probably shouldn't have said anything. If they could hear him, they could hear the curses, anyway.

"A nagyobb jó érdekében!" came the cry from the other side of the door. Their slogan, which every combatant knew by now: "for the greater good."

There was silence from the other side of the door, so Hig and Shohet simultaneously sealed off any cracks above, below, or through the door with an immediate and hastily conjured wall of iron. If your opponent was silent, then they were probably transfiguring something nasty that would drown you in your own blood with noxious gas.

They never found out if they'd been right, or if the Hírnökei were just deciding what to try next, because Tineagar and the other four suddenly succeeded in charming the floor beneath them. One moment, the seven members of Daleth Group were trying to guard a door, and the next... well, it was as though the floor dropped right out from under them without actually moving. The Butterball Charm was weak, but it was enough so that all seven of them and all of the storage lockers in the room slipped right through a floor that was suddenly too liquid to support them. There was a tremendous crash and painful thump as everything and everyone in the room dropped down through seven feet of fitted stone right into the room below.

This was their objective. A direct fight to bring them to this point would have taken hours and gone through three defensive chokepoints, if they could have done it at all. Dumbledore had said that a quick swim would be easier, and he had been right. He had also been right about what was in the room: seven orange crystal balls, spangled with glowing red stars. Satomi's Dogs, spoken of in legend and acquired by Grindelwald at a terrible cost.

Dumbledore was wrong about one thing, though. He'd said that Grindelwald would trust no one with access to this room, but there were three people waiting there.

One of the defending Hírnökei was crushed by a storage locker, hammered into the stone wetly, but the others barely even paused in their surprise. Instinct took over, and the defenders — Záh Kardja, as Hig had thought — attacked. They got off three curses

in a matter of moments, while Hig was still struggling to find his wand in a slurry of liquid stone.

“Stupefy! Stupefy!”

“Avada Kedavra!”

Shohet fell, stunned and then murdered in quick succession. The Argentinian fell stunned. Hig found his wand, as did another member of Daleth, but it was still too slow.

“Stupefy!”

“Stupefy! Stupefy!”

The Latinate curses had the raw accent of Hungarian, but they were no less effective. Attackers dropped stiffly to the ground. By his count, only Hig was left. Still, only one person was needed to smash these damn crystal balls. He raised his wand and successfully cursed one of the two defenders, *“Stupefy!”*, and then turned his wand to cast again in quick succession.

Not quick enough. The other Hírnöke hit him with an *Immobulus* in the same instant, and Hig felt his body stiffen. He leaned to the side, caught in an awkward position with one arm thrust forward, and felt himself tilt until he came to a rest against the wall, still upright. The Hírnöke must be a Legilimens, and want quick answers, Hig thought, cursing inwardly. He was not a Occlumens, and couldn't close his eyes while frozen.

The Hírnöke stalked over to him. She was a nasty-looking woman. Not that Hig thought he was any prize, but this witch had long curving scars all across her face. They looked like punishment, but she had the sword emblem of the Záh Kardja: they might be a point of pride.

“Véget vetnék minden szenvedésnek. Megállítanátok minket? Bolondok,” she spat at him through cleft lips. He had not the faintest idea what that meant, and he couldn't have answered if he'd wanted to. His heart sank. If Satomi's Dogs remained intact, then everything was lost.

“Expelliarmus!” called a voice Hig recognized as Tineagar's. He'd miscounted.

The Hírnöke's wand was ripped from her fingers and soared over to Tineagar, who was still rising to her feet. The American snapped it neatly out of the air, and darted her wand in Hig's direction just long enough to *Innervate* him. Hig went sprawling against the wall, choking on a magically-sustained breath.

“Hig, you okay?” Tineagar called, leveling her wand back on the Záh Kardja.

“Yes,” he gasped. “Don’t wait, just do it *now!*” Every second they delayed was another second that Grindelwald was channeling power through these crystals. Hig didn’t understand how it worked — he suspected that no one but Dumbledore and Grindelwald could have even hazarded a guess — but they were some vital part to Grindelwald’s invincible strength. This was April 30th, and every part of the plan had to go correctly. It was a masterpiece of strategy and tactics, and Hig had been left in awe when Momo and Dumbledore had devised it, but it would all fail unless they destroyed Satomi’s Dogs. No time for discussion.

“*Reducto!*” cast Tineagar, leveling her wand at one of the Dogs. It exploded into pinkish glass dust as the blue bolt struck it, destroyed in a moment. Tineagar paused to gather her strength into her tall and thin body, then moved from one Dog to the next, destroying each of the seven in turn, as quickly as she could.

Above them, Hig heard an explosion. But it didn’t matter that the rest of the attackers were soon to be storming down upon them, since Tineagar had just turned and obliterated the last of the crystal balls. Hig readied himself, even as the Hírnöke snarled something completely foreign, heavy with bitterness. “Láttuk a jóslatokat és tudjuk, hogy még győzni fogunk. Lesz egy ember akit a villám megjelölt és ő kioltja majd a csillagokat.”

Tineagar cut off any more chatter from the Hungarian with a curt stunner, then turned to Hig. “We did it.”

“Yes. But it will, I think, be the last thing we do.” Hig moved to a corner of the room. They’d have to drop down to get him, and he’d get a clear shot at the first one at least. He wished they had the time and strength to revive their frozen friends, but that would just leave them unable to defend themselves when the attack came.

As she mimicked him and moved to a different corner, Tineagar said, “It was worth it.” She glanced at the stunned enemies. “I can’t abide this nonsense about the ends justifying the means... about how they want to fix everything, so all the murder and madness is worth it.” Tineagar raised her wand, and set her features grimly. “I don’t care what kind of good you think you’re

going to do, and I don't care what kind of person you think you are. It's your actions that matter, not your goals. To the pit with tyrants and all their people."

Her kind of irreducible skepticism had its uses. He shouldn't have been so hasty to judge her. Not that it mattered, now.

"Hello? Reg? Sammy?"

Hig blinked. He called up, surprised, "Momo?"

"Yes!" called his ally. "Get up here — we can't block the corridor much longer! We need to form a line of defense!"

But before he'd even finished speaking, Hig and Tineagar were beginning to *Innervate* the fallen (except for poor Shohet) as quickly as they could manage. That wasn't very quickly at all, given their exhaustion, but it was fast enough that six witches and wizards were able to join their comrades before the Hírnökei could break through to them.

The Americans' blood was up, and they roared their anger when the Hírnökei came — the remains of Veres Kezek and Záh Kardja. The Hírnökei shouted their own fanatical screams in return. And there was war. Bloody and bitter war, fought in the halls of Nurmengard and atop its battlement. Many died that day, and others would long bear the curse scars for years to come. You probably know the rest of the story — or at least, you know the romantic parts about Dumbledore and Grindelwald, and how ambition soured into madness, and love curdled after a single tragic accident. Certainly, you know about the great duel between the two. It is said to be the greatest duel ever yet fought, justly citing the long hours over which it ceaselessly raged, the unstoppable force of Dumbledore's skill, and the immovable object of Grindelwald's defenses.

Grindelwald held the Elder Wand, and was sustained by Satomi's Dogs, and guarded by the Iron Halo. While it is known that he stole the Elder Wand from Mykew Gregorovitch, it is not yet known how he came by his other great devices. But they were all powerful, and they preserved him against all ills, like an unbreachable barrier a hundred metres high.

There are twenty-eight books about Grindelwald's War, seven books about the rivalry and lives of Dumbledore and Grindelwald, and three books just about that single duel. And yet it is certain

that he would never have fallen, Dumbledore notwithstanding — *all else* notwithstanding — had the Americans not succeeded in breaching Nurmengard and destroying Satomi's Dogs.

Reg Hig learned something about Limpel Tineagar that day. He learned about her steel, and he learned her value. And Hig took her words about the “greater good” to heart, too. He would remember them.

Opposition

—Lord Voldemort

I wish that our results had more practical application. The Umbridge Snare is a useful plant for spell research in the future, I admit to that. A laboratory set within a solarium where the vines are growing in abundance would be an excellent place for inquiries into the most delicate charms, where no interference could be tolerated from local warding. But time spent on that research was time we could have spent on more important things, like weapons. Once everyone and everything are sorted out, and there is no more nastiness, then we'll have time for foolish little plants.

$\Omega = \{1, 2, \dots, n\}$, $n \geq 1$. Let $\mathcal{C}(\Omega)$ denote the set of all continuous functions from Ω to \mathbb{R} .

$$\odot \quad -1 \quad -1 + 1 = 0 \qquad -1 + 1 // III = 1 \qquad I = 1 \qquad -1 + 1 = 0$$

1 0 1

2

look for anything unusual. No, wait. Look for anything unusual, and if you don't find anything, *take a really close look at all the usual things.*"

She paused, on the verge of contradicting herself because *maybe that was what they wanted her to do, and there would be an ambush in here or out there or...*

"Wait a second."

Stop. You can afford to take the time to think about this for a minute. Any trap that relies on us being right here is one that could have been laid anywhere, including the tavern's main room, and there would be no way to predict when exactly we would be here. We're probably not in immediate danger. Stop and think, don't just react.

This setup has been clever and erudite, but controlled. They already have some way to control the redcaps, and the little monsters weren't that dangerous — blunt trauma against a gang of witches and a wizard, plus me? Well, and Urg, but still... if you want to make a deadly trap, then you fill that hole with acid-spitting spiders or vermicious knids or whatever. Or just a bomb, for that matter, these days...

Hermione felt like events were out-of-control... like there were hidden forces just beyond the edge of her understanding. It was like playing a game she didn't understand... there was some sort of pattern taking place according to unknown rules, but she couldn't make a move when she was unable to perceive the goals.

So why the goons, the redcaps, and now the riddles?

Oh.

"The first letter of the name has been uttered..." she said, distantly.

"I think I know what -" Tonks began.

Hermione cut her off, snapping back to the situation. "No, don't. Sorry. And forget what I said a moment ago. Sorry, but it's important. We're leaving." *If the trigger to the next level of this trap is auditory, we don't need to be chatting about the riddles right here. We should have already been out of here.*

Tonks didn't look offended, but instead grinned hugely. "Ahhh... you figured something out, didn't you?" Esther scowled at her, and put a finger to her lips.

Hyori stepped out of the Actually Quite Clever Trap Room cautiously, wand high. The pub was just like they left it, and they stood to one side of the wreckage after a cautious scan of the room.

As they walked out, warily and quickly, Tonks' hair shortened and turned pale blonde. "Do tell me," she said, with a deeper voice than usual, "how you have seen through my plottings and plannings, you bloodmud girl."

Hermione didn't answer, but did smile. As they stepped out of the Armin Arms, she glanced around quickly. No one in sight.

"Tonks, do you remember how either of the men at the table inside looked?" *Damn, why did we send them to the Tower? Should we call and get them to show us?*

"Pretty near," Tonks said. "I have a good memory for faces. So what's up?" Her own was already broadening and coarsening, pores on her nose widening and eyes developing heavy bags.

"One, two, three, four," Hermione counted. "What comes next?"

"Five," Hyori answered.

"No. But if you wanted to get someone to say something, that would be the way to do it. Especially if what really came next was '*Pequod* turnip' or something else impossible to just guess," Hermione said. She indicated the Armis Arms with one gauntlet-golden finger. "This is a trap."

"Not a good enough one," Esther said, scowling.

"No, the very best," Hermione said, shaking her head. "If you're not looking for it, you'll never find it. If you find it, you'll either be stunned and memory-charmed, or beaten unconscious and memory-charmed..."

"And if you make it through both," Tonks said, "Then there's a very obvious next step with schoolchild riddles. And writing on the parchment turns you into a newt or something."

"Yes, precisely, the next step is way *too* obvious! A 'textbook secret entrance.' It would get most people, especially people ready to complete an expected pattern: defeat the boss and solve the riddle, and then, *voila!*" She swept her arm around. "Only I bet this *voila* is a stunner or memory-charm. It's like a story I once read, about a detective who thinks he's found a pattern."

"I think you're right," Esther said.

“But I think that this goes another level deeper. When I imagine myself trying to design this whole trap, I think about how anyone with *serious* sense isn’t going to take the bait. They’re going to do the smarter thing. What we did. What I did, without thinking. Thugs, redcaps, riddles... and one final trap.”

“Call for backup,” said Esther, nodding. “But why assume it goes any deeper? Maybe you’re just smarter than everyone else.”

“The redcaps were clever and showed considerable thought... it seems unlikely our opponent is at that level. And anyway, we don’t lose anything by waiting for the backup and taking one small precaution,” Hermione replied, shrugging. “But here is my prediction: the Council — or whoever answers the request of our four when they get there — is going to send just a few people.”

“For this? When we were just attacked?” Tonks said, patting his round belly with one hand idly, while scratching his unshaven chin with the other. He pulled off his gauntlet, feeding it into his pouch.

“They’ll have a plausible story,” Hermione said confidently. “And if I’m wrong...” She shrugged. “We lose nothing and I just look a little silly. I can live with that.”

Hyori and Esther were already nodding in agreement with her judgment. Tonks shrugged.

I have been stupid, Hermione thought. I didn’t understand the game or the moves or anything about what’s going on. But there is one question I can ask: who am I playing against?

“Then there’s just one thing to do first,” Hermione said.



Simon, Susie, Urg, and Charlevoix did not return with anyone. They didn’t return at all.

Instead, thirty minutes after the four had been dispatched to the Alping, there was a trio of popping sounds in the street. It was scant yards from where Hermione stood with Hyori and Esther.

A bloody and battered Limpel Tineagar and two American aurors had appeared. The robes on Tineagar’s spidery limbs were not simply worn: they were bloody rags. Her breasts were exposed through the shredded front, and long cuts arced across her chest

and neck. There was a red stump where her left ear had once been. Her wand was in her hand, and her teeth were bared.

The two aurors with Tineagar were in worse shape. Hermione didn't recognize them. The one on the left was slightly taller, with a hook nose and long hair in a braid. His clothing had been burned, and the fabric along his left side was black and stiff with intermingled ash and the scorched gore of his own damaged flesh. He stood unconcerned and cool, wand at alert as well, and his eyes already flickering around them. His companion was average in height, with thick hands. His face was bruised and bloody, and he looked to have been beaten — his eyes were purpling and swelling enough that it looked as though he could barely see. But even he was ready for a fight, with the hardened look of a man who'd fought dangerous creatures and frenzied Euphorics.

These Americans were made of stern stuff.

"Councilor!" Hermione called, running towards them and lowering her shield. Her long strides outpaced Esther and Hyori easily, and she was at Tineagar's side in a moment. "Jesus! What happened?!"

Tineagar ignored Hermione's instinctive Muggle curse of surprise, and used one hand to gather up the remains of her robes in front of her into a bunch, to cover herself. The other hand kept her wand up, as the Westphalian swept it over the street, looking for a threat. "Ms. Granger, are you all right? Were you attacked?" Her voice was urgent and hoarse.

What happened? I wanted to flush out my opponent... did someone attack the Alping?! An attack on such a scale wouldn't just bring a further investigation... it might bring a war. And had the others been caught up in it? Were the other Returned all right?

Hermione touched her wand to the witch's shoulder. "There was an ambush here, yes. *Vulnera Sanentur. Reparo.* Did you see my people? Simon, Susie, Urg, and Charl -"

"We must get inside," Tineagar said, cutting her off. "It's not safe out here. Oh Merlin... we've been attacked. It was Malfoy. They had Blastbombs..."

Hermione felt her stomach turn, but she turned to glance at Hyori and Esther, indicating with a nod of her head that they

should help the two aurors. She herself gave support to Tineagar, putting an arm around the witch's waist. Tineagar looked a little better now that Hermione had healed her a bit and repaired her garments, but this was disaster. Should they portkey out? No, not without finding out what happened to the others.

All six of them rushed inside the Armin Arms, one of the aurors bringing up the rear, his wand out and ready for trouble.

"Wait," Hermione said, as they re-entered the pub. This place had been trapped — was *still* probably trapped — and it was a terrible place to take shelter. A low mound of grey bubbled foam still sat like a giant mushroom in the center of the room, studded with stunned redcaps, and one of the wizards who'd ambushed them lay slumped along the wall. They needed to at least Apparate to a safehouse, if not clear over to London. She hadn't been thinking clearly — there was not the slightest reason to stay here. She'd bubble for reinforcements and

"Stupefy."

Colors returned first, swirling in smears. There was a rubble of sounds, meaningless bumbles that she knew must be words. It was an unknowable time before the colors became shapes, and the sounds became words.

"...say who it was. If it was a Brit, we'll need to take action, soon. But we're all set up here, already... we shouldn't move them outside of the wards unless we absolutely must. Only our trusted people even know about this place, and I don't think anyone knows they're here."

Stunned. They stunned me.

It couldn't have been long ago... she didn't stun easily and it wore off quickly. Something about the regeneration... enchanted cells were replaced with new ones at a significant rate, maybe — it was hard to keep her down. Although she still couldn't move a muscle. They'd done something else while she was out.

It was Tineagar speaking.

Well, I wanted to flush out my opponent. And I said that this would happen... a "plausible story." Why didn't I stop and think? I

made a prediction... why didn't I stick to it? I predicted exactly this very thing, and I still fell for the trick. Just because they roughed themselves up a little bit, I acted according to a script. Stupid, stupid. Is Tineagar with Malfoy? Is she acting alone? Is this a move by the Council?

Hermione strained herself to move, willing her toes to wiggle. Nothing happened. She put a convulsive mental effort into it. *Move move move MOVE.* Not a twitch. She couldn't even figure out what they'd done to her. There were a half-dozen spells that rendered the victim immobile.

"Bring them here. Do it directly," Tineagar said.

A male voice answered her. One of the aurors? "Yes, ma'am. It'll take me a few minutes to bring all four of them, though. We can't Apparate out, but —"

"No, no," Tineagar said. "I'll hook up the Floo here, and you can bring them directly. I know the *agenspræc* to Greater Boston, and I can link it up downstairs in no time. We won't leave a trace."

A trace...

Far too late, Hermione realized: *I could have checked for fingerprints on that jar of Floo powder. I am stupid.*

Tineagar went on. "Go and wait in my office. You and Horvath keep anyone from going in, and send the four Brits through, once I signal you through the Floo. Stun the Goddess again before you go. Better safe than sorry."

"Stupefy."



Colors... shapes...

Hermione was awake again. She blinked, then did it again. She could move. She was lying on her side, on the floor. Somewhere.

Her left arm, right leg, and her sides tingled. She recognized the sensation of new-healed wounds. They'd found her implants and taken them out. It made sense they might find the Ultimate Ulna and the portkeys, but how had they found the batballs? She and Harry had tested them, and she'd thought that only the Tower's magic detector was sensitive enough to find them.

Hermione glanced around. They were in a brick-walled room with a low ceiling. There was a long and narrow table with

a dozen stools around it. Her belongings were resting on the table. Pouches, two wands, portkeys, batballs, gauntlet, and other miscellaneae. Hyori and Esther were along one wall, still stunned, lying on top of each other unceremoniously. Next to them was the figure of one of the drunks who'd ambushed them, sitting up and leaning against the wall, but still apparently unconscious. Limpel Tineagar and one of the aurors — the one with the hook nose and braid — were standing next to a fireplace. Tineagar was bent down slightly, and had her wand resting on the stone of the fireplace. She was muttering to herself. The auror was watching Hermione. He smirked when he saw her looking.

This was some sort of meeting room or local headquarters. There was stacked parchment, boxes of potion components, and other odds and ends. The local meeting place for the Malfoy faction? She didn't see anything to hint at a larger purpose.

She shifted a bit. She was no longer paralyzed, but she was bound tightly in place. Looking down, she saw tight black cords wrapped around the length of her body. Her arms were pinned against her so firmly that she couldn't do more than wiggle her fingers. Her legs were cocooned with the black cording. *Incarcerous* ropes, conjured on her multiple times.

"Cou —" Hermione's voice warbled. She swallowed and tried again. "Councilor Tineagar, have you lost your mind?"

"Ms. Granger, you're awake." Tineagar didn't turn around, but continued casting, wand on the fireplace. "I have some questions for you. Just one moment, and I'll be right with you."

"Councilor," Hermione said. She was anxious over her Returned — *please be okay, please be okay* — and angry over the betrayal and utterly confounded about this situation, and she let all of that emotion into her voice. "Turn around."

Tineagar lifted her wand and straightened, turning to face her captive. Her face was sour, mouth tight.

"You're in command of yourself," Hermione said, eyeing her. "This is you." It wasn't a question.

"Yes, Ms. Granger," Tineagar said, sighing. "This is me. And believe me when I say that I am sorry about this. This was not..." She paused. She had always looked pale, but now she looked even whiter than usual. "There was no alternative. And things could

be much worse. You and your people are all safe. You will be memory-charmed, and no worse the wear. We'll add a few things, of course... to help you serve the right cause."

Tineagar shook her head, wonderingly. "I thought that they were being paranoid when they said that anyone could get past our traps here... the goons, the redcaps, and the riddles. But I see that they were right, and that's why we've got a captive Goddess. But you won't be harmed."

Hermione didn't say anything. She just glowered at Tineagar.

The American went on. "We would already have done those alterations and let you go, in fact, except that two of my men are missing." She gestured with her wand at the unconscious drunk leaning against the wall. "I need to know where you have them."

Hermione shifted herself so that she rolled onto her back, and then sat up. Her bonds tightened at the motion, and she felt them strain and bite into her. She ignored the discomfort, which was trivial. The auror was already covering her with his wand, and Tineagar lifted her own slightly.

Do I tell her that she's already lost? I need to make sure they don't do anything desperate... what would serve my purpose better: confidence or fear? Hm. Tineagar has been very contrary, which might come from arrogance or insecurity. Reportedly a high achiever, but that doesn't provide evidence either way. Hard to say which would succeed. I should start with intimidating her, though. It's easy to go from intimidation to cowering, but a lot harder to go the other way.

Hermione could probably kip up from this position, but it would be difficult. Better not to risk her dignity yet. "I don't see any reason to tell you that."

Tineagar rubbed her eyes with her free hand. "I'm not going to pretend that I'm willing to torture you or yours. Even if I would do that sort of thing, I've seen your mettle... I don't think you'd break. And I know for a mortal fact that none of your insane little group would make a peep."

Scruples. In someone willing to murder an innocent like Tarleton? Unless she didn't order that, or she's not the boss, or it was a mistake. She's proudly taking an ethical stance, here... let's see if I can goad her into self-righteousness.

"You didn't... seem like you were that kind of person," Hermione said, cautiously. * Be dumb, let her correct you and supply information. This has to be hard on her... push it. Tineagar's not a plotter, not subtle... she's a born lieutenant. A Gryffindor, not a Ravenclaw or Slytherin.* "Not that we've known each other long, but when we were discussing Tarleton's murder — but wait, *you* were behind that... you were the one who killed him... you're a murderer..."

As Hermione pushed it a bit further with each phrase, probing for a response, she saw Tineagar's face twist in disgust at Hermione's fake process of "realization."

"That was the *Malfoys*, not us!" Tineagar said, her lip curling. The auror standing next to her walked across the room, separating himself from Tineagar. An abundance of caution... he wanted a clear shot and a crossfire on Hermione, just in case. He did not seem won over by Hermione's aura of innocence, even though she was bound and helpless and it should be accentuated. Maybe they'd discussed it while she was out.

So this was a Council stronghold, after all. That had implications. If Hermione escaped — no longer a safe assumption, now — she'd have to live in fear for her Returned, or else pit them against one of the most powerful magical organizations in the world. The Council of Westphalia was in effective control of more than one *government*. Or it could be war, if magical Britain acted to protect one of its most beloved popular figures. A magical world war.

Her dread of the possibilities must have shown on her face. Under the circumstances, it was probably easy to misinterpret.

"Yes, your friend, Draco Malfoy... he murdered that boy," Tineagar said. "He murdered his own *agent*. He must have known we'd discovered that the boy was an infiltrator. And that blood is on your hands, too."

"His own agent," Hermione repeated, slowly. "Tarleton was passing out information. That's why the Floo powder was in that room, even though there was a Flounder." She wriggled in place, trying to work some blood down to her bound extremities. The ropes were digging deeply into her.

Tineagar's eyes widened. "That is... Merlin's beard, yes." Her eyes narrowed, and she stared suspiciously at Hermione. "You *are* clever."

“Not so clever. Tarleton and Kemp... hah. I get it, now. Stupid of me — a British Muggleborn with a good education should have figured it out immediately. Stupid of *them*, for playing those risky games,” Hermione said. She didn’t clarify for Tineagar when the American witch looked puzzled. “Well, then. We’re at an impasse. How about a trade?”

“I very much doubt you have anything to offer me, actually,” Tineagar returned. “I want you to tell me where you have my men because it’s the *right thing to do*. I have no choice but to wipe your memory of this whole debacle... my hands are tied. With or without them, you’ll forget all of this. And wherever you’ve put my men, you’ve surely tied them up or caged them or something. If you don’t tell me where they are, they’ll be trapped wherever you have them, until they die.”

Do I tell her that they’re already at the Tower? That there’s no hope of keeping this affair a secret? What will her reaction be... will she act desperately? No. She’s been through enough that she’ll keep a cool head. But neither is she soft enough to surrender, once she finds that out.

No, she’ll wipe our memories. That will be the best course of action... it gives her deniability. No one will really want a war, so things will settle out with distrust. The Council’s plan — whatever it is — will continue.

It was a pity she couldn’t signal to her future self that she’d been memory-charmed. They’d probably put back all of her belongings, and her wounds would heal... she’d never even know that all this happened.

Well, then. That leaves me no other alternatives but to act.

She glanced at the auror, who was standing across the room from her. The table was between them. All of her belongings were lying on it, including the gauntlet. It was facing away from her, and she wished she could burst free of her bonds and leap to it, sliding her hand right in and sweeping away Tineagar and the auror. But even she couldn’t break this many *Incarcerous* bonds.

So how could she do this? Two enemies, and she was unarmed. She gave herself another long second to think.

Oh.

“They’re in a secure location. My headquarters at Powis, in Britain. There’s a portkey in my garments, here. You missed it. It looks like a piece of Drooble’s Gum.”

When Hermione said “garment,” the Returned code word for “prepare for violence,” she saw the “unconscious drunk” lying next to Hyori and Esther move his hand incrementally, sliding it behind his back. She knew there was a wand hidden there. Tonks was ready.

“Get it. Be careful,” Tineagar ordered the auror. He didn’t look like he needed to be warned. “If you try anything, remember your friends. No one wants them getting hurt in a scuffle.”

“I don’t want anyone getting hurt, ever,” Hermione said, as the auror rounded the table and approached her, “But sometimes it’s necessary.”

“The ends justify the means?” Tineagar said, scornful.

“I recently fought off your swarm of bloodthirsty redcaps, and now you’re getting ready to violate the memories of eight people, Councilor. I’m not sure you’ve taken the time to think through on your ethics, here.” Hermione said, and she couldn’t stop a laugh from escaping her lips. The auror in front of her kept his wand on her, carefully, as he approached. “Please be aware that this is probably your last chance to sort this out, before you go too far.”

“My last chance to surrender, Ms. Granger?” Tineagar said, drily. “This is not a play.”

“As I’ve occasionally had to remind a friend of mine, sometimes life imitates art,” Hermione replied. “Kavo!”

The blast of wind from the gauntlet on the table behind the auror was immense, like a hurricane had been unleashed from a bottle. As the charger spent its contents, pressurized air was released all at once. In defiance of physics, the gauntlet didn’t move in an equal and opposite way... but the auror certainly did. Caught full in the back, he was flung like a rag doll over Hermione’s head and into the wall, smashing into it like an insect. His wand was blown away, to the far end of the room away from Tineagar. The auror actually hung upright for a moment, pinned to the brick wall by the concentrated gale that was blasting forth from the gauntlet. By the time the wind died away, Hermione had struggled to her feet with a graceful jackknife, and was hopping towards the fallen wand.

Tineagar raised her wand to attack Hermione in the same moment that Tonks raised his. The American must have seen the movement out of the corner of her eye, because she threw herself forward spastically, landing on her side. Tonks tried to track her dive, but his stunner missed Tineagar's back by what looked like centimeters.

"*Drysdory!*" Tineagar cast as she landed on the floor, pointing her wand at Tonks and swirling the tip. With a crackling sound, her wand seemed to be subsumed in a wooden pole that sprouted out from within it, covering it with dark wood in a fraction of an instant. The wood erupted forward, the end of the pole sharpening to a point as it did. The spear stabbed out at Tonks' stomach like a bolt of lightning. The British witch (wizard? Tonks was still disguised) was still seated, but he was able to jerk himself to the side, and the spear struck the wall. The tip exploded in splinters with the force of the attack.

Another spell of which she'd never heard, Hermione thought with surprise as she reached the auror's fallen wand. She threw herself onto it on her side, grasping for the end. Her hands were bound to her side, but her fingers were free. *Where are these spells coming from?*

Tonks raised his wand again to attack the American, but Tineagar brought her eight-foot spear-wand down on the metamorphmagus' wand arm with as much ease as if it was still eight inches of willow — it must have no weight to her — and deflected the attack before it could even come. Then the spear retracted as if it was shrinking, and erupted forth a second time like another flash of lightning. Tonks couldn't avoid it this time, and the splintered end buried itself in his stomach.

No no no, Hermione thought, as she struggled the auror's wand into place and pointed it at herself. "*Finite Incantatem!*" she cast. But only the outermost layer of ropes vanished as Hermione's magic overcame it. She could have howled in frustration.

Tineagar moved her hand, again with remarkably little effort, and lifted her spear-wand over her head with a flicking gesture. Tonks was scraped up the bricks and then launched free, sailing into the opposite wall with a thud, unconscious. Blood trickled from his stomach, starting to pool on the floor.

Desperate, Hermione pointed the auror's wand at herself again. She closed her eyes and turned her face away. There was probably a better solution than this but *she couldn't think of it* and she had to *save Tonks*.

"Confringo!"

The explosive fire bit into her like some heat-toothed demon, and Hermione staggered from the pain that shocked through her. But the *Incarcerous* ropes had been mostly blasted or burned away, and when she wrenched her arms and legs away from her body with desperate strength, the remaining bonds snapped. She was free.

Tineagar's spear-wand seemed to have no limits on its range, however. At the moment that Hermione freed herself, she could see the wood retract and burst forth again as Tineagar brought it to bear on the Goddess. It smashed into Hermione's hand with incredible force. The appropriated wand wasn't knocked free from Hermione's inhuman grip, but the blunt and bloody splintered pole broke it against her palm in two places. It probably also broke a few bones, although the pain of the Blasting Curse drowned out anything else.

On the next attack, as the spear receded and erupted at her again, Hermione was ready. "Hok!" she grunted, as she turned to the side and brought her bunched fingers down into the spear, as it shot past her. Her blow carried through the wood, snapping it as cleanly as if her hand was a cleaver.

Tineagar gestured dexterously with the hand in which she held the wand-spear, sweeping it to the side like a long club at Hermione's head. It moved with such speed that the pole whistled. But this was not an equal fight, and Hermione caught the pole in one palm. It was a toy to her. She yanked on it with trollish strength, hoping to catch Tineagar off-guard.

The American didn't even move, as the spell just fed four more feet of dark wood out of her hand. Frustrated, Hermione whirled in place and brought her foot up with another grunt, snapping the wood once more. This was physical combat now and Hermione still wasn't winning... where the hell had this woman learned to *fight*?!

"I wish we could work together, Ms. Granger," Tineagar called, as the wood drew back to her hand once more. She held it ready, a short length of pole ready to expand and strike.

“We could have, Councilor,” Hermione said, hefting her own — non-magical — pole upright in her hands to the great banner position, ready to block an attack. She glanced at Tonks. He had regained consciousness, and was holding his hands over his stomach. Out of the fight, but he didn’t look like he was in danger.

“I can’t let the world end because of the Tower, nor can I let the villains win,” the American said. Her thin face looked pained. “I didn’t want to... Reg and I have been through so much. I didn’t want it to be like this. I didn’t want to be against him, not after standing at his side so many times over the years. I didn’t want to be against *magic*. But there’s no choice. I won’t accept evil, and I won’t accept destruction.”

...what?

“But if you’re... wait, if you’re not working for Malfoy *or* Hig *or* Harry... Councilor, *what is going on?!*” Hermione said, desperately.

“You’re just a pawn in this game, Goddess,” Tineagar said, and now she sounded as though her heart was breaking. “And in the end, there are really only two sides. The Council and the Tower and the Ten Thousand and every other Thing, even Malfoy’s nasty little Honourable... you’re all just doing evil, no matter what you say you want. The Three are the world’s only hope. You’re a pawn, and you’re on the wrong side.”

But if she’s not here for the Council... if Hig doesn’t know...

“Pawns are powerful when in force,” said Councilor Reg Hig, as he dismissed his Disillusionment. He was standing at the door with a dozen — no, two dozen aurors visible in a crowd behind him. His voice was strained, but firm. “And really, you’re doing Ms. Granger a disservice if you call her anything but a queen.”

There was a tingle over Hermione’s skin, as someone applied a Anti-Disapparition Jinx.

Tineagar’s face contorted with emotion. “Reg, you have to —”

“Take her into custody,” Hig said to the aurors behind him. “Take everyone into custody, and we’ll sort out the truth of this mess afterward.”

“Damn you. *Damn you, Granger,*” Tineagar snarled. “I have never seen anyone struggle so hard to help *break the world*. You snooped until you broke apart everything I’d built here, stumbling around like a blind mule.”

She twitched her fingers, and the wood encasing her wand disintegrated into sawdust, drifting down from where the pole had once jutted. Hermione felt the snapped-off length in her own hands vanish, as well. “And damn you too, Reg, if you can’t see the truth. If you can’t trust me. If you’re joining these heralds of the end.”

“You can’t —” Hig began, but Tineagar stabbed her wand at the ceiling without another word.

“*Aloofoti!*” cast the witch. There was an orange flash as though from a fiery dawn, and a horse of flames burst through the wall. It left no marks and brought no heat, crossing the room with soundless hoofbeats as swift as the flicker of a candle, and swept Tineagar out of sight in the span of a breath. She was gone.

Hermione rushed to Tonks’ side, stopping only to snatch up her wand from beneath the table where it had fallen. The metamorphmagus had passed out again. “You need to get someone on Bill Kemp, immediately. And four of my people are —”

“It’s all right, Ms. Granger,” Hig said. He had staggered over to the table and was leaning on it. Aurors bustled in behind him, checking on Hyori, Esther, and the fallen auror. “We have the other two traitors in shackles already — the auror and young Tarleton’s friend, Bill Kemp — and your Returned are unharmed.” He rubbed his unshaven face with his hands, sighing heavily. His hair was mussed; unkempt black locks. “I’m sorry it took us so long to get here... we might have taken her, if we’d gotten in sooner. There’s no excuse, since you gave me an hour’s warning, but... well, the entrance was trapped.”

For a while there, when she’d thought that the Council was behind this place, Hermione thought that it had been monumentally stupid to have time-turned back and sent a warning to Hig. But she’d thought that calling for back-up in the first place was the obvious thing to do, which meant she was probably acting predictably. So she’d had to assume that she was *expected* to call for help from the nearest authority, and that her request would be intercepted. It cost nothing to be cautious, after all.

She’d time-turned back and gone herself to ask Hig for back-up, under cover of the Cloak of Invisibility. For a while, it looked like that had been a serious mistake... if it *had* been the Council at work, all she would have done would be to give them more warning about how to trap her.

In retrospect, she should have had *everyone* go back even further and done some serious preparation. But hindsight was 20/20, and that sort of paranoia had costs. *Sorry, Alastor.*

“Ah, yes, the riddles,” Hermione said, glancing up at the Westphalian as she walked over to the table and got her pouch. She sent Tonks to the Tower, just to be safe. *Ker-chak.* “A tempting trap for a Ravenclaw, believe me. I wonder if they were written with Harry in mind, or me? ‘Nogtail,’ ‘one eighty-five,’ and ‘a ring,’ right? Did it knock you out?”

“Yes, all of us at a stroke,” Hig said. He didn’t seem embarrassed, only drained. “Who was... what is going on, Hermione?”

“I don’t know. I had thought... I didn’t know what to think,” Hermione said. She approached the table, and sat down at one of the chairs. “We’ll have to see if there’s anything here to give us more of a clue. Councilor Tineagar said that Malfoy was behind the bombing, which makes sense. Tarleton was his agent, according to her. I think I understand what was going on, there.” A quote from Lenin seemed appropriate, although the exact one escaped her at the moment. “But this room — this place — it didn’t have anything to do with Malfoy. Tineagar didn’t have anything to do with him.”

Hig made a low sound of agreement in his throat. “He is persuasive, and he makes good points. I receive *Unbreakable Honour*, and it’s made me think long and hard from time to time. But Malfoy argues from every perspective. It’s like standing in a hailstorm with a drink: sometimes you get ice cubes, but a lot of the time it just hits you wrong. And Limpel and I...” He paused for a second. “We spent a long time fighting for the rights of Muggles and other Beings. Fighting for their right to exist, for a long time. It took thirty years before we had the votes in the Council. Even if we weren’t talking about Malfoys — and Lucius Malfoy once *cursed me* — I don’t think Limpel would be persuaded.” He paused again, for a longer time, and sank down in another chair, across from Hermione. His face looked drawn, as if he’d aged ten years in the last ten minutes. “She was never easy to persuade.”

“The Three,” Hermione mused. “She said the ‘Three’ were the world’s only hope.”

Hig shook his head. “Which three? There’s no triumvirate in the Council. There’s a trio of representatives from the Sawad

to the Confederation with whom Limpel and I have tangled, on occasion, but I hardly think she's suddenly been won over to their theocratic goals. Or are these three objects? There are many artifacts of legend that came in threes... the Cauldrons of the Sallowin Sisters, the Forged Halos, the Deathly Hallows... "He grimaced. "Who or what are we talking about?"

"I don't know," said Hermione. "For years, Harry and I have been wrangling with Draco and Narcissa over politics in Britain. And now we've been working hard to resolve our differences and misunderstandings with your Council and other Things." Hig didn't comment on her euphemistic summary of the global political struggle in which they had all been locked. "I thought we knew the players... I thought coming here, today, was about flushing out some minor intrigue. I thought there was one hand behind the bombing and the British spy following us and this place."

"Limpel told you that we knew Tarleton was a spy," Hig said. Hermione nodded. Hig went on: "We'd known for a while. He was part of an... information network within the Council. We like to keep track of what's happening in the world, as best we can. Tarleton worked with sorting through information about the Muggle world, and I noticed last year that we didn't seem to know as much as we should. Key facts about important people, particular documents... the picture was incomplete. I ran some tests, and we knew the information was coming in... but we didn't have it. It stopped at Tarleton. And he wasn't the only one."

"Bill Kemp, too," Hermione said. "Both of them hired two years ago. And they weren't just destroying information... someone else was getting it. They were handing it out through the Floo."

"Yes..." Hig said, slowly. He didn't ask how she knew these things, but there was a break in the despair on his face for a moment. He was impressed, she thought.

Good. Yes... I shouldn't let this moment go to waste. We've brought this man from a certain enemy to an uneasy ally. The ground has shifted under his feet... I need to give him a firm hand on which to rely.

"We have Kemp in custody, and one of the aurors — the one who went back to the Alping to get my people?" she asked. She drummed bright fingernails on the surface of the table in front of

her, thoughtfully. *“We” have them in custody... not “you.” We’re working together.*

“Yes,” Hig said. The corner of his mouth twisted in the slightest of smiles, despite the circumstances. He knew what she was doing, she could see. He thought it was cute. Good.

“Then we have one of Malfoy’s spies. And we have four of the agents of the, um, ‘Three,’ including the ones from the pub here. And we have this room and all of its clues. Those are clear paths to start figuring these things out, which is maybe the only good news out of all of this. Tineagar and the people here had spells I’ve never seen before... she teleported out of here without Apparating!”

Hig rose to his feet. “Yes. But Ms. Granger, you should know now: this doesn’t mean that the Americas will enter into your Treaty. You might have won my trust, and my confidence in my own people might be... shaken. We might agree on many things, like Muggle rights and the status of Beings. But that doesn’t mean that we can go so far as to allow Britain to place magical devices throughout the Americas, or to enact unknown rituals on Americans to change their bodies.”

“Councilor Hig,” Hermione said, standing up as well, “One of the great advantages of honesty is that you don’t need to be afraid of closer scrutiny. We can work together to fight our common problems and advance our common interests. And maybe, in time, you’ll see that the entire program is on the level. And if it isn’t... well, a wise woman once said, ‘that which can be destroyed by the truth should be.’ If you find evil, I’ll be standing right by you to stamp it out.”

He put out his hand, and they shook.



NOTE: Below are explanations for the riddle answers. If you didn’t get them, or got a slightly different answer, don’t feel bad. Any answer at all simply caused a stunning effect, so there was no “right answer.” The only way to win was not to play.

“Change my beginning, and subtract my end and all color, and chase me away for good.”

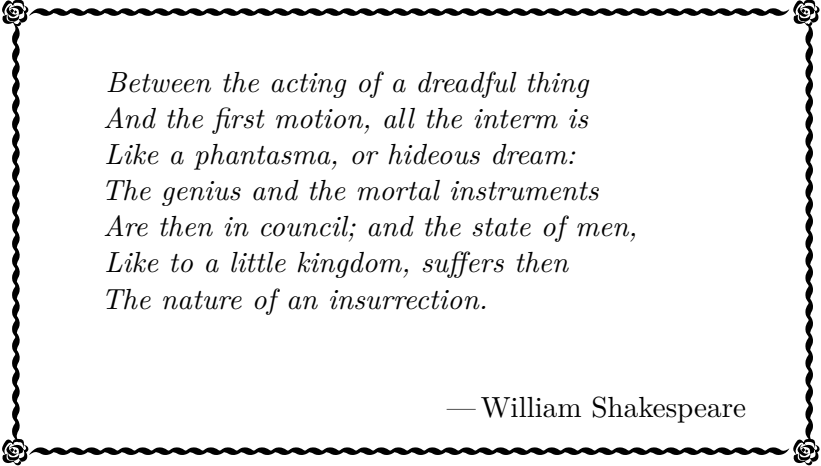
Nogtail, minus its “end” is nog. Change the first letter to dog, and make sure it’s white by taking away all color, and it can chase away nogtails. Only a pure white dog can do that, allegedly. It was an obscure bit of HP trivia, so I reminded you of it in Chapter 2.

“Grindelwald’s fall less Urg’s fall less price of Tower’s rise.”

Grindelwald fell in 1945 (as we were reminded last chapter), and Urg fell in 1722 (as we were reminded three chapters ago), and 37 Death Eaters plus Voldemort died in 1992 to lay the foundation for the Tower’s rise. Harry didn’t kill all of them, but that’s not common knowledge.

“What have I got in my pocket?”

This is a direct reference to J.R.R. Tolkien’s The Hobbit. Bilbo cheats during the riddle contest with Gollum. The answer is “a ring” — the One Ring, which he’s found and taken. I did not remind you of The Hobbit, but you’re a Muggle, so you have no excuse.



*Between the acting of a dreadful thing
And the first motion, all the interm is
Like a phantasma, or hideous dream:
The genius and the mortal instruments
Are then in council; and the state of men,
Like to a little kingdom, suffers then
The nature of an insurrection.*

— William Shakespeare

Pip's Day Out

— *Daily Prophet* headline for April 4th, 1999

TOWER TO OPEN FOR SQUIBS

— *Daily Prophet* headline for April 5th, 1999

TREATY SURPRISE: WESTPHALIA REOPENS ISSUE WITH NEW DEMANDS

— *Daily Prophet* headline for April 6th, 1999



April 7th, 1999

5:30 a.m.

Outskirts of Curd, Tipperary, Ireland

Pip kept up a quick step as he walked down the winding path that led to Curd. He tried to look smart, with his head high and shoulders back. He was a representative of the Government of magical Britain and of the Tower, and he had to look the part. Considering how busy things were going to be back at the Tower, he should thank his lucky stars to be out on delivery duty, anyway.

He'd been here before, on similar errands. The cobblestone path was not very well-maintained, since it was only used by the relatively few wizards and witches who visited the city. You weren't allowed to Apparate or fly directly into Curd; you had to go to a "welcome platform" (a cleared dirt area a half-mile away from the city) and then walk down the "welcome path" (on which rough cobblestones you might stub your toe) through the "welcome gate" (which crawled with wards and precautions). Considering the names of everything, he thought sourly, it wasn't very ruddy welcoming at all.

There was a chill in the air at this early hour. It felt pleasant on Pip's face, since it didn't touch the rest of him thanks to a Warming Charm. It reminded him of something he could remember his dad liked to say, quoting from a book and tugging on his beard with solemnity: "There is no quality in this world that is not what it is merely by contrast." Pip felt vaguely guilty at the thought. He'd never been much for reading, and particularly not Muggle books. He really should try to read *something* this month — a real book, not just *The Adventures of Martin Miggs, the Mad*

Muggle. Wasn't there a new Lockhart out? He'd liked the vampire one.

Curd lay before him — the town of towers. Low sandstone buildings with sloping walls were all topped with at least one conical tower. None of the towers were very high. Pip supposed that was probably because the gobbies couldn't build Floo networks, and it would be a bother to go up and down a lot of stairs. Maybe that would change, soon.

Pip sighed as he marched down the path. The town looked like it had been made out of a child's toy blocks.

A few minutes along, he was finally nearing the outskirts. He passed a pair of guards sitting in a small pavilion next to the welcome gate, and nodded to them with great dignity as he passed through. The two goblins were armored in silver plate: cuirass, cuisses, and vambraces. They didn't wear any helmets, so he could see them grin horribly at him. Their short spears sat on a rack nearby, but they didn't even bother to get up. Maybe they recognized him — Pip had a bit of trouble telling goblins apart (except for Podrut in Material Methods, who had a distinctive notch in his right ear), but the goblins never seemed to have the same problem with humans.

Wait, should he have said something to them? He'd just nodded to them and hadn't said anything. They hadn't looked bothered, though. Just bored. But he didn't want them to think he was rude, or that the Tower was rude, or anything. J.C. had said that goblins valued truth more than anything, and that they were suspicious of politeness, but Pip thought that was probably just something they wanted everyone to think. It probably made people trust Gringott's more. Although J.C. did seem like she would know, as a senior auror — she was all sharp edges and grimness. Plus he'd heard that she had some gobbie blood. But that might just be one of the rumors probies passed around during training, on account of her wide mouth and the largish ears that poked out of her curly black hair, and because she was so skinny. It *could* be true, but there were rumors like that about everyone who was even a little different. Tall people had giantish ancestry, pretty people had veela ancestry, people with bad teeth had mermish ancestry... Silly, really. When he'd been stationed in Nurmengard,

there had been a German auror with really red hair, and he'd heard someone whisper with complete seriousness that she had *phoenix* ancestry, which didn't even make any *sense*. That would have meant that someone had *been* with a phoenix at some point, and then... what, hatched a baby with it? It was as silly and weird as when people said that the Goddess had unicorn ancestry.

Oh, Merlin. He'd forgotten about the guards. Well, he'd gone way too far to turn back and say anything now.

Pip stepped off the welcome path onto the large flagstones of Curd's streets. An extremely obese goblin man wheeling a little cart squinted at him suspiciously, but said nothing. Not a friendly lot, here.

Okay, so let's see... he needed to go down this street, and then left at the bronze statue of the angry goblin with his fist raised (Crad the Callow, Pip thought it was), then another left at the town market, and then straight on to the Burgod Bur. That was where they put up notices and delivered regulations, and Pip had a stack of them.

Goblin names were a nightmare, really. He didn't know how they kept it sorted out. Curd's government was in the Burgod Bur, while Ackle's was in the Urgod Ur, and if you confused those they thought it was *really funny* even though they sounded almost identical to humans. And they kept using the same names with no surname: the Chief Goldsmith of Gringotts right now was Haddad, not to be confused with Haddad the Silent or Haddad the Hallowed from goblin history (wait, was it Hodrod the Hallowed?). And all the buildings were called things like Poddle Pol, Sugworn Sug, Togrigworn Tog, and whatnot. Impossible to keep them straight! He knew that the way place-name syllables were repeated meant something about the purpose of the building, but he'd never been much for Gobbledegook. It all just sounded silly to him, instead... like the babbling of a baby.

Pip followed the street, glancing around as he walked. Part of the reason they did this by hand, instead of by owl, was that it gave them a chance to take a look at things. Tourism in Curd or Ackle was discouraged, and so the only way to keep tabs on the goblins was with regular official visits. Pip knew that they'd been a lot more intrusive in the past, with wizarding inspectors and

regulators and so on, always barging in on the gobbies and making sure everything was on the up-and-up. That made sense to him, since every witch and wizard knew how violent they could be. But that had all been scaled back over the past few years — partly as part of the new cooperative arrangements that the Ministry had made (putting the Tribunes in the Wizengamot), and partly because so many government employees had been sacked.

All the layoffs had brought down Minister for Magic Junius Simplewort Smith (although thankfully not Senior Undersecretary Weasley, who Pip thought was a good bloke), but no one was hired back, even under new Minister for Magic Carmel N'goma. Even if the Ministry wanted to start poking their noses into goblin business all the time, like they used to do, they probably wouldn't have the staff. The sacked inspectors and bureaucrats had all been offered training and loans to start new businesses, and most everyone had moved on with their lives (well, except for those who had started supporting the Malfoys).

The statue of Crad the Callow was in sight, and Pip walked past it and turned left. He wasn't sure why ol' Crad had a statue — the inscription was in Gobbledegook — but he assumed it was probably because of some rebellion or another. Professor Binns had droned on for hours about the rebellions, when Pip was in school.

Pip turned left again once he reached the market, which was almost deserted at this hour. The handful of vendors pulling canvas covers off of their carts and tables paid him no mind except for an occasional glare. Honestly, Pip couldn't help but think gobbies were an ungrateful lot. Goblins controlled a third of the money in the entire country through Gringotts (which bank they'd taken *from wizards* only a century and a half ago), and he knew they used that power all the time to help themselves out. Further, the Wand Ban had been repealed, and now they were allowed to legally buy and use wands. They'd even been given a seat on the Wizengamot with that Suffrage Decree, six years ago! You'd think they'd show a little gratitude towards wizards and witches, these days, considering what had been done for them.

The Burgod Bur wasn't very impressive... just another sandstone building with slotted windows and a tower. There was

Gobbledegook carved in above the door, and a pair of guards, but it was otherwise indistinguishable from most other Curdish buildings. It's odd... Gringotts was a beautiful building of white marble, with Greek columns and bronze doors and glittering lamps. But Curd and Ackle were both very plain places. Pip did have to admit that he'd seen very little of the two goblin settlements, but even with his limited perspective, there was a clear disjunction between them and the bank.

Pip gave the armored guards a nod as he walked in. These were more attentive, but they just nodded their helmeted heads in return. They were each armed with fancy golden partisans which probably had long names and thousand-year-histories, and which probably cost ten times as much as Pip's house.

A goblin in a dapper black suit stood just inside the Burgod Bur, and stepped forward as Pip approached. Pip thought he recognized the goblin, but it was hard to be sure... He hesitated slightly, then risked a greeting: "Hullo, Nagrod."

The goblin smiled toothily and bowed slightly. "Auror Pirrip. What a surprise to see you!" Almost certainly a lie — Nagrod was very good at his job. Pip wasn't entirely sure what that job actually was, but it was bloody well clear at this point that some large part of it involved knowing the name, purpose, history, and shoe size of every visitor to Curd.

"Well, they need someone to plod on out with these things," Pip said. He unbuckled the slicebox at his belt and reached inside, pulling out a sheaf of parchment. "A new decree from the Wizengamot and a new rejuvenation policy from the Tower."

"Ah, the two pillars of your society, handing down rules to us," Nagrod said, managing to sound completely neutral. "May I ask?"

Pip handed the sheaf over to the goblin. "The new decree is not very interesting. Guess that's both bad news and good news. It's just about extending the Floo Network."

Until recently, the Government had always declined to put the settlements of any Beings on the network, but they'd decided to reverse that policy and offer the services of the Floo Network Authority to anyone who requested it, Beings included. Here in Curd, that meant they could connect with places like Dublin or Helga's Roost, if they so desired. That might make travel to

England somewhat easier, since they could Floo to Dublin and then buy a portkey.

"Must have been quite the stir in Ackle over this, though," Nagrod said, taking the parchments. "Will the heirs of Togrod Teulu be putting themselves one fireplace away from the Ministry, I wonder?"

Pip didn't venture a comment on that, since that sounded like gobbie politics. He buckled the slicebox back on his belt, instead, fixing the thin wooden box back in place. It had been his suggestion to use them for carrying parchment. Well, not so much his deliberate *suggestion*... he'd just assumed that was their purpose, and so he'd asked for one at the DMLE when they gave him this assignment, yesterday. Chief Auror Diggory hadn't known what he was talking about, but Pip had gone back to the Tower and asked around, and Mr. Potter himself had been delighted by the idea. He'd called them an unintentional byproduct of testing, and said that they had loads of the useless things, and that Pip was a genius. Pip had told his mother about it, and she'd baked him a Whirlibird Cake to celebrate.

Nagrod glanced over the first few sheets, before looking back up. The goblin's long nose was crooked at the arch, and looked more like a hawk's beak than a nose. He blinked owlishly for a moment, then asked Pip, "And what news from the Tower?"

"Even less exciting for you, I'm afraid. They're opening up rejuvenation to Muggles. Direct relatives and Squibs and all that." Pip shrugged.

This would be big news in London, Godric's Hollow, and other human settlements... but less so for Beings, who were already enjoying the benefits of rejuvenation and Safety Poles. Madame Bones had put precautions in place to make sure everything went in an orderly fashion; there were going to be special groups of aurors stationed at the Poles, in addition to the normal pairs of clinic workers who manned those stations, to make sure that the Tower didn't get mobbed as it first opened its doors to Muggles. It was still only a small fraction of Muggles, but there was always a rush whenever any new group was allowed to rejuvenate. When British merfolk signed on to the Treaty for Health and Life in late 1997, Pip had heard that they were shipping in water tanks of

old and sick and dying half-people from the Black Lake and Loch Lomond for a solid two days. Before his time in the Tower, of course, but the other aurors talked about it (mostly because of the smell).

“This will be a busy day for you, then,” Nagrod said. He lowered the sheaf of papers, after looking carefully for any surprises. “What is a ‘direct relative,’ though? Mother, brother, uncle, grandfather, cousin, brother-in-law, second cousin twice removed... you will be having many arguments about this.”

“Not me... at least, not today,” Pip said, brightly. “I’m out on delivery, all day. Here, Dublin, and Helga’s Roost, then over to Godric’s Hollow and Ackle and down to Wales and all over London.” His list of destinations was a long one... these decrees went out to every sizeable community in Britain. “And anyway, they spell out who’s eligible, but they’re usually really soft about that kind of thing. Anyone who’s seriously hurt... they whisk them right in, as fast as they can.” “Really..? How interesting... say, where else are you heading, today?” Nagrod said, thoughtfully. Pip didn’t like where this was going, and he’d spent enough time here. He still had that bloody long walk back to the “welcome platform.” And honestly, what sort of question was that? Was Nagrod trying to chat him up?

Pip briefly considered what that would be like, and then cleared his throat loudly. “Yes, well, I better be going. You’ll put those up, will you?” he said, uncomfortably.

“It would be my pleasure, Auror Pip,” Nagrod said, smiling widely. Sharp little teeth shone whitely from behind thick little lips.

Pip nodded firmly and — he hoped — professionally, and got out of there. Today was going to be a long day, full of cryptic conversations, he could tell already.



April 7th, 1999

3:01 p.m.

Diagon Alley, London, England

"Three Galleons, young man. Final offer. That's a great deal of money for just a few minutes of discomfort," said Jerina. "You won't even feel it... it'll be numb as a stone. Then a very quick turn of the knife, and it'll be done in moments. Two spells later, you'll be walking out of here just as you came in, only with quite a bit more coin. Likho will be right here... she'll watch and make sure it's done right. And this knife is as sharp as a razor."

"No, thank you, ma'am," Pip said, as pleasantly and courteously as possible under the circumstances. One did not trifle with a hag, even a Nutcombe hag. Even if you were an auror and you were there on official business. No trifling. "I apologize, but I think it would make me uncomfortable, and I must decline."

"It's a waste, is all," said Jerina, sadly. "Young fellow like you, athletic type... good calves. Firm and lean. Four Galleons."

"Jerina," said Likho, warningly. The elder hag stood nearby, arms crossed. Stout almost to the point of obesity, with a spine that twisted into a hump and greyish skin, Likho was firm with her flock. Two long yellow teeth jutted up past her stern lips.

Jerina grimaced, scrunching up her wart-covered face in suffering.

Pip had seen a play once about an Italian named Ugolino. The leading actor had torn at his clothes and howled at the sky and beat the ground with his fists. He had wept until his eyes looked raw and his mouth was a round "O" of unhappiness. And yet there was far more pain in Jerina's expression right at this moment, twisted in agony and need, as she begged to be allowed to eat his flesh.

He almost agreed, just to give her some relief.

"Jerina..." Likho repeated, and the younger hag turned away, slamming her fists down against her legs. Jerina stalked away, out of the parlor and out of sight. Pip didn't permit himself a sigh or a change in posture, but kept a pleasant smile stiffly pasted on his mouth. His cheeks hurt from maintaining it.

Likho watched Jerina go, then turned to Pip. "I apologize, Auror Pirrip. She is young, and it is difficult."

"I understand, ma'am, and accept your apology," he said. *Did that sound false? Damn it, Pip... Be sincere be sincere be sincere be sincere...* "I hope that Miss Jerina soon feels better."

Likho nodded absently, turning to look back at where Jerina had gone. The older hag's eyes were a tawny and beautiful gold, quite out of keeping with the rest of her physical hideousness. Pip had read that a hag's eyes were always blood-red — like Jerina's — but he supposed that the effect must be a result of Likho's abstinence from human meat. She was famously self-controlled, which was why she led the Nutcombe Society.

"Tell me, Auror Pirrip, about the Tower," Likho said to him. "Tell me about the man. I've met him, twice, but only on formal occasions. What sort of man is he?"

Pip thought carefully — very carefully — for a moment, then said, "Well, ma'am, he's very strange... very much in his own head. He makes jokes that no one understands, like calling aurors 'red shirts.' And I think he's a little lonely. But maybe that's like most people in power." He considered for another long moment. He didn't want to give a bad impression of Mr. Potter. But neither was he going to lie or dissemble. Not here. No trifling. "I think probably the most important thing about him is that he doesn't want anyone to get hurt."

Likho nodded, and Pip got the impression that she was no longer paying attention. Hags could see things that no one else could see. It wasn't the future, exactly... They just seemed to reach bizarre and inexplicable conclusions — some of which ended up being eerily efficacious, while others... well, one famous hag had insisted that she was meant to be married to a teenage boy that she'd just met. That had made headlines for weeks.

Honorina Nutcombe herself would only ever say that they could "see all the things that were real." Pip wasn't enough of a scholar to know what that meant, so he only abided by Madame Bones' advice to the Shichinin, which he'd overheard last year: "When dealing with a hag, gentlemen, be scrupulously polite and expeditiously brief."

These hags, at least, were trying to be civilized. He didn't know what they ate, when they couldn't get someone to agree to sell them a bit of themselves, but it seemed quite difficult for them. Maybe they didn't really *have* to eat at all. Pip had no interest in loitering about to find out.

After a bit, Likho spoke up again, asking, "And does he know the cause of the narrowing?"

Pip had not the smallest idea what that might mean, and so he erred on the side of caution. "I don't know, ma'am."

"Very well. Thank you, then, Auror Pirrip. Good afternoon."

All day like this, Pip thought glumly, as he bowed slightly and left the Nutcombe Society. His smile was still plastered on his face. He'd already been to Curd, Dublin, Helga's Roost, and Godric's Hollow, and at every stop there was someone asking him things that were entirely unanswerable about recent events or the Tower or rejuvenation, asking about things that their seers or oneiromancers or neladoracht had told them.

Maybe there was a reason Diggory kept sending him on these assignments.



April 7th, 1999

3:04 p.m.

Salor Sprig, The Forbidden Forest, Scotland

"No, sir, I don't know what the meaning of 'is,' is," Pip said, patiently. "Just the usual meaning, I suppose."

Roonwit rumbled deep in his chest and struck the dirt with an idle hoof. "What is usual to me may not be usual to you, human. The subordination of the rigor of definition to the glib gesturing towards 'usual' — by which you mean, 'custom;' the humbling of writing beneath a speech dreaming its plenitude; such are the gestures required by an onto-theology determining the archaeological and eschatological meaning of being as presence, as parousia, as life without difference: another name for death, historical metonymy where God's name holds death in check. That is why, if this movement begins its era in the form of Platonism, it ends in infinitist metaphysics. If we follow your feeble logic where it will, there is no end to our questioning — we'll never really communicate, since we'll never know what a word truly means." He gestured with an immense spear at the sky, as though waving the needle point at the futility of language.

"Roonwit, you are speaking in deliberately difficult language, and that is why you are not really communicating," said Cloud-birth, who was standing nearby. He clopped over, flanks shining in

the sun overhead. “Just speak clearly, and trust that you will make your point. Don’t try to hide in jargon like the Fontainebleau.”

Pip nodded gratefully at Cloudbirth, but the centaur wasn’t done. Cloudbirth went on, and his dangerous, flashing eye cut off Pip before he could speak, “The same principle holds, you know, for more everyday matters. Even in social life, you will never make a good impression on other people until you stop thinking about what sort of impression you are making. Even in literature and art, no man who bothers about originality will ever be original whereas if you simply try to tell the truth you will, nine times out of ten, become original without ever having noticed it. The principle runs through all life from top to bottom: Give up yourself, and you will find your real self.”

“Is there anyone else I can speak to, sir?” Pip asked, politely.

“Elder Glenstorm!” called Roonwit, gesturing across the clearing at a centaur who was standing next to one of the rough bark shacks that were the only buildings at the Salor Sprig. The named centaur looked up from his book, startled, and put it carefully on a shelf within one of the shacks, and trotted over. He took a wide berth around the center of the grassy clearing, where the sacred sapling grew.

“Afternoon,” Glenstorm said. He was a blue roan, with broad sides of a dusty grey. A longbow was slung across his human torso, and a quiver of arrows swung along his equine shoulder, kept from abrading with an oilcloth. “Are you two foals harassing this young human?”

“Elder Glenstorm has a smooth mouth, and much experience speaking with humans,” said Cloudbirth, kindly. “We learn to think first, and it is only with time that we develop concision.”

“Thank y—” began Pip, but Cloudbirth wasn’t finished.

“We do our best, of course,” continued Cloudbirth, “but some of the humans from your Ministry have given very unbalanced accounts of our aim, as though the wine which is the reward of all our labors was the anguish and bewilderment of a human. We merely follow a general rule: in all activities of mind which favor our cause of wisdom, encourage oneself to be un-selfconscious and to concentrate on that object, but in all other activities bend the mind back on itself and fix the attention inward. It is the best way to restrain our native temperaments.”

"Enough, enough," murmured Glenstorm. Cloudbirth frowned and thumped the ground. The elder centaur turned to Pip. "It is unwise to come to the Salor Sprig without good cause, auror. Matters between our peoples have much improved, of late, but cross half a distance and half yet remains."

Oh, Merlin.

"I would like to post these two announcements. One is from the Ministry, and one is from the Tower," Pip said, remaining as calm as he was able. "I don't think either of them affect your people very much."

"We will be the judge of that," said Glenstorm, curtly. At least he was brief. Pip handed the sheaf of parchment up to the elder centaur, happy to be rid of his charge and eager to be gone.

"Yes, well," Pip said, backing up, "Please do." One never really recognized just how ruddy big a horse-man could be until you were standing uncomfortably in the middle of three of them.

"More to do with wizard kin than the people," Glenstorm said to Roonwit, after scanning the sheaf of parchment. "The auror is quite right. I will speak to the other elders about this, but I see nothing to intrude upon us, here. We will be able to keep our hands clean. Firenze is wrong, again."

Roonwit hefted his spear in one hand and transferred it to the other, as if impatient with it. Pip wasn't exactly sure if Roonwit was a posted guard here, or just carrying the spear for protection or a ceremony or... some other unknowable mysterious centaur purpose. They were proper weird. They were an exceedingly private and outrageously proud people, only sending out rare emissaries to wizardkind when they felt forced to do so. Not a single one had consented to be rejuvenated or even healed by the Tower, despite the Salor Sprig's Safety Pole.

Pip's Head of House back in school, Severus Snape, had once spoken of centaurs in the common room, when a plot was being hatched to get rid of Professor Trelawney (who was widely believed to favor Gryffindor students). She was high-strung, and three enterprising Slytherins had plotted to start leaving her notes in her own handwriting (as best they could manage it) informing her that she'd been Obliviated, and telling her about all sorts of terrible things that she'd witnessed important people doing. Snape had

discovered the plot, and while he approved of this plan in terms of conception and cleverness (not that he could ever have actually countenanced such actions against a fellow professor) he had been merciless in mocking their next step: to invite a centaur to teach in Trelawney's place, once she'd been stuffed into St. Mungo's. Pip was unclear on the purpose of that replacement, but he thought it had been rooted in a basic assumption that the centaur would fail so badly they'd just eliminate Divination altogether.

Snape had said that centaurs were monstrously jealous of their privacy: they spent their lives in pursuit of philosophy, divination, and medicine — three practices that inherently involved interacting with strangers — and yet still worked tirelessly to isolate themselves from the unwashed masses. Any centaur who deigned to accept a teaching assignment at Hogwarts would be beaten and cast out from his people. "No member of that race," Snape had sneered, "would pay a permanent price for a temporary position. They are self-involved, not outright imbecilic."

Pip sometimes thought that the Sorting Hat had been wrong, putting him in Slytherin.

Roonwit spoke again, gruffly. "My apologies to you, auror, if I was too obscure. The pursuit of meaning is an important one, but I have been perhaps too-long devoted to the contemplation of signifier and signified. It is a matter of great importance to me... it is immortality."

"Metaphorically, you mean," replied Cloudbirth. "Such a conceit can't give any real guidance to action... What is the good of telling the ships how to steer so as to avoid collisions if, in fact, they are such crazy old tubs that they cannot be steered at all?"

"Not at all! True immortality... and it is inherent in every sign!" said Roonwit. "Every sign, linguistic or nonlinguistic, spoken or written, as a small or large unity, can be cited, put between quotation marks; thereby it can break with every given context, and engender infinitely new contexts in an absolutely nonsaturable fashion. This does not suppose that the mark is valid outside its context, but on the contrary that there are only contexts without any center of absolute anchoring. This citationality, duplication, or duplicity, this iterability of the mark is not an accident or anomaly, but is that normal or abnormal without which a mark

could no longer even have a so-called 'normal' functioning. What would a mark be that one could not cite? And whose origin could not be lost on the way? It would be an immortal sign, alive because an end cannot approach that which does not have a beginning."

Pip must have been revealing too much on his face — or maybe Glenstorm really was just more thoughtful than the other centaurs — because the elder centaur waved him on, signaling that he could leave.

He was starting to understand why he had the full sweep of messenger duty today, and not a more experienced auror. The goblins were strange, but fine. He'd be happy to keep going back to Curd and Ackle, like he had before. Even the Nutcombe Society was only unnerving and dangerous.

But this...

Whoever regularly brought messages to the Salor Sprig deserved a promotion and a crate of firewhiskey.



April 7th, 1999 7:28 p.m. The Receiving Room, Hogwarts, Scotland

When Pip got back to the Tower after his *very* long day (fourteen different places!), people were arriving in the Receiving Room at the rate of seven or eight people a minute, and all the receiving aurors looked ragged. The foreigners looked worst of all — Pip supposed that they had fewer people on their team to relieve them, but were still expected to put in their fair share.

The elderly and injured and diseased appeared, spinning in from a sideways that was always orthogonal to the viewer, and coming to a rest softly. Usually, they still glowed a faint red from the stunning effect of the trip. As they arrived, one of the aurors would examine them for a second, and then a pair would get to work scanning and dispelling. After years of practice — including other mad days like today — most of the sizeable contingent of receiving aurors were old hands at the work, and patients were either wheeled in through the golden entrance to the Tower or moved into an adjacent room for other assistance or questioning.

The on-site workers at the Safety Poles usually did a decent job of triage, and kept back those who didn't actually need the Tower's

assistance, but those facilities — some of which were growing to be full-fledged hospitals to rival St. Mungo's, squatting protectively around their individual Safety Poles — weren't perfect. And almost a third of all visitors traveled via Safety Stick instead, directly from their homes or work. Some of them were only panicking, some of them only needed first aid, and many had just made a mistake with the Safety Stick. A surprising number of children thought "running safety" was just a lark.

On a day like today, with Muggles and Squibs arriving... well, who knew how many things had gone wrong today? Pip knew that the Obliviator Squad had been expanded and was scheduled to work around the clock for the next two weeks, until they'd worked out all the kinks in the system. Even everyone in the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol had been scheduled for extra shifts, filling in for aurors as guards at Howard. It was incredibly hectic.

Auror Kwannon saw Pip arrive. She looked exhausted, her almond eyes heavy-lidded and face drawn. She was probably on her second or third straight shift, he thought, and brimming with tea to keep her sharp.

"Do you want me to spell you for a bit, Hedley?" he asked her, stepping over a merwoman as another auror put a poultice of sullyflower to the being's gills, so the stunned creature could breathe. There were several people in odd Muggle clothes on gurneys nearby — Muggles or Squibs.

Kwannon shook her head. "Go report to Kraeme. I'm fine." She paused. "Wait, this just came in," she said, pulling a sealed parchment from her belt. "You'll save me a trip... give it to the Tower."

Some people were made of bloody iron, Pip reflected. He nodded respectfully, taking the parchment, and walked through the golden portal into the Tower, moving briskly through the Thieves' Downfall.

Britain, Italy, Germany, Norden, France, the Free States, Nigeria, and half a dozen more states... their dying and desperately diseased streamed into the Tower all around Pip. He was back in the beating heart of the world once more. His chest swelled with pride, though he knew that was silly. He was just a small part of it. But to be here, now... being sent personally on missions for the Tower!

The clinic was bursting, Pip could see from his brief glance inside. Temporary bunks had been set up along the walls to accommodate those patients who had been healed and were just waiting on their dismissal, each one tagged with labels indicating time and healer. The special ward had been reclaimed for general use — apparently lycanthropes and vampires were being asked to come in another day. The discharge ward was a madhouse, as the Obliviators had set up shop in one corner and were carefully keeping tabs on all the Muggles, double-checking with the arithmancers on duty throughout the Tower to make sure no one fell through the cracks.

Pip headed down the corridors away from the hellacious racket, past the Conjunction Conjunction, the Extension Establishment, and Material Methods. J.C. wasn't in the meeting room, so he went down another corridor to Pairing Partnership. That was where the Tower had been spending a lot of time over the past few weeks, and J.C. Kraeme was probably with him.

"J.C.?" he asked, as he entered the Pairing Partnership. The Lovegood Leaf rustled as he opened and closed the door. There was a hum and a whirring in the room, which was filled with all sorts of esoteric Muggle equipment, but it wasn't very loud, and J.C. noticed him immediately. She was standing next to the Tower, who was on a computer (as usual). Luna Lovegood and Dolores Umbridge were also present, fiddling with odd objects.

As Pip approached Mr. Potter and J.C., he glanced at the screen, but the glowing text was written in a kind of code to hide its meaning:

```
else if(state==ENDQUOTE) {  
    state=QUOTE;  
    eeg\_data[j][k++] = csv\_line[i];
```

"Pirrip. Any problems today?" J.C. asked, her voice sharp. Her mess of black curls didn't hide the grim intensity of her scrutiny. She was one of the old breed, like Kwannon... before the ranks of the aurors doubled in 1996. Mr. Potter didn't look up — he just kept manipulating the computer's keys. He was wearing Muggle clothing — a brown suit. Very handsome, even with the ponytail.

“Not a one,” Pip said, brightly.

Mr. Potter leaned back in his seat, and swiveled to face Pip. “What did the centaurs have to say?”

“I wasn’t sure about most of it, sir. A lot of arguing over how things were said. But there was an elder there who could talk straight, and he was just happy that the new Tower rules for rejuvenation weren’t going to ‘intrude’ on them,” Pip said.

Mr. Potter smiled coldly. “Ah, yes. They keep their hands off of me and mine as much as they can. They don’t want to be involved, since they fear some sort of moral Anns test. In their minds, they’re not morally culpable for outcomes, as long as they remain uninvolved. An odd sort of moral calculus, but that’s one of the flaws of deontology.”

Oh, good, this again. At least I’m used to him saying impenetrable things.

“They get what they deserve, though... nasty creatures are sentencing themselves to their own punishment,” said Miss Umbridge. It was odd to see her, here... one of the only middle-aged people who worked in the Tower or with the Unspeakables who hadn’t been rejuvenated. She was plump and shiny and unpleasant, wearing a fluffy pink cardigan.

“There’s probably a better explanation,” Miss Lovegood said. The blonde witch had an odd-looking bonnet in her hands. “Blibbering Humdingers, rampant gum disease, a sustained private propaganda campaign... could be anything.” She paused. “Although the last one of those is most likely.”

“What on earth is a Blibbering Humdinger?” asked Miss Umbridge, with a sweetness that covered her contempt with a thin layer of syrupy falseness.

“It’s a dreadful Dark creature that infects you when you’re young,” Miss Lovegood replied, turning back to the Muggle-made bonnet in her hands and fixing a metal wire into it. She sounded vague and airy. “It can control your behavior. Its life-cycle involves small animals, and so when the Humdinger takes over, it makes you unbearable to be around for other people. So you spend your time around small animals, instead.”

Miss Umbridge snorted derisively and shook her head.

“You haven’t been rejuvenated, though, Dolores,” said Mr. Potter, swiveling his chair to face her, now. He was grinning at what

Miss Lovegood had said. "Aren't you sentencing yourself to the same fate as the centaurs, eventually?"

"Well," Miss Umbridge said, pursing her lips. "I just haven't done it *yet*. I'm quite young and in vigorous health. And I'm not entirely sure about the whole thing, anyway. I don't think it's been thought through..." She paused, nervously. "That is to say, I'm just waiting."

"You have proven to be invaluable, Dolores, so please don't wait forever. You remind me of a certain journal editor I once knew, although you are less particular about the color of ink." Mr. Potter said, and smiled affectionately. He turned to Pip. "Mr. Pirrip — sorry, do you mind if I call you 'Pip?' "

Pip felt such a warm glow of pride that it threatened to stifle him, but he managed to say, "Please do, sir."

"Pip, have you heard anyone talking about the 'Three' today? Or about new and powerful magic they've seen? A new sort of Dark Mark, that wipes memories? You get along very well with everyone, and people talk around you... did you hear anything like that?"

"The 'Three,' sir?" Pip scratched his head. "I'm not sure... you mean the Shichinin?"

"No, not Neville and the twins," Harry said, shaking his head. He grinned again. "Although that would be a particularly terrifying possibility. Just keep your ears open, will you?"

Pip nodded, puzzled. "Yes, sir." He started, remembering. "Oh, sir, Auror Kwannon gave me this for you."

J.C. scowled ferociously at Pip as he handed over the sealed parchment. The Tower took it and broke the seal, scanning the contents rapidly. "Cappadocia and the Sawad appear to be in secret negotiations over a treaty," he mused. "It'll be in the *Prophet* tomorrow."

Miss Lovegood looked up, surprise wiping away her dreamy expression. "They're joining the Treaty! That's wonderful, Harry! And... surprising!"

"A Treaty of Independence," said Mr. Potter. "With the Malfoys' organization. They're enlisting with the Honourable." He handed the missive to Miss Lovegood, and Miss Umbridge crowded next to her to read it, as well.

“What does this mean, sir?” asked Pip. He felt a small twinge of fear in his guts, but it was overwhelmed by awe and joy at his place in things.

“I’m not sure,” said the Tower, and fell silent.

It was by far the scariest thing Pip had seen all day.

Chapter fourteen

Azkaban

The infinite resignation is the last stage prior to faith, so that one who has not made this movement has not faith; for only in the infinite resignation do I become clear to myself with respect to my eternal validity, and only then can there be any question of grasping existence by virtue of faith.

—Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*

July 14th, 1992

The office of Headmistress McGonagall, Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry

“No, I didn’t mean it, please don’t die!”

“No, I didn’t mean it, please don’t die!”

“No, I didn’t mean it, please don’t die!”

“No, I didn’t mean it, please don’t die!”

“No, I didn’t mean it, please don’t die!”

“No, I didn’t mean it, please don’t die!”

“No, I didn’t mean it, please don’t die!”

“No, I didn’t mean it, please don’t die!”

“No, I didn’t mean it, please don’t die!”

“Don’t go! No, no, no, don’t go, don’t take it away, don’t don’t don’t... Please, please, I can’t remember my children’s names any more...”

And that was the end to the memory. A ghostly boy with terror and pain on his face stood stricken, visible beneath the

translucent drape of the Cloak of Invisibility, pointing his wand at a placid and skeletal Bellatrix Black. They were frozen in a stone corridor, standing before a heavy metal door with a simple lock, lit by a glowing humanoid figure, and deep in the foulest hell made by man.

Hermione pulled herself free, wrenching herself out of the liquid memory in the Pensieve with an effort of will, and vomited on the floor.

Harry felt the acid burn of vomit in the back of his own throat as he watched her. When she looked up at Harry, Hermione's eyes were as dead and dry as stones.

"But... you're in charge now, Harry," Her voice was very small. "Just close Azkaban. Have it destroyed. Free everyone, Harry. Do... do something."

She hung her head like she was broken. "Fix it."

"I can't," he said, his voice as heavy as his heart. Even though he knew what was going to come next, and that hope fluttered deep in his soul like something winged, and even though he knew that she had to *know* if she was going to *do*... he was hurting her. He was hurting her *again*, even though it was good for her and good for the world and utterly necessary. "I just... this is..." Harry had prepared words, but now they sounded grossly inadequate. "Almost all of the prisoners are gone, except for the... the worst. But I couldn't end it... I couldn't fix it... and I can't go myself. I actually *can't*. I'm too..." *Important. I'm too important, now. I can't risk myself and the future of the world. Not while the path to the scorpion and the archer... not while...* But the words died on his tongue. The Vow and all logic could stop him from acting, but they couldn't touch his shame.

"They wouldn't close it. They don't understand... not really," he said. Hermione's fingers clutched at the stone beneath her. Her fingernails clawed spasmodic tracks into its surface, dusting their brilliance with grey.

Harry had made speeches and he had made threats on the floor of the Wizengamot. He had demanded and received the greatest political cunning of Amelia Bones and the most clever plotting of Alastor Moody and the sheer moral weight of Minerva McGonagall's pursed lips, and yet the vote had failed. There

had been bribery and blackmail and hissed words, and though many dire opponents were already lying headless on slabs as an example... and the vote had failed. At the climax of the debate, the Wizengamot — desperate to find some accommodation that would satisfy the Boy-Who-Lived, who was now clearly one of the most powerful figures in the country — had coalesced around an alternative proposal to have the dozen remaining prisoners executed instead of freed. Harry had rejected that outrage, and by a margin of three votes, Azkaban remained open.

Dementors still fed.

“But there is something that can fix it,” he said. Hermione stayed on her hands and knees, heaving with shuddering breaths, and Harry knelt down next to her. “If we destroy the Dementors, then... that will be an end to Azkaban. No more torture. No more... *that*.”

A word tore from her throat, ragged and loud. “*How?!*”

“There is a way to cast the Patronus Charm... a different way. A way that can *destroy Dementors*. They’re not unkillable... it’s why they were afraid of me, in the Wizengamot. It can... do other things, too. It can fix this. You can fix this, if you learn it.” Harry shifted in position a little bit, moving a fold of his robes from beneath one knee. “There are a dozen people left in Azkaban that I couldn’t save.” He put a hand on her back, felt it move in heaves as she sucked air in and out, overcome with what she’d seen. Harry knew how she’d felt... remembered when he was in that nightmare, and the depth of his feeling had nearly drained the life out of him through his Patronus. He leaned in, and hated himself for this manipulation. But he remembered the concussive shock to his soul that it had taken for him to see through the illusion... to see the death behind the fear. To understand. He had to bring her to that point, or he’d be betraying her. His voice was almost a whisper as he said, “But you can.”

She looked up at him, and her eyes were alive again, eagle-bright and demanding. “Tell me.”



Take a child by the hand. Lead them to a dark place... the basement they fear, perhaps, or the alley that scares them so much

that they cross the street when they need to walk past. Look them in the eyes. There's someone hurting in there, child, you say. They're hurting so much. They hurt all the time, and they scream, and there's no one to help them. There are things in there that eat them.

Take that child by the shoulders and point into the darkness. Look there, you say. Look into that darkness. Someone is hurting and someone is screaming and someone is being *eaten*, and no one can help them.

No one but you.

You're the only one who can do it, you say, taking their hot little hand in yours and squeezing it. Only you.

All you have to do is fly.

That's all. I know you can do it. I have faith in you. I believe in you. Just... fly. Lift off into the air. Rise up into the sky, and swoop down into that darkness. That person is being eaten, all alone, and you just have to go there and take them by the hand and lift them out.

No one but you. You can do it.

Then turn that child towards the darkness and give them a push. A little shove — they stagger forward a bit. And their face is determined and they clench their fists and they *leap*...

But they can't fly. Of course they can't fly. You're asking the impossible. And they will fall to the ground and skin their knees, and scramble to their feet and try again, and fall again but jump right back up and try and try and try and try. They will scream with frustration and stretch out their hands towards that basement, that alley, that darkness.

They believed you. They believed you when you said that they could do it. That someone was there in the dark, alone and in pain and in need. They believed that they were the only ones who could do it.

And how terrible it is to fail.



Hermione couldn't do it. She couldn't cast the Patronus Charm.

She spoke intently with Harry for hours, and studied physics and philosophy for hours. She practiced, over and over, for hours.

Six, ten, fourteen hours a day, sometimes. She had a Time Turner, and she used it every day.

Every hour she could spare from studying for her Ordinary Wizarding Levels or from working in the odd little hospital that Harry had set up, in that tower room with shabby couches and a few chairs and full-wall windows all around, guarded by a handful of bemused aurors and an intricate passageway of Alastor's wards and traps.

Every hour she could spare from auror training, even though that already left her exhausted enough to break down in tears, keyed up and nervous and ready to DODGE and CAST and DUCK and SHIELD and everything all surprises until she was ready to collapse from nerves.

Every hour she could spare from healing people in the tower and dealing with all the myriad mysteries and emergencies of her new role. Lesath Lestrange went missing from his bed in the Slytherin dormitories, and Hermione was so exhausted that she was barely able to join the search for six hours before she had to retreat to her bed — not that she could sleep once she'd gotten there.

Every hour she could spare from visiting dignitaries and nobles and emissaries, going to every member of the Wizengamot and two-dozen Confederation representatives and doing everything she could — *throwing* herself and all her small childish dignity and every ounce of fame she possessed — the Girl-Who-Revived, how she *loathed* that name now, since she was a *mockery* and there were *people in Azkaban* — and she would persuade and threaten and *beg* them into committing to close the prison, but that was too much to ask of the Wizengamot. Harry and Hermione did what they could: two more prisoners were released. One died. But nine remained, despite everything. Nine people were being eaten.

She spoke to everyone she could. There was almost no one she could really tell, not without destroying their own ability or capacity to cast a Patronus. A middling Occlumens at this point, she had to be careful about many things. But she spoke around the problem, and sought inspiration and guidance. For one memorable evening, she'd talked with Draco all through the night and into the dawn, and wept in his arms.

They formulated plans: maybe they could recruit all the trusted people they could, those who could cast Patronuses, and attack that way. Hold off the Dementors while the ten victims were taken away, and then herd them off to some other isle. Keep them there by standing guard in shifts. With all of Harry and Hermione's money and will and fame, there were fully a hundred wizards and witches who could be enlisted. A Dementor zoo, until such time as they could be abolished. A Dementor prison.

But Dementors must be fed. Even a Patronus will not restrain them if they are not fed. Not forever. And it would mean open rebellion against the Wizengamot and the law, and that would hurt matters as much as help.

Harry told her all he knew of the true nature of a Dementor. He told her of his absolute rejection of death as the natural order. He told her about his dreams for the future, about how death was a thing that would be overcome one day in the distant future — heck, they had the Stone, it might not even be that *distant*. She read Heinlein and Asimov and Sagan and Vonnegut and Adams and a thousand other books. He took her through it, over and over. He arranged to bring in a Dementor, and she tried the Charm in its view and right in front of it and with a Patronus protecting her and without one protecting her and *every other way* they could think of. He did it with her and talked her through, and stood behind her and held her hand and everything else. Over and over, until she broke down, and then she would still make herself go on. And she failed, every time. Completely. Not even a silver mist.

In her room — a private room, she needed it, she had to have it so she could study and practice and plan — she would read and practice and think and cast:

“Expecto Patronum!”

But she barely even heard herself when she cast the charm, even after thousands and thousands of tries. All she heard were the words in her head:

“No, I didn't mean it, please don't die!”

It wasn't supposed to be this way, Harry thought one night in the library, looking at her collapsed in exhaustion in front of a book. * You're the bravest person... you're the* best person. *When a Dementor was eating me, you ran towards it to save me. When*

Voldemort tempted you with every cleverness he could devise, you never wavered from the good. And you know science... you were raised with science. Not like me, but you know the possibilities. You are brave and good and smart — smarter than me — and wise... how can this be the way things are? How can I have... have broken you so badly?

It was unfair, to expect this of her. It was so unfair that they tried everything else they could think of, but the truth was that no one was willing to be the deciding vote to release a serial rapist or mass-murderer from the only unbreachable prison in the world. Everyone knew the story of Godfrey of Sontag, a Dark Lord who had been released and pardoned by the Wizengamot in the tenth century for his service in the war against Lord Foul the Despiser — a villain who had been one of the great evils of that time, whose evil had bound the Founders of Hogwarts into a companionship sworn against him. Godfrey had taken his pardon and had gone on to carve out a kingdom for himself in the Basque Country in Spain, and had done unspeakable acts, out of reach of all law, for fifty years... acts that were, in truth, too monstrous for any thirteen-year-old girl of sound mind to dwell upon. But she dwelt on it, and agonized, and wondered if this was why she couldn't cast the Patronus... since she was striving with all her heart to free nine people who were truly vile. Logic could have trouble touching the heart.

But it was not given to Hermione Jean Granger to give up or to give in. Maybe that was a flaw. Maybe that was why she had once fallen victim to a careful plot to convince even *her* that she was a murderer. She could not let herself stop. She couldn't *forgive* herself. She tried, and failed, and wept. In time, and despite all the magics in her flesh, her eyes grew as hollow as any of the Demented.

She was undergoing a special kind of torture, you see. There were people being eaten in the darkness, but Hermione could not fly to save them.



December 23rd, 1992

Eight months since Hermione's death.

Six months since Professor Quirrell's final exam and Hermione's resurrection.

*Five months since that day in the office of the Headmistress.
In the Tower.*

They were talking about her. She could hear them. Her hearing was better than average, especially with high frequencies — she wasn't sure why, but she suspected that the cause was the continuous regeneration of the stereocilia in her inner ears.

"Ms. Granger is going to kill herself if she continues at this rate, and it will be on your head," Headmistress McGonagall said to Harry, in a low but angry voice. She was sitting with a rigid back on a bench next to him, as he held a wand to an unconscious girl-child's chest. "Even she cannot do this, not at this pace, not for so many months... what cannot continue forever must eventually stop, and I fear the consequences when it does. You have to do something. She won't listen to me." McGonagall leaned in closer and spoke some more, but Hermione could only make out the words, "poisoned her mind."

Hermione grit her teeth, and returned her attention to the middle-aged man in front of her. He'd had Dragon Pox last year, and it hadn't been treated properly, leaving him with weeping sores all over his skin. She concentrated on transfiguring them into healthy flesh.

For his part, Harry remained silent and grim. He didn't look at Hermione — he probably knew she could hear. He just shook his head at McGonagall and kept working. Eventually, he placed his hand on the child in front of him, placing the special glove he wore on the girl's chest. The glove concealed the Stone, which was almost entirely buried in a specially-made Extension Charm on the palm. One last precaution, notwithstanding all of Alastor's traps in the entrance corridor and the strict limits on who was even allowed to be here and the fact that everyone was supposed to be stunned or sleeping. Harry had to touch all of their patients, and expose the most valuable and powerful artifact in the world to them when he did. This was their best solution to that dilemma. It wasn't perfect: they were healing a dozen people a day, now, but Harry wanted to increase that by an order of magnitude. They'd

need a new solution, soon. Hermione felt weary just thinking about that.

After a while, the headmistress left. Hermione tried to put it out of mind, and called out, "Harry." Without needing further prompting, the boy with the lightning scar rose from the bench where he was sitting and walked over to her. He put his hand on her patient's chest, and left it there.

"What did the headmistress want?" she asked him, keeping her voice level.

Harry didn't take the bait, and kept his attention on the man in front of him. "Just about the schedule for the Science Program. It makes her nervous... she's worried that the first few years of graduates won't get any kind of proper education — leaving the standard Hogwarts curriculum and going to our untested new one. And she told me off again about the Houses thing."

Harry had floated the notion of the Science Program being resorted into new groupings, to build new loyalties and break the bad old patterns. He'd said that it was important to have the right kind of heroes, and had proposed Talleyrand House, Newton House, and... two others. She was tired, and couldn't remember which other Muggles he'd suggested. It didn't matter. Harry was literally the only one in any of the planning meetings for the Program who'd thought this was a good idea. McGonagall had been downright offended, in fact. Hermione had expressed her disagreement for the added layer of complexity with a John Gall quote: "New systems mean new problems" (*Systemantics*, page 29, her brain automatically supplied).

She didn't want any new problems. Her life was a single difficulty, sharpened down to a point and stabbing her through the heart.

"Fine," she said. She avoided his eyes. "I think I'm done for the day. I'm going to go to the library."

"Try to rest," Harry said, quietly.

She nodded, but she wasn't tired. Not physically. She felt a... *moral* exhaustion, she supposed.

This must be, she thought as she walked down the corridor, *something like what charitable adults must feel*. If you make £20,000 a year, how much did you give away? Maybe you keep

enough to live comfortably, and then donated the rest. Keep £18,000 and donate £2,000 to OxFam. But why not £2,001? Why not £10,000 — you could live well-enough on the other half of your income, and those thousand of pounds might save a life. Where did it end? When did you relax and say that you'd done enough?

There was always room to be a little bit more ethical, Hermione thought. Just like in Harry's hospital — the "Tower," as she'd heard the aurors call it synecdochally — there was always going to be room to heal more people. Certainly they were never going to be able to heal everyone in Britain, much less the world... but Harry kept pushing to increase the number of people who were portkeyed in, every day. He urged more from the pairs of aurors at St. Mungo's and Godric's Hollow, where they chose the desperate cases who needed Harry's unique healing ability. He had grand plans for expanding the staff and hiding the Stone... he was always pushing. Trying to be a little bit better.

But Hermione had a different worry. It was the worry that drove her to twenty-eight-hour days for weeks at a time, and that led her to wrack her brain for every possible trick or thought or fact that might serve her. Because in the meantime, minutes were ticking away. Minute after minute after minute... and in those minutes, people were suffering.

Hermione worried that she hadn't done enough.

She should have been able to cast the True Patronus spell, by all reason and reckoning. There was no excuse. She could let herself forget about donating to OxFam since she had no income — and because she was directly helping to save lives — but there were nine people who were being tortured, and that was on her shoulders. Hermione hadn't been able to do what she *should* be able to do, and the time was past when she could shrug off that responsibility and turn to her elders. Alastor almost certainly couldn't learn the True Patronus. Nor could the headmistress, or Madame Bones, or any of the aurors, or Neville, or the twins. Trying to teach them would have destroyed their Patronuses, and probably failed to teach them anything new. To look squarely at death without flinching... to see it as a thing to be overcome and surpassed... to reject death on some fundamental level... it was a

way of thinking that even she could understand only in *theory*. She couldn't pretend differently. She couldn't pretend this was anyone else's responsibility.

So Hermione drove herself. To devise new strategies and ways of thought, or to sway the Wizengamot on another of the prisoners — she knew all of the remaining victims by name and foul deed, with such intimacy that she felt she knew them, though they seldom had the strength to even speak to her when she visited — to try to do just *one more thing* to fix it. Those minutes were ticking away, each of them agony, each of them one more minute she might have been able to stop. If she hadn't failed.

She was back in her rooms. When had that happened? She'd intended to go to the library.

Hermione sat heavily on the bed, instead. She felt as if she were going mad. But she couldn't do that, either. She didn't have that luxury. Minutes were passing. Minute after minute. One more minute, every minute, that she wasn't fixing this.

At some point, she fell into a sleep that was so deep that it was like plunging into a pit. She was drawn down into it, and knew nothing.



Hermione dreamt.

She was climbing a mountain with her son. She knew that fact, somehow, in the way of dreams — a knowledge that was in her bones. Her beard was long, and she had seen nearly a century's worth of suns, but those things were not what made her steps heavy. It was despair. She was leaden with sorrow. Was this real? Had this ever happened? It didn't seem to matter. Sand shifted under her sandals, and they climbed the mountain under the hot sun.

(and Hermione, who had only ever been to mass once — at Guildford with her grandparents when she was six — but whose reading had been all-encompassing, stirred uncomfortably in her sleep, and murmured to the cold and empty room)

There had been something terrible asked of her, and she knew that she didn't have the strength for the task. They climbed the

mountain anyway, since what else could she do, and she laid a hand on her son's back from time to time, in her affection for the child of her old age. When she thought of her wife, it was like a blade in her side that made her gasp, because there had been something terrible asked of her. And she knew that she would fail.

(she moaned quietly again, and the muscles of her legs tensed, and when she rolled a bit onto her side, her hair stuck to her face in dark ringlets)

The dark-stained stone was on the southern peak, and as they mounted up to the top of the dusty trail, she tripped and fell. Her boy caught her arm and held her up, and she found her feet and squeezed his forearm in her hand for a moment, in gratitude, before she let go. He smiled at her, looking at her with his strong good looks beneath his sun-blond hair. Where is the sacrifice, Father, he asked her.

(she was thirteen and too much had been asked of her, *too much and it wasn't fair*, and even asleep she knew it, but she fell into stillness once more, four soft words on her motionless lips, unspoken)

Something terrible had been asked of her, but she could do naught but each next necessary thing, until the moment came when she could do no more. She quieted her child and they prepared the wood, setting it in place, sweet-smelling fig wood from their grove. She took the boy and she bound him with strong cord, silencing him with a sad and stern glance when he protested. And the knife was in her hand now, without ever being drawn, as a dream may do.

(tears on dark lashes)

But now was the time to do right and to be strong, and she had not the will. For she knew that she should disobey — that by every law of heart and soul she *should disobey* — but she had built her life on obedience and she could not relent now, that was an extravagance beyond her ability, she who had thought of herself for decades as the one who obeyed. For what would her life be, if she turned away — turned to a new path, alone? How much would her family suffer? What price would they pay in consequence of her choice? She knew what was right — she knew she should throw down the knife and go out by herself, and damn the consequences

damn the consequences — she knew the right thing but *she could not do it*. She must obey. The knife. It was raised.

(four words on her lips)

But at the last, at the last—

(four words on her lips)

—she looked at the bright knife. She paused. She found that there was mettle within her, hard and strong—

(four words on her lips)

—and there was only one way to pay, to hold true to everything, and so she tore her son's bonds away and raised the knife and plunged it into her *own* breast, and there was no pain but only the exhilaration, at last at last at last, and she called to the mountain with a roar of defiance as it shook around her, "Despise not this sacrifice — *I* will pay all debts!" There was a hole in her but no blood poured forth, instead there was light, there was fire...

And Hermione awoke, jerking upright with a frenzy, pawing at her chest and shrieking into the stillness of the ancient school the four words on her lips, the ones that lay in her heart under the weight of frustration and pain and sadness and exhaustion.

"Not one more minute!"

And the call of a bird answered her from the night sky, beyond, piercing and pure like the voice of a god.

Hermione sat upright, panting. She was fully clothed, her robes were muggy with sweat, and she felt filthy. But she felt... okay. She'd made a decision, and now it didn't matter how bad things got. She would be alone, but she would be okay.

It was like being a little kid and playing outside in the hot sun, running around and getting sticks in your hair and dirt all over your face, but knowing that when you were done, you could leap into the pool and it would be cool and clean and none of that would matter.

Once you just *committed*, you didn't have to worry.

Hermione scooted to the side and swung her feet down from the bed, her breath slowing. She stood up, tugging her robes away from her neck and loosening them, as she walked to the window. She knew what she would see.

Guilt had hung heavy on her for months, and it was a relief to have certainty at last. She wasn't religious — didn't even know

how that would work in a magical world — but she believed fiercely in doing the right thing, no matter what. In her dream... well, that analogy from her subconscious was imprecise, but the emotions were right. The decision was right. She had a plan... one she'd floated last month, in desperation.

Fiat justitia ruat caelum, in the words of Lord Mansfield. *Let justice be done, though the heavens fall*. She would go and try and be damned. They'd tried everything they could think of, after all. There was just one last step to take.

Hermione pulled the window up and open with one hand, and leaned out.

He was the size of a swan, perhaps. His feathers were scarlet and gold, thrusting bright sparks into the moonless night with each mighty beat of his wings. His beak was black and nearly straight, with no raptor's hook to it. Flames gamboled in his warm wake, careless and free. His eyes were kindness.

Don't be afraid, Hermione Granger, the Sorting Hat had told her, more than a year ago. *Just decide where you belong*.

She backed away from the window, and the phoenix streamed through with a swoop like a sudden dawn.

The phoenix called again, and in the small room it was huge and proud. It said the first word from every phoenix to every chosen person:

Come.

Hermione smiled. She picked up her wand and pouch, and reached out her hand. The flames kissed her palm, and then there was a great clap of fire and passion.

Granville... his name is Granville, she thought with a flicker of amusement. They vanished.



“Mr. Potter! Wake up! In Merlin's name wake up!”

Harry looked up from his book. “I wasn't asleep, Headmistress,” he said, quietly. “Has Hermione gone?”

“She has!” The Scottish voice that spoke from the glowing cat had a hard edge to it. “What do you know of this?” Minerva McGonagall had lost so very many of her friends over the years,

and so often it happened with strange events in the night. She'd lost her greatest friend of all, not too long ago. He shouldn't keep her in any suspense.

"I heard a phoenix, Headmistress," he said around the lump in his throat. He blinked rapidly, his eyes filling with tears. He'd known immediately. "Hermione is going to Azkaban. She couldn't wait any more, I think. Draco told me... I didn't know what to do. I had to let her decide... you said it yourself before, she was killing herself..."

"To Azkaban?! Alone?!"

"Send to them and tell them to go and... No, tell them to stay with their Patronuses. They can do that much... just in case. That's for safety. But... they must let whatever is going to happen, happen. We can't..." He trailed off, and the argent cat flared with light.

"Mr. Potter!"

"We can't take away her choices!"



December 23rd, 1992

11:00 p.m.

Azkaban

She came in fierce tempest... in thunder and in earthquake, like a Jove.

Ten aurors sat in the command room at the top of Azkaban, that black place of death and despair. Ten aurors who were venal enough to take a despised and voluntary assignment, scorned by Shacklebolt and Bones and Moody. If none would agree to guard that place, it might have been another reason to close it... it might have made the difference. But it was quadruple pay, and some wizards and witches were able to make excuses to themselves.

Five slept and five gambled. But they were all alert soon enough, as Azkaban began to shake.

Hermione didn't know how much weight a phoenix could bear with its flame — when it vanished from one point in a fit of fire and reappeared elsewhere. Granville himself didn't know.

But whatever Granville's limits might be, they encompassed great grey spars of rock, selected from Azkaban's salt-sprayed shores. The stones were ten or twenty tonnes apiece, dropping from the sky from a kilometer above. The grim rock and metal of Azkaban endured, but cracked and danced.

Azkaban was an artificial place. It had been built by a Dark Lord centuries ago, and the Dementors had come to feast on the suffering he wrought. It was a place of eternal darkness, crafted from pain made solid stone. When he was defeated, the wizards and witches of Britain had made it a prison, to seize upon the opportunity. But the essential nature of Azkaban remained. The sun never rose. Whatever attack was happening, it was hidden by the night from their sight out the windows.

"What in Merlin's name?!" shouted Nicomedius Salamander, clutching the head of the bed as he lurched to his feet. The metal floor of the room screeched as it rolled underfoot, one edge coming free of the VeriWeld and curving upward from the stress.

"Call it in," barked Hortense Hood. "Call it in!" She struggled to the Vanishing Cabinet that linked them to the DMLE, wrestling with her robes to find the key.

Gregor Nimue and Holly Nguyễn were already on their brooms and in the air, the latter calling out, "It's from above! Keep the Patronuses up!" Rescues had been tried before, and most of them relied on the Dementors themselves. Distract or stun the aurors, and the Dementors would take care of the rest when the Patronuses dropped. It had never worked, but it was still clever.

"Alarum! Alarum!" called Salamander into his mirror, as more thunder crashed into the fortress. "We're under attack!"

A face appeared in the mirror, a wide-eyed young man that Salamander didn't know. "You're... what?! Oh Merlin... I'll get s
__"

The man was cut off abruptly and the viewpoint of the mirror whipped around, showing a crazy zigzag of desk and floor and someone's shirt, and then Salamander was looking at Kingsley Shacklebolt. The man scowled bitterly. He was unshaven and missing his trademark kofia. "Get out of there. Get out of there and into the air, everybody!"

"Sir, the Dementors! We can't... the prisoners!" Salamander shouted, astonished. There was another thunderous crash, as

twenty tonnes of stone hit Azkaban's roof with the force of an explosion, and the room rocked violently again.

"Keep your Patronuses active and down there, but get *out of there!* We know who it is!" shouted Shackbolt. "*Get out man, I say!*"

Salamander clutched the mirror and shoved it into his robes as he staggered across the room. "Shackbolt says to get in the air. Patronuses active and left here, but everyone up in the air!" He snatched a broom from the wall rack and threw it to Hood, who had gotten the bars off the Cabinet, then threw another to a second auror. "Up, up, up! Get out! They know who it is — there's some plan!"

They were airborne and out in two minutes, eight of them joining the two already aloft. Hood had paused only to activate the Vanishing Cabinet, but no one had come out. Protocol was... what had *happened* to protocol?!

They joined Nimue and Nguyễn in the standard pattern above the Azkaban, two hundred meters up and away, out of reach of the bounce of any crashing meteors. Wind and rain whipped them until they had charms up. Comfort was almost out of mind, given what they were witnessing. Nguyễn had her mirror in hand... she must have called in as well. That was why they weren't attacking. That was why they were just... watching.

Something was flitting in and out of existence with roars of flame, leaving a welter of sparks in its wake as it sprang into the sky, and down to the shore, and up, and back, and everywhere from moment to moment. There might have been a shape there, but it was lost in rain and distance. "What is that?!" shouted Salamander to Nguyễn. "*Who* is that?!"

"I don't know," returned the Muggleborn witch, her voice almost too low to be heard over the storm. "It look like... it's..." But she caught herself, and didn't finish the thought. Lightning flashed and thunder boomed.

A new pattern had settled in. One immense spear of rock was being used again and again — the mysterious flash of flame plucking it out of existence and then stabbing down with it from above, it looked like two kilometers now, hurtling it into one part of the prison's sloping walls over and over — in Merlin's name, was

that a phoenix?! — was Albus Dumbledore here, back from where he'd gone? — and then struck such a blow that the projectile cracked in half — but now *Azkaban was cracked*, the ceiling gaped wide and the walls on that side were falling away in great chunks of metal and stone. It was unbelievable, quite literally unbelievable, and Salamander performed Jackson's Disbelieving Test just to see if he was being confunded, but it was still happening.

"The Dementors!" cried Nimue, jabbing his finger at the prison.

A stream of black cloaks was visible, rising from the center of Azkaban, illuminated by flashes of fire and the slashes of lightning that cut through the night. Several Patronuses yet remained near the top of the building, but their effect was diminished with distance and the creatures were hungry. He expected it was only natural for them to seek out the disturbance, to feed on it and punish it.

Salamander felt a twist in his guts. He didn't know how to feel... didn't know who this was... didn't know what was happening. It was an uncertainty not common to an auror. He steadied himself against the wind and turned to look at Hood, but she looked stricken, as well. This was... too *big* for them...



Hermione had thought she wouldn't be afraid, but that was silly. Of course she was afraid. She might very well die. She'd just realized... well, that wasn't as important as it might have seemed, that's all.

If they wouldn't close Azkaban, then Hermione would *break* it.

She wasn't certain, but she thought she could use her expectations like a weapon — like Harry had told her and demonstrated — to restrain the Dementors while she did this, even if she couldn't destroy them. She would batter this prison open, *expect* the Dementors to leave, and rescue the nine people on the bottom level. The aurors could guard the *ruddle* she would leave behind, if this place meant so much to them.

Granville clutched her back, easily bearing her weight, his talons gripping the back of her robes firmly and pulling them tight

against her chest. That part didn't make much sense, of course: biology would suggest that Granville was far too small to do that — he wasn't a Haast's Eagle, for goodness' sake. But magic and flame kept them aloft, and the phoenix was so happy and so proud that it shrieked out great glorious cries as they swooped and vanished with cracking bursts of flame.

They would hold for a moment in the air, and she would point at a stone — did she even need to point? — and then there would be a wash of heat through her body, as though she were being consumed by fire in a peculiarly pleasant way... and they would be where she'd pointed. Granville would swoop down, and Hermione would clutch the boulder she'd chosen, spitting out the sea's salt as it was whipped into her mouth by the wind, and then they'd be burning once more as Granville took them away, vanishing from the world for a thought's span.

She couldn't actually lift the rocks, but that didn't seem to matter: they were scooped up along with Granville and dropped back into reality, a kilometer above Azkaban, to plunge down and smash into the prison.

They did it a dozen times, two dozen times, before she started choosing even larger rocks, and they began appearing even higher up. Hermione couldn't see how much damage they were doing, with the lashing rain and little light, but she could see the prison shake and shudder. She was afraid to get closer for an inspection, even if it was only for a flame-filled moment... she was afraid to get too close to the Dementors. She was *expecting* them to stay cowering in the bottom for now, expecting that behavior as hard as she could — a peculiar feeling, to try to force yourself to believe in a future prediction — but she didn't trust that.

There were aurors still down there, she thought; she could see three small creatures of glowing silver. No, they were there, on brooms. They weren't interfering... she'd known — she'd *hoped* that they would stand down. Though they agreed to stand this guard, nonetheless they were the type of person who could cast a Patronus Charm. There was good in them. And here, while they watched, they would expect the Dementors to stay in the pit, where they always stayed. That would help.

Granville didn't seem to be getting tired... she didn't know if phoenix travel would ever tire him, or if the burden mattered. His

joyful cries had no trace of weariness or fear. Phoenixes had a purpose, unlike any evolved creature. Their purpose was right action, regardless of consequences or danger. Granville looked upon the black bitterness of Azkaban and burned with joyful war.

She saw a thick finger of rock like a spear — too dark and wet to see what exactly it was made of — and Granville took her there, holding her firmly, and swooping down from a few feet away, the warm wash of his golden light illuminating everything. She bumped against the rock and grabbed onto it, her fingers digging into the stone until the crushed grit filled the space under her nails — and they were gone again, burning up with joy and flame, the whole world reconfiguring in a scarlet eyeblink to place them hundreds of meters above Azkaban... two kilometers or more, now.

Hermione released the stone the instant they appeared — could she have held on, and dragged the phoenix down with her? — and it plummeted straight down like a blade, and hit Azkaban with a cracking boom — Cra-KOOM! — bouncing away from the impact and bounding down the steep sides of Azkaban's cliffs, end over end. That was good. Again.

They snatched up the finger of rock, now scarred with impact, and repeated the procedure. Cra-KOOM! Again and again. Cra-KOOM! They could hit twice a minute or so, now, girl and phoenix working in unspoken harmony, united by the battlesong in their hearts. Cra-KOOM!

They could have done this *six months ago*, she realized, gritting her teeth as she reached out her arms to clutch the spear-stone. Minute after minute had passed for six months, and they could have acted *immediately* after the Wizengamot vote failed. If you could control where the Dementors went with your expectations, then it didn't even matter that she couldn't destroy them, and they could have done this *six months ago*. Maybe not without help, and Harry couldn't have been seen to help if he wanted his plans to stay on track, but she could have taken it on herself. She could have found others. She could have done this months ago.

She would never wait again. Never allow suffering when she could stop it. Not one more minute.

Cra-KOOM! went the stone, and Azkaban broke. She could see it from here, thrust one fist out at the sight, and Granville

shrieked a cry of joy that thrilled her to her core, and she shouted wordless exuberance into the wind.

But the Dementors came.

The breaching of the walls had brought them — or rather, the breaching of the walls had made the aurors expect them to attack. It was natural, and obvious, and Hermione felt very stupid as she scrubbed the water out of her eyes with her sleeve. Lightning flashed, and fluttering black cloaks rose from Azkaban like soiled bits of paper caught in the wind.

Granville wheeled, her thought and his joined as one will, and climbed away, soaring quickly as she craned her head back around to see. Ribbons of flame followed in their wake, and the Dementors rose in a column to pursue. It didn't make any sense that the Dementors flew around rather than — no, what was she doing, why would she even start to think about that, never mind.

She guided Granville up and into the sky as she thought, ignoring the storm and taking a moment's comfort in the warm touch of her phoenix's light. *They're slow and they're moving in a swarm... I just need to keep my distance.*

She focused on a spar of rock on the other side of the island, one blocked from sight now but that she'd noticed before. A rush of flame burned through her, erupting within her flesh and igniting her clothing, and Granville brought her there. Looking up, Hermione could see the Dementors following. She waited... waited... almost a full minute as they swept down in a black cloud of nightmare, and then she seized the rock, and Granville took her away with a tide of fire.

Hermione let the rock fall, so high now that she couldn't even see the Dementors, and they hung there for a minute, listening to the cacophony of the boulder's impact. Granville beat the air with crimson wings, sparks flickering out all around them with each stroke. *I can do this all evening. Let them chase me... I'll batter their home until it gapes open, then we'll fly down and rescue the prisoners, one by one.* She knew intimately where each was located, had been to visit each cell many times (though she hadn't gone in each one... for a few of them, that had been too much). *And then I'll crush this hell to dust.*

She waited until they could see the Dementors streaming up at them once more, and barked a short, harsh laugh that would

have surprised her friends, and then Granville took her in flames to Azkaban's base, and hung there, beating sparks down and crying a great caw into the storm. *You are death and you can fly, but we are life and we can teleport.* When the fluttering black cloaks descended on her out of the night, highlighted by flashing lightning, she seized the rock and Granville covered them over and through with fire, and they were gone again.

An instant of flame later, they were back in the world. The dark and terrible world of storm, rushing around them with battering wind and rain. A world of pain and madness. No joy, not really, since it all had an end. An end where you were alone. Every living thing dies alone.

The phoenix heat in Hermione's heart flickered and went out as though it had never been. The boulder fell from her nerveless fingers, but she didn't even realize it. Granville made a strangled cry, and his golden flames dimmed.

Distantly, Hermione remembered that aurors were trained to flank their enemies. To anticipate their movements.

They expected it.

Granville turned them in place, with two faltering beats of his wings, and she saw the Dementor behind them. A dozen of them had spread across the sky. They'd been waiting.

The Dementor rushed them, and now Hermione could really see it, and it was a rotting corpse, fingertips peeled away into bone talons, mouth agape with lust and hunger, black cloaking billowing out in the wind behind it. It had *eyes*, and they held a promise in them as they met Hermione's gaze.

Granville shrieked in defiance once more, and beat his wings strongly, but the moment of hesitation had been too long. The Dementor washed into them and over them and through them, and Granville crumpled in on himself. His golden flames dulled and his cry caught in his throat, and they were falling.



Salamander gasped, and it was then he knew what he'd been hoping. He realized he'd been cheering for that faceless figure of

flame and joy, as it smashed Azkaban over and over until the stone flew. He knew there were good reasons to keep the place open — he never would have wanted to release Dolokhov or Sarian or the others — but... to see this...

The golden glory of fire that had burned like a small sun over the prison had faded into faintness, and dropped out of sight.

Hood and Nguyễn shouted as well, and Salamander wasn't sure if they felt the same as him. Nguyễn looked stricken, though, when Salamander looked over at her. She looked sick.



There was a moment's relief — a few second's respite as they plunged further away from the Dementor. Hermione spun and tossed in the wind, and screamed. Granville's light flooded back, gold and crimson illuminating them once more, and he caught himself back up into flight with a beat of his wings. Hermione fell, and Granville pulled into a dive after her. Dementors surged towards them, their cloaks whipping behind them as they plunged towards their meal.

Hermione fell for six seconds.

It was long enough for her to snatch her wand from its holster in her sleeve, to pull it free.

It was long enough for Granville to call out, shrieking with a cry that split the night as surely as any lightning.

It was long enough for her to remember.

I'm not sure I really believe that death will ever end, she thought, as she fell towards Azkaban. There will always be accidents, even if we get to the point where we sail the stars and forget about age. And I think I'll always be afraid of dying alone, and no happy thought is ever going to put that out of mind.

Her robes whipped wildly as her wand came to hand.

I don't really reject death as the natural order, since it's a part of the universe in a deep way. Even if humanity evolves past it, there will be suns and galaxies that die and are reborn. In time, there would be an end to the world, and its magic, and that would be a death even if humans survived it to soar out into space. And there will always be people who want to die... just to leave pain behind.

I don't agree with Harry, not exactly.

Her fingers slid along the wand, just the right way.

Harry's thought isn't my thought. But I have my own. Since I do think death shall be mastered, if not ended. I have my own thought. Just like everyone has their own way to do the regular Patronus. The True Patronus is about defeating death... believing that we will overcome it... death as a thing to master and leash to our will... we just need to work together... we can do it... I can do it...

Because even if it seems impossible now...

Her hand thrust forward.

I can do anything if I study hard enough.

And she whispered into the wind.

"Expecto Patronum."



Salamander's breath caught in his throat when he saw the light which erupted from the tiny falling figure. It began as an argent glow to join the phoenix flame which had surged down to catch the caster. The silver light of a Patronus, shining and proud, and giving him hope again. .

But it wasn't right... because it was neither mist nor animal. It was just a roar of silver light, blooming brighter and brighter until Salamander couldn't even look at it anymore. He looked away, and saw the dark waters of the shore illuminated by argent. It was unlike anything he'd ever seen. It was like a story of old.

The light began like a bright star, dropping down into the prison, but in moments it had flared up — it flooded forth with argent power...

And for the first time in all the centuries since the vile fortress had been hewn from hatred and had risen from the ocean, dawn had come to Azkaban.

The silver light covered the world.

It washed over the aurors with peace and happiness and possibility, and it felt comfortable on Salamander's soul — it felt like the parchment of a well-loved book. It touched everything with a comforting hand. It was day: a day of beauty and silver and joy.

When it receded, the Dementors were gone. Even though that was impossible.

And Azkaban had fallen. Even though that was impossible.

Entire floors had cracked and peeled open and pulled away, leaving only the jagged stub of the bottom three levels. Rubble and metal gaped open. Azkaban had fallen.

The light shrank back down to a bright star of joy, and then its fall was arrested as it mixed together with the scarlet flames of the phoenix. The twin lights caught each other and joined and flowed into a single glow of laughter and justice. The united glow climbed back up into the sky, and hung there like a new polestar.

Though it was his place to obey and to guard, nonetheless Salamander felt joy. He had to feel joy... he didn't think anyone could be touched by that light and feel anything else. He saw that all the others felt the same, as he glanced around, squinting against the wind. There were smiles on everyone's faces, mixed with astonishment or outright awe. He blinked rain and tears out of his eyes, and wondered at what they'd seen. Wondered at what that was: that new light in the sky.

He saw Nguyễn mouthing something, and this time he understood it perfectly, despite the rain and night and tumult. It was his answer.

"Goddess," Nguyễn said. "It's a goddess."

*And death shall have no dominion.
Dead men naked they shall be one
With the man in the wind and the west moon;
When their bones are picked clean and the clean
bones gone,
They shall have stars at elbow and foot;
Though they go mad they shall be sane,
Though they sink through the sea they shall rise
again;
Though lovers be lost love shall not;
And death shall have no dominion.*

*And death shall have no dominion.
Under the windings of the sea
They lying long shall not die windily;
Twisting on racks when sinews give way,
Strapped to a wheel, yet they shall not break;
Faith in their hands shall snap in two,
And the unicorn evils run them through;
Split all ends up they shan't crack;
And death shall have no dominion.*

*And death shall have no dominion.
No more may gulls cry at their ears
Or waves break loud on the seashores;
Where blew a flower may a flower no more
Lift its head to the blows of the rain;
Though they be mad and dead as nails,
Heads of the characters hammer through daisies;
Break in the sun till the sun breaks down,
And death shall have no dominion.*

—Dylan Thomas



Glossary



Ackle The mountain home of much of the goblin nation in Britain.

Agenspræc Literally “other-speech,” this term of art refers to the incantation required to authorize or remove a Floo connection to an established network.

Alping The fortress-like headquarters of the Council of Westphalia, the Alping (or “All-**Thing**”) serves as an information warehouse and the site of fiery debates.

Americas See **Westphalia, Council of**.

Bogdanova, Agapa ``Ilya" Ilyinichna Head of the Office for the Detection and Confiscation of Counterfeit Defensive Spells and Protective Objects, Ilya is an efficient older witch of Russian extraction. She is a graduate of the Durmstrang Institute, and maintains close ties with its faculty.

Bones, Amelia As the Chief Warlock, Madame Amelia Bones serves as the leader of the **Wizengamot** and administrator of the justice system of Magical Britain. As Supreme Mugwump, she leads the **International Confederation of Wizards**.

Cappadocia Magical Cappadocia, also called the Exarchate of Cappadocia, is a magical state that controls much of the Balkans and Turkey. It is ruled by an elite class known as the *sakellarioi* (in continuity with the Byzantine state from which it descended), although nominally headed by a single powerful *Strategos*. They are relatively poor when compared with the rest of the world, and the two dominant languages are Greek and Turkish. They have belligerent relations with **Cyprus**.

Caucasus Magical Caucasus is officially a single magical state north of **Cappadocia**, but in practice is a fractious conglomeration of small regions with little to unite them but convenience. Delegate status to the **International Confederation** is frequently doled out as a sop to potential rivals of local strongmen, and in practice the Caucasus tends to lean heavily in favor towards Russia and the European contingent.

Charlevoix, Odette A member of the **Returned** of **Hermione Granger**, Charlevoix is of French extraction. She is quiet and shy by nature, which combines oddly with the extremism of the Returned. She looks just like your aunt.

Covenant, Tilly Assistant Head of the Office for the Detection and Confiscation of Counterfeit Defensive Spells and Protective Objects.

Curd A small community of goblins in Ireland.

Cyprus Magical Cyprus is a small and wealthy state in the Mediterranean with strong historical ties to Britain. They have had fractious relations with **Cappadocia**.

Diggory, Cedric Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and widely considered to be a prodigy, having risen to his position with remarkable speed.

Eleusinian Mysteries The magical cabal that ruled Ancient Rome during much of its early history. After their fall and some discord, they were succeeded by the Caesars and Muggle rule.

Euphoric An addict of Euphoria Elixir, unable to resist compulsively indulging in that potion's rush of pleasure and delight.

Floo Flounder An American device, these take the form of small bellows on the floor and dispense a set amount of Floo powder. It is slightly safer and considerably cleaner than using manual pinches of the stuff, especially for children and the elderly.

Franklin's Nez A popular Boston tavern, conspicuous for having Pensieves and a variety of exhilarating or pleasurable memories to rent.

Free States Several different small states in the south of Africa that tend to agree on matters of international politics but

which endure frequent friction among themselves: the Orange Free State, the Zulu Free State, and the Transvaal Free State. The Free States are also notable for being one of the areas where the magical world is wholly out of sync with the Muggle world's borders.

Goddess, The See **Granger, Hermione Jean**.

Göreme A prison complex of the Exarchate of **Cappadocia**, where Dementors are housed. They are kept a maximum distance away from prisoners, who are there to provide sustenance, not suffer punishment.

Granger, Hermione Jean Also melodramatically known as the "Goddess," Hermione is an international envoy for the **Treaty for Health and Life** and an activist for various causes (most prominently the abolition of Dementors).

Grindelwald, Gellert A Hungarian wizard who was educated at the Durmstrang Institute and who rose to power as a Dark Lord with the stated intention of overturning the Statute of Secrecy and improving the lives of Muggles everywhere under a benevolent dictatorship, modeled after Plato's *The Republic*.

Hig, Councilor Regulus ``Reg" Black-Horse

Arguably the most influential Councilor on the **Council of Westphalia**, Hig has risen to power despite his years spent fighting for the rights of Muggles and Beings. His closest ally is Councilor **Limpel Tineagar**.

Hírnökei The "Vég Hírnökei," or "Heralds of the End," were the fighting force assembled by **Gellert Grindelwald** and indoctrinated with a strange kind of fanaticism. They mostly came from former Durmstrang Institute students and the ranks of local warlords from Eastern Europe, and used Hungarian as a lingua franca.

Howard Prison A purpose-built prison for magical Britain, created to replace Azkaban after its destruction at the end of 1992.

International Confederation of Wizards The international assembly of wizardkind. It is governed by majority vote, and delegates are apportioned to states based on magical population. It is similar to the Muggle United Nations,

with the differences of meeting infrequently, having no permanent headquarters, and occasionally being efficacious.

International Statute for Health and Life An attempt at an international law setting into place requirements for all nations to have their sick and elderly restored to health at the **Tower**. It failed to pass in the **International Confederation of Wizards**, and was one of Harry Potter's early failures. See also **Treaty for Health and Life**.

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; Lectenbergl, Susie; Li, Hyori; Price, Esther; Smith, Simon; Tonks, Nymphadora; or Urg of the Returned**.

Room 101 Everyone knows what’s in Room 101. The thing that is in Room 101 is the worst thing in the world.

Russell Center, The One of the two major schools of magic in North America, the Russell Center focuses on practical application and specialization. Students choose a specific course of study in addition to their general education, and are required to master their chosen field.

Safety Pole See **Tower, The**.

Safety Stick See **Tower, The**.

Salor Sprig, The The Salor Sprig is a revered silver birch sapling at the centre of a sacred clearing in the Forbidden Forest near Hogwarts, in the northwest of their designated lands. The Sprig remains the same, year after year, never maturing from its sapling stage. According to legend, this is because it accords the centaurs too much respect to obstruct them in their studies or their frolics. A small group of buildings has been built among the trees near the Sprig, and form a rough center to their community.

Satomi's Dogs A powerful set of magical items once employed by **Gellert Grindelwald**, these crystal devices granted that Dark Lord some unknown power to sustain himself. The secret of their means and method was restricted to only a handful of people.

Sawad The group of magical states in the Middle East, a relic of ancient magical despots that are still customarily considered a unit, despite their actual independence and occasionally divergent interests.

Science Program A four-year educational track at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, the Science Program features two years of general magical studies and two years of scientific training. It was introduced in the 1992-1993 school year as an optional vocational program.

Shacklebolt, Kingsley Former Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, succeeding **Amelia Bones** upon her ascension to Chief Warlock and dismissed several years later.

Shichinin A wildly effective and wildly unconventional trio of Hit Wizards.

Smith, Junius Simplewort See **Minister for Magic**.

Smith, Simon A member of the **Returned** of **Hermione Granger**, Simon is Scottish and proud of it. He once had a drinking problem and a fighting problem, and in time it led to Azkaban.

Sontag A hamlet of medieval Magical Britain, located in the West Country. It was abandoned in the fourteen century. It was near Godric's Hollow, the magical community from

which Sontag once sprang due to disagreements over the prohibition of werewolves.

Ten Thousand, The Colloquial term used to refer to those twelve magical Asian states with a common Taoist and Confucian heritage.

Tidewater The main magical community of Boston, Tidewater is a quaint and narrow dockside village set within Boston. It is dominated, metaphorically and literally, by the stately **Alping**.

Tineagar, Councilor Limpel A veteran of the **Council of Westphalia** and the ally of **Reg Hig**, Tineagar is generally disagreeable. She is an expert in Floo networks and similar magics.

Thing In addition to being a generic noun, it also historically refers to governing assemblies in many Germanic countries. It is still used in some areas as a term for any magical assembly of lawmakers.

Tonks, Nymphadora A member of the **Returned of Hermione Granger**, Tonks is a metamorphmagus and kind of a pain in the ass.

Treaty for Health and Life A formal agreement between different magical states, sponsored by Britain and guided by the **Tower**, that directs the establishment of Safety Poles in magical communities, the free availability of Safety Sticks and elite Healer's Kits, and a variety of other social and economic changes.

Tower, The The clinic and sprawling research center on the grounds of Hogwarts, led by **Harry Potter** and dedicated to the perfect healing of any wound or sickness, free of charge. Travel to the Tower is free and instantaneous with Safety Sticks or a Safety Pole. Not technically a part of the government of magical Britain. Also see **Tower School of Doubt**.

Tower School of Doubt, The The institute of higher learning established by **Harry Potter** and designed to systematically apply the principles of the scientific method to the study of magic. Works closely with the Unspeakables of the Department of Mysteries in the government of magical Britain.

Unbreakable Honour The underground newspaper published by Draco and Narcissa Malfoy. It has a worldwide circulation, and has made them the leaders of the minority campaign against the current leadership of Britain and the **Treaty for Health and Life**.

Urg the Unclean The charismatic and brilliant leader of the fifth goblin rebellion of 1720-1722 C.E., the “Great Rebellion.”

Urg the Returned A member of the **Returned** of **Hermione Granger**, Urg was imprisoned in Azkaban as a gesture of dominance by the **Wizengamot**, asserting their authority over the goblins. He was one of the first goblins to legitimately purchase a masterwork wand in many centuries.

Vanishing Room A natural extension of the concept of the Vanishing Cabinet, constructed for easy international shipping. Put things in, close the door, and they’re teleported to the twin room somewhere else in the world.

Veres Kezek The “Red Hands,” one of the death squads of **Gellert Grindelwald** during his reign of terror. See also **Hírnökei**.

Walpurgisnacht “Walpurgis Night,” the night of April 30th, is a night of celebration for many Muggles. It is named after St. Walpurga, and in many countries in Europe is marked by the building of big bonfires, evoking the fires in which witches were once burned. It is a grim night of remembrance for wizardkind.

Weasley, Percy Senior Undersecretary Percy Weasley is the effective head of government of Magical Britain, serving under a rotating and mostly meaningless series of Ministers. He is seen as slightly priggish by his underlings, but his efficiency and concern for detail are peerless.

Westphalia, Council of The Mystical and Benevolent Council of Westphalia, also called the **Westphalian Council** and headquartered in the **Alping**, is the most powerful magical organization in the United States of America and Canada. For years, it has acted as the self-appointed guardian of the interests of both North and South

America (or at least, those interests as it sees them). It has controlled a large majority of the Magical Congress of the United States for many years, making it the effective ruler of the country and arbiter of its delegates to the **International Confederation of Wizards**.

Westphalia, Peace of A formative historical event in both the Muggle and magical worlds, the Peace ended multiple wars and established norms regarding the formal existence of states and their rights under international law. Soon led to the founding of the **International Confederation of Wizards**.

Wizengamot The supreme judicial and legislative body of magical Britain, the Wizengamot is led by **Amelia Bones** and populated overwhelmingly with supporters of **Harry Potter** and his initiatives. It is composed predominantly of the representatives of Noble Houses, as well as elected Tribunes from other constituent bodies.

Záh Kardja The “Sword of Záh,” one of the death squads of **Gellert Grindelwald** during his reign of terror. Named in honor of the Hungarian Felician Záh. See also **Hírnökei**.