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HARRY POTTER *and the* METHODS OF RATIONALITY

Volume II

Based on the works of J.K. Rowling

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Harry Potter and the Methods of Rationality

Arc Set Three

THE CARDINAL SIN

BRIGHT the sun, bright the air, bright the students and bright their parents, clean the paved ground of Platform 9.75, the winter Sun hanging low in the sky at 9:45am in the morning on January 5th, 1992. Some of the younger students wore scarves and mittens, but most simply wore their robes; they were wizards, after all.

After Harry had moved away from the landing platform, he took off his scarf and coat, opened a compartment of his trunk, and stowed away his winter things.

For a long moment, he stood there letting the January air bite at him, just to see what it was like.

Harry took out his wizards' robes, shrugged them on.

And finally, Harry drew his wand; and he couldn't help thinking of the parents he'd only just kissed goodbye, of the world whose problems he was leaving behind...

With a strange feeling of guilt for the unavoidable, Harry said, "Thermos."

The warmth flowed through him.

And the Boy-Who-Lived was back.

Harry yawned and stretched, feeling more lethargic than anything else at the conclusion of his vacation. He didn't feel like reading his textbooks, or even any serious science fiction, this morning; what he needed was something completely frivolous to occupy his attention...

Well, that wouldn't be hard to come by, if he was willing to part with four Knuts.

Besides, if the Daily Prophet was corrupt and the Quibbler was the only competing newspaper, there might be some suppressed real news in there.

Harry trudged back over to the same newsstand from last time, wondering if the Quibbler could top the headline he'd seen before.

The vendor started to smile as Harry approached, and then the man's face suddenly changed, as he caught sight of the scar.

"Harry Potter?" gasped the vendor.

“No, Mr. Durian,” said Harry, eyes dipping briefly to the man’s nametag, “just an amazing imitation –”

And then Harry’s voice stopped in his throat, as he caught sight of the top fold of the Quibbler.

SLOSHED SEER SPILLS SECRETS:
DARK LORD TO RETURN,

For just an instant, Harry tried to clamp down on his face, before realizing that not being shocked could be just as revealing, in a sense –

“Excuse me,” Harry said. His voice sounded a little alarmed, and he didn’t even know whether that was too revealing, or just what his normal reaction would be if he didn’t know anything. He’d spent too much time around Slytherins, he was forgetting how to keep secrets from ordinary people. Four Knuts hit the counter. “One copy of the Quibbler, please.”

“Oh, no worries, Mr. Potter!” said the vendor hastily, waving his hands. “It’s – never mind, just –”

A newspaper flew through the air and hit Harry’s fingers, and he unfolded it.

SLOSHED SEER SPILLS SECRETS:
DARK LORD TO RETURN,
WED DRACO MALFOY

“It’s free,” said the vendor, “for you, I mean –”

“No,” Harry said, “I was going to buy one anyway.”

The vendor took the coins, and Harry read on.

“Gosh,” Harry said half a minute later, “you get a seer smashed on six slugs of Scotch and she spills all sorts of secret stuff. I mean, who’d have thought that Sirius Black and Peter Pettigrew were secretly the same person?”

“Not me,” said the vendor.

“They’ve even got a picture of the two of them together, so we know who it is that’s secretly the same person.”

“Yup,” said the vendor. “Pretty clever disguise, innit?”

“And I’m secretly sixty-five years old.”

“You don’t look half that,” the vendor said amiably.

“And I’m betrothed to Hermione Granger, and Bellatrix Black, and Luna Lovegood, and oh yes, Draco Malfoy too...”

“Goin’ ter be one interesting wedding,” said the vendor.

Harry looked up from the newspaper, and said in a pleasant voice, "You know, I heard at first that Luna Lovegood was insane, and I wondered if she really was, or if she was just making stuff up and giggling to herself the whole time. Then when I read my second Quibbler headline, I decided that she couldn't be insane, I mean, it can't be easy to make this stuff up, you couldn't do it by accident. And now do you know what I think? I think she must be mad after all. When ordinary people try to make stuff up, it doesn't come out like this. Something's got to go really wrong with the inside of your head before this is what comes out when you start making stuff up!"

The vendor stared at Harry.

"Seriously," said Harry. "Who reads this stuff?"

"You," said the vendor.

Harry wandered off to read his newspaper.

He didn't sit at the same nearby table he'd sat down at with Draco, the first time he'd prepared to board this train. That seemed like tempting history to repeat itself.

It wasn't just that his first week at Hogwarts had been, judging by the Quibbler, fifty-four years long. It was that, in Harry's humble opinion, his life did not need any new threads of complexity.

So Harry found a small iron chair somewhere else, distant from the main crowd and the occasional muffled cracks of parents Apparating in with their children, and sat down and read the Quibbler to see if it contained any suppressed news.

And besides the obvious craziness (heaven help them all if any of that was real) there was a good deal of snide romantic gossip; but nothing that would really be all that important if it was true.

Harry was just reading about the Ministry's proposed marriage law, to ban all marriages, when –

"Harry Potter," said a silken voice that sent a shock of adrenaline jolting through Harry's blood.

Harry looked up.

"Lucius Malfoy," Harry said, his voice weary. Next time he was going to do the smart thing, and wait outside in the Muggle part of King's Cross until 10:55am.

Lucius inclined his head courteously, sending his long white hair drifting over his shoulders. The man was still carrying that same cane, lacquered in black with a silver snake's head for its handle; and something about his grip

silently said this is a weapon of deadly power, not I am feeble and leaning on this. His face was expressionless.

Two men flanked him, their eyes continuously scanning, their wands already gripped low in their hands. The two of them moved like a single organism with four legs and four arms, the senior Crabbe-and-Goyle, and Harry thought he could guess which was which, but then it didn't really matter. They were merely Lucius's appendages, as certainly as if they'd been the two rightmost toes on his left foot.

"I apologize for disturbing you, Mr. Potter," said the smooth, silken voice. "But you have answered none of my owls; and this, I thought, might be my only opportunity to meet you."

"I have received none of your owls," Harry said calmly. "Dumbledore intercepted them, I presume. But I would not have answered them if I had, except through Draco. For me to deal with you directly, without Draco's knowledge, would trespass on our friendship."

Please go away, please go away...

The grey eyes glittered at him. "Is that your pose, then..." said the senior Malfoy. "Well. I shall play along a little. What was your purpose in maneuvering your good friend, my son, into a public alliance with that girl?"

"Oh," Harry said lightly, "that's obvious, right? Draco's working with Granger will make him realize that Muggleborns are human after all. Bwa. Ha. Ha."

A thin trace of a smile moved over Lucius's lips. "Yes, that does sound like one of Dumbledore's plans. Which it is not."

"Indeed," said Harry. "It is part of my game with Draco, and no work of Dumbledore's, and that is all I will say."

"Let us dispense with games," said the senior Malfoy, the grey eyes suddenly hardening. "If my suspicions are true, you would hardly do Dumbledore's bidding in any case, Mr. Potter."

There was a slight pause.

"So you know," Harry said, his voice cold. "Tell me. At which point, exactly, did you realize?"

"When I read your response to Professor Quirrell's little speech," said the white-haired man, and chuckled grimly. "I was puzzled, at first, for it seemed not in your own interest; it took me days to understand whose interest was being served, and then it all finally became clear. And it is also obvious that you are weak, in some ways if not others."

“Very clever of you,” said Harry, still cold. “But perhaps you mistake my interests.”

“Perhaps I do.” A hint of steel came into the silken voice. “Indeed, that is precisely what I fear. You are playing strange games with my son, to a purpose I cannot guess. That is not a friendly act, and you cannot but expect me to be concerned!”

Lucius was leaning upon his cane with both hands now, and both those hands white, and his bodyguards had suddenly tensed.

Some instinct within Harry claimed that it would be a very bad idea to show his fear, to let Lucius see that he could be intimidated. They were in a public train station anyway –

“I find it interesting,” Harry said, putting steel into his own voice, “that you think I could benefit from doing Draco harm. But it is irrelevant, Lucius. He is my friend, and I do not betray my friends.”

“What?” whispered Lucius. His face showed sheer shock.

Then –

“Company,” said one of the minions, and Harry thought, from the voice, that it must be the senior Crabbe.

Lucius straightened and turned, then let out a hiss of disapproval.

Neville was approaching, looking scared but determined, in tow behind a tall woman who didn’t look scared at all.

“Madam Longbottom,” Lucius said icily.

“Mr. Malfoy,” returned the woman with equal ice. “Are you being an annoyance to our Harry Potter?”

The bark of laughter that came from Lucius seemed strangely bitter. “Oh, I rather think not. Come to protect him from me, have you?” The white-haired head shifted toward Neville. “And this would be Mr. Potter’s loyal lieutenant, the last scion of Longbottom, Neville, self-styled of Chaos. How strangely does the world turn. Sometimes I think it must all be mad.”

Harry had no idea at all what to say to that, and Neville looked confused, and frightened.

“I doubt it is the world that is mad,” said Madam Longbottom. Her voice took on a gloating tone. “You seem in a poor mood, Mr. Malfoy. Did the speech of our dear Professor Quirrell cost you a few allies?”

“It was a clever enough slander of my abilities,” Lucius said coldly, “though only effective upon the fools who believe that I was truly a Death Eater.”

“What?” blurted Neville.

"I was under the Imperius, young man," said Lucius, now sounding tired. "The Dark Lord could hardly have begun recruiting among pureblood families without the support of House Malfoy. I demurred, and he simply made sure of me. His own Death Eaters did not know it until afterward, hence the false Mark I bear; though since I did not truly consent, it does not bind me. Some of the Death Eaters still believe I was foremost among their number, and for the peace of this nation I let them believe it, to keep them controlled. But I was not such a fool as to support that ill-fated adventurer of my own choice —"

"Ignore him," Madam Longbottom said, the instruction addressed to Harry as well as Neville. "He must spend the rest of his life pretending, for fear of your testimony under Veritaseum." Said with malicious satisfaction.

Lucius turned his back on her dismissively, and faced Harry again. "Will you request this harridan to depart, Mr. Potter?"

"I think not," said Harry in a dry voice. "I prefer to deal with the part of House Malfoy that's my own age."

There was a long pause, then. The grey eyes searched him.

"Of course..." said Lucius slowly. "I do feel the fool now. This whole time you were just pretending to have no idea what we were talking about."

Harry met the gaze, and said nothing.

Lucius raised his cane a few centimeters and struck it hard on the ground.

The world vanished in a pale haze, all sounds went quiet, there was nothing in the universe but Harry and Lucius Malfoy and the snake-headed cane.

"My son is my heart," said the senior Malfoy, "the last worthwhile thing I have left in this world, and this I say to you in a spirit of friendship: if he were to come to harm, I would give my life over to vengeance. But so long as my son does not come to harm, I wish you the best of luck in your endeavors. And as you have asked nothing more of me, I will ask nothing more of you."

Then the pale haze vanished, showing an outraged Madam Longbottom being blocked from moving forward by the senior Crabbe; her wand was in her hand, now.

"How dare you!" she hissed.

Lucius's dark robes swirled around him, and his white hair, as he turned to the senior Goyle. "We return to Malfoy Manor."

There were three pops of Apparition, and they were gone.

A silence followed.

"Dear heavens," said Madam Longbottom. "What was that about?"

Harry shrugged helplessly. Then he looked at Neville.

There was sweat on Neville's forehead.

"Thank you very much, Neville," said Harry. "Your help was greatly appreciated, Neville. And now, Neville, I think you should sit down."

"Yes, General," said Neville, and instead of coming over to one of the other chairs near Harry, he semi-collapsed into a sitting position on the pavement.

"You have wrought many changes in my grandson," said Madam Longbottom. "I approve of some, but not others."

"Send me the list of which is which," said Harry. "I'll see what I can do."

Neville groaned, but said nothing.

Madam Longbottom gave a chuckle. "I shall, young man, thank you." Her voice lowered. "Mr. Potter... the speech given by Professor Quirrell is something our nation has long needed to hear. I cannot say as much of your comment on it."

"I will take your opinion under advisement," Harry said mildly.

"I dearly hope that you do," said Madam Longbottom, and turned back to her grandson. "Do I still need to –"

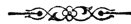
"It's okay for you to go, Granma," said Neville. "I'll be fine on my own, this time."

"Now that I approve of," she said, and popped and vanished like a soap bubble.

The two boys sat quietly for a moment.

Neville spoke first, his voice weary. "You're going to try to fix all the changes she approves of, right?"

"Not all of them," Harry said innocently. "I just want to make sure I'm not corrupting you."



Draco looked very worried. His head kept darting around, despite the fact that Draco had insisted on them going down into Harry's trunk, and using a true Quieting Charm and not just the sound-blurring barrier.

"What did you say to Father?" blurted Draco, the moment the Quieting Charm went up and the sounds of Platform 9 3/4 vanished.

"I... look, can you tell me what he said to you, before he dropped you off?" said Harry.

“That I should tell him right away if you seemed to be threatening me,” said Draco. “That I should tell him right away if there was anything I was doing that could pose a threat to you! Father thinks you’re dangerous, Harry, whatever you said to him today it scared him! It’s not a good idea to scare Father!”

Oh, hell...

“What did you talk about?” demanded Draco.

Harry leaned back wearily in the small folding chair that sat at the bottom of his trunk’s cavern. “You know, Draco, just as the fundamental question of rationality is ‘What do I think I know and how do I think I know it?’, there’s also a cardinal sin, a way of thinking that’s the opposite of that. Like the ancient Greek philosophers. They had no clue what was going on, so they’d go around saying things like ‘All is water’ or ‘All is fire’, and they never asked themselves, ‘Wait a minute, even if everything is water, how could I possibly know that?’ They didn’t ask themselves if they had evidence which discriminated that possibility from all the other possibilities you could imagine, evidence they’d be very unlikely to encounter if the theory wasn’t true –”

“Harry,” Draco said, his voice strained, “What did you talk about with Father?”

“I don’t know, actually,” said Harry, “so it’s very important that I not just make stuff up –”

Harry had never heard Draco shriek in horror in quite that high a pitch before.

PRETENDING TO BE WISE, PART I

WHISTLE. Tick. Bzzzt. Ding. Glorp. Pop. Splat. Chime. Toot. Puff. Tinkle. Bubble. Beep. Thud. Crackle. Whoosh. Hiss. Pffft. Whirr.

Professor Flitwick had silently passed Harry a folded parchment during Charms class that Monday, and the note had said that Harry was to visit the Headmaster at his convenience and in such fashion that no one else would notice, especially not Draco Malfoy or Professor Quirrell. His one-time password for the gargoyles would be “squeamish ossifrage”. This had been accompanied by a remarkably artistic ink drawing of Professor Flitwick staring at him sternly, the eyes of which occasionally blinked; and at the bottom of the note, underlined three times, was the phrase DON’T GET INTO TROUBLE.

And so Harry had finished up Transfiguration class, and studied with Hermione, and eaten dinner, and spoken with his lieutenants, and finally, when the clock struck nine, turned himself invisible and dropped back to 6pm and wearily trudged off toward the gargoyles, the turning spiral stairs, the wooden door, the room full of little fiddly things, and the silver-bearded figure of the Headmaster.

This time, Dumbledore looked quite serious, the customary smile absent; and he was dressed in pajamas of a darker and more sober purple than usual.

“Thank you for coming, Harry,” said the Headmaster. The old wizard rose from his throne, began to slowly pace through the room and the strange devices. “First, do you have with you the notes of yesterday’s encounter with Lucius Malfoy?”

“Notes?” blurted Harry.

“Surely you wrote it down...” said the old wizard, and his voice trailed off.

Harry felt rather embarrassed. Yes, if you’d just fumbled through a mysterious conversation full of significant hints you didn’t understand, the bloody obvious thing to do would be to write it all down immediately afterward, before the memory faded, so you could try to figure it out later.

“All right,” said the Headmaster, “from memory then.”

Harry sheepishly recited as best he could, and got almost halfway through before he realized that it wasn't smart to just go around telling the possibly-crazy Headmaster everything, at least not without thinking about it first, but then Lucius was definitely a bad guy and Dumbledore's opponent so it probably was a good idea to tell him, and Harry had already started talking and it was too late to try and calculate things out now...

Harry finished his recollections honestly.

Dumbledore's face had grown more remote as Harry went on, and at the end there was a look of ancientness about him, a sternness in the air.

"Well," said Dumbledore. "I suggest you take the best of care that the heir of Malfoy does not come to harm, then. And I will do the same." The Headmaster was frowning, his fingers drumming soundlessly through the inky black surface of a plate inscribed with the word Leliel. "And I think it would be most extremely wise for you to avoid all interaction with Lord Malfoy henceforth."

"Did you intercept owls from him to me?" said Harry.

The Headmaster gazed at Harry for a long moment, then reluctantly nodded.

For some reason Harry wasn't feeling as outraged as he should have been. Maybe it was just that Harry was finding it very easy to sympathize with the Headmaster's point of view right now. Even Harry could understand why Dumbledore wouldn't want him to interact with Lucius Malfoy; it didn't seem like an evil deed.

Not like the Headmaster blackmailing Zabini... for which they had only Zabini's word, and Zabini was wildly untrustworthy, in fact it was hard to see why Zabini wouldn't just tell the story that got him the most sympathy from Professor Quirrell...

"How about if, instead of protesting, I say that I understand your point of view," said Harry, "and you go on intercepting my owls, but you tell me who from?"

"I have intercepted a great many owls to you, I am afraid," Dumbledore said soberly. "You are a celebrity, Harry, and you would receive dozens of letters a day, some from far outside this country, did I not turn them back."

"That," Harry said, now starting to feel a bit of indignation, "seems like going a little too far -"

"Many of those letters," the old wizard said quietly, "will be asking you for things you cannot give. I have not read them, of course, only turned

them back to their senders undelivered. But I know, for I receive them too. And you are too young, Harry, to have your heart broken six times before breakfast each morning.”

Harry looked down at his shoes. He should insist on reading the letters and judging for himself, but... there was a small voice of common sense inside him, and it was screaming very loudly right now.

“Thank you,” Harry muttered.

“The other reason I asked you here,” said the old wizard, “was that I wished to consult your unique genius.”

“Transfiguration?” said Harry, surprised and flattered.

“No, not that unique genius,” said Dumbledore. “Tell me, Harry, what evil could you accomplish if a Dementor were allowed onto the grounds of Hogwarts?”



It developed that Professor Quirrell had asked, or rather demanded, that his students test their skills against an actual Dementor after they learned the words and gestures to the Patronus Charm.

“Professor Quirrell is unable to cast the Patronus Charm himself,” said Dumbledore, as he paced slowly through the devices. “Which is never a good sign. But then, he volunteered that fact to me in the course of demanding that outside instructors be brought in to teach the Patronus Charm to every student who wished to learn; he offered to pay the expense himself, if I would not. This impressed me greatly. But now he insists on bringing in a Dementor —”

“Headmaster,” Harry said quietly, “Professor Quirrell believes very strongly in live-fire tests under realistic combat conditions. Wanting to bring in an actual Dementor is completely in character for him.”

Now the Headmaster was giving Harry a strange look.

“In character?” said the old wizard.

“I mean,” said Harry, “it’s entirely consistent with the way Professor Quirrell usually acts...” Harry trailed off. Why had he put it that way?

The Headmaster nodded. “So you have the same sense I do; that it is an excuse. A very reasonable excuse, to be sure; more so than you may realize. Often, wizards seemingly unable to cast a Patronus Charm will succeed in the presence of an actual Dementor, going from not a single flicker of light to a full corporeal Patronus. Why this should be, no one knows; but it is so.”

Harry frowned. "Then I really don't see why you're suspicious –"

The Headmaster spread his hands as though in helplessness. "Harry, the Defense Professor has asked me to pass the darkest of all creatures through the gates of Hogwarts. I must be suspicious." The Headmaster sighed. "And yet the Dementor will be guarded, warded, in a mighty cage, I will be there myself to watch it at all times – I cannot think of what ill could be done. But perhaps I am merely unable to see it. And so I am asking you."

Harry stared at the Headmaster with his mouth open. He was so shocked he couldn't even feel flattered.

"Me?" said Harry.

"Yes," said Dumbledore, smiling slightly. "I try my best to anticipate my foes, to encompass their wicked minds and predict their evil thoughts. But I would never have imagined sharpening a Hufflepuff's bones into weapons."

Was Harry ever going to live that down?

"Headmaster," Harry said wearily, "I know it doesn't sound good, but in all seriousness: I'm not evil, I'm just very creative –"

"I did not say that you were evil," Dumbledore said seriously. "There are those who say that to comprehend evil is to become evil; but they are merely pretending to be wise. Rather it is evil which does not know love, and dares not imagine love, and cannot ever understand love without ceasing to be evil. And I suspect that you can imagine your way into the minds of Dark Wizards better than I ever could, while still knowing love yourself. So, Harry." The Headmaster's eyes were intent. "If you stood in Professor Quirrell's shoes, what misdeeds could you accomplish after you tricked me into allowing a Dementor onto the grounds of Hogwarts?"

"Hold on," said Harry, and in something of a daze trudged over to the chair in front of the Headmaster's desk, and sat down. It was a large and comfortable chair this time, not a wooden stool, and Harry could feel himself enveloped as he sank into it.

Dumbledore was asking him to outwit Professor Quirrell.

Point one: Harry was rather fonder of Professor Quirrell than of Dumbledore.

Point two: The hypothesis was that the Defense Professor was planning to do something evil, and in that subjunctive case, Harry ought to be helping the Headmaster prevent it.

Point three...

“Headmaster,” Harry said, “if Professor Quirrell is up to something, I’m not sure I can outwit him. He’s got a lot more experience than I do.”

The old wizard shook his head, somehow managing to appear very solemn despite his smile. “You underestimate yourself.”

That was the first time anyone had ever said that to Harry.

“I remember,” the old wizard continued, “a young man in this very office, cold and controlled as he faced down the Head of House Slytherin, blackmailing his own Headmaster to protect his classmates. And I believe that young man is more cunning than Professor Quirrell, more cunning than Lucius Malfoy, that he will grow to be the equal of Voldemort himself. It is he who I wish to consult.”

Harry suppressed the chill that went through him at the name, frowned thoughtfully at the Headmaster.

How much does he know...?

The Headmaster had seen Harry in the grip of his mysterious dark side, as deep as Harry had ever sunk into it. Harry still remembered what it had been like to watch, invisibly Time-Turned, as his past self faced down the older Slytherins; the boy with the scar on his forehead who didn’t act like the others. Of course the Headmaster would have noticed something odd about the boy in his office...

And Dumbledore had concluded that his pet hero had cunning to match his destined foe, the Dark Lord.

Which wasn’t asking for very much, considering that the Dark Lord had put a clearly visible Dark Mark on all of his servants’ left arms, and that he’d slaughtered the entire monastery that taught the martial art he’d wanted to learn.

Enough cunning to match Professor Quirrell would be a whole different order of problem.

But it was also clear that the Headmaster wouldn’t be satisfied until Harry went all cold and darkish, and came up with some sort of answer that sounded impressively cunning... which had better not actually get in the way of Professor Quirrell’s teaching Defense...

And of course Harry would go over to his dark side and think it through from that direction, just to be honest, and just in case.

“Tell me,” Harry said, “everything about how the Dementor is to be brought in, and how it is to be guarded.”

Dumbledore's eyebrows rose for a moment, and then the old wizard began to speak.

The Dementor would be transported to the grounds of Hogwarts by an Auror trio, all three personally known to the Headmaster, and all three able to cast a corporeal Patronus Charm. They would be met at the edge of the grounds by Dumbledore, who would pass the Dementor through the Hogwarts wards –

Harry asked if the pass was permanent or temporary – whether someone could just bring in the same Dementor again the next day.

The pass was temporary (replied the Headmaster with an approving nod), and the explanation went on: The Dementor would be in a cage of solid titanium bars, not Transfigured but true-forged; in time a Dementor's presence would corrode that metal to dust, but not in a single day.

Students awaiting their turn would stay well back of the Dementor, behind two corporeal Patronuses maintained by two of the three Aurors at any given time. Dumbledore would wait by the Dementor's cage with his Patronus. A single student would approach the Dementor; and Dumbledore would dispel his Patronus; and the student would attempt to cast their own Patronus Charm; and if they failed, Dumbledore would restore his Patronus before the student could suffer any permanent damage. Past dueling champion Professor Flitwick would also be present while there were students near, just to add safety margin.

"Why just you waiting by the Dementor?" said Harry. "I mean, shouldn't it be you plus an Auror –"

The Headmaster shook his head. "They could not withstand the repeated exposure to the Dementor, each time I dispel my Patronus."

And if Dumbledore's Patronus did fail for some reason, while one of the students was still near the Dementor, the third Auror would cast another corporeal Patronus and send it to shield the student...

Harry poked and prodded, but he couldn't see a flaw in the security.

So Harry took a deep breath, sank further into the chair, closed his eyes, and remembered:

"And that will be... five points? No, let us make it an even ten points from Ravenclaw for backchat."

The cold came more slowly now, more reluctantly, Harry hadn't been calling much on his dark side lately...

Harry had to run through that entire session in Potions in his mind, before his blood chilled into something approaching deadly crystalline clarity.

And then he thought of the Dementor.

And it was obvious.

"The Dementor is a distraction," Harry said. The coldness clear in his voice, since that was what Dumbledore wanted and expected. "A large, salient threat, but in the end straightforward, and easy to defend against. So while all your attention is focused on the Dementor, the real plot will be happening elsewhere."

Dumbledore stared at Harry for a moment, and then gave a slow nod. "Yes..." said the Headmaster. "And I do believe I know what it might be a distraction from, if Professor Quirrell means ill... thank you, Harry."

The Headmaster was still staring at Harry, a strange look in those ancient eyes.

"What?" said Harry with a tinge of annoyance, the cold still lingering in his blood.

"I have another question for that young man," said the Headmaster. "It is something I have long wondered to myself, yet been unable to comprehend. Why?" There was a tinge of pain in his voice. "Why would anyone deliberately make himself a monster? Why do evil for the sake of evil? Why Voldemort?"



Whirr, bzzzt, tick; ding, puff, splat...

Harry stared at the Headmaster in surprise.

"How would I know?" said Harry. "Am I supposed to magically understand the Dark Lord because I'm the hero, or something?"

"Yes!" said Dumbledore. "My own great foe was Grindelwald, and him I understood very well indeed. Grindelwald was my dark mirror, the man I could so easily have been, had I given in to the temptation to believe that I was a good person, and therefore always in the right. For the greater good, that was his slogan; and he truly believed it himself, even as he tore at all Europe like a wounded animal. And him, I defeated in the end. But then after him came Voldemort, to destroy everything I had protected in Britain." The hurt was plain now in Dumbledore's voice, exposed upon his face. "He committed acts worse by far than Grindelwald's worst, horror for the sake of horror. I sacrificed everything only to hold him back, and I still don't

understand why! Why, Harry? Why did he do it? He was never my destined foe, but yours, so if you have any guesses at all, Harry, please tell me! Why?"

Harry stared down at his hands. The truth was that Harry hadn't read up on the Dark Lord yet, and right now he hadn't the tiniest clue. And somehow that didn't seem like an answer the Headmaster wanted to hear. "Too many Dark rituals, maybe? In the beginning he thought he'd do just one, but it sacrificed part of his good side, and that made him less reluctant to perform other Dark rituals, so he did more and more rituals in a positive feedback cycle until he ended up as a tremendously powerful monster –"

"No!" Now the Headmaster's voice was agonized. "I can't believe that, Harry! There has to be something more to it than just that!"

Why should there be? thought Harry, but he didn't say it, because it was clear that the Headmaster thought the universe was a story and had a plot, and that huge tragedies weren't allowed to happen except for equally huge, significant reasons. "I'm sorry, Headmaster. The Dark Lord doesn't seem like much of a dark mirror to me, not at all. There isn't anything I find even the tiniest bit tempting about nailing the skins of Yermy Wibble's family to a newsroom wall."

"Have you no wisdom to share?" said Dumbledore. There was pleading in the old wizard's voice, almost begging.

Evil happens, thought Harry, it doesn't mean anything or teach us anything, except to not be evil? The Dark Lord was probably just a selfish bastard who didn't care who he hurt, or an idiot who made stupidly avoidable mistakes that snowballed. There is no destiny behind the ills of this world; if Hitler had been allowed into architecture school like he wanted, the whole history of Europe would have been different; if we lived in the sort of universe where horrible things were only allowed to happen for good reasons, they just wouldn't happen in the first place.

And none of that, obviously, was what the Headmaster wanted to hear.

The old wizard was still looking at Harry from over a fiddly thing like a frozen puff of smoke, a painful desperation in those ancient, waiting eyes.

Well, sounding wise wasn't difficult. It was a lot easier than being intelligent, actually, since you didn't have to say anything surprising or come up with any new insights. You just let your brain's pattern-matching software complete the cliché, using whatever Deep Wisdom you'd stored previously.

"Headmaster," Harry said solemnly, "I would rather not define myself by my enemies."

Somehow, even in the midst of all the whirring and ticking, there was a kind of silence.

That had come out a bit more Deeply Wise than Harry had intended.

"You may be very wise, Harry..." the Headmaster said slowly. "I do wish... that I could have been defined by my friends." The pain in his voice had grown deeper.

Harry's mind searched hastily for something else Deeply Wise to say that would soften the unintended force of the blow –

"Or perhaps," Harry said more softly, "it is the foe that makes the Gryffindor, as it is the friend that makes the Hufflepuff, and the ambition that makes the Slytherin. I do know that it is always, in every generation, the puzzle that makes the scientist."

"It is a dreadful fate to which you condemn my House, Harry," said the Headmaster. The pain was still in his voice. "For now that you remark on it, I do think that I was very much made by my enemies."

Harry stared at his own hands, where they lay in his lap. Maybe he should just shut up while he was ahead.

"But you have answered my question," said Dumbledore more softly, as though to himself. "I should have realized that would be a Slytherin's key. For his ambition, all for the sake of his ambition; and that I know, though not why..." For a time Dumbledore stared off into nothingness; then he straightened, and his eyes seemed to focus on Harry again.

"And you, Harry," said the Headmaster, "you name yourself a scientist?" His voice was laced with surprise and mild disapproval.

"You don't like science?" said Harry a little wearily. He'd hoped Dumbledore would be fonder of Muggle things.

"I suppose it is useful to those without wands," said Dumbledore, frowning. "But it seems a strange thing by which to define yourself. Is science as important as love? As kindness? As friendship? Is it science that makes you fond of Minerva McGonagall? Is it science that makes you care for Hermione Granger? Will it be science to which you turn, when you try to kindle warmth in Draco Malfoy's heart?"

You know, the sad thing is, you probably think you just uttered some kind of incredibly wise knockdown argument.

Now, how to phrase the rejoinder in such fashion that it also sounded incredibly wise...

“You are not Ravenclaw,” Harry said with calm dignity, “and so it might not have occurred to you that to respect the truth, and seek it all the days of your life, could also be an act of grace.”

The Headmaster’s eyebrows rose up. And then he sighed. “How did you become so wise, so young...?” The old wizard sounded sad, as he said it. “Perhaps it will prove valuable to you.”

Only for impressing ancient wizards who are overly impressed with themselves, thought Harry. He was actually a bit disappointed by Dumbledore’s credulity; it wasn’t that Harry had lied, but Dumbledore seemed far too impressed with Harry’s ability to phrase things so that they sounded profound, instead of putting them into plain English like Richard Feynman had done with his wisdom...

“Love is more important than wisdom,” said Harry, just to test the limits of Dumbledore’s tolerance for blindingly obvious cliches completed by sheer pattern matching without any sort of detailed analysis.

The Headmaster nodded gravely, and said, “Indeed.”

Harry stood up out of the chair, and stretched his arms. Well, I’d better go off and love something, then, that’s bound to help me defeat the Dark Lord. And next time you ask me for advice, I’ll just give you a hug –

“This day you have helped me much, Harry,” said the Headmaster. “And so there is one last thing I would ask that young man.”

Great.

“Tell me, Harry,” said the Headmaster (and now his voice sounded simply puzzled, though there was still a hint of pain in his eyes), “why do Dark Wizards fear death so greatly?”

“Er,” said Harry, “sorry, I’ve got to back the Dark Wizards on that one.”



Whoosh, hiss, chime; glorp, pop, bubble –

“What?” said Dumbledore.

“Death is bad,” said Harry, discarding wisdom for the sake of clear communication. “Very bad. Extremely bad. Being scared of death is like being scared of a great big monster with poisonous fangs. It actually makes a great deal of sense, and does not, in fact, indicate that you have a psychological problem.”

The Headmaster was staring at him as though he’d just turned into a cat.

“Okay,” said Harry, “let me put it this way. Do you want to die? Because if so, there’s this Muggle thing called a suicide prevention hotline –”

“When it is time,” the old wizard said quietly. “Not before. I would never seek to hasten the day, nor seek to refuse it when it comes.”

Harry was frowning sternly. “That doesn’t sound like you have a very strong will to live, Headmaster!”

“Harry...” The old wizard’s voice was starting to sound a little helpless; and he had paced to a spot where his silver beard, unnoticed, had drifted into a crystalline glass goldfish bowl, and was slowly taking on a greenish tinge that crept up the hairs. “I think I may have not made myself clear. Dark Wizards are not eager to live. They fear death. They do not reach up toward the sun’s light, but flee the coming of night into infinitely darker caverns of their own making, without moon or stars. It is not life they desire, but immortality; and they are so driven to grasp at it that they will sacrifice their very souls! Do you want to live forever, Harry?”

“Yes, and so do you,” said Harry. “I want to live one more day. Tomorrow I will still want to live one more day. Therefore I want to live forever, proof by induction on the positive integers. If you don’t want to die, it means you want to live forever. If you don’t want to live forever, it means you want to die. You’ve got to do one or the other... I’m not getting through here, am I.”

The two cultures stared at each other across a vast gap of incommensurability.

“I have lived a hundred and ten years,” the old wizard said quietly (taking his beard out of the bowl, and jiggling it to shake out the color). “I have seen and done a great many things, too many of which I wish I had never seen or done. And yet I do not regret being alive, for watching my students grow is a joy that has not begun to wear on me. But I would not wish to live so long that it does! What would you do with eternity, Harry?”

Harry took a deep breath. “Meet all the interesting people in the world, read all the good books and then write something even better, celebrate my first grandchild’s tenth birthday party on the Moon, celebrate my first great-great-great grandchild’s hundredth birthday party around the Rings of Saturn, learn the deepest and final rules of Nature, understand the nature of consciousness, find out why anything exists in the first place, visit other stars, discover aliens, create aliens, rendezvous with everyone for a party on the other side of the Milky Way once we’ve explored the whole thing, meet up with everyone else who was born on Old Earth to watch the Sun finally go

out, and I used to worry about finding a way to escape this universe before it ran out of negentropy but I'm a lot more hopeful now that I've discovered the so-called laws of physics are just optional guidelines."

"I did not understand much of that," said Dumbledore. "But I must ask if these are things that you truly desire so desperately, or if you only imagine them so as to imagine not being tired, as you run and run from death."

"Life is not a finite list of things that you check off before you're allowed to die," Harry said firmly. "It's life, you just go on living it. If I'm not doing those things it'll be because I've found something better."

Dumbledore sighed. His fingers drummed on a clock; as they touched it, the numerals changed to an indecipherable script, and the hands briefly appeared in different positions. "In the unlikely event that I am permitted to tarry until a hundred and fifty," said the old wizard, "I do not think I would mind. But two hundred years would be entirely too much of a good thing."

"Yes, well," Harry said, his voice a little dry as he thought of his Mum and Dad and their allotted span if Harry didn't do something about it, "I suspect, Headmaster, that if you came from a culture where people were accustomed to living four hundred years, that dying at two hundred would seem just as tragically premature as dying at, say, eighty." Harry's voice went hard, on that last word.

"Perhaps," the old wizard said peacefully. "I would not wish to die before my friends, nor live on after they had all gone. The hardest time is when those you loved the most have gone on before you, and yet others still live, for whose sake you must stay..." Dumbledore's eyes were fixed on Harry, and growing sad. "Do not mourn me too greatly, Harry, when my time comes; I will be with those I have long missed, on our next great adventure."

"Oh!" Harry said in sudden realization. "You believe in an afterlife. I got the impression wizards didn't have religion?"



Toot. Beep. Thud.

"How can you not believe it?" said the Headmaster, looking completely flabbergasted. "Harry, you're a wizard! You've seen ghosts!"

"Ghosts," Harry said, his voice flat. "You mean those things like portraits, stored memories and behaviors with no awareness or life, accidentally impressed into the surrounding material by the burst of magic that accompanies the violent death of a wizard –"

“I’ve heard that theory,” said the Headmaster, his voice growing sharp, “repeated by wizards who mistake cynicism for wisdom, who think that to look down upon others is to elevate themselves. It is one of the silliest ideas I have heard in a hundred and ten years! Yes, ghosts do not learn or grow, because this is not where they belong! Souls are meant to move on, there is no life remaining for them here! And if not ghosts, then what of the Veil? What of the Resurrection Stone?”

“All right,” Harry said, trying to keep his voice calm, “I’ll hear out your evidence, because that’s what a scientist does. But first, Headmaster, let me tell you a little story.” Harry’s voice was trembling. “You know, when I got here, when I got off the train from King’s Cross, I don’t mean yesterday but back in September, when I got off the train then, Headmaster, I’d never seen a ghost. I wasn’t expecting ghosts. So when I saw them, Headmaster, I did something really dumb. I jumped to conclusions. I, I thought there was an afterlife, I thought no one had ever really died, I thought that everyone the human species had ever lost was really fine after all, I thought that wizards could talk to people who’d passed on, that it just took the right spell to summon them, that wizards could do that, I thought I could meet my parents who died for me, and tell them that I’d heard about their sacrifice and that I’d begun to call them my mother and father –”

“Harry,” whispered Dumbledore. Water glittered in the old wizard’s eyes. He took a step closer across the office –

“And then,” spat Harry, the fury coming fully into his voice, the cold rage at the universe for being like that and at himself for being so stupid, “I asked Hermione and she said that they were just afterimages, burned into the stone of the castle by the death of a wizard, like the silhouettes left on the walls of Hiroshima. And I should have known! I should have known without even having to ask! I shouldn’t have believed it even for all of thirty seconds! Because if people had souls there wouldn’t be any such thing as brain damage, if your soul could go on speaking after your whole brain was gone, how could damage to the left cerebral hemisphere take away your ability to talk? And Professor McGonagall, when she told me about how my parents had died, she didn’t act like they’d just gone away on a long trip to another country, like they’d emigrated to Australia back in the days of sailing ships, which is the way people would act if they actually knew that death was just going somewhere else, if they had hard evidence for an afterlife, instead of making stuff up to console themselves, it would change everything, it wouldn’t matter

that everyone had lost someone in the war, it would be a little sad but not horrible! And I'd already seen that people in the wizarding world didn't act like that! So I should have known better! And that was when I knew that my parents were really dead and gone forever and ever, that there wasn't anything left of them, that I'd never get a chance to meet them and, and, and the other children thought I was crying because I was scared of ghosts –"

The old wizard's face was horrified, he opened his mouth to speak –

"So tell me, Headmaster! Tell me about the evidence! But don't you dare exaggerate a single tiny bit of it, because if you give me false hope again, and I find out later that you lied or stretched things just a little, I won't ever forgive you for it! What's the Veil?"

Harry reached up and wiped at his cheeks, while the glass things of the office stopped vibrating from his last shriek.

"The Veil," said the old wizard with only a slight tremble in his voice, "is a great stone archway, kept in the Department of Mysteries; a gateway to the land of the dead."

"And how does anyone know that?" said Harry. "Don't tell me what you believe, tell me what you've seen!"

The physical manifestation of the barrier between worlds was a great stone archway, old and tall and coming to a sharp point, with a tattered black veil like the surface of a pool of water, stretched between the stones; rippling, always, from the constant and one-way passage of the souls. If you stood by the Veil you could hear the voices of the dead calling, always calling in whispers barely on the wrong side of comprehension, growing louder and more numerous if you stayed and tried to hear, as they tried to communicate; and if you listened too long, you would go to meet them, and in the moment you touched the Veil you would be sucked through, and never be heard from again.

"That doesn't even sound like an interesting fraud," Harry said, his voice calmer now that there was nothing there to make him hope, or make him angry for having hopes dashed. "Someone built a stone archway, made a little black rippling surface between it that Vanished anything it touched, and enchanted it to whisper to people and hypnotize them."

"Harry..." the Headmaster said, starting to look rather worried. "I can tell you the truth, but if you refuse to hear it..."

Also not interesting. "What's the Resurrection Stone?"

"I would not tell you," the Headmaster said slowly, "save that I fear what this disbelief may do to you... so listen, then, Harry, please listen..."

The Resurrection Stone was one of the three legendary Deathly Hallows, kin to Harry's cloak. The Resurrection Stone could call souls back from the dead – bring them back into the world of the living, though not as they were. Cadmus Peverell used the stone to call back his lost beloved from the dead, but her heart stayed with the dead, and not in the world of the living. And in time it drove him mad, and he killed himself to be truly with her once more...

In all politeness, Harry raised his hand.

"Yes?" the Headmaster said reluctantly.

"The obvious test to see if the Resurrection Stone is really calling back the dead, or just projecting an image from the user's mind, is to ask a question whose answer you don't know, but the dead person would, and that can be definitely verified in this world. For example, call back –"

Then Harry paused, because this time he'd managed to think it through one step ahead of his tongue, fast enough to not say the first name and test that had sprung to mind.

"...your dead wife, and ask her where she left her lost earring, or something like that," Harry finished. "Did anyone do any tests like that?"

"The Resurrection Stone has been lost for centuries, Harry," the Headmaster said quietly.

Harry shrugged. "Well, I'm a scientist, and I'm always willing to be convinced. If you really believe the Resurrection Stone calls back the dead – then you must believe a test like that will succeed, right? So do you know anything about where to find the Resurrection Stone? I got one Deathly Hallow already under highly mysterious circumstances, and, well, we both know how the rhythm of the world works on that sort of thing."

Dumbledore stared at Harry.

Harry gazed equably back at the Headmaster.

The old wizard passed a hand across his forehead and muttered, "This is madness."

(Somehow, Harry managed to stop himself from laughing.)

And Dumbledore told Harry to draw forth the Cloak of Invisibility from his pouch; at the Headmaster's direction, Harry stared at the inside and back of the hood until he saw it, faintly drawn against the silvery mesh in faded scarlet like dried blood, the symbol of the Deathly Hallows: a triangle, with a circle drawn inside, and a line dividing them both.

"Thank you," Harry said politely. "I shall be sure to keep an eye out for a stone so marked. Do you have any other evidence?"

Dumbledore appeared to be fighting a struggle within himself. "Harry," the old wizard said, his voice rising, "this is a dangerous road you are walking, I am not sure I do the right thing by saying this, but I must wrench you from this way! Harry, how could Voldemort have survived the death of his body if he did not have a soul?"

And that was when Harry realized that there was exactly one person who'd originally told Professor McGonagall that the Dark Lord was still alive in the first place; and it was the crazy Headmaster of their madhouse of a school, who thought the world ran on cliches.

"Good question," Harry said, after some internal debate about how to proceed. "Maybe he found some way of duplicating the power of the Resurrection Stone, only he loaded it in advance with a complete copy of his brain state. Or something like that." Harry was suddenly far from sure that he was trying to come up with an explanation for something that had actually happened. "Actually, can you just go ahead and tell me everything you know about how the Dark Lord survived and what it might take to kill him?" If he even still exists as more than Quibbler headlines.

"You are not fooling me, Harry," said the old wizard; his face looked ancient now, and lined by more than years. "I know why you are truly asking that question. No, I do not read your mind, I do not have to, your hesitation gives you away! You seek the secret of the Dark Lord's immortality in order to use it for yourself!"

"Wrong! I want the secret of the Dark Lord's immortality in order to use it for everyone!"



Tick, crackle, fzzzt...

Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore just stood there and stared at Harry with his mouth gaping open dumbly.

(Harry awarded himself a tally mark for Monday, since he'd managed to blow someone's mind completely before the day was over.)

"And in case it wasn't clear," said Harry, "by everyone I mean all Muggles too, not just all wizards."

"No," said the old wizard, shaking his head. His voice rose. "No, no, no! This is insanity!"

“Bwa ha ha!” said Harry.

The old wizard’s face was tight with anger and worry. “Voldemort stole the book from which he gleaned his secret; it was not there when I went to look for it. But this much I know, and this much I will tell you: his immortality was born of a ritual terrible and Dark, blacker than pitchest black! And it was Myrtle, poor sweet Myrtle, who died for it; his immortality took sacrifice, it took murder –”

“Well obviously I’m not going to popularize a method of immortality that requires killing people! That would defeat the entire point!”

There was a startled pause.

Slowly the old wizard’s face relaxed out of its anger, though the worry was still there. “You would use no ritual requiring human sacrifice.”

“I don’t know what you take me for, Headmaster,” Harry said coldly, his own anger rising, “but let’s not forget that I’m the one who wants people to live! The one who wants to save everyone! You’re the one who thinks death is awesome and everyone ought to die!”

“I am at a loss, Harry,” said the old wizard. His feet once more began trudging across his strange office. “I know not what to say.” He picked up a crystal ball that seemed to hold a hand in flames, looked into it with a sad expression. “Only that I am greatly misunderstood by you... I don’t want everyone to die, Harry!”

“You just don’t want anyone to be immortal,” Harry said with considerable irony. It seemed that elementary logical tautologies like $\text{All } x: \text{Die}(x) = \text{Not Exist } x: \text{Not Die}(x)$ were beyond the reasoning abilities of the world’s most powerful wizard.

The old wizard nodded. “I am less afraid than I was, but still greatly worried for you, Harry,” he said quietly. His hand, a little wizened by time, but still strong, placed the crystal ball firmly back into its stand. “For the fear of death is a bitter thing, an illness of the soul by which people are twisted and warped. Voldemort is not the only Dark Wizard to go down that bleak road, though I fear he has taken it further than any before him.”

“And you think you’re not afraid of death?” Harry said, not even trying to mask the incredulity in his voice.

The old wizard’s face was peaceful. “I am not perfect, Harry, but I think I have accepted my death as part of myself.”

“Uh huh,” Harry said. “See, there’s this little thing called cognitive dissonance, or in plainer English, sour grapes. If people were hit on the heads

with truncheons once a month, and no one could do anything about it, pretty soon there'd be all sorts of philosophers, pretending to be wise as you put it, who found all sorts of amazing benefits to being hit on the head with a truncheon once a month. Like, it makes you tougher, or it makes you happier on the days when you're not getting hit with a truncheon. But if you went up to someone who wasn't getting hit, and you asked them if they wanted to start, in exchange for those amazing benefits, they'd say no. And if you didn't have to die, if you came from somewhere that no one had ever even heard of death, and I suggested to you that it would be an amazing wonderful great idea for people to get wrinkled and old and eventually cease to exist, why, you'd have me hauled right off to a lunatic asylum! So why would anyone possibly think any thought so silly as that death is a good thing? Because you're afraid of it, because you don't really want to die, and that thought hurts so much inside you that you have to rationalize it away, do something to numb the pain, so you won't have to think about it –"

"No, Harry," the old wizard said. His face was gentle, his hand trailed through a lighted pool of water that made small musical chimes as his fingers stirred it. "Though I can understand how you must think so."

"Do you want to understand the Dark Wizard?" Harry said, his voice now hard and grim. "Then look within the part of yourself that flees not from death but from the fear of death, that finds that fear so unbearable that it will embrace Death as a friend and cozen up to it, try to become one with the night so that it can think itself master of the abyss. You have taken the most terrible of all evils and called it good! With only a slight twist that same part of yourself would murder innocents, and call it friendship. If you can call death better than life then you can twist your moral compass to point anywhere –"

"I think," said Dumbledore, shaking water droplets from his hand to the sound of tiny tinkling bells, "that you understand Dark Wizards very well, without yet being one yourself." It was said in perfect seriousness, and without accusation. "But your comprehension of me, I fear, is sorely lacking." The old wizard was smiling now, and there was a gentle laughter in his voice.

Harry was trying not to go any colder than he already was; from somewhere there was pouring into his mind a blazing fury of resentment, at Dumbledore's condescension, and all the laughter that wise old fools had ever used in place of argument. "Funny thing, you know, I thought Draco Malfoy was going to be this impossible to talk to, and instead, in his childish

innocence, he was a hundred times stronger than you.”

A look of puzzlement crossed the old wizard’s face. “What do you mean?”

“I mean,” Harry said, his voice biting, “that Draco actually took his own beliefs seriously and processed my words instead of throwing them out the window by smiling with gentle superiority. You’re so old and wise, you can’t even notice anything I’m saying! Not understand, notice!”

“I have listened to you, Harry,” said Dumbledore, looking more solemn now, “but to listen is not always to agree. Disagreements aside, what is it that you think I do not comprehend?”

That if you really believed in an afterlife, you’d go down to St. Mungo’s and kill Neville’s parents, Alice and Frank Longbottom, so they could go on to their next great adventure, instead of letting them linger here in their damaged state –

Harry barely, barely kept himself from saying it out loud.

“All right,” Harry said coldly. “I’ll answer your original question, then. You asked why Dark Wizards are afraid of death. Pretend, Headmaster, that you really believed in souls. Pretend that anyone could verify the existence of souls at any time, pretend that nobody cried at funerals because they knew their loved ones were still alive. Now can you imagine destroying a soul? Ripping it to shreds so that nothing remains to go on its next great adventure? Can you imagine what a terrible thing that would be, the worst crime that had ever been committed in the history of the universe, which you would do anything to prevent from happening even once? Because that’s what Death really is – the annihilation of a soul!”

The old wizard was staring at him, a sad look in his eyes. “I suppose I do understand now,” he said quietly.

“Oh?” said Harry. “Understand what?”

“Voldemort,” said the old wizard. “I understand him now at last. Because to believe that the world is truly like that, you must believe there is no justice in it, that it is woven of darkness at its core. I asked you why he became a monster, and you could give no reason. And if I could ask him, I suppose, his answer would be: Why not?”



They stood there gazing into each other’s eyes, the old wizard in his robes, and the young boy with the lightning-bolt scar on his forehead.

“Tell me, Harry,” said the old wizard, “will you become a monster?”

“No,” said the boy, an iron certainty in his voice.

“Why not?” said the old wizard.

The young boy stood very straight, his chin raised high and proud, and said: “There is no justice in the laws of Nature, Headmaster, no term for fairness in the equations of motion. The universe is neither evil, nor good, it simply does not care. The stars don’t care, or the Sun, or the sky. But they don’t have to! We care! There is light in the world, and it is us!”

“I wonder what will become of you, Harry,” said the old wizard. His voice was soft, with a strange wonder and regret in it. “It is enough to make me wish to live just to see it.”

The boy bowed to him with heavy irony, and departed; and the oaken door slammed shut behind him with a thud.

PRETENDING TO BE WISE, PART II

HARRY, holding the tea cup in the exactly correct way that Professor Quirrell had needed to demonstrate three times, took a small, careful sip. All the way across the long, wide table that was the centerpiece of Mary's Room, Professor Quirrell took a sip from his own cup, making it look far more natural and elegant. The tea itself was something whose name Harry couldn't even pronounce, or at least, every time Harry had tried to repeat the Chinese words, Professor Quirrell had corrected him, until finally Harry had given up.

Harry had maneuvered himself into getting a glimpse at the bill last time, and Professor Quirrell had let him get away with it.

He'd felt an impulse to drink a Comed-Tea first.

Even taking that into account, Harry had still been shocked out of his skin.

And it still tasted to him like, well, tea.

There was a quiet, nagging suspicion in Harry's mind that Professor Quirrell knew this, and was deliberately buying ridiculously expensive tea that Harry couldn't appreciate just to mess with him. Professor Quirrell himself might not like it all that much. Maybe nobody actually liked this tea, and the only point of it was to be ridiculously expensive and make the victim feel unappreciative. In fact, maybe it was really just ordinary tea, only you asked for it in a certain code, and they put a fake gigantic price on the bill...

Professor Quirrell's expression was drawn and thoughtful. "No," Professor Quirrell said, "you should not have told the Headmaster about your conversation with Lord Malfoy. Please try to think faster next time, Mr. Potter."

"I'm sorry, Professor Quirrell," Harry said meekly. "I still don't see it." There were times when Harry felt very much like an impostor, pretending to be cunning in Professor Quirrell's presence.

"Lord Malfoy is Albus Dumbledore's opponent," said Professor Quirrell. "At least for this present time. All Britain is their chessboard, all wizards their pieces. Consider: Lord Malfoy threatened to throw away everything,

abandon his game, to take vengeance on you if Mr. Malfoy was hurt. In which case, Mr. Potter...?"

It took more long seconds for Harry to get it, but it was clear that Professor Quirrell wasn't going to give any more hints, not that Harry wanted them.

Then Harry's mind finally made the connection, and he frowned. "Dumbledore kills Draco, makes it look like I did it, and Lucius sacrifices his game against Dumbledore to get at me? That... doesn't seem like the Headmaster's style, Professor Quirrell..." Harry's mind flashed back to a similar warning from Draco, which had made Harry say the same thing.

Professor Quirrell shrugged, and sipped his tea.

Harry sipped his own tea, and sat in silence. The tablecloth spread over the table was in a very peaceful pattern, seeming at first like plain cloth, but if you stared at it long enough, or kept silent long enough, you started to see a faint tracery of flowers glimmering on it; the curtains of the room had changed their pattern to match, and seemed to shimmer as though in a silent breeze. Professor Quirrell was in a contemplative mood that Saturday, and so was Harry, and Mary's Room, it seemed, had not neglected to notice this.

"Professor Quirrell," Harry said suddenly, "is there an afterlife?"

Harry had chosen the question carefully. Not, do you believe in an afterlife? but simply Is there an afterlife? What people really believed didn't seem to them like beliefs at all. People didn't say, 'I strongly believe in the sky being blue!' They just said, 'the sky is blue'. Your true inner map of the world just felt to you like the way the world was...

The Defense Professor raised his cup to his lips again before answering. His face was thoughtful. "If there is, Mr. Potter," said Professor Quirrell, "then quite a few wizards have wasted a great deal of effort in their searches for immortality."

"That's not actually an answer," Harry observed. He'd learned by now to notice that sort of thing when talking to Professor Quirrell.

Professor Quirrell set down his teacup with a small, high-pitched tacking sound on his saucer. "Some of those wizards were reasonably intelligent, Mr. Potter, so you may take it that the existence of an afterlife is not obvious. I have looked into the matter myself. There have been many claims of the sort which hope and fear would be expected to produce. Among those reports whose veracity is not in doubt, there is nothing which could not be the result of mere wizardry. There are certain devices said to communicate with the

dead, but these, I suspect, only project an image from the mind; the result seems indistinguishable from memory because it is memory. The alleged spirits tell no secrets they knew in life, nor could have learned after death, which are not known to the wielder –”

“Which is why the Resurrection Stone is not the most valuable magical artifact in the world,” said Harry.

“Precisely,” said Professor Quirrell, “though I wouldn’t say no to a chance to try it.” There was a dry, thin smile on his lips; and something colder, more distant, in his eyes. “You spoke to Dumbledore of that as well, I take it.”

Harry nodded.

The curtains were taking on a faintly blue pattern, and a dim tracery of elaborate snowflakes now seemed to be becoming visible on the tablecloth. Professor Quirrell’s voice sounded very calm. “The Headmaster can be very persuasive, Mr. Potter. I hope he has not persuaded you.”

“Heck no,” said Harry. “Didn’t fool me for a second.”

“I should hope not,” said Professor Quirrell, still in that very calm tone. “I would be extremely put out to discover that the Headmaster had convinced you to throw away your life on some fool plot by telling you that death is the next great adventure.”

“I don’t think the Headmaster believed it himself, actually,” Harry said. He sipped his own tea again. “He asked me what I could possibly do with eternity, gave me the usual line about it being boring, and he didn’t seem to see any conflict between that and his own claim to have an immortal soul. In fact, he gave me a whole long lecture about how awful it was to want immortality before he claimed to have an immortal soul. I can’t quite visualize what must have been going on inside his head, but I don’t think he actually had a mental model of himself continuing forever in the afterlife...”

The temperature of the room seemed to be dropping.

“You perceive,” said a voice like ice from the other end of the table, “that Dumbledore does not truly believe as he speaks. It is not that he has compromised his principles. It is that he never had them from the beginning. Are you becoming cynical yet, Mr. Potter?”

Harry had dropped his eyes to his teacup. “A little,” Harry said to his possibly-ultra-high-quality, perhaps-ridiculously-expensive Chinese tea. “I’m certainly becoming a bit frustrated with... whatever’s going wrong in people’s heads.”

“Yes,” said that icy voice. “I find it frustrating as well.”

"Is there any way to get people not to do that?" said Harry to his teacup.

"There is indeed a certain useful spell which solves the problem."

Harry looked up hopefully at that, and saw a cold, cold smile on the Defense Professor's face.

Then Harry got it. "I mean, besides Avada Kedavra."

The Defense Professor laughed. Harry didn't.

"Anyway," Harry said hastily, "I did think fast enough not to suggest the obvious idea about the Resurrection Stone in front of Dumbledore. Have you ever seen a stone with a line, inside a circle, inside a triangle?"

The deathly chill seemed to draw back, fold into itself, as the ordinary Professor Quirrell returned. "Not that I can recall," Professor Quirrell said after a while, a thoughtful frown on his face. "That is the Resurrection Stone?"

Harry set aside his teacup, then drew on his saucer the symbol he had seen on the inside of his cloak. And before Harry could take out his own wand to cast the Hover Charm, the saucer went floating obligingly across the table toward Professor Quirrell. Harry really wanted to learn that wandless stuff, but that, apparently, was far above his current curriculum.

Professor Quirrell studied Harry's tea-saucer for a moment, then shook his head; and a moment later, the saucer went floating back to Harry.

Harry put his teacup back on the saucer, noting absently as he did so that the symbol he'd drawn had vanished. "If you happen to see a stone with that symbol," said Harry, "and it does talk to the afterlife, do let me know. I have a few questions for Merlin or anyone who was around in Atlantis."

"Quite," said Professor Quirrell. Then the Defense Professor lifted up his teacup again, and tipped it back as though to finish the last of what was there. "By the way, Mr. Potter, I fear we shall have to cut short today's visit to Diagon Alley. I was hoping it would – but never mind. Let it stand that there is something else I must do this afternoon."

Harry nodded, and finished his own tea, then rose from his seat at the same time as Professor Quirrell.

"One last question," Harry said, as Professor Quirrell's coat lifted itself off the coatrack and went floating toward the Defense Professor. "Magic is loose in the world, and I no longer trust my guesses so much as I once did. So in your own best guess and without any wishful thinking, do you believe there's an afterlife?"

"If I did, Mr. Potter," said Professor Quirrell as he shrugged on his coat, "would I still be here?"

FRONTAL OVERRIDE

THE biting January wind howled around the vast, blank stone walls that demarcated the material bounds of the castle Hogwarts, whispering and whistling in odd pitches as it blew past closed windows and stone turrets. The most recent snow had mostly blown away, but occasional patches of melted and refrozen ice still stuck to the stone face and blazed reflected sunlight. From a distance, it must have looked like Hogwarts was blinking hundreds of eyes.

A sudden gust made Draco flinch, and try, impossibly, to press his body even closer to the stone, which felt like ice and smelled like ice. Some utterly pointless instinct seemed convinced that he was about to be blown off the outer wall of Hogwarts, and that the best way to prevent this was to jerk around in helpless reflex and possibly throw up.

Draco was trying very hard not to think about the six stories worth of empty air underneath him, and focus, instead, on how he was going to kill Harry Potter.

“You know, Mr. Malfoy,” said the young girl beside him in a conversational voice, “if a seer had told me that someday I’d be hanging onto the side of a castle by my fingertips, trying not to look down or think about how loud Mum’d scream if she saw me, I wouldn’t’ve had any idea of how it’d happen, except that it’d be Harry Potter’s fault.”



Earlier:

The two allied Generals stepped together over Longbottom’s body, their boots hitting the floor in almost perfect synchrony.

Only a single soldier now stood between them and Harry, a Slytherin boy named Samuel Clamons, whose hand was clenched white around his wand, held upward to sustain his Prismatic Wall. The boy’s breathing was coming rapidly, but his face showed the same cold determination that lit the eyes of his general, Harry Potter, who was standing behind the Prismatic

Wall at the dead end of the corridor next to an open window, with his hands held mysteriously behind his back.

The battle had been ridiculously difficult, for the enemy being outnumbered two-to-one. It should have been easy, Dragon Army and the Sunshine Regiment had melded together easily in practice sessions, they'd fought each other long enough to know each other very well indeed. Morale was high, both armies knowing that this time they weren't just fighting to win for themselves, but fighting for a world free of traitors. Despite the surprised protests of both generals, the soldiers of the combined army had insisted on calling themselves Dramione's Sungon Argument, and produced patches for their insignia of a smiling face wreathed in flames.

But Harry's soldiers had all blackened their own insignia – it didn't look like paint, more like they'd burned that part of their uniforms – and they'd fought all through the upper levels of Hogwarts with a desperate fury. The cold rage that Draco sometimes saw in Harry had seemed to trickle down into his soldiers, and they'd fought like it hadn't been play. And Harry had emptied out his entire bag of tricks, there'd been tiny metal balls (Granger had identified them as "ball bearings") on floors and staircases, rendering them impassable until cleared, only Harry's army had already practiced coordinated Hover Charms and they could fly their own people right over the obstacles they'd made...

You couldn't bring devices into the game from outside, but you could Transfigure anything you wanted during the game, so long as it was safe. And that just wasn't fair when you were fighting a boy raised by scientists, who knew about things like ball bearings and skateboards and bungee cords.

And so it had come to this.

The survivors of the allied forces had cornered the last remnants of Harry Potter's army in a dead-end corridor.

Weasley and Vincent had rushed Longbottom at the same time, moving together like they'd practiced for weeks instead of hours, and somehow Longbottom had managed to hex them both before falling himself.

And now it was Draco and Granger and Padma and Samuel and Harry, and by the looks of Samuel, his Prismatic Wall couldn't last much longer.

Draco had already leveled his wand at Harry, waiting for the Prismatic Wall to fall of its own accord; there was no need to waste a Breaking Drill Hex before then. Padma leveled her own wand at Samuel, Granger leveled hers at Harry...

Harry was still hiding his hands behind his back, instead of aiming his wand; and looking at them with a face that could have been carved out of ice.

It might be a bluff. It probably wasn't.

There was a brief, tense silence.

And then Harry spoke.

"I'm the villain now," the young boy said coldly, "and if you think villains are this easy to finish off, you'd better think again. Beat me when I'm fighting seriously, and I'll stay beaten; but lose, and we'll be doing this all over again next time."

The boy brought his hands forward, and Draco saw that Harry was wearing strange gloves, with a peculiar grayish material on the fingertips, and buckles that strapped the gloves tightly to his wrists.

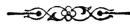
Beside Draco, the Sunshine General gasped in horror; and Draco, without even asking why, fired a Breaking Drill Hex.

Samuel staggered, he let out a scream as he staggered, but he held the Wall; and if Padma or Granger fired now, they would exhaust their own forces so badly that they might just lose.

"Harry!" shouted Granger. "You can't be serious!"

Harry was already in motion.

And as he swung out the open window, his cold voice said, "Follow if you dare."



The icy wind howled around them.

Draco's arms were already starting to feel tired.

...It had developed that, yesterday, Harry had carefully demonstrated to Granger exactly how to Transfigure the gloves he was currently wearing, which used something called 'gecko setae'; and how to glue Transfigured patches of the same material to the toes of their shoes; and Harry and Granger had, in innocent childish play, tried climbing around the walls and ceiling a little.

And that, also yesterday, Harry had supplied Granger with a grand total of exactly two doses of Feather-Falling Potion to carry around in her pouch, "just in case".

Not that Padma would have followed them, anyway. She wasn't crazy.

Draco carefully peeled loose his right hand, stretched it over as far as he could, and slapped it down on the stone again. Beside him, Granger did the same.

They'd already swallowed the Feather-Falling Potion. It was skirting the edges of the game rules, but the potion wouldn't be activated unless one of them actually fell, and so long as they didn't fall they weren't using the item.

Professor Quirrell was watching them.

The two of them were perfectly, completely, utterly safe.

Harry Potter, on the other hand, was going to die.

"I wonder why Harry is doing this," said General Granger in a reflective tone, as she slowly peeled the fingertips of one hand off the wall with an extended sticky sound. Her hand plopped back down again almost as soon as it was lifted. "I'll have to ask him that after I kill him."

It was amazing how much the two of them were turning out to have in common.

Draco didn't really feel like talking right now, but he managed to say, through gritted teeth, "Could be revenge. For the date."

"Really," said Granger. "After all this time."

Stick. Plop.

"How sweet of him," said Granger.

Stick. Plop.

"I guess I'll find some truly romantic way to thank him," said Granger.

Stick. Plop.

"What's he got against you?" said Granger.

Stick. Plop.

The icy wind howled around them.



One might have thought it would feel safer to have ground under your feet again.

But if that ground was a slanted roof tiled with rough slats, which had rather a lot more ice on it than the stone walls, and you were running across it at a high rate of speed...

Then you would be sadly mistaken.

"Luminos!" shouted Draco.

"Luminos!" shouted Granger.

"Luminos!" shouted Draco.

“Luminos!” shouted Granger.

The distant figure was dodging and scrambling as it ran, and not a single shot hit, but they were gaining.

Until Granger slipped.

It was inevitable, in retrospect, in real life you couldn’t actually run across icy slanted rooftops at a high rate of speed.

And also inevitably, because it happened without the slightest thought, Draco spun and grabbed for Granger’s right arm, and he caught her, only she was already too far off balance, she was falling and pulling Draco with her, it all happened so quickly –

There was a hard, painful impact, not just Draco’s weight hitting the rooftop but some of Granger’s weight too, and if she’d hit just a little bit closer to the edge they could have made it, but instead her body tipped again and her legs slipped off and her other hand grabbed frantically...

And that was how Draco ended up holding onto Granger’s arm in a white grip, while her other hand clenched frantically at the edge of the rooftop and the toes of Draco’s shoes dug into the edge of a roof tile.

“Hermione!” Harry’s voice shrieked distantly.

“Draco,” whispered Granger’s voice, and Draco looked down.

That might have been a mistake. There was a lot of air underneath her, nothing but air, they were on the edge of a rooftop that had jutted out from the main stone wall of Hogwarts.

“He’s going to come help me,” whispered the girl, “but first he’s going to Luminos both of us, there’s no way he wouldn’t. You have to let me go.”

It should have been the easiest thing in the world.

She was just a mudblood, just a mudblood, just a mudblood!

She wouldn’t even be hurt!

...Draco’s brain wasn’t listening to anything Draco was telling it right now.

“Do it,” Hermione Granger whispered, her eyes blazing without a single trace of fear, “do it, Draco, do it, you can beat him yourself we have to win Draco!”

There was a sound of someone running and it was coming closer.

Oh, be rational...

The voice in Draco’s head sounded an awful lot like Harry Potter teaching lessons.

...are you going to let your brain run your life?



Aftermath, 1:

It was taking a bit of an effort for Daphne Greengrass to keep herself quiet, as Millicent Bulstrode retold the story in the Slytherin girls' common room (a cozy cool place in the dungeons running beneath the Hogwarts Lake, with fish swimming past every window, and couches you could lie down in if you wanted). Mostly because, in Daphne's opinion, it was a perfectly good story already without all of Millicent's improvements.

"And then what?" gasped Flora and Hestia Carrow.

"General Granger looked up at him," Millicent said dramatically, "and she said, 'Draco! You've got to let go of me! Don't worry about me, Draco, I promise I'll be all right! And what do you suppose Malfoy did then?'"

"He said 'Never!'," shouted Charlotte Wiland, "and held on even tighter!"

All the listening girls except Pansy Parkinson nodded.

"Nope!" said Millicent. "He dropped her. And then he jumped up and shot General Potter. The end."

There was a stunned pause.

"You can't do that!" said Charlotte.

"She's a mudblood," said Pansy, sounding confused. "Of course he let go!"

"Well, Malfoy shouldn't have grabbed her in the first place, then!" said Charlotte. "But once he grabbed her, he had to hang on! Especially in the face of approaching certain doom!" Tracey Davis, sitting next to Daphne, was nodding along in firm agreement.

"I don't see why," said Pansy.

"That's because you don't have the tiniest smidgin of romance in you," said Tracey. "Besides, you can't just go dropping girls. A boy who'd drop a girl like that... he'd drop anyone. He'd drop you, Pansy."

"What d'you mean, drop me?" Pansy said.

Daphne couldn't resist any more. "You know," Daphne said darkly, "you're eating breakfast one day at our table, and the next thing you know, Malfoy lets go of you, and you're falling off the top of Hogwarts! That's what!"

"Yeah!" said Charlotte. "He's a witch dropper!"

"You know why Atlantis fell?" said Tracey. "'Cause someone like Malfoy dropped it, that's why!"

Daphne lowered her voice. "In fact... what if Malfoy's the one who made Hermione, I mean General Granger, slip in the first place? What if he's out to make all the Muggleborns trip and fall?"

"You mean – ?" gasped Tracey.

"That's right!" Daphne said dramatically. "What if Malfoy is – the heir of Slipperin?"

"The next Drop Lord!" said Tracey.

Which was far too good a line for anyone to keep to themselves, so by nightfall it was all over Hogwarts, and the next morning it was the Quibbler's headline.



Aftermath, 2:

Hermione made sure she got to their usual classroom nice and early that evening, just so that she would be by herself, in a chair, peacefully reading a book, when Harry got there.

If there was any way for a door to creak open apologetically, that was how the door was creaking open.

"Um," said Harry Potter's voice.

Hermione kept reading.

"I'm, um, kinda sorry, I didn't mean for you to actually fall off the roof or anything..."

It had been quite an entertaining experience, in fact.

"I, ah... I don't have much experience apologizing, I'll fall to my knees if you want, or buy you something expensive, Hermione I don't know how to apologize to you for this what can I do just tell me?"

She kept reading the book in silence.

It wasn't as if she had any idea how Harry could apologize, either.

Right now she was just feeling a sort of odd curiosity as to what would happen if she kept reading her book for a while.

COURAGE

“Romantic?” Hermione said. “They’re both boys!”
“Wow,” Daphne said, sounding a little shocked. “You mean Muggles really do hate that? I thought that was just something the Death Eaters made up.”

“No,” said an older Slytherin girl Hermione didn’t recognize, “it’s true, they have to get married in secret, and if they’re ever discovered, they get burned at the stake together. And if you’re a girl who thinks it’s romantic, they burn you too.”

“That can’t be right!” objected a Gryffindor girl, while Hermione was still trying to sort out what to say to that. “There wouldn’t be any Muggle girls left!”

She’d kept on reading quietly, and Harry Potter had kept on trying to apologize, and it had soon dawned on Hermione that Harry had realized, possibly for the first time in his life, that he’d done something annoying; and that Harry, definitely for the first time in his life, was terrified that he’d lost her as a friend; and she’d started to feel (a) guilty and (b) worried about the direction Harry’s increasingly desperate offers were going. But she still had no idea what sort of apology was appropriate, so she’d said that the Ravenclaw girls should vote on it – and this time she wouldn’t fix the outcome, though she hadn’t mentioned that part – to which Harry had instantly agreed.

The next day, practically every Ravenclaw girl over the age of thirteen had voted to have Draco drop Harry.

Hermione had felt mildly disappointed it was that simple, though it was obviously fair.

Right now, however, standing just outside the great doors of the castle amid half the female population of Hogwarts, Hermione was beginning to suspect that there were things going on here that she did not understand and that she desperately hoped neither of her fellow generals ever heard about.



You couldn't really see the details from up there, just the general fact of a sea of expectant female faces.

"You've got no idea what this is about, do you?" said Draco, sounding amused.

Harry had read a fair number of books he wasn't supposed to read, not to mention a few Quibbler headlines.

"Boy-Who-Lived gets Draco Malfoy pregnant?" said Harry.

"Okay, you do know what this is about," said Draco. "I thought Muggles hated that?"

"Only the dumb ones," said Harry. "But, um, aren't we, uh, a little young?"

"Not too young for them," said Draco. He snorted. "Girls!"

They silently walked toward the edge of the roof.

"So I'm doing this for revenge on you," said Draco, "but why are you doing this?"

Harry's mind made a lightning calculation, weighing the factors, whether it was too soon...

"Honestly?" said Harry. "Because I meant to have her climb up the icy walls, but I didn't mean to have her fall off the roof. And, um, I kinda did feel really awful about that. I mean, I guess I actually did start seeing her as my friendly rival after a while. So this is a real apology to her, not a plot or anything."

There was a pause.

Then –

"Yeah," said Draco. "I understand."

Harry didn't smile. It might have been the most difficult nonsmile of his life.

Draco looked at the edge of the roof, and made a face. "This is going to be a lot harder to do on purpose than by accident, isn't it."



Harry's other hand held the roof in a reflexively terrified grip, his fingers white on the cold, cold stone.

You could know with your conscious mind that you'd drunk the Feather-Falling Potion. Knowing it with your unconscious mind was another matter entirely.

It was every bit as scary as Harry had thought it might have been for Hermione, which was justice.

“Draco,” said Harry, controlling his voice wasn’t easy, but the Ravenclaw girls had given them a script, “You’ve got to let me go!”

“Okay!” said Draco, and let go of Harry’s arm.

Harry’s other hand scrabbled at the edge, and then, without any decision being made, his fingers failed, and Harry fell.

There was a brief moment when Harry’s stomach tried to leap up into his throat, and his body tried desperately to orient itself in the absence of any possible way to do so.

There was a brief moment when Harry could feel the Feather-Falling Potion kicking in, starting to slow him, a sort of lurching, cushioning feeling.

And then something pulled on Harry and he accelerated downward again faster than gravity –

Harry’s mouth had already opened and begun screaming while part of his brain tried to think of something creative he could do, part of his brain tried to calculate how much time he had left to be creative, and a tiny rump part of his brain noticed that he wasn’t even going to finish the remaining-time calculation before he hit the ground –



Harry was desperately trying to control his hyperventilating, and it wasn’t helping him to hear the shrieking of all the girls, now lying in heaps on the ground and each other.

“Good heavens,” said the unfamiliar man, he of the old-looking clothes and faintly scarred face, who was holding Harry in his arms. “Of all the ways I imagined we might meet again someday, I didn’t expect it to be you falling out of the sky.”

Harry remembered the last thing he’d seen, the falling body, and managed to gasp, “Professor... Quirrell...”

“He’ll be all right after a few hours,” said the unfamiliar man holding Harry. “He’s just exhausted. I wouldn’t have thought it possible... he must have knocked down two hundred students just to make sure he got whoever was jinxing you...”

Gently, the man set Harry upright on the ground, supporting him the while.

Harry carefully balanced himself, and nodded to the man.

He let go, and Harry promptly fell over.

The man helped him rise again. Making sure, at all times, to stand between Harry and the girls now picking themselves up from the ground, his head constantly glancing in that direction.

“Harry,” the man said quietly, and very seriously, “do you have any idea which of these girls might have wanted to kill you?”

“Not murder,” said a strained voice. “Just stupidity.”

This time it was the unfamiliar man who seemed to almost fall over, utter shock on his face.

Professor Quirrell was already sitting up from where he’d fallen on the grass.

“Good heavens!” gasped the man. “You shouldn’t be –”

“Mr. Lupin, your concerns are misplaced. No wizard, no matter how powerful, casts such a Charm by strength alone. You must do it by being efficient.”

Professor Quirrell didn’t stand up, though.

“Thank you,” Harry whispered. And then, “Thank you,” to the man standing beside him as well.

“What happened?” said the man.

“I should have foreseen it myself,” Professor Quirrell said, his voice crisp with disapproval. “Some number of girls tried to summon Mr. Potter to their own, particular arms. Individually, I suppose, they all thought they were being gentle.”

Oh.

“Consider it a lesson in preparedness, Mr. Potter,” said Professor Quirrell. “Had I not insisted that there be more than one adult witness to this little event, and that both of us have our wands out, Mr. Lupin would not have been available to slow your fall afterward, and you would have been gravely injured.”

“Sir!” said the man – Mr. Lupin, apparently. “You should not say such things to the boy!”

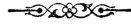
“Who is –” Harry started to say.

“The only other person who was available to watch, besides myself,” said Professor Quirrell. “I introduce you to Remus Lupin, who is here temporarily to instruct students in the Patronus Charm. Though I am told that the two of you have already met.”

Harry studied the man, puzzled. He should have remembered that faintly scarred face, that strange, gentle smile.

"Where did we meet?" said Harry.

"In Godric's Hollow," said the man. "I changed a number of your nappies."



Mr. Lupin's temporary office was a small stone room with a small wooden desk, and Harry couldn't see anything of what Mr. Lupin was sitting on, suggesting that it was a small stool just like the one in front of his desk. Harry guessed that Mr. Lupin wouldn't be at Hogwarts for long, or use this office much, and so he'd told the house elves not to waste the effort. It said something about a person that he tried not to bother house elves. Specifically, it said that he'd been Sorted into Hufflepuff, since, to the best of Harry's knowledge, Hermione was the only non-Hufflepuff who worried about bothering house elves. (Harry himself thought her qualms rather silly. Whoever had created house elves in the first place had been unspeakably evil, obviously; but that didn't mean Hermione was doing the right thing now by denying sentient beings the drudgery they had been shaped to enjoy.)

"Please sit down, Harry," the man said quietly. His formal robes were of low quality, not quite tattered, but visibly worn by the passage of time in a way that simple Repair Charms couldn't fix; shabby was the word that came to mind. And despite that, somehow, there was a dignity about him that couldn't have been obtained by fine and expensive robes, that wouldn't have fit with fine robes, that was the exclusive property of the shabby. Harry had heard of humility, but he'd never seen the real thing before – only the satisfied modesty of people who thought it was part of their style and wanted you to notice.

Harry took a seat on the small wooden stool in front of Mr. Lupin's short desk.

"Thank you for coming," the man said.

"No, thank you for saving me," said Harry. "Let me know if you ever need something impossible done."

The man seemed to hesitate. "Harry, may I... ask a personal question?"

"You can ask, certainly," Harry said. "I have a lot of questions for you, too."

Mr. Lupin nodded. "Harry, are your stepparents treating you well?"

"My parents," Harry said. "I have four. Michael, James, Petunia, and Lily."

"Ah," said Mr. Lupin. And then, "Ah" again. He seemed to be blinking rather hard. "I... that is good to hear, Harry, Dumbledore would tell none of

us where you were... I was afraid he might think you ought to have wicked stepparents, or some such..."

Harry wasn't sure Mr. Lupin's concern had been misplaced, considering his own first encounter with Dumbledore; but it had all turned out well enough, so he said nothing. "What about my..." Harry searched for a word that didn't raise them higher or put them lower... "other parents? I want to know, well, everything."

"A tall order," Mr. Lupin said. He wiped a hand across his forehead. "Well, let us begin at the beginning. When you were born, James was so happy that he couldn't touch his wand without it glowing gold, for a whole week. And even after that, whenever he held you, or saw Lily holding you, or just thought of you, it would happen again –"



Every now and then Harry would look at his watch, and find that another thirty minutes had passed. He felt slightly bad about making Remus miss dinner, especially since Harry himself would just drop back to 7pm later, but that wasn't enough to stop either of them.

Finally Harry screwed up enough courage to ask the critical question, while Remus was in the middle of an extended discourse on the wonders of James's Quidditch that Harry couldn't find the heart to squash more directly.

"And that was when," Remus said, his eyes shining brightly, "James pulled off a triple reverse Mulhanney Dive with extra backspin! The whole crowd went wild, even some of the Hufflepuffs were cheering –"

I guess you had to be there, Harry thought – not that being there would have helped in any way – and said, "Mr. Lupin?"

Something about Harry's voice must have reached the man, because he stopped in mid-sentence.

"Was my father a bully?" said Harry.

Remus looked at Harry for a long moment. "For a little while," Remus said. "He grew out of it soon enough. Where did you hear that?"

Harry didn't answer, he was trying to think of something true to say that would deflect suspicion, but he didn't think fast enough.

"Never mind," said Remus, and sighed. "I can guess who." The faintly scarred face was pinched in disapproval. "What a thing to tell –"

"Did my father have any extenuating circumstances?" Harry said. "Poor home life, or something like that? Or was he just... being naturally nasty?" Cold?

Remus's hand swept his hair back, the first nervous gesture Harry had seen from him. "Harry," Remus said, "you can't judge your father by what he did as a young boy!"

"I'm a young boy," Harry said, "and I judge myself."

Remus blinked twice at that.

"I want to know why," Harry said. "I want to understand, because to me, it seems like there isn't any possible excuse for that!" Voice shaking a bit. "Please tell me anything you know about why he did it, even if it doesn't sound nice." So I don't fall into the same trap myself, whatever it is.

"It was the thing to do if you were in Gryffindor," Remus said, slowly, reluctantly. "And... I didn't think so back then, I thought it was the other way around, but... it might have been Black who got James into it, really... Black wanted so much to show everyone that he was against Slytherin, you see, we all wanted to believe that blood wasn't destiny –"



"No, Harry," said Remus. "I don't know why Black went after Peter instead of running. It was as though Black was making tragedy for the sake of tragedy that day." The man's voice was unsteady. "There was no hint, no warning, we all thought – to think that he was to be –" Remus's voice cut off.

Harry was crying, he couldn't help it, it hurt worse to hear it from Remus than anything he'd ever felt himself. Harry had lost two parents he didn't remember, knew only from stories. Remus Lupin had lost all four of his best friends in less than twenty-four hours; and for the loss of his last remaining one, Peter Pettigrew, there'd just been no reason at all.

"Sometimes it still hurts to think of him in Azkaban," Remus finished, his voice almost a whisper. "I am glad, Harry, that Death Eaters are not allowed visitors. It means I do not have to feel ashamed of not going."

Harry had to swallow hard several times before he could speak. "Can you tell me about Peter Pettigrew? He was my father's friend, and it seems – that I should know, that I should remember –"

Remus nodded, water glittering in his own eyes now. "I think, Harry, that if Peter had known it would end that way –" the man's voice choked up. "Peter was more afraid of the Dark Lord than any of us, and if he'd known

it would end that way, I don't think he would have done it. But Peter knew the risk, Harry, he knew the risk was real, that it could happen, and yet he stayed by James and Lily's side. All through Hogwarts I used to wonder why Peter hadn't been sorted into Slytherin, or maybe Ravenclaw, because Peter so adored secrets, he couldn't resist them, he would find out things about people, things they wanted kept hidden –" A brief wry look crossed Remus's face. "But he didn't use those secrets, Harry. He just wanted to know. And then the Dark Lord's shadow fell over everything, and Peter stood by James and Lily and put his talents to good use, and I understood why the Hat had sent him to Gryffindor." Remus's voice was fierce now, and proud. "It's easy to stand by your friends if you're a hero like Godric, bold and strong like people think Gryffindors should be. But if Peter was more afraid than any of us, doesn't that also make him the most brave?"

"It does," Harry said. His own voice was choked to where he almost couldn't talk. "If you could, Mr. Lupin, if you have time, there's someone else who I think should hear Peter Pettigrew's story, a student in first-year Hufflepuff, named Neville Longbottom."

"Alice and Frank's boy," said Remus, his voice turning sad. "I see. It is not a happy story, Harry, but I can tell it again, if you think it will help him."

Harry nodded.

A brief silence fell.

"Did Black have any unfinished business with Peter Pettigrew?" Harry said. "Anything that would make him seek out Mr. Pettigrew, even if it wasn't a killing matter? Like a secret Mr. Pettigrew knew, that Black wanted to know himself, or wanted to kill him to hide?"

Something flickered in Remus's eyes, but the older man shook his head, and said, "Not really."

"That means there is something," said Harry.

That wry smile appeared again beneath the salt-and-pepper mustache. "You have a bit of Peter in you yourself, I see. But it's not important, Harry."

"I'm a Ravenclaw, I'm not supposed to resist the temptation of secrets. And," Harry said more seriously, "if it was worth Black getting caught, I can't help but think it might matter."

Remus looked quite uncomfortable. "I suppose I could tell you when you're older, but really, Harry, it's not important! Just something from our school days."

Harry couldn't have put his finger on exactly what tipped him off; it might

have been something about the exact tone of nervousness in Remus's voice, or the way the man had said when you're older, that sparked the sudden leap of Harry's intuition...

"Actually," said Harry, "I think I've sort of guessed it already, sorry."

Remus raised his eyebrows. "Have you?" He sounded a bit skeptical.

"They were lovers, weren't they?"

There was an awkward pause.

Remus gave a slow, grave nod.

"Once," Remus said. "A long time ago. A sad affair, ending in vast tragedy, or so it seemed to us all when we were young." The unhappy puzzlement was plain on his face. "But I had thought that long since over and done and buried beneath adult friendship, until the day that Black killed Peter."

HUMANISM, PART I

THE gentle sun of January shone on the cold fields outside Hogwarts. For some of the students it was a study hour, and others had been let out of class. The first-years who'd signed up for it were practicing a certain spell, a spell that was most advantageously learned outdoors, beneath the bright sun and a clear blue sky, rather than within the confines of any classroom. Cookies and lemonade were also considered helpful.

The early gestures of the spell were complex and precise; you twitched your wand once, twice, thrice, and four times with small tilts at exactly the right relative angles, you shifted your forefinger and thumb exactly the right distances...

The Ministry thought this meant it was futile to try and teach anyone the spell before their fifth year. There had been a few known cases of younger children learning it, and this had been dismissed as "genius".

It might not have been a very polite way of putting it, but Harry was beginning to see why Professor Quirrell had claimed that the Ministry Committee of Curriculum would have been of greater benefit to wizardkind if they had been used as landfill.

So the gestures were complicated and delicate. That didn't stop you from learning it when you were eleven. It meant you had to be extra careful and practice each part for a lot longer than usual, that was all.

Most Charms that could only be learned by older students were like that because they required more strength of magic than any young student could muster. But the Patronus Charm wasn't like that, it wasn't difficult because it needed too much magic, it was difficult because it took more than mere magic.

It took the warm, happy feelings that you kept close in your heart, the loving memories, a different kind of strength that you didn't need for ordinary spells.

Harry twitched his wand once, twice, thrice and four times, shifted his fingers exactly the right distances...

"Good luck at school, Harry. Do you think I bought you enough books?"

"You can never have enough books... but you certainly tried, it was a really, really, really good try..."

It had brought tears to his eyes, the first time Harry had remembered and tried to put it into the spell.

Harry brought the wand up and around and brandished it, a gesture that didn't have to be precise, only bold and defiant.

"Expecto Patronum!" cried Harry.

Nothing happened.

Not a single flicker of light.

When Harry looked up, Remus Lupin was still studying the wand, a rather troubled look on his faintly scarred face.

Finally Remus shook his head. "I'm sorry, Harry," the man said quietly. "Your wandwork was exactly right."

And there wasn't a flicker of light anywhere else, either, because all the other first-years who were supposed to be practicing their Patronus Charms had been glancing out of the corners of their eyes at Harry instead.

The tears were threatening to come back into Harry's eyes, and they weren't happy tears. Of all the things, of all the things, Harry had never expected this.

There was something horribly humiliating about being informed that you weren't happy enough.

What did Anthony Goldstein have inside him that Harry didn't, that made Anthony's wand shine with that bright light?

Did Anthony love his own father more?

"What thought were you using to cast it?" said Remus.

"My father," Harry said, his voice trembling. "I asked him to buy me some books before I came to Hogwarts, and he did, and they were expensive, and then he asked me if they were enough –"

Harry didn't try to explain about the Verres family motto.

"Take a rest before you try a different thought, Harry," said Remus. He gestured toward where some other students were sitting on the ground, looking disappointed or embarrassed or regretful. "You won't be able to cast a Patronus Charm while you're feeling ashamed of not being grateful enough." There was a gentle compassion in Mr. Lupin's voice, and for a moment, Harry felt like hitting something.

Instead Harry turned around, and stalked to where the other failures were sitting. The other students whose wandwork had also been proclaimed

perfect, and who were now supposed to be searching for happier thoughts; by the looks of them they weren't making much progress. There were many robes there trimmed in dark blue, and a handful of red, and one lone Hufflepuff girl who was still crying. The Slytherins hadn't even bothered showing up, except for Daphne Greengrass and Tracey Davis, who were still trying to get the gestures.

Harry plopped down on the cold dead grass of winter, next to the student whose failure had surprised him the most.

"So you couldn't do it either," Hermione said. She'd fled the field at first, but she'd come back after that, and you had to look closely at her reddened eyes to see that she'd been crying.

"I," Harry said, "I, I'd probably feel a lot worse about that if you hadn't failed, you're the nicest, person I know, that I've ever met, Hermione, and if you also can't do it, it means I might still be, be good..."

"I should have gone to Gryffindor," Hermione whispered. She blinked hard a few times, but she didn't wipe her eyes.



The boy and the girl walked forward together, definitely not holding hands, but each drawing a kind of strength from the other's presence, something that let them ignore the whispers of their year-mates, as they walked through the hallway approaching the great doors of Hogwarts.

Harry hadn't been able to cast the Patronus Charm no matter what happy thought he tried. People hadn't seemed surprised by that, which made it even worse. Hermione hadn't been able to do it either. People had been very surprised by that, and Harry had seen her starting to get the same sidelong looks as him. The other Ravenclaws who'd failed weren't getting those looks. But Hermione was the Sunshine General, and her fans were treating it like she'd failed them, somehow, like she'd betrayed a promise she'd never made.

The two of them had gone to the library to research the Patronus Charm, which was Hermione's way of dealing with distress, as it was sometimes also Harry's. Study, learn, try to understand why...

The books had confirmed what the Headmaster had told Harry; often, wizards who couldn't cast the Patronus Charm in practice would be able to do so in the presence of a real Dementor, going from flat failure all the way to a full corporeal Patronus. It defied all logic, the Dementor's aura of fear

ought to make it harder to wield a happy thought; but that was the way it was.

So the two of them were both going to give it one last try, there was no way either of them wouldn't give it one last try.

It was the day the Dementor came to Hogwarts.

Earlier, Harry had unTransfigured his father's rock from where it usually rested on his pinky ring in the form of a tiny diamond, and placed the huge gray stone back into his pouch. Just in case Harry's magic failed entirely, when he confronted the darkest of all creatures.

Harry had already started to feel pessimistic, and he wasn't even in front of a Dementor yet.

"I bet you can do it and I can't," Harry said in a whisper. "I bet that's what happens."

"It felt wrong to me," Hermione said, her voice even quieter than his. "I tried it this morning and I realized. When I was doing the brandish at the end, even before I said the words, it felt wrong."

Harry didn't say anything. He'd felt the same thing, right from the start, though it had taken another five attempts using five other happy thoughts before he'd been able to acknowledge it to himself. Every time he tried to brandish his wand, it had felt hollow; the spell he was trying to learn didn't fit him.

"It doesn't mean we're going to be Dark Wizards," said Harry. "Lots of people who can't cast the Patronus Charm aren't Dark Wizards. Godric Gryffindor wasn't a Dark Wizard..."

Godric had defeated Dark Lords, fought to protect commoners from Noble Houses and Muggles from wizards. He'd had many fine friends and true, and lost no more than half of them in one good cause or another. He'd listened to the screams of the wounded, in the armies he'd raised to defend the innocent; young wizards of courage had rallied to his calls, and he'd buried them afterward. Until finally, when his wizardry had only just begun to fail him in his old age, he'd brought together the three other most powerful wizards of his era to raise Hogwarts from the bare ground; the one great accomplishment to Godric's name that wasn't about war, any kind of war, no matter how just. It was Salazar, and not Godric, who'd taught the first Hogwarts class in Battle Magic. Godric had taught the first Hogwarts class in Herbology, the magics of green growing life.

To his last day he'd never been able to cast the Patronus Charm.

Godric Gryffindor had been a good man, not a happy one.

Harry didn't believe in angst, he couldn't stand reading about whiny heroes, he knew a billion other people in the world would have given anything to trade places with him, and...

And on his deathbed, Godric had told Helga (for Salazar had abandoned him, and Rowena passed before) that he didn't regret any of it, and he was not warning his students not to follow in his footsteps, no one was ever to say he'd told anyone not to follow in his footsteps. If it had been the right thing for him to do, then he wouldn't tell anyone else to choose wrongly, not even the youngest student in Hogwarts. And yet for those who did follow in his footsteps, he hoped they would remember that Gryffindor had told his House that it was all right for them to be happier than him. That red and gold would be bright warm colors, from now on.

And Helga had promised him, weeping, that when she was Headmistress she would make sure of it.

Whereupon Godric had died, and left no ghost behind him; and Harry had shoved the book back to Hermione and walked away a little, so she wouldn't see him crying.

You wouldn't think that a book with an innocent title like "The Patronus Charm: Wizards Who Could and Couldn't" would be the saddest book Harry had ever read.

Harry...

Harry didn't want that.

To be in that book.

Harry didn't want that.

The rest of the school just seemed to think that No Patronus meant Bad Person, plain and simple. Somehow the fact that Godric Gryffindor also hadn't been able to cast the Patronus Charm seemed not to get repeated. Maybe people didn't talk about it to respect his last wish, Fred and George probably didn't know and Harry certainly wasn't about to tell them. Or maybe the other failures didn't mention it because it was less shameful, the smaller loss of pride and status, to be thought Dark rather than unhappy.

Harry saw that Hermione, beside him, was blinking hard; and he wondered if she was thinking of Rowena Ravenclaw, who'd also loved books.

"Okay," Harry whispered. "Happier thoughts. If you do go to a full corporeal Patronus, what do you think your animal will be?"

"An otter," Hermione said at once.

"An otter?" Harry whispered incredulously.

"Yes, an otter," said Hermione. "What about yours?"

"Peregrine falcon," Harry said without hesitation. "It can dive faster than three hundred kilometers per hour, it's the fastest living creature there is." The peregrine falcon had been Harry's favorite animal since forever. Harry was determined to become an Animagus someday, just to get that as his form, and fly by the strength of his own wings, and see the land below with sharper eyes... "But why an otter?"

Hermione smiled, but didn't say anything.

And the vast doors of Hogwarts swung open.

They walked for a time, the children, over a pathway that led toward the unforbidden forest, and continued through the forest itself. The Sun was lowering to near the horizon, the shadows long, the sunlight filtered through the bare branches of the winter trees; for it was January, and the first-years the last to learn, that day.

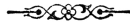
Then the path swerved and took a new direction, and they all saw it in the distance, the clearing in the forest, and the sere winter grounds, yellowing dried grass whitened by a few small remnants of snow.

The human figures still small at that range. The two spots of dim white light from the Aurors' Patronuses, and the brighter spot of silver light from the Headmaster's, next to something...

Harry squinted.

Something...

It must have been purely Harry's imagination, because there shouldn't have been any way for a Dementor to reach past three corporeal Patronuses, but he thought he could feel a touch of emptiness brushing at his mind, brushing straight at the soft inner center of himself without any respect for Occlumency barriers.



Seamus Finnigan was ashen and trembling as he rejoined the students milling about on the withered and snow-spotted grass. Seamus's Patronus Charm had been successful, but there was still that interval between when the Headmaster dispelled his own Patronus and when you were supposed to cast your own, when you faced the Dementor's fear unshielded.

Up to twenty seconds of exposure at five paces was certainly safe, even for an eleven-year-old wizard with weak resistance and a still-maturing

brain. There was a lot of variance in how hard the Dementor's power hit people, which was another thing not quite understood; but twenty seconds was definitely safe.

Forty seconds of Dementor exposure at five paces might possibly have been enough to cause permanent damage, though only to the most sensitive subjects.

It was harsh training even by the standards of Hogwarts, where the way you learned to fly on a hippogriff was by being tossed on one and told to get going. Harry was no fan of overprotectiveness, and if you looked at the difference in maturity between a fourth-year in Hogwarts and a fourteen-year-old Muggle, it was clear that Muggles were smothering their children... but even Harry had started to wonder if this was pushing it. Not every hurt could be healed afterward.

But if you couldn't cast the spell under those conditions, it meant you couldn't rely on using the Patronus Charm to defend yourself; overconfidence was even more dangerous to wizards than to Muggles. Dementors could drain your magic and your physical vitality, not just your happy thoughts, which meant you might not be able to Apparate away if you waited too long, or if you didn't recognize the approaching fear until the Dementor was within range for its attack. (During his reading, Harry had discovered with considerable horror that some books claimed the Dementor's Kiss would eat your soul and that this was the reason for the permanent mindless coma into which it put the victims. And that wizards who believed this had deliberately used the Dementor's Kiss to execute criminals. It was a certainty that some called criminals were innocent, and even if they weren't, destroying their souls? If Harry had believed in souls, he would have... drawn a blank, he just couldn't think of an appropriate response to that.)

The Headmaster was taking security seriously, and so were the three Aurors standing guard. Their leader was an Asianish-looking man, solemn without being grim, Auror Komodo, whose wand never left his hand. His Patronus, an orangutan of solid moonlight, paced back and forth between the Dementor and the first-years awaiting their turn; beside the orangutan moved the bright white panther of Auror Butnaru, a man with a piercing gaze, long black hair in a ponytail, and a long braided goatee. Those two Aurors, and their two Patronuses, were all watching the Dementor. On the opposite side of the students was the resting Auror Goryanof, tall and thin and pale and unshaven, sitting back on a chair he'd conjured without word or

wand, and maintaining an absentminded pokerface as he scanned the entire scene. Professor Quirrell had shown up not long after the first-years began their attempts, and his eyes never strayed far from Harry. The tiny Professor Flitwick, who had been a champion duellist, was fiddling absently with his wand; and his eyes, peering out from within the huge puffy beard that served as his face, stayed focused on Professor Quirrell.

And it must have been Harry's imagination, but Professor Quirrell seemed to wince slightly each time the Headmaster's Patronus winked out to test the next student. Maybe Professor Quirrell was imagining the same placebo effect as Harry, that backwash of emptiness caressing at his mind.

"Anthony Goldstein," called the voice of the Headmaster.

Harry quietly walked toward Seamus, even as Anthony began to approach the shining silver phoenix, and... whatever it was beneath the tattered cloak.

"What did you see?" Harry asked Seamus in a low voice.

A lot of students hadn't answered Harry, when he'd tried to gather the data; but Seamus was Finnigan of Chaos, one of Harry's lieutenants. Maybe that wasn't fair, but...

"Dead," said Seamus in a whisper, "grayish and slimy... dead and left in water for a while..."

Harry nodded. "That's what a lot of people see," Harry said. He projected confidence, even though it was fake, because Seamus needed it. "Go eat some chocolate, you'll feel better."

Seamus nodded and stumbled off toward the table of healing sweets.

"Expecto Patronum!" cried a young boy's voice.

Then there were gasps of shock, even from the Aurors.

Harry spun around to look –

There was a brilliant silver bird standing between Anthony Goldstein and the cage. The bird reared its head and let out a cry, and the cry was also silver, as bright and hard and beautiful as metal.

And something in the back of Harry's mind said, if that's a peregrine falcon, I'm going to strangle him in his sleep.

Shut up, Harry said to the thought, do you want us to be a Dark Wizard?

What's the point? You're going to end up as one eventually.

That... wasn't something Harry would usually have thought...

It's a placebo effect, Harry told himself again. The Dementor can't actually get to me through three corporeal Patronuses, I'm just imagining what I think

it's like. When I actually face the Dementor, it'll feel completely different, and then I'll know I was just being silly before.

A slight chill went down Harry's spine then, because he had a feeling that yes, it would be completely different, and not in a positive direction.

The blazing silver phoenix sprang back into existence from the Headmaster's wand, the lesser bird vanished; and Anthony Goldstein began to walk back.

The Headmaster was coming with Anthony instead of calling out the next name, the Patronus waiting behind to guard the Dementor.

Harry glanced over to where Hermione was standing, just behind the glowing panther. Hermione's turn would have come next, but had apparently just been delayed.

She looked stressed.

Earlier, she'd politely asked Harry to please stop trying to distress her.

Dumbledore was smiling slightly as he escorted Anthony back toward the others; smiling only slightly, because the Headmaster looked very, very tired.

"Unbelievable," said Dumbledore in a voice that sounded much weaker than his accustomed boom. "A corporeal Patronus, in his first year. And an astounding number of successes among the other young students. Quirinus, I must acknowledge that you have proved your point."

Professor Quirrell inclined his head. "A simple enough guess, I should think. A Dementor attacks through fear, and children are less afraid."

"Less afraid?" said Auror Goryanof from where he was sitting.

"So I said as well," said Dumbledore. "And Professor Quirrell pointed out that adults had more courage, not less to fear; which thought, I confess, had never occurred to me before."

"That was not my precise phrasing," Professor Quirrell said dryly, "but it will do. And the rest of our agreement, Headmaster?"

"As you say," Dumbledore said reluctantly. "I admit I was not expecting to lose that wager, Quirinus, but you have proven your wisdom."

All the students were looking at them, puzzled; except Hermione, who was staring in the direction of the cage and the tall decaying robes; and Harry, who was watching everyone, since he was imagining himself feeling paranoid.

Professor Quirrell said, in tones that did not invite further comments, "I am allowed to teach the Killing Curse to students who wish to learn it. Which will render them considerably safer from Dark Wizards and other

pests, and it is foolish to think they will otherwise know no deadly magics.” Professor Quirrell paused, his eyes narrowing. “Headmaster, I respectfully observe that you are not looking well. I suggest leaving the remainder of the day’s task to Professor Flitwick.”

Dumbledore shook his head. “We are almost done for the day, Quirinus. I will last.”

Hermione had approached Anthony. “Captain Goldstein,” she said, and her voice trembled only a little, “can you give me any advice?”

“Don’t be afraid,” Anthony said firmly. “Don’t think about anything it tries to make you think about. You’re not just holding up the wand in front of you as a shield against the fear, you’re brandishing your wand to drive the fear away, that’s how you make a happy thought into something solid...” Anthony shrugged helplessly. “I mean, I heard all that before, but...”

Other students were starting to congregate around Anthony, with their own questions.

“Miss Granger?” the Headmaster said. His voice might have been gentle, or just weakened.

Hermione straightened her shoulders, and followed him.

“What did you see under the cloak?” Harry said to Anthony.

Anthony looked at Harry, surprised, and then answered, “A very tall man who was dead, I mean, sort of dead-shaped and dead-colored... it hurt to see him and I knew that was the Dementor trying to get at me.”

Harry looked back out at where Hermione was confronting the cage and the cloak.

Hermione raised her wand into position for the first gestures.

The Headmaster’s phoenix winked out of existence.

And Hermione gave a tiny, pathetic shriek, flinched –

– took a step back, Harry could see her wand moving, and then she brandished it and said “Expecto Patronum!”

Nothing happened.

Hermione turned and ran.

“Expecto Patronum!” said the Headmaster’s deeper voice, and the silver phoenix blazed back to life.

The young girl stumbled, and kept running, strange sounds beginning to come from her throat.

“Hermione!” Susan yelled it, and Hannah, and Daphne, and Ernie, and they all started to run toward her; even as Harry, who was always thinking

one step ahead, spun on his own heel and ran for the table with the chocolate.

Even after Harry had shoved the chocolate into Hermione's mouth and she'd chewed and swallowed, she was still breathing in great gasps and crying, her eyes still seemed unfocused.

She can't have been permanently Demented, Harry thought desperately at the confusion inside him, the horrible fear and deathly fury beginning to twist around each other, she can't have been, she wasn't exposed for even ten seconds let alone forty –

But she could be temporarily Demented, as Harry realized in that moment, there wasn't any rule that you couldn't be temporarily injured by a Dementor in just ten seconds if you were sensitive enough.

Then Hermione's eyes seemed to focus, and dart around, and settle on him.

"Harry," she gasped, and the other students went silent. "Harry, don't. Don't!"

Harry was suddenly afraid to ask what he shouldn't do, was he in her worst memories, or some sleep's nightmare that she was now reliving in waking life?

"Don't go near it!" said Hermione. Her hand reached out, grabbed him by the lapel of his robes. "You mustn't go near it, Harry! It spoke to me, Harry, it knows you, it knows you're here!"

"What –" Harry said, and then cursed himself for asking.

"The Dementor!" said Hermione. Her voice rose to a shriek. "Professor Quirrell wants it to eat you!"

In the sudden hush, Professor Quirrell came forward a few steps; but he didn't approach any closer (Harry was there, after all). "Miss Granger," he said, and his voice was grave, "I think you should have some more chocolate."

"Professor Flitwick, don't let Harry try, send him back!"

The Headmaster had arrived by then, and he and Professor Flitwick were exchanging worried looks.

"I did not hear the Dementor speak," the Headmaster said. "Still..."

"Just ask," said Professor Quirrell, sounding a little weary.

"Did the Dementor say how it would get to Harry?" said the Headmaster.

"All his tastiest parts first," said Hermione, "it would – it would eat –"

Hermione blinked. Some sanity seemed to come back into her eyes.

Then she started crying.

"You were too brave, Hermione Granger," the Headmaster said. His voice was gentle, and clearly audible. "Too much braver than I comprehended. You should have turned and run, not endured and tried to complete your Charm. When you are older and stronger, Miss Granger, I know that you will try again, and I know that you will succeed."

"I'm sorry," Hermione said in gasps, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry... I'm sorry, Harry, I can't tell you what I saw, I didn't look at it, I didn't dare look at it, I knew it was too horrible to ever be seen..."

It should have been Harry, but he'd hesitated, because his hands were all chocolatey; and then Ernie and Susan were there, helping Hermione from where she'd fallen on the grass, leading her toward the snacks table.

Five bars of chocolate later, Hermione seemed to be all right again, and she went over and apologized to Professor Quirrell; but she was always watching Harry, every time that he glanced in her direction. He'd stepped toward her only once, and stopped when she'd stepped away. Her eyes had silently apologized, and silently pleaded for him to leave her be.



Neville Longbottom had seen something dead and half-dissolved, oozing and running with a face like a squashed sponge.

It was the worst thing anyone had yet described seeing. Neville had been able to produce a small flicker of light from his wand before, but he had, intelligently and with great presence of mind, turned and run away instead of trying to cast his own Patronus Charm.

(The Headmaster had said nothing to the other students, told no one else to be less brave; but Professor Quirrell had calmly observed that if you made the mistake after being warned, that was when ignorance became stupidity.)

"Professor Quirrell?" Harry said in a low voice, having come as close to the Defense Professor as he dared. "What do you see when you –"

"Don't ask." The voice was very flat.

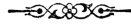
Harry nodded respectfully. "What was your original phrasing to the Headmaster, if I can ask?"

Dryly. "Our worst memories can only grow worse as we grow older."

"Ah," Harry said. "Logical."

Something strange flickered in Professor Quirrell's eyes, then, as he looked at Harry. "Let us hope," Professor Quirrell said, "that you succeed upon this try, Mr. Potter. For if you do, the Headmaster may teach you

his trick of using a Patronus to send messages that cannot be forged or intercepted, and the military importance of that is impossible to overstate. It would be a tremendous advantage to the Chaos Legion, and someday, I suspect, this entire country. But if you do not succeed, Mr. Potter... well, I shall understand."



Morag MacDougal had said, in a wavering voice, "Ouch", and Dumbledore had recast his Patronus right away.

Parvati Patil had produced a corporeal Patronus in the form of a tiger, larger than Dumbledore's phoenix, though not nearly as bright. There had been a great burst of applause from all the watchers, though not the same shock as when Anthony had done it.

And then it was Harry's turn.

The Headmaster called the name of Harry Potter, and Harry was afraid.

Harry knew, he knew that he was going to fail, and he knew that it was going to hurt.

But he still had to try; because sometimes, in the presence of a Dementor, a wizard went from not a flicker of light to a full corporeal Patronus, and no one understood why.

And because if Harry couldn't defend himself from Dementors, he had to be able to recognize their approach, recognize the feeling of them in his mind, and run before it was too late.

What is my worst memory...?

Harry had expected the Headmaster to give him a worried look, or a hopeful look, or deeply wise advice; but instead Albus Dumbledore only watched him with quiet calm.

He thinks I'm going to fail, but he won't sabotage me by telling me so, thought Harry, if he had true words of encouragement to speak, he would speak them...

The cage came closer. It was already tarnished, but not rusted away to nothing, not yet.

The cloak came closer. It was unraveling and shot through with unpatched holes; it had been new that morning, Auror Goryanof had said.

"Headmaster?" Harry said. "What do you see?"

The Headmaster's voice was also calm. "The Dementors are creatures of fear, and as your fear of the Dementor diminishes, so does the fearsomeness

of its form. I see a tall, thin, naked man. He is not decaying. He is only slightly painful to look upon. That is all. What do you see, Harry?"

...Harry couldn't see under the cloak.

Or that wasn't right, it was that his mind was refusing to see what was under the cloak...

No, his mind was trying to see the wrong thing under the cloak, Harry could feel it, his eyes trying to force a mistake. But Harry had done his best to train himself to notice that tiny feeling of confusion, to automatically flinch away from making stuff up; and every time his mind tried to start inventing a lie about what was under the cloak, that reflex was fast enough to shut it down.

Harry looked under the cloak and saw...

An open question. Harry wouldn't let his mind see something false, and so he didn't see anything, like the part of his visual cortex getting that signal was just ceasing to exist. There was a blind spot under the cloak. Harry couldn't know what was under there.

Just that it was far worse than any decaying mummy.

The unseeable horror beneath the cloak was very close, now, but the blazing bird of moonlight, the white phoenix, yet lay between them.

Harry wanted to run away like some of the other students had. Half the ones who'd had no luck with their Patronus Charms just hadn't shown up today in the first place. Of those remaining, half had fled before the Headmaster had even dispelled his own Patronus, and no one had said a word. There'd been a little laughter when Terry had turned and walked back before his own try; and Susan and Hannah, who'd gone before, had yelled at everyone to shut up.

But Harry was the Boy-Who-Lived, and he would lose much respect if he was seen to give up without even trying...

Pride and roles seemed to diminish and fall away, in the presence of whatever lay beneath the cloak.

Why am I still here?

It wasn't the shame of others thinking him cowardly, that kept Harry's feet in place.

It wasn't the hope of repairing his reputation that brought up his wand.

It wasn't the desire to master the Patronus Charm as magic, that moved his fingers into the initial position.

It was something else, something that had to oppose whatever lay beneath the cloak, this was the true darkness and Harry had to find out whether it lay within him, the power to drive it back.

Harry had planned to try one final time to think of his book-shopping spree with his father, but instead, at the last minute, facing the Dementor, a different memory occurred to him, something he hadn't tried before; a thought that wasn't warm and happy in the ordinary way, but felt righter, somehow.

And Harry remembered the stars, remembered them burning terribly bright and unwavering in the Silent Night; he let that image fill him, fill all of him like an Occlumency barrier across his entire mind, became once again the bodiless awareness of the void.

The bright silver shining phoenix vanished.

And the Dementor smashed into his mind like the fist of God.

FEAR / COLD / DARKNESS

There was an instant when the two forces clashed head-on, when the peaceful starlit memory held its own against the fear, even as Harry's fingers began the wand motions, practiced until they had become automatic. They weren't warm and happy, those blazing points of light in perfect blackness; but it was an image the Dementor could not easily pierce. For the silent burning stars were vast and unafraid, and to shine in the cold and darkness was their natural state.

But there was a flaw, a crack, a fault-line in the immovable object trying to resist that irresistible force. Harry felt a twinge of anger at the Dementor for trying to feed on him, and it was like slipping on wet ice. Harry's mind began to slide sideways, into bitterness, black fury, deathly hatred –

Harry's wand came up in the final brandish.

It felt wrong.

"Expecto Patronum," his voice spoke, the words hollow and pointless.

And Harry fell into his dark side, fell down into his dark side, further and faster and deeper than ever before, down down down as the slide accelerated, as the Dementor latched onto the exposed and vulnerable parts and fed on them, eating away the light. A fading reflex scrabbled for warmth, but even as an image of Hermione came to him, or an image of Mum and Dad, the Dementor twisted it, showed him Hermione lying dead on the ground, the corpses of his mother and father, and then even that was sucked away.

Into the vacuum rose the memory, the worst memory, something forgotten so long ago that the neural patterns shouldn't have still existed.

"Lily, take Harry and go! It's him!" shouted a man's voice. "Go! Run! I'll hold him off!"

And Harry couldn't help but think, in the empty depths of his dark side, how ridiculously overconfident James Potter had been. Hold off Lord Voldemort? With what?

Then the other voice spoke, high-pitched like the hiss of a teakettle, and it was like dry ice laid on Harry's every nerve, like a brand of metal cooled to liquid helium temperatures and laid on every part of him. And the voice said:

"Avadakedavra."

(The wand flew from the boy's nerveless fingers as his body began to convulse and fall, the Headmaster's eyes widening in alarm as he began his own Patronus Charm.)

"Not Harry, not Harry, please not Harry!" screamed the woman's voice.

Whatever was left of Harry listened with all the light drained out of him, in the dead void of his heart, and wondered if she thought that Lord Voldemort would stop because she asked politely.

"Step aside, woman!" said the shrill voice of burning cold. "For you I am not come, only the boy."

"Not Harry! Please... have mercy... have mercy..."

Lily Potter, Harry thought, seemed not to understand what type of people became Dark Lords in the first place; and if this was the best strategy she could conceive to save her child's life, that was her final failure as a mother.

"I give you this rare chance to flee," said the shrill voice. "But I will not trouble myself to subdue you, and your death here will not save your child. Step aside, foolish woman, if you have any sense in you at all!"

"Not Harry, please no, take me, kill me instead!"

The empty thing that was Harry wondered if Lily Potter seriously imagined that Lord Voldemort would say yes, kill her, and then depart leaving her son unharmed.

"Very well," said the voice of death, now sounding coldly amused, "I accept the bargain. Yourself to die, and the child to live. Now drop your wand so that I can murder you."

There was a hideous silence.

Lord Voldemort began to laugh, horrible contemptuous laughter.

And then, at last, Lily Potter's voice shrieked in desperate hate, "Avada ke-"

The lethal voice finished first, the curse rapid and precise.

"Avadakedavra."

A blinding flare of green marked the end of Lily Potter.

And the boy in the crib saw it, the eyes, those two crimson eyes, seeming to glow bright red, to blaze like miniature suns, filling Harry's whole vision as they locked to his own –



The other children saw Harry Potter fall, they heard Harry Potter scream, a thin high-pitched scream that seemed to pierce their ears like knives.

There was a brilliant silver flash as the Headmaster bellowed "Expecto Patronum!" and the blazing phoenix returned to being.

But Harry Potter's horrible scream went on and on and on, even as the Headmaster scooped up the boy in his arms and bore him away from the Dementor, even as Neville Longbottom and Professor Flitwick both went for the chocolate at the same time and –

Hermione knew it, she knew it as she saw it, she knew that her nightmare had been real, it was coming true, somehow it was coming true.

"Get him chocolate!" demanded the voice of Professor Quirrell, pointlessly, because Professor Flitwick's tiny form was already cannonballing toward where the Headmaster was racing toward the students.

Hermione was moving forward herself, though she didn't know what else she meant to do –

"Cast Patronuses!" shouted the Headmaster, as he brought Harry behind the Aurors. "Everyone who can! Get them between Harry and the Dementor! It's still feeding on him!"

There was a moment of frozen horror.

"Expecto Patronum!" shouted Professor Flitwick and Auror Goryanof, and then Anthony Goldstein, but he failed the first time, and then Parvati Patil, who succeeded, and then Anthony tried again and his silver bird spread its wings and screamed at the Dementor, and Dean Thomas roared the words like they had been written in letters of fire and his wand gave birth to a towering white bear; there were eight blazing Patronuses all in a line between Harry and the Dementor, and Harry went on screaming and screaming as the Headmaster laid him on the dried grass.

Hermione couldn't cast a Patronus Charm, so she ran toward where Harry lay. In her mind, something tried to guess how long it had been already. Was it twenty seconds? More?

There was a dreadful agony and bewilderment on the face of Albus Dumbledore. His long black wand was in his hand, but he spoke no spells, only looked down at Harry's convulsing body in horror –

Hermione didn't know what to do, she didn't know what to do, she didn't understand what was happening, and the most powerful wizard in the world seemed equally at a loss.

"Use your phoenix!" bellowed Professor Quirrell. "Take him far away from that Dementor!"

Without a single word the Headmaster scooped up Harry in his arms and vanished in a crack of fire along with the suddenly appearing Fawkes; and the Headmaster's Patronus winked out, where it had guarded the Dementor.

Horror and confusion and sudden babble.

"Mr. Potter should recover," Professor Quirrell said, raising his voice, but his tone now calm once again, "I think it was just over twenty seconds."

Then the blazing white phoenix appeared again, like it was flying before them from elsewhere, to Hermione Granger came the creature of moonlight, and it cried to her in Albus Dumbledore's voice:

"It still feeds on him, even here! How? If you know, Hermione Granger, you must tell me! Tell me!"

The senior Auror turned to stare at her, and so did many students. Professor Flitwick didn't turn, he was now leveling his wand on Professor Quirrell, who was holding out clearly empty hands.

Seconds ticked past, uncounted.

She couldn't remember it, she couldn't remember the nightmare clearly, she couldn't remember why she had thought it was possible, why she had been afraid –

Hermione realized then what she ought to do, and it was the hardest decision of her life.

What if whatever had happened to Harry, happened to her too?

All her limbs cold as death, her vision gone dark, fear overwhelming everything; she'd seen Harry dying, Mum and Dad dying, all her friends dying, everyone dying, so that in the end, when she died, she would be alone. That was her secret nightmare she'd never talked about with anyone, that

had given the Dementor its power over her, the loneliest thing was to die alone.

She didn't want to go to that place again, she, she didn't, she didn't want to stay there forever –

You have courage enough for Gryffindor, said the calm voice of the Sorting Hat in her memory, but you will do what is right in any House I give you. You will learn, you will stand by your friends, in any House you choose. So don't be afraid, Hermione Granger, just decide where you belong...

There was no time for deciding, Harry was dying.

"I can't remember now," said Hermione, her voice cracking, "but just hold on, I'll go in front of the Dementor again..."

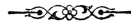
She started to run toward the Dementor.

"Miss Granger!" squeaked Professor Flitwick, but he made no move to stop her, only kept holding his wand on Professor Quirrell.

"Everyone!" shouted Auror Komodo in a voice of military command. "Get your Patronuses out of her way!"

"FLITWICK!" roared Professor Quirrell. "SUMMON POTTER'S WAND!"

Even as Hermione understood, Professor Flitwick was already crying "Accio!", and she saw the stick of wood zooming up from where it had lain almost touching the Dementor's cage.



The eyes opened, dead and vacant.

"Harry!" gasped a voice in the colorless world. "Harry! Speak to me!"

The face of Albus Dumbledore leaned over into the field of vision, which had been occupied by a distant marble ceiling.

"You're annoying," said the empty voice. "You should die."

HUMANISM, PART II

“**F**AWKES,” said Albus Dumbledore, his voice cracking, “help him, please –” A brilliant creature of red-gold shuffled into the field of vision, looking down quizzically; and it began to croon.

The meaningless chirps slid off the emptiness, there was nothing onto which they could hold.

“You’re noisy,” said the voice, “you should die.”

“Chocolate,” Albus Dumbledore said, “you need chocolate, and your friends – but I dare not take you back –”

Then a shining raven came, and spoke in Professor Flitwick’s voice; whereupon Albus Dumbledore gasped in sudden comprehension, and cursed aloud at his own stupidity.

The empty thing laughed at that, for it had retained the capacity to be amused.

And a moment later they had all vanished in another flash of fire.



It was only a moment, it seemed, between when Flitwick’s raven had flown to elsewhere, and when Albus Dumbledore reappeared in another crack of red and golden fire with Harry in his arms; but somehow in that time Hermione had already managed to fill her hands with chocolate.

Before Hermione even got there, chocolate had zoomed off the table and straight into Harry’s mouth, which a tiny part of her mind said was unfair, he’d gotten a chance to do it for her –

Harry spat the chocolate back out again.

“Go away,” said a voice so empty it wasn’t even cold.

...

Everything seemed to freeze, everyone who had been moving toward Harry halted, all movements broken by the shock of those two dead words.

Then: “No,” said Albus Dumbledore, “I will not,” and time resumed again, even as another piece of chocolate zoomed off the table and into Harry’s mouth.

Hermione was close enough now that she could see Harry's expression become more hateful, as his mouth chewed with a mechanical, unnatural rhythm.

The Headmaster's voice was grim as iron. "Filius, call Minerva, tell her she must come at speed."

Professor Flitwick whispered to his silver raven, and it flew into the air and vanished.

Another piece of chocolate floated into Harry's mouth, and the mechanical chewing continued.

There were more students gathering around where the Headmaster watched over Harry with grim eyes: Neville, Seamus, Dean, Lavender, Ernie, Terry, Anthony, none of them daring to approach any closer than Hermione had.

"What can we do?" said Dean in a trembling voice.

"Back off and give him more space –" said the dry voice of Professor Quirrell.

"No!" interrupted the Headmaster. "Let him be surrounded by his friends."

Harry swallowed his chocolate, and said in that empty voice, "They're stupid. They should diemmmppphh" as another piece of chocolate entered his mouth.

Hermione saw the looks of shock that crossed their faces.

"He doesn't mean it, does he?" Seamus said it like he was begging.

"You don't understand," Hermione said, her voice breaking, "that's not Harry –" and she shut up before she said anything more, but she had to say that much.

She saw from the look on his face that Neville understood, and she also saw that the others didn't. If Harry had really never thought anything like that, then being exposed to a Dementor for less than a minute wouldn't have made him say it. That's what they were probably thinking.

Less than a minute of Dementor exposure couldn't create a whole new evil person inside you out of nothing.

But if that person was already there –

Does the Headmaster know?

Hermione looked up at the Headmaster, and found that Albus Dumbledore was gazing at her, and that his blue eyes had grown suddenly piercing –

Words came into her mind.

Do not speak of it, said the will of Dumbledore to her.

You know, thought Hermione. About his dark side.

I know. But this is beyond even that. Fawkes's song cannot reach him, where he is lost.

What can we –

I have a plan, sent the Headmaster. Patience.

Something about the tenor of that thought made Hermione nervous. What sort of plan?

It is better that you not know, sent the Headmaster.

Now Hermione was getting really nervous. She didn't know how much the Headmaster knew about Harry's dark side –

A fair point, sent the Headmaster. I am about to tell you; steel yourself so as not to react. Are you ready? Good. I am going to pretend to cast the Killing Curse on Professor McGonagall – DO NOT REACT, Hermione!

That took work. The Headmaster really was crazy! That wouldn't bring Harry out of his dark side, Harry would go completely berserk, he'd kill the Headmaster –

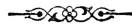
But that is not true darkness, sent Albus Dumbledore. That is protectiveness, that is love. Fawkes will be able to reach him, then. And when Harry sees that Minerva is alive after all, it will return him fully.

The thought came to Hermione –

I doubt that will work, sent the Headmaster, and you may not like the way he reacts if you try. But you may try if you wish.

She hadn't really meant that seriously! It was too –

Then her eyes moved, breaking gaze with the Headmaster, going to the boy looking around with empty, despising eyes as his mouth kept chewing and swallowing bar after bar of chocolate without effect. Her heart wrenched, and suddenly a lot of things didn't seem to matter, only that there was a chance.



There was a compulsion to chew and swallow chocolate. The response to compulsion was killing.

People had gathered around and stared. That was annoying. The response to annoyance was killing.

Other people were chattering in the background. That was insolent. The response to insolence was to inflict pain, but since none of them were useful, killing them would be simpler.

Killing all those people would be difficult. But many of them didn't trust Quirrell, who was strong. Finding exactly the right trigger could cause them all to kill each other.

Then a person leaned over into the field of vision and did something completely strange, something that belonged to a foreign mode of thought, for which there was only a single response stored anywhere –



She heard the gasps around her, and they didn't matter, she maintained the kiss on those chocolate-smeared lips as the tears welled in her eyes.

And Harry's arms came up and pushed her away, and his lips yelled, "I told you, no kissing!"



"I think he'll be all right now," the Headmaster said, looking at where Harry was crying in great wretched sobs as Fawkes crooned over him. "Excellently done, Miss Granger. Do you know, not even I would have expected that to actually work?"

The phoenix's song wasn't meant for her, Hermione knew, but she could still be soothed by it, which she needed, because her life was officially over.

HUMANISM, PART III

F^AWKES's song gently trailed off into nothing.

Harry sat up from where he had lain on the winter-blasted grass, Fawkes still perched on his shoulder.

There were intakes of breath from all around him.

"Harry," said Seamus in a wavering voice, "are you all right?"

The peace of the phoenix was still in him, and warmth, from where Fawkes perched. Warmth, spreading out through him, and the memory of the song, still alive in the phoenix's presence. There were terrible things that had happened to him, terrible thoughts that had passed through him. He had regained an impossible memory, for all that the Dementor had made him desecrate it. A strange word kept echoing in his mind. And all of that could be put on hold for later, while the phoenix still shone red and gold beneath the setting sun.

Fawkes cawed at him.

"Something I have to do?" Harry said to Fawkes. "What?"

Fawkes bobbed its head in the direction of the Dementor.

Harry looked at the unseeable horror still in its cage, then back at the phoenix, puzzled.

"Mr. Potter?" said Minerva McGonagall's voice from behind him. "Are you all right?"

Harry climbed to his feet and turned.

Minerva McGonagall was looking at him, looking very worried; Albus Dumbledore beside her was studying him carefully; Filius Flitwick appeared tremendously relieved; and all the students were just plain staring.

"I think so, Professor McGonagall," Harry said calmly. He'd almost said Minerva before managing to stop himself. While Fawkes was on his shoulder, at least, Harry was fine; it might be that he would collapse a moment after Fawkes left, but somehow thoughts like that didn't seem important. "I think I'm okay."

There ought to have been cheering, or sighs of relief, or something, but no one seemed to know what to say, no one at all.

The peace of the phoenix lingered.

Harry turned back. "Hermione?" he said.

Everyone with the tiniest smidgin of romance in their hearts held their breath.

"I don't really know how to say thank you graciously," Harry said quietly, "any more than I know how to apologize. All I can say that if you're wondering whether it was the right thing to do, it was."

The boy and the girl gazed into each other's eyes.

"Sorry," Harry said. "About what happens next. If there's anything I can do –"

"No," Hermione said back. "There isn't. It's all right, though." Then she turned from Harry and walked away, toward the path that led back to the gates of Hogwarts.

A number of girls gave Harry puzzled looks, and then followed her. As they went, you could hear the excited questions starting.

Harry looked at them as they left, turned back to look at the other students. They'd seen him on the ground, screaming, and...

Fawkes nuzzled his cheek, briefly.

...and that would help them, someday, understanding that the Boy-Who-Lived could also be hurt, could be wretched. So that when they were hurt and wretched themselves, they would remember seeing Harry writhing on the ground, and know that their own pain and troubles didn't mean they'd never amount to anything. Had the Headmaster calculated that, when he had let the other students stay and watch?

Harry's eyes went back to the tall tattered cloak, almost absentmindedly, and without really being aware of what he was speaking, Harry said, "It shouldn't ought to exist."

"Ah," said a dry, precise voice. "I thought you might say that. I am very sorry to tell you, Mr. Potter, that Dementors cannot be killed. Many have tried."

"Really?" Harry said, still absentmindedly. "What did they try?"

"There is a certain extremely dangerous and destructive spell," Professor Quirrell said, "which I will not name here; a spell of cursed fire. It is what you would use to destroy an ancient device such as the Sorting Hat. It has no effect on Dementors. They are undying."

"They are not undying," said the Headmaster. The words mild, the gaze sharp. "They do not possess eternal life. They are wounds in the world, and

attacking a wound only makes it larger.”

“Hm,” Harry said. “Suppose you threw it into the Sun? Would it be destroyed?”

“Throw it into the Sun?” squeaked Professor Flitwick, looking like he wanted to faint.

“It seems unlikely, Mr. Potter,” Professor Quirrell said dryly. “The Sun is very large, after all; I doubt the Dementor would have much effect on it. But it is not a test I would like to try, Mr. Potter, just in case.”

“I see,” Harry said.

Fawkes cawed a final time, mantled his wings around Harry’s head, and then launched himself from Harry. Launched himself straight toward the Dementor, screaming a great piercing cry of defiance that echoed around the field. And before anyone could react to that, there was a flash of fire, and Fawkes was gone.

The peace faded, a little.

The warmth faded, a little.

Harry took in a deep breath, let it out again.

“Yep,” Harry said. “Still alive.”

Again that silence, again the absence of cheering; no one seemed to know how to respond –

“It is good to know you are fully recovered, Mr. Potter,” Professor Quirrell said firmly, as though to deny any other possibility. “Now, I believe Miss Ransom was up next?”

That started a bit of an argument, in which Professor Quirrell was right and everyone else was wrong. The Defense Professor pointed out that, despite the understandable emotions of all concerned, the chance of a similar mishap occurring to any other student verged on the infinitesimal; the more so as they now knew to avoid mischances with wands. And meanwhile, there were other students who needed to take their own best chance at casting a corporeal Patronus Charm, or else learn the feeling of a Dementor so they could flee, and discover their own degree of vulnerability...

In the end it turned out that Dean Thomas and Ron Weasley of Gryffindor were the only ones left who were still willing to go anywhere near the Dementor, which simplified the argument.

Harry glanced in the Dementor’s direction. The word echoed in his mind again.

All right, Harry thought to himself, if the Dementor is a riddle, what is the answer?

And just like that, it was obvious.

Harry looked at the tarnished, slightly corroded cage.

He saw what lay beneath the tall, tattered cloak.

That was it, then.

Professor McGonagall came and spoke to Harry. She hadn't seen the worst of it, so there was only a slight glitter of water in her eyes. Harry told her that he needed to talk to her afterward and ask a question he'd put off for a while, but that didn't need to happen right now, if she was busy. There was a certain look about her which suggested that she had been pulled away from something important; and Harry observed this to her, and said that she honestly didn't need to feel guilty about leaving. This earned him something of a sharp look, but then leave she did, hurriedly, with a promise that they would talk later.

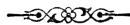
Dean Thomas cast his white bear again, even in the Dementor's presence; and Ron Weasley put up an adequate shield of sparkling mist. Which concluded the day, so far as everyone else was concerned, and Professor Flitwick began to herd the students back to Hogwarts. When it was clear that Harry meant to stay behind, Professor Flitwick looked at him quizzically; and Harry, for his part, glanced significantly at Dumbledore. Harry didn't know what Professor Flitwick made of that, but after a sharp gaze of warning, his Head of House departed.

And so remained only Harry, Professor Quirrell, Headmaster Dumbledore, and an Auror trio.

It would have been better to get rid of the trio first, but Harry couldn't think of a good way to do that.

"All right," said Auror Komodo, "let's take it back."

"Excuse me," Harry said. "I'd like to have another go at the Dementor."



Harry's request met with a certain amount of opposition of the you're completely insane variety, though it was only Auror Butnaru who actually said that out loud.

"Fawkes told me to," Harry said.

This did not overcome all the opposition, despite the look of shock it produced on Dumbledore's face. The argument went on, and it was starting

to wear the edges off the phoenix's remaining peace, which annoyed Harry, though only a little.

"Look," Harry said, "I'm pretty sure I know what I was doing wrong before. There's a kind of person who has to use a different sort of warm and happy thought. Just let me try it, okay?"

This did not prove persuasive either.

"I think," Professor Quirrell said finally, staring at Harry with narrowed eyes, "that if we do not allow him to do this under supervision, he may, at some point or another, sneak off and look for a Dementor on his own. Do I accuse you falsely, Mr. Potter?"

There was an appalled pause at this. It seemed like a good time to play his trump card.

"I don't mind if the Headmaster keeps his own Patronus up," Harry said. For I will be in the presence of a Dementor just the same, Patronus or no.

There was confusion at this, even Professor Quirrell looked puzzled; but the Headmaster finally acceded, since it didn't seem likely that Harry could be hurt through four Patronuses.

If the Dementor could not reach through your Patronus on some level, Albus Dumbledore, you would not see a naked man painful to look upon...

Harry didn't say it out loud, for obvious reasons.

And they began to walk toward the Dementor.

"Headmaster," Harry said, "suppose the Ravenclaw door asked you this riddle: What lies at the center of a Dementor? What would you say?"

"Fear," said the Headmaster.

It was a simple enough mistake. The Dementor approached, and the fear came over you. The fear hurt, you felt the fear weakening you, you wanted the fear to go away.

It was natural to think the fear was the problem.

So they'd concluded that the Dementor was a creature of pure fear, that there was nothing there to fear but fear itself, that the Dementor couldn't hurt you if you weren't afraid...

But...

What lies at the center of a Dementor?

Fear.

What is so horrible that the mind refuses to see it?

Fear.

What is impossible to kill?

Fear.

...it didn't quite fit, once you thought about it.

Though it was clear enough why people would be reluctant to look beyond the first answer.

People understood fear.

People knew what they were supposed to do about fear.

So, faced with a Dementor, it wouldn't exactly be comforting to ask: 'What if the fear is just a side effect rather than the main problem?'

They had come very close to the Dementor's cage guarded by four Patronuses, when there came sharp intakes of breath from the three Aurors and Professor Quirrell. Everyone's faces turned to look at the Dementor, seeming to listen; there was horror on Auror Goryanof's face.

Then Professor Quirrell raised his head, his face hard, and spat toward the Dementor.

"It did not like having its prey taken from it, I suppose," Dumbledore said quietly. "Well. If it becomes necessary, Quirinus, there will always be a refuge for you at Hogwarts."

"What did it say?" said Harry.

Every head swung to stare at him.

"You didn't hear it...?" Dumbledore said.

Harry shook his head.

"It said to me," said Professor Quirrell, "that it knew me, and that it would hunt me down someday, wherever I tried to hide." His face was rigid, showing no fright.

"Ah," Harry said. "I wouldn't worry about that, Professor Quirrell." It's not like Dementors can actually talk, or think; the structure they have is borrowed from your own mind and expectations...

Now everyone was giving him very strange looks. The Aurors were glancing nervously at each other, at the Dementor, at Harry.

And they stood directly before the Dementor's cage.

"They are wounds in the world," Harry said. "It's just a wild guess, but I'm guessing the one who said that was Godric Gryffindor."

"Yes..." said Dumbledore. "How did you know?"

It is a common misconception, thought Harry, that all the best rationalists are Sorted into Ravenclaw, leaving none for other Houses. This is not so; being Sorted into Ravenclaw indicates that your strongest virtue is curiosity, wondering and desiring to know the true answer. And this is not the only

virtue a rationalist needs. Sometimes you have to work hard on a problem, and stick to it for a while. Sometimes you need a clever plan for finding out. And sometimes what you need more than anything else to see an answer, is the courage to face it...

Harry's gaze went to what lay beneath the cloak, the horror far worse than any decaying mummy. Rowena Ravenclaw might also have known, for it was an obvious enough riddle once you saw it as a riddle.

And it was also obvious why the Patronuses were animals. The animals didn't know, and so were sheltered from the fear.

But Harry knew, and would always know, and would never be able to forget. He'd tried to teach himself to face reality without flinching, and though Harry had not yet mastered that art, still those grooves had been worn into his mind, the learned reflex to look toward the painful thought instead of away. Harry would never be able to forget by thinking warm happy thoughts about something else, and that was why the spell hadn't worked for him.

So Harry would think a warm happy thought that wasn't about something else.

Harry drew forth his wand that Professor Flitwick had returned to him, put his feet into the beginning stance for the Patronus Charm.

Within his mind, Harry discarded the last remnants of the peace of the phoenix, put aside the calm, the dreamlike state, remembered instead Fawkes's piercing cry, and roused himself for battle. Called upon all the pieces and elements of himself to awaken. Raised up within himself all the strength that the Patronus Charm could ever draw upon, to put himself into the right frame of mind for the final warm and happy thought; remembered all bright things.

The books his father had bought him.

Mum's smile when Harry had handmade her a mother's day card, an elaborate thing that had used half a pound of spare electronics parts from the garage to flash lights and beep a little tune, and had taken him three days to make.

Professor McGonagall telling him that his parents had died well, protecting him. As they had.

Realizing that Hermione was keeping up with him and even running faster, that they could be true rivals and friends.

Coaxing Draco out of the darkness, watching him slowly move toward the light.

Neville and Seamus and Lavender and Dean and everyone else who looked up to him, everyone that he would have fought to protect if anything threatened Hogwarts.

Everything that made life worth living.

His wand rose into the starting position for the Patronus Charm.

Harry thought of the stars, the image that had almost held off the Dementor even without a Patronus. Only this time, Harry added the missing ingredient, he'd never truly seen it but he'd seen the pictures and the video. The Earth, blazing blue and white with reflected sunlight as it hung in space, amid the black void and the brilliant points of light. It belonged there, within that image, because it was what gave everything else its meaning. The Earth was what made the stars significant, made them more than uncontrolled fusion reactions, because it was Earth that would someday colonize the galaxy, and fulfill the promise of the night sky.

Would they still be plagued by Dementors, the children's children's children, the distant descendants of humankind as they strode from star to star? No. Of course not. The Dementors were only little nuisances, paling into nothingness in the light of that promise; not unkillable, not invincible, not even close. You had to put up with little nuisances, if you were one of the lucky and unlucky few to be born on Earth; on Ancient Earth, as it would be remembered someday. That too was part of what it meant to be alive, if you were one of the tiny handful of sentient beings born into the beginning of all things, before intelligent life had come fully into its power. That the much vaster future depended on what you did here, now, in the earliest days of dawn, when there was still so much darkness to be fought, and temporary nuisances like Dementors.

Mum and Dad, Hermione's friendship and Draco's journey, Neville and Seamus and Lavender and Dean, the blue sky and brilliant Sun and all bright things, the Earth, the stars, the promise, everything humanity was and everything it would become...

On the wand, Harry's fingers moved into their starting positions; he was ready, now, to think the right sort of warm and happy thought.

And Harry's eyes stared directly at that which lay beneath the tattered cloak, looked straight at that which had been named Dementor. The void, the emptiness, the hole in the universe, the absence of color and space, the

open drain through which warmth poured out of the world.

The fear it exuded stole away all happy thoughts, its closeness drained your power and strength, its kiss would destroy everything that you were.

I know you now, Harry thought as his wand twitched once, twice, thrice and four times, as his fingers slid exactly the right distances, I comprehend your nature, you symbolize Death, through some law of magic you are a shadow that Death casts into the world.

And Death is not something I will ever embrace.

It is only a childish thing, that the human species has not yet outgrown.

And someday...

We'll get over it...

And people won't have to say goodbye any more...

The wand rose up and leveled straight at the Dementor.

"EXPECTO PATRONUM!"

The thought exploded from him like a breaking dam, surged down his arm into his wand, burst from it as blazing white light. Light that became corporeal, took on shape and substance.

A figure with two arms, two legs, and a head, standing upright; the animal Homo sapiens, the shape of a human being.

Glowing brighter and brighter as Harry poured all his strength into his spell, blazing with incandescent light brighter than the fading sunset, the Aurors and Professor Quirrell shielding their eyes in shock –

And someday when the descendants of humanity have spread from star to star, they won't tell the children about the history of Ancient Earth until they're old enough to bear it; and when they learn they'll weep to hear that such a thing as Death had ever once existed!

The figure of a human shone more brilliant now than the noonday Sun, so radiant that Harry could feel the warmth of it on his skin; and Harry sent out all his defiance at the shadow of Death, opening all the floodgates inside him to make that bright shape blaze even brighter and yet brighter.

You are not invincible, and someday the human species will end you.

I will end you if I can, by the power of mind and magic and science.

I won't cower in fear of Death, not while I have a chance of winning.

I won't let Death touch me, I won't let Death touch the ones I love.

And even if you do end me before I end you,

Another will take my place, and another,

Until the wound in the world is healed at last...

Harry lowered his wand, and the bright figure of a human faded away. Slowly, he exhaled.

Like waking up from a dream, like opening his eyes after sleep, Harry's gaze moved away from the cage, he looked around and saw that everyone was staring at him.

Albus Dumbledore was staring at him.

Professor Quirrell was staring at him.

The Auror trio was staring at him.

They were all looking at him like they'd just seen him destroy a Dementor.

The tattered cloak lay empty within the cage.

HUMANISM, PART IV

THE last tip of the Sun was sinking below the horizon, the red light fading from the treetops, only the blue sky illuminating the six people standing upon the winter-dried and snow-spotted grass, near a vacant cage on whose floor lay an empty, tattered cloak.

Harry felt... well, normal again. Sane-ish. The spell hadn't undone the day and its damage, hadn't made the injuries as if they had never been, but his hurts had been... bandaged, meliorated? It was hard to describe.

Dumbledore was also looking healthier, though not fully restored. The old wizard's head turned for a moment, locked eyes with Professor Quirrell, then looked back to Harry. "Harry," Dumbledore said, "are you about to collapse in exhaustion and possibly die?"

"No, strangely enough," Harry said. "That took something out of me, but a lot less than I thought it would." Or maybe it gave something back, as well as taking... "Honestly, I expected my body to be hitting the ground with a thud about now."

There was a distinct body-hitting-the-ground-with-a-thuddish sort of sound.

"Thank you for taking care of that, Quirinus," said Dumbledore to Professor Quirrell, who was now standing above and behind the unconscious forms of the three Aurors. "I confess I am still feeling a bit peaky. Though I shall handle the Memory Charms myself."

Professor Quirrell inclined his head, and then looked at Harry. "I will omit a good deal of useless incredulity," said Professor Quirrell, "remarks to the effect that Merlin himself failed to do that, et cetera. Let us go straight to asking the important question. What the sweet slithering snakes was that?"

"The Patronus Charm," Harry said. "Version 2.0."

"I rejoice to see that you are your usual self again," said Dumbledore. "But you are not going anywhere, young Ravenclaw, until you tell me what exactly was that warm and happy thought."

"Hm..." said Harry. He tapped a contemplative finger on his cheek. "I wonder if I should?"

Professor Quirrell suddenly grinned.

"Please?" said the Headmaster. "Pretty please with sugar on top?"

Harry felt an impulse and decided to go with it. It was dangerous, but there might not ever be a better opportunity until the end of time.

"Three sodas," Harry said to his pouch, then looked up at the Defense Professor and the Headmaster of Hogwarts. "Gentlemen," Harry said, "I bought these sodas on my first visit to Platform Nine and Three-Quarters, on the day I entered into Hogwarts. I have been saving them for special occasions; there is a minor enchantment on them to ensure they are drunk at the right time. This is the last of my supply, but I do not think there will ever come a finer occasion. Shall we?"

Dumbledore took a soda can from Harry, and Harry tossed another to Professor Quirrell. The two older men each muttered identical charms over the can and frowned briefly at the result. Harry, for his part, simply popped the top and drank.

The Defense Professor and the Headmaster of Hogwarts politely followed suit.

Harry said, "I thought of my absolute rejection of death as the natural order."

It might not be the right kind of warm feeling you needed to cast a Patronus Charm, but it was going into Harry's Top 10 nonetheless.

The looks he got from the Defense Professor and the Headmaster briefly made Harry nervous, as the spilled Comed-Tea faded out of existence; but then the two of them each glanced at the other and both apparently decided that they couldn't get away with doing anything really awful to Harry in the other's presence.

"Mr. Potter," said Professor Quirrell, "even I know that is not how things are supposed to work."

"Indeed," said Dumbledore. "Explain."

Harry opened his mouth, and then, as realization hit him, rapidly snapped his mouth shut again. Godric hadn't told anyone, nor had Rowena if she'd known; there might have been any number of wizards who'd figured it out and kept their mouths shut. You couldn't forget if you knew that was what you were trying to do; once you realized how it worked, the animal form of the Patronus Charm would never work for you again – and most wizards didn't have the right upbringing to turn on Dementors and destroy them –

“Erm, sorry about this,” said Harry. “But I’ve just this instant realized that explaining would be an incredibly bad idea until you work some things out on your own.”

“Is that the truth, Harry?” Dumbledore said slowly. “Or are you just pretending to be wise –”

“Headmaster!” said Professor Quirrell, sounding genuinely shocked. “Mr. Potter has told you that this spell is not spoken of with those who cannot cast it! You do not press a wizard on such matters!”

“If I told you –” Harry began.

“No,” Professor Quirrell said, sounding rather severe. “You don’t tell us why, Mr. Potter, you simply tell us that we are not to know. If you wish to devise a hint, you do so carefully, at leisure, not in the midst of conversation.”

Harry nodded.

“But,” said the Headmaster. “But, but what am I to tell the Ministry? You can’t just lose a Dementor!”

“Tell them I ate it,” said Professor Quirrell, causing Harry to choke on the soda he had unthinkingly raised to his lips. “I don’t mind. Shall we head on back, Mr. Potter?”

The two of them began to walk the dirt path back to Hogwarts, leaving behind Albus Dumbledore staring forlornly at the empty cage and the three sleeping Aurors awaiting their Memory Charms.



Aftermath, Harry Potter and Professor Quirrell:

They walked for a while before Professor Quirrell spoke, and all background noise dropped into silence when he did.

“You are exceptionally good at killing things, my student,” said Professor Quirrell.

“Thank you,” Harry said sincerely.

“I am not prying,” said Professor Quirrell, “but on the off-chance that it was only the Headmaster who you did not trust with the secret...?”

Harry considered this. Professor Quirrell already couldn’t cast the animal Patronus Charm.

But you couldn’t untell a secret, and Harry was a fast enough learner to realize that he ought to at least think for a while before unleashing this one upon the world.

Harry shook his head, and Professor Quirrell nodded acceptance.

“Out of curiosity, Professor Quirrell,” said Harry, “if your bringing the Dementor to Hogwarts had been part of an evil plot, what would have been its goal?”

“Assassinate Dumbledore while he was weakened,” Professor Quirrell said without even hesitating. “Hm. The Headmaster told you he was suspicious of me?”

Harry said nothing for a second while he tried to think of a reply, and then gave up when he realized he’d already answered.

“Interesting...” Professor Quirrell said. “Mr. Potter, it is not out of the question that there was a plot at work today. Your wand ending up that close to the Dementor’s cage could have been an accident. Or one of the Aurors could have been Imperiused, Confunded, or Legilimized to exert an influence. Flitwick and myself should not be excluded as suspects, in your calculation. One notes that Professor Snape canceled all his classes today, and I suspect he is powerful enough to Disillusion himself; the Aurors cast detection charms early on, but they did not repeat them immediately before your turn. But most easily of all, Mr. Potter, the deed could have been plotted by Dumbledore himself; and if he did, why, he might also take steps in advance to cast your suspicion elsewhere.”

They walked on for a few steps.

“But why would he?” Harry said.

The Defense Professor stayed quiet a moment, and then said, “Mr. Potter, what steps have you taken to investigate the Headmaster’s character?”

“Not many,” said Harry. He’d only recently realized... “Not nearly enough.”

“Then I will observe,” said Professor Quirrell, “that you do not find out all there is to know about a man by asking only his friends.”

Now it was Harry’s turn to walk a few steps in silence on the slightly beaten dirt path that led back to Hogwarts. He’d really been supposed to know better than that already. Confirmation bias was the technical term; it meant, among other things, that when you chose your information sources, there was a notable tendency to choose information sources that agreed with your current opinions.

“Thank you,” Harry said. “Actually... I didn’t say it earlier, did I? Thank you for everything. If another Dementor ever threatens you, or for that matter, slightly annoys you, just let me know and I’ll introduce it to Mister Glowy Person. I don’t like it when Dementors slightly annoy my friends.”

That got him an indecipherable glance from Professor Quirrell. "You destroyed the Dementor because it threatened me?"

"Erm," Harry said, "I'd sort of decided on it before then, but yes, that would have been sufficient reason by itself."

"I see," said Professor Quirrell. "And what would you have done about the threat to me if your spell hadn't worked for destroying the Dementor?"

"Plan B," said Harry. "Encase the Dementor in dense metal with a high melting point, probably tungsten, drop it into an active volcano, and hope it ends up inside Earth's mantle. Ah, the whole planet is filled with molten lava under its surface –"

"Yes," said Professor Quirrell. "I know." The Defense Professor was wearing a very odd smile. "I really should have thought of that myself, all things considered. Tell me, Mr. Potter, if you wanted to lose something where no one would ever find it again, where would you put it?"

Harry considered this question. "I suppose I shouldn't ask what you've found that needs losing –"

"Quite," said Professor Quirrell, as Harry had expected; and then, "Perhaps you will be told when you are older," which Harry hadn't.

"Well," said Harry, "besides trying to get it into the molten core of the planet, you could bury it in solid rock a kilometer underground in a randomly selected location – maybe teleport it in, if there's some way to do that blindly, or drill a hole and repair the hole afterward; the important thing would be not to leave any traces leading there, so it's just an anonymous cubic meter somewhere in the Earth's crust. You could drop it into the Mariana Trench, that's the deepest depth of ocean on the planet – or just pick some random other ocean trench, to make it less obvious. If you could make it buoyant and invisible, then you could throw it into the stratosphere. Or ideally you would launch it into space, with a cloak against detection, and a randomly fluctuating acceleration factor that would take it out of the Solar System. And afterward, of course, you'd Obliviate yourself, so even you didn't know exactly where it was."

The Defense Professor was laughing, and it sounded even odder than his smile.

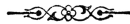
"Professor Quirrell?" Harry said.

"All excellent suggestions," said Professor Quirrell. "But tell me, Mr. Potter, why those exact five?"

"Huh?" said Harry. "They just seemed like the obvious sorts of ideas."

“Oh?” said Professor Quirrell. “But there is an interesting pattern to them, you see. One might say it sounds like something of a riddle. I must admit, Mr. Potter, that although it has had its ups and downs, on the whole, this has been a surprisingly good day.”

And they continued walking down the path that led to the gates of Hogwarts, quite some distance apart; as Harry, without even thinking about it, automatically stayed far enough away from the Defense Professor not to trigger that sense of doom, which for some reason seemed unusually strong right now.



Aftermath, Daphne Greengrass:

Hermione had refused to answer any questions, and as soon as they'd passed the split leading to the Slytherin dungeons, Daphne and Tracey had peeled off at once, walking as quickly as they could. Rumor traveled fast in Hogwarts, so they'd have to go to the dungeons right away if they wanted to be the first to tell everyone the story.

“Now remember,” said Daphne, “don't just blurt out about the kiss as soon as we walk in, okay? It works better if we tell the whole story in order.”

Tracey nodded excitedly.

And as soon as they burst into the Slytherin common room, Tracey Davis took a deep breath and shouted, “Everyone! Harry Potter couldn't cast the Patronus Charm and the Dementor almost ate him and Professor Quirrell saved him but then Potter was all evil until Granger brought him back with a kiss! It's true love for sure!”

It was ordered storytelling of a sort, Daphne supposed.

The news failed to produce the expected reaction. Most of the girls glanced over and then stayed in their couches, or the boys simply kept reading in their chairs.

“Yes,” said Pansy sourly, from where she was sitting with Gregory's feet in her lap, leaning back and reading what seemed to be a coloring book, “Millicent already told us.”

How –

“Why didn't you kiss him first, Tracey?” said Flora and Hestia Carrow from their own chairs. “Now Potter's going to marry a mudblood girl! You could've been his true love and gotten into a rich Noble House and everything if you'd just kissed him first!”

Tracey's face was a picture in stunned realization.

"What?" shrieked Daphne. "Love does not work like that!"

"Of course it does," stated Millicent from where she was practicing some sort of Charm while looking out a window at the swirling waters of the Hogwarts Lake. "First kiss gets the prince."

"It wasn't their first kiss!" shouted Daphne. "Hermione was already his true love! That's why she could bring him back!" Then Daphne realized what she'd just said and winced internally, but as the saying went, you had to fit the tongue to the ear.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, what?" said Gregory, swinging his feet off Pansy's lap. "What's this? Miss Bulstrode didn't tell that part."

Everyone else was also looking at Daphne, now.

"Oh, yeah," said Daphne, "Harry shoved her away and shouted, 'I told you, no kissing!' Then Harry screamed like he was dying and Fawkes started singing to him – I'm not sure which one of those happened first, actually –"

"That doesn't sound like true love to me," said the Carrow twins. "That sounds like the wrong person kissed him."

"It was supposed to be me," whispered Tracey. Her face was still stunned. "I was supposed to be his true love. Harry Potter was my general. I should've, I should've fought Granger for him –"

Daphne spun on Tracey, incensed. "You? Take Harry away from Hermione?"

"Yeah!" said Tracey. "Me!"

"You're nuts," Daphne stated with conviction. "Even if you had kissed him first, you know what that would make you? The sad little lovestruck girl who dies at the end of Act Two."

"You take that back!" shouted Tracey.

Meanwhile, Gregory had crossed the room to where Vincent was doing his homework. "Mr. Crabbe," Gregory said in a low voice, "I think Mr. Malfoy needs to know about this."



Aftermath, Hermione Granger:

Hermione stared at the wax-sealed paper, on the surface of which was inscribed simply the number 42.

I figured out why we couldn't cast the Patronus Charm, Hermione, it doesn't have anything to do with us not being

happy enough. But I can't tell you. I couldn't even tell the Headmaster. It needs to be even more secret than partial Transfiguration, for now, anyway. But if you ever need to fight Dementors, the secret is written here, cryptically, so that if someone doesn't know it's about Dementors and the Patronus Charm, they won't know what it means...

She'd told Harry about seeing him dying, her parents dying, all her friends dying, everyone dying. She hadn't told him about her terror of dying alone, somehow that was still too painful.

Harry had told her about remembering his parents dying, and that he'd thought it was funny.

There's no light in the place the Dementor takes you, Hermione. No warmth. No caring. It's somewhere that you can't even understand happiness. There's pain, and fear, and those can still drive you. You can hate, and take pleasure in destroying what you hate. You can laugh, when you see other people hurting. But you can't ever be happy, you can't even remember what it is that isn't there anymore... I don't think there's any way I can ever explain just what you saved me from. I'm usually ashamed to put people to trouble, I usually can't stand it when people make sacrifices for me, but this one time I'll say that no matter what it ends up costing you to have kissed me, don't ever doubt for a second that it was the right thing to do.

Hermione hadn't realized how little the Dementor had touched her, how small and shallow had been the darkness into which it had taken her.

She'd seen everyone dying, and that had still been able to hurt.

Hermione put the paper back into her pouch, like a good girl ought to. She'd really wanted to read it, though.

She was frightened of Dementors.



Aftermath, Minerva McGonagall:

She felt frozen; she shouldn't have been so shocked, she shouldn't have found Harry so hard to face, but after what he'd been through... She had searched the young boy in front of her for any signs of Dementation, and

failed to find them. But something about the calm with which he had asked such a foreboding question seemed deeply worrying. "Mr. Potter, I can't possibly speak of such matters without the Headmaster's permission!"

The boy in her office took this in without changing expression. "I would prefer not to disturb the Headmaster over this matter," Harry Potter said calmly. "I insist on not disturbing him, in fact, and you did promise that our conversation would be kept private. So let me put it this way. I know that there was, in fact, a prophecy. I know that you are the one who originally heard it from Professor Trelawney. I know that the prophecy identified the child of James and Lily as someone dangerous to the Dark Lord. And I know who I am, indeed everyone now knows who I am, so you are revealing nothing new or dangerous, if you tell me only this: What was the exact wording which identified me, the child of James and Lily?"

Trelawney's hollow voice echoed in her mind –

BORN TO THOSE WHO HAVE THRICE DEFIED HIM,

BORN AS THE SEVENTH MONTH DIES...

"Harry," said Professor McGonagall, "I can't possibly tell you that!" It chilled her to the bone that Harry knew so much already, she couldn't imagine how Harry had learned –

The boy looked at her with strange, sorrowful eyes. "Can you not sneeze without the Headmaster's permission, Professor McGonagall? For I do promise to you that I have good reason to ask, and good reason to keep the question private."

"Please don't, Harry," she whispered.

"All right," Harry said. "One simple question. Please. Was the Potter family mentioned by name? Does the prophecy literally say 'Potter'?"

She stared at Harry for a while. She couldn't have said why or where she got the sense that this was a critical point, that she could not lightly refuse the request, nor lightly accede to it –

"No," she finally said. "Please, Harry, don't ask any more."

The boy smiled, a little sadly it seemed, and said, "Thank you, Minerva. You are a good woman and true."

And while her mouth was still open in utter shock, Harry Potter got up and left the office; and only then did she realize that Harry had taken her refusal as an answer, and the true answer at that –

Harry closed the door behind himself.

The logic had presented itself with a strange diamondlike clarity. Harry couldn't have said if it had come to him during Fawkes's singing, or maybe even before.

Lord Voldemort had killed James Potter. He had preferred to spare Lily Potter's life. He had continued his attack, therefore, with the sole purpose of killing their infant child.

Dark Lords were not usually scared of infant children.

So there was a prophecy about Harry Potter being dangerous to Lord Voldemort, and Lord Voldemort had known that prophecy.

"I give you this rare chance to flee. But I will not trouble myself to subdue you, and your death here will not save your child. Step aside, foolish woman, if you have any sense in you at all!"

Had it been a whim, to give her that chance? But then Lord Voldemort would not have tried to persuade her. Had the prophecy warned Lord Voldemort against killing Lily Potter? Then Lord Voldemort would have troubled himself to subdue her. Lord Voldemort had been mildly inclined not to kill Lily Potter. The preference had been stronger than a whim, but not as strong as a warning.

So suppose that someone whom Lord Voldemort considered a lesser ally or servant, useful but not indispensable, had begged the Dark Lord to spare Lily's life. Lily's, but not James's.

This person had known that Lord Voldemort would attack the house of the Potters. Had known both the prophecy, and the fact that the Dark Lord knew it. Otherwise he would not have begged Lily's life.

According to Professor McGonagall, besides herself, the other two who knew of the prophecy were Albus Dumbledore and Severus Snape.

Severus Snape, who had loved Lily before she was Lily Potter, and hated James.

Severus, then, had learned of the prophecy, and told it to the Dark Lord. Which he had done because the prophecy had not described the Potters by name. It had been a riddle, and Severus had solved that riddle only too late.

But if Severus had been the first to hear the prophecy, and disposed to tell it to the Dark Lord, then why would he also have told Dumbledore or Professor McGonagall?

Therefore Dumbledore or Professor McGonagall had heard it first.

The Headmaster of Hogwarts had no obvious reason to tell the Transfiguration Professor about an extremely sensitive and crucial prophecy. But

the Transfiguration Professor had every reason to tell the Headmaster.

It seemed likely, then, that Professor McGonagall had been the first to hear it.

The prior probabilities said that it had been Professor Trelawney, Hogwarts's resident seer. Seers were rare, so if you counted up most of the seconds Professor McGonagall had spent in the presence of a seer over the course of her lifetime, most of those seer-seconds would be Trelawney-seconds.

Professor McGonagall had told Dumbledore, and would have told no one else about the prophecy without permission.

Therefore, it was Albus Dumbledore who had arranged for Severus Snape to somehow learn of the prophecy. And Dumbledore himself had solved the riddle successfully, or he would not have selected Severus, who had once loved Lily, as the intermediary.

Dumbledore had deliberately arranged for Lord Voldemort to hear about the prophecy, in hopes of luring him to his death. Perhaps Dumbledore had arranged for Severus to learn only some of the prophecy, or there were other prophecies of which Severus had remained innocent... somehow Dumbledore had known that an immediate attack on the Potters would still lead to Lord Voldemort's immediate defeat, although Lord Voldemort himself had not believed this. Or maybe that had just been a lucky stroke of Dumbledore's insanity, his taste for bizarre plots...

Severus had ended up serving Dumbledore afterward; perhaps the Death Eaters would not look kindly on Severus if Dumbledore revealed his role in their defeat.

Dumbledore had tried to arrange for Harry's mother to be spared. But that part of his plot had failed. And he had knowingly condemned James Potter to his death.

Dumbledore was responsible for the deaths of Harry's parents. If the whole chain of logic was correct. Harry could not, in justice, say that successfully ending the Wizarding War did not count as extenuating circumstances. But somehow this still... bothered him a great deal.

And it was time and past time to ask Draco Malfoy what the other side of that war had to say about the character of Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore.

PERSONHOOD THEORY

THERE comes a point in every plot where the victim starts to suspect; and looks back, and sees a trail of events all pointing in a single direction. And when that point comes, Father had explained, the prospect of the loss may seem so unbearable, and admitting themselves tricked may seem so humiliating, that the victim will yet deny the plot, and the game may continue long after.

Father had warned Draco not to do that again.

First, though, he'd let Mr. Avery finish eating all of the cookies he'd swindled from Draco, while Draco watched and cried. The whole lovely jar of cookies that Father had given him just a few hours earlier, for Draco had lost all of them to Mr. Avery, down to the very last one.

So it was a familiar feeling that Draco had felt in the pit of his stomach, when Gregory told him about The Kiss.

Sometimes you looked back, and saw things...

(In a lightless classroom – you couldn't quite call it unused any more, since it'd seen weekly use over the last few months – a boy sat enshrouded in a hooded cowl, with an unlighted crystal globe on the desk in front of him. Thinking in silence, thinking in darkness, waiting for an opening door to let in the light.)

Harry had shoved Granger away and said, I told you, no kissing!

Harry would probably say something like, She just did it to annoy me, last time, just like she made me go on that date.

But the verified story was that Granger had been willing to face the Dementor again in order to help Harry; that she had kissed Harry, crying, when he was lost in the depths of Dementation; and that her kiss had brought him back.

That didn't sound like rivalry, even friendly rivalry.

That sounded like the kind of friendship you usually didn't see even in plays.

Then why had Harry made his friend climb the icy walls of Hogwarts?

Because that was the sort of thing Harry Potter did to his friends?

Father had told Draco that to fathom a strange plot, one technique was to look at what ended up happening, assume it was the intended result, and ask who benefited.

What had ended up happening as the result of Draco and Granger fighting Harry Potter together... was that Draco had started to feel a lot friendlier toward Granger.

Who benefited from the scion of Malfoy becoming friends with a mud-blood witch?

Who benefited, that was famous for exactly that sort of plot?

Who benefited, that could possibly be pulling Harry Potter's strings?

Dumbledore.

And if that was true then Draco would have to go to Father and tell him everything, no matter what happened after that, Draco couldn't imagine what would happen after that, it was awful beyond imagining. Which made him want to cling desperately to the last shred of hope that it wasn't all what it looked like...

...Draco remembered that, too, from Mr. Avery's lesson.

Draco hadn't planned to confront Harry yet. He was still trying to think of an experimental test, something that Harry wouldn't just see through and fake. But then Vincent had come with the message that Harry wanted to meet early this week, on Friday instead of Saturday.

And so here Draco was, in a dark classroom, an unlit crystal globe on his desk, waiting.

Minutes passed.

Footsteps approached.

The door made a gentle creak as it swung open into the classroom, revealing Harry Potter dressed in his own hood and cowl; Harry stepped forward into the dark classroom, and the sturdy door closed behind him with a faint click.

Draco tapped the crystal globe, and the classroom lit with bright green light. Green light projected shadows of the desks onto the floor, and glared back at him from the curved chair-backs, photons bouncing off the wood in such fashion that the angle of incidence equaled the angle of reflection.

At least that much of what he'd learned wasn't likely to be a lie.

Harry had flinched as the light went on, halting for a moment, then resumed his approach. "Hello, Draco," Harry said quietly, drawing back his

hood as he came to Draco's desk. "Thank you for coming, I know it's not our usual time –"

"You're welcome," Draco said flatly.

Harry dragged one of the chairs to face Draco across his desk, the legs making a slight screeching sound on the floor. He spun the chair so that it was facing the wrong way, and sat down straddling it, his arms folded across the back of the chair. The boy's face was pensive, frowning, serious, looking very adult even for Harry Potter.

"I have an important question to ask you," said Harry, "but there's something else I want us to do before that."

Draco said nothing, feeling a certain weariness. Part of him just wanted it all to be over with already.

"Tell me, Draco," said Harry. "Why don't Muggles ever leave ghosts behind when they die?"

"Because Muggles don't have souls, obviously," Draco said. He didn't even realize until after he'd said it that it might contradict Harry's politics, and then he didn't care. Besides, it was obvious.

Harry's face showed no surprise. "Before I ask my important question, I want to see if you can learn the Patronus Charm."

For a moment the sheer nonsequitur stumped Draco. Good old impossible-to-predict-or-understand Harry Potter. There were times when Draco wondered whether Harry was deliberately this disorienting as a tactic.

Then Draco understood, and shoved himself up and away from his desk in a single angry motion. That was it. It was over. "Like Dumbledore's servants," he spat.

"Like Salazar Slytherin," Harry said steadily.

Draco almost stumbled over his own feet in the middle of his first stride toward the door.

Slowly, Draco turned back toward Harry.

"I don't know where you came up with that," said Draco, "but it's wrong, everyone knows the Patronus Charm is a Gryffindor spell –"

"Salazar Slytherin could cast a corporeal Patronus Charm," Harry said. Harry's hand darted into his robes, brought out a book whose title was written as white on green, and so almost impossible to read in the green light; but it looked old. "I discovered that when I was researching the Patronus Charm before. And I found the original reference and checked the book out of the library just in case you didn't believe me. The author of this book doesn't

think there's anything unusual about Salazar being able to cast a Patronus, either; the belief that Slytherins can't do that must be recent. And as a further historical note, though I don't have the book with me, Godric Gryffindor never could."

After the first six times Draco had tried calling Harry's bluff, on six successively more ridiculous occasions, he'd realized that Harry just didn't lie about what was written in books. Still, when Harry's hands opened the book and laid it out to the place of a bookmark, Draco leaned over and studied the place where Harry's finger pointed.

Then the fires of Ravenclaw fell upon the darkness that had cloaked the left wing of Lord Foul's army, breaking it, and it was revealed that the Lord Gryffindor had spoken true; the fear they all had felt was not natural in its source, but coming from thrice a dozen Dementors, who had been promised the souls of the defeated. At once the Lady Hufflepuff and Lord Slytherin brought forth their Patronuses, a vast angry badger and a bright silver serpent, and the defenders lifted their heads as the shadow passed from their hearts. And Lady Ravenclaw laughed, remarking that Lord Foul was a great fool, for now his own army would be subject to the fear, but not the defenders of Hogwarts. Yet the Lord Slytherin said, "No fool he, that much I know." And the Lord Gryffindor beside him studied the battlefield with a frown upon his face...

Draco looked back up. "So?"

Harry closed the book and put it into his pouch. "Chaos and Sunshine both have soldiers that can cast corporeal Patronus Charms. Corporeal Patronuses can be used to convey messages. If you can't learn the spell, Dragon Army will be at a severe military disadvantage –"

Draco didn't care about that right now, and told Harry so. His voice was sharper than it probably should have been.

Harry didn't blink. "Then I'm calling in the favor you owe me from that time I stopped a riot from breaking out, on our first day of broomstick lessons. I'm going to try to teach you the Patronus Charm, and for my favor, I want you to do your honest best to learn and cast it. I trust to the honor of House Malfoy that you will."

Draco felt that certain weariness again. If Harry had asked at any other time, it would have been a fair return on favor owed, given that it wasn't actually a Gryffindor spell. But...

"Why?" Draco said.

"To find out whether you can do this thing that Salazar Slytherin could do," Harry said evenly. "This is an experimental test, and I will not tell you what it means until after you have done it. Will you?"

...It probably was a good idea to discharge that favor on something innocuous, all the more so if it was time to break with Harry Potter. "All right."

Harry drew a wand from his robes, and laid it against the globe. "Not really the best color for learning the Patronus Charm," Harry said. "Green light the exact shade of the Killing Curse, I mean. But silver is a Slytherin color too, isn't it? Dulak." The light went out, and Harry whispered the first two phrases of the Continual Light enchantment, recasting that part of it, though neither of them could have cast the whole thing by themselves. Then Harry tapped the globe again, and the room lit with a silver radiance, brilliant but still soft and gentle. Color returned to the desks and chairs, and to Harry's slightly sweaty face beneath his shock of black hair.

It took that long for Draco to realize the implication. "You saw a Killing Curse cast since the last time we met? When – how –"

"Cast the Patronus Charm," Harry said, looking more serious than ever, "and I'll tell you."

Draco pressed his hands to his eyes, shutting out the silver light. "You know, I really should remember that you're too weird for any normal plots!"

Within his self-imposed darkness, he heard the sound of Harry snickering.



Harry watched closely as Draco finished his latest run-through of the preliminary gestures, the part of the spell that was difficult to learn; the final brandish and the pronunciation didn't have to be precise. All three of the last runs had been perfect as far as Harry could see. Harry had also felt an odd impulse to adjust things that Mr. Lupin hadn't said anything about, like the angle of Draco's elbow or the direction his foot was pointing; it could have been entirely his own imagination, and probably was, but Harry had decided to go with it just in case.

"All right," Harry said quietly. There was a tension in his chest that made it a little hard to speak. "Now we don't have a Dementor here, but that's all right. We won't need one. Draco, when your father spoke to me at the train station, he said that you were the one thing in the world that was most

precious to him, and he threatened to throw away all his other plans to take vengeance on me, if ever you came to harm.”

“He... what?” There was a catch in Draco’s voice, and a strange look on his face. “Why are you telling me that?”

“Why wouldn’t I?” Harry didn’t let his expression change, though he could guess what Draco was thinking; that Harry had been plotting to separate Draco from his father, and shouldn’t be saying anything that would bring them closer together. “There’s always been just one person who matters most to you, and I know exactly what warm and happy thought will let you cast the Patronus Charm. You told it to me at the train station before the first day of school. Once you fell off a broomstick and broke your ribs. It hurt more than anything you’d ever felt, and you thought you were going to die. Pretend that fear is coming from a Dementor, standing in front of you, wearing a tattered black cloak, looking like a dead thing left in water. And then cast the Patronus Charm, and when you brandish the wand to drive the Dementor away, think of how your father held your hand, so that you wouldn’t be afraid; and then think of how much he loves you, and how much you love him, and put it all into your voice when you say Expecto Patronum. For the honor of House Malfoy, and not just because you promised me a favor. Show me you didn’t lie to me that day in the train station when you told me Lucius was a good father. Show me you can do what Salazar Slytherin could do.”

And Harry stepped backward, behind Draco, out of Draco’s field of vision, so that Draco only faced the dusty old teacher’s desk and blackboard at the front of the unused classroom.

Draco cast one look behind him, that strange look still on his face, and then turned away to face forward. Harry saw the exhalation, the inhalation. The wand twitched once, twice, thrice, and four times. Draco’s fingers slid along the wand, exactly the right distances –

Draco lowered his wand.

“This is too –” Draco said, “I can’t think this right, while you’re watching –”

Harry turned around and started walking toward the door. “I’ll come back in a minute,” Harry said. “Just hold to your happy thought, and the Patronus will stay.”



From behind Draco came the sound of the door opening again.

Draco heard Harry's footsteps entering the classroom, but Draco didn't turn to look.

Harry didn't say anything either. The silence stretched.

Finally –

"What does this mean?" Draco said. His voice wavered a bit.

"It means you love your father," Harry's voice said. Which was just what Draco had been thinking, and trying not to cry in front of Harry. It was too right, just too right –

Before Draco, on the floor, was the shining form of a snake that Draco recognized; a Blue Krait, a snake first brought to their manor by Lord Abraxas Malfoy after a visit to some faraway land, and Father had kept a Blue Krait in the ophidiarium ever since. The thing about the Blue Krait was that the bite wouldn't hurt much. Father had said that, and told Draco that he was never allowed to pet the snake, no matter who was watching. The venom killed your nerves so fast that you didn't have time to feel pain as the poison spread. You could die of it even after using Healing Charms. It ate other snakes. It was as Slytherin as any creature could possibly be.

That was why a Blue Krait head had been forged into the handle of Father's cane.

The bright snake darted out its tongue, which was also silver; and seemed to smile somehow, in a warmer way than any reptile should.

And then Draco realized –

"But," Draco said, still staring at the beautifully radiant snake, "you can't cast the Patronus Charm." Now that Draco had cast it himself, he understood why that was important. You could be evil, like Dumbledore, and still cast the Patronus Charm, so long as you had something bright left inside you. But if Harry Potter didn't have a single thought inside him that shone like that –

"The Patronus Charm is more complicated than you think, Draco," Harry said seriously. "Not everyone who fails at casting it is a bad person, or even unhappy. But anyway, I can cast it. I did it on my second try, after I realized what I'd done wrong facing the Dementor my first time. But, well, my life gets a little peculiar sometimes, and my Patronus came out strange, and I'm keeping it a secret for now –"

"Am I supposed to just believe that?"

"You can ask Professor Quirrell if you don't believe me," said Harry. "Ask him whether Harry Potter can cast a corporeal Patronus, and tell him that

I told you to ask. He'd know the request was from me, no one else would know."

Oh, and now Draco was to trust Professor Quirrell? Still, knowing Harry, it might be true; and Professor Quirrell wouldn't lie for trivial reasons.

The glowing snake turned its head back and forth, as though seeking a prey that wasn't there, and then coiled itself into a circle, as though to rest.

"I wonder," Harry said softly, "when it was, which year, which generation, that Slytherins stopped trying to learn the Patronus Charm. When it was that people started to think, that Slytherins themselves started to think, that being cunning and ambitious was the same as being cold and unhappy. And if Salazar knew that his students didn't even bother showing up to learn the Patronus Charm any more, I wonder, would he wish that he'd never been born? I wonder how it all went wrong, when Slytherin's House went wrong."

The shining creature winked out, the turmoil rising in Draco making it impossible to sustain the Charm. Draco spun on Harry, he had to control himself not to raise his wand. "What do you know about Slytherin House or Salazar Slytherin? You were never Sorted into my House, what gives you the right to –"

And that was when Draco finally realized.

"You did get Sorted into Slytherin!" Draco said. "You did, and afterwards you, you somehow, you snapped your fingers –" Draco had once asked Father if it would be cleverer to get Sorted into some other House so that everyone would trust him, and Father had smiled and said that he'd thought of that too at Draco's age, but there was no way to fool the Sorting Hat...

...not until Harry Potter came along.

How had he ever bought for one minute that Harry was a Ravenclaw?

"An interesting hypothesis," Harry said equably. "Do you know, you're the second person in Hogwarts to come up with a theory along those lines? At least you're the second that's actually said so to my face –"

"Snape," Draco said with certainty. His Head of House was no fool.

"Professor Quirrell, of course," said Harry. "Though come to think, Severus did ask me how I managed to stay out of his House, and whether I had something the Sorting Hat wanted. I suppose you could say you're number three. Oh, but Professor Quirrell's theory was a little different than yours, though. May I have your word not to repeat it?"

Draco nodded without even really thinking about it. What was he supposed to do, say no?

"Professor Quirrell thought that Dumbledore wasn't happy with the Hat's choice for the Boy-Who-Lived."

And the instant Harry said it, Draco knew, he knew that it was true, it was just obvious. Who did Dumbledore even think he was fooling?

...well, besides every single other person in Hogwarts except Snape and Quirrell, Harry might even believe it himself...

Draco stumbled back over to his desk in something of a daze, and sat down hard enough to hurt slightly. This sort of thing happened around once a month with Harry, and it hadn't happened yet in January, so it was time.

His fellow Slytherin, who might or might not think himself a Ravenclaw, sat back down in the chair he'd used earlier, now sitting on it crosswise, and looking up intently at Draco.

Draco didn't know what he should be doing now, whether he should be trying to persuade the lost Slytherin boy that, no, he wasn't actually a Ravenclaw... or trying to figure out whether Harry was in league with Dumbledore, though that suddenly seemed less likely... but then why had Harry set up the whole thing with him and Granger...

He really should have remembered that Harry was too weird for any normal plots.

"Harry," Draco said. "Did you deliberately antagonize me and General Sunshine just so we'd work together against you?"

Harry nodded without hesitation, as though it was the most normal thing in the world, and nothing to be ashamed of.

"The whole thing with the gloves and making us climb up the walls of Hogwarts, the only point was to make me and Granger more friendly toward each other. And even before then. You've been plotting it for a really long time. Since the beginning."

Again the nod.

"WHYYYYYY?"

Harry's eyebrows lifted for a moment, the only reaction he showed to Draco shrieking so loudly in the closed classroom that it hurt his own ears. WHY, WHY, WHY did Harry Potter DO this sort of thing...

Then Harry said, "So that Slytherins will be able to cast the Patronus Charm again."

"That... doesn't... make... SENSE!" Draco was aware that he was losing control of his voice, but he didn't seem able to stop himself. "What does that have to do with Granger?"

“Patterns,” Harry said. His face was very serious now, and very grave. “Like a quarter of children born to Squib couples being wizards. A simple, unmistakable pattern you would recognize instantly, if you knew what you were looking at; even though, if you didn’t know, you wouldn’t even realize it was a clue. The poison in Slytherin House is something that’s been seen before in the Muggle world. This is an advance prediction, Draco, I could have written it down for you before our first day of school, just from hearing you talk in King’s Cross Station. Let me describe some really pathetic sorts of people that hang around at your father’s political rallies, pureblood families that would never be invited to dinner at Malfoy Manor. Bearing in mind that I’ve never met them, I’m just predicting it from recognizing the pattern of what’s happening to Slytherin House –”

And Harry Potter proceeded to describe the Parkinsons and Montagues and Boles with a calmly cutting accuracy that Draco wouldn’t have dared think to himself in case there was a Legilimens around, it was beyond insult, they would kill Harry if they ever heard...

“To sum up,” Harry finished, “they don’t have any power themselves. They don’t have any wealth themselves. If they didn’t have Muggleborns to hate, if all the Muggleborns vanished the way they say they want, they’d wake up one morning and find they had nothing. But so long as they can say purebloods are superior, they can feel superior themselves, they can feel like part of the master class. Even though your father would never dream of inviting them to dinner, even though there’s not one Galleon in their vaults, even if they did worse on their OWLs than the worst Muggleborn in Hogwarts. Even if they can’t cast the Patronus Charm any more. Everything is the Muggleborns’ fault to them, they have someone besides themselves to blame for their own failures, and that makes them even weaker. That’s what Slytherin House is becoming, pathetic, and the root of the problem is hating Muggleborns.”

“Salazar Slytherin himself said that mudbloods needed to be cast out! That they were weakening our blood –” Draco’s voice had risen to a shout.

“Salazar was wrong as a question of simple fact! You know that, Draco! And that hatred is poisoning your whole House, you couldn’t cast the Patronus Charm using a thought like that!”

“Then why could Salazar Slytherin cast the Patronus Charm?”

Harry was wiping sweat from his forehead. “Because things have changed between then and now! Listen, Draco, three hundred years ago you could find great scientists, as great as Salazar in their own way, who would have

told you that some other Muggles were inferior because of their skin color –”

“Skin color?” said Draco.

“I know, skin color instead of anything important like blood purity, isn’t it ridiculous? But then something in the world changed, and now you can’t find any great scientists who still think skin color should matter, only loser people like the ones I described to you. Salazar Slytherin made the mistake when everyone else was making it, because he grew up believing it, not because he was desperate for someone to hate. There were a few people who did better than everyone else around them, and they were exceptionally good. But the ones who just accepted what everyone else thought weren’t exceptionally evil. The sad fact is that most people just don’t notice a moral issue at all unless someone else is pointing it out to them; and once they’re as old as Salazar was when he met Godric, they’ve lost the ability to change their minds. Only then Hogwarts was built, and Hogwarts started sending acceptance letters to Muggleborns like Godric insisted, and more and more people began to notice that Muggleborns weren’t any different. Now it’s a big political issue instead of something that everyone just believes without thinking about it. And the correct answer is that Muggleborns aren’t any weaker than purebloods. So now the people who end up siding with what Salazar once believed, are either people who grew up in very closed pureblood environments like you, or people who are so pathetic themselves that they’re desperate for someone to feel superior to, people who love to hate.”

“That doesn’t... that doesn’t sound right...” Draco’s voice said. His ears listened, and wondered that he couldn’t come up with anything better to say.

“It doesn’t? Draco, you know now there’s nothing wrong with Hermione Granger. You had trouble dropping her off a roof, I hear. Even though you knew she’d taken a Feather-Falling Potion, even though you knew she was safe. What sort of person do you think wants to kill her, not for any wrong she did to them, just because she’s a Muggleborn? Even though she’s, she’s just a young girl who would help them with their homework in a second, if they ever asked her,” Harry’s voice broke, “what sort of person wants her to die?”

Father –

Draco felt split in two, he seemed to be having a problem with dual vision, Granger is a mudblood, she should die and a girl hanging from his hand on the rooftop, like seeing double, seeing double –

“And anyone who doesn’t want Hermione Granger to die, won’t want to hang around the sort of people who do! That’s all people think Slytherin is now, not clever planning, not trying to achieve greatness, just hating Muggle-borns! I paid Morag a Sickle to ask Padma why she hadn’t gone to Slytherin, we both know she got the option. And Morag told me that Padma just gave her a look and said that she wasn’t Pansy Parkinson. You see? The best students with the virtues of more than one House, the students with choices, they go under the Hat thinking anywhere but Slytherin, and someone like Padma ends up in Ravenclaw. And... I think the Sorting Hat tries to maintain a balance in the Sorting, so it fills out the ranks of Slytherin with anyone who isn’t repelled by all the hatred. So instead of Padma Patil, Slytherin gets Pansy Parkinson. She’s not very cunning, and she’s not very ambitious, but she’s the sort of person who doesn’t mind what Slytherin is turning into. And the more Padmas go to Ravenclaw and the more Pansies go to Slytherin, the more the process accelerates. It’s destroying Slytherin House, Draco!”

It had a ring of awful truth, Padma had belonged in Slytherin... and instead Slytherin got Pansy... Father rallied lesser families like the Parkinsons because they were convenient sources of support, but Father hadn’t realized the consequences of associating Slytherin’s name with them...

“I can’t –” Draco said, but he wasn’t even sure what he couldn’t do – “What do you want from me?”

“I’m not sure how to heal Slytherin House,” Harry said slowly. “But I know it’s something you and I will end up having to do. It took centuries for science to dawn over the Muggle world, it only happened slowly, but the stronger science got, the further that sort of hatred retreated.” Harry’s voice was quiet, now. “I don’t know exactly why it worked that way, but that’s how it happened historically. As though there’s something in science like the shine of the Patronus Charm, driving back all sorts of darkness and madness, not right away, but it seems to follow wherever science goes. The Enlightenment, that was what it was called in the Muggle world. It has something to do with seeking the truth, I think... with being able to change your mind from what you grew up believing... with thinking logically, realizing that there’s no reason to hate someone because their skin is a different color, just like there’s no reason to hate Hermione Granger... or maybe there’s something to it that even I don’t understand. But the Enlightenment is something that you and I belong to now, both of us. Fixing Slytherin House is just one of the things we have to do.”

"Let me think," Draco said, his voice coming out in something of a croak, "please," and he rested his head in his hands, and thought.



Draco thought for a while, with his palms over his eyes to shut out the world, no sound but his and Harry's breathing. All the persuasive reasonableness of what Harry said, the evident grains of truth that it contained; and against that, the obvious, the perfectly and entirely obvious hypothesis about what was really going on...

After a time, Draco finally raised his head.

"It sounds right," Draco said quietly.

A huge smile broke out on Harry's face.

"So," Draco continued, "is this where you bring me to Dumbledore, to make it official?"

He kept his voice very casual as he said it.

"Oh, yeah," Harry said. "That was the thing I was going to ask you about, actually –"

Draco's blood froze in his veins, froze solid and shattered –

"Professor Quirrell said something to me that got me thinking, and, well, no matter how you answer this question, I'm already stupid for having not asked you a lot earlier. Everyone in Gryffindor thinks Dumbledore is a saint, the Hufflepuffs think he's crazy, the Ravenclaws are all proud of themselves for having worked out that he's only pretending to be crazy, but I never asked anyone in Slytherin. I'm supposed to know better than to make that sort of mistake. But if even you think Dumbledore's okay to conspire with on fixing Slytherin House, I guess I didn't miss anything important."

...

...

...

"You know," Draco said, his voice remarkably calm, all things considered, "every time I wonder if you do things like this just to annoy me, I tell myself that it has to be accidental, no one could possibly do this sort of thing on purpose even if they tried until blood trickled out of their ears. That's the only reason I'm not going to strangle you now."

"Huh?"

And then strangle himself, because Harry had grown up with Muggles, and then Dumbledore had smoothly diverted him from Slytherin to Raven-

claw, so it was perfectly plausible that Harry might not know anything, and Draco had never thought to tell him.

Or else Harry had guessed that Draco wouldn't join up with Dumbledore so readily, and this itself was just the next step of Dumbledore's plan...

But if Harry really didn't know about Dumbledore, then warning him had to take precedence over everything.

"All right," Draco said, after he'd had a chance to organize his thoughts. "I don't know where to start, so I'll just start somewhere." Draco drew a deep breath. This was going to take a while. "Dumbledore murdered his little sister, and got away with it because his brother wouldn't testify against him —"



Harry listened with increasing worry and dismay. Harry had been prepared, he'd thought, to take the blood purist side of the story with a grain of salt. The trouble was that even after you added an enormous amount of salt, it still didn't sound good.

Dumbledore's father had been convicted of using Unforgivable Curses on children, and died in Azkaban. That was no sin of Dumbledore's, but it would be a matter of public record. Harry could check that part, and see whether all of this had been made up out of thin air by the blood purists.

Dumbledore's mother had died mysteriously, shortly before his younger sister died in what the Aurors had ruled to be murder. Supposedly that sister had been brutalized by Muggles and never spoken again after that; which, Draco pointed out, sounded remarkably like a botched Obliviation.

After Harry's first few interruptions, Draco had seemed to pick up on the general principle, and was now presenting the observations first and the inferences afterward.

"— so you don't have to take my word for it," said Draco, "you can see it, right? Anyone in Slytherin can. Dumbledore waited to fight his duel with Grindelwald until the exact moment when it would look best for Dumbledore, after Grindelwald had ruined most of Europe and built up a reputation as the most terrible Dark Wizard in history, and just when Grindelwald had lost the gold and blood sacrifices he was getting from his Muggle pawns and was about to start heading downhill. If Dumbledore was really the noble wizard he pretended to be, he'd have fought Grindelwald long before that. Dumbledore probably wanted Europe ruined, it was probably part of their

plan together, he only attacked Grindelwald after his puppet failed him. And that big flashy duel wasn't real, there's no way two wizards would be so exactly matched that they'd fight for twenty whole hours until one of them fell over from exhaustion, that was just Dumbledore making it look more spectacular." Here Draco's voice became more indignant. "And that got Dumbledore made Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot! The Line of Merlin Unbroken, corrupted after fifteen hundred years! And then he became Supreme Mugwump on top of that, and he already had Hogwarts to use as an invincible fortress – Headmaster and Chief Warlock and Supreme Mugwump, no normal person would try to do all that at once, how can anyone not see that Dumbledore's trying to take over the world?"

"Pause," Harry said, and closed his eyes to think.

It wasn't any worse than what you would have heard about the West in Stalin's Russia, and none of that would have been true. Though the blood purists wouldn't be able to get away with making stuff up entirely... or would they? The Daily Prophet had shown a pronounced tendency to make stuff up... but then again, when they stuck out their neck too far on the Weasley betrothal, they had been called on it and they had been embarrassed...

Harry opened his eyes, and saw that Draco was watching him with a steady, waiting gaze.

"So when you asked me if it was time to join up with Dumbledore, that was just a test."

Draco nodded.

"And before that, when you said it sounded right –"

"It sounds right," said Draco. "But I don't know if I can trust you. Are you going to complain about my testing you, Mr. Potter? Are you going to say that I fooled you? That I led you on?"

Harry knew he should smile like a good sport, but he couldn't really, it was too much of a disappointment.

"You're right, it's fair, I can't complain," Harry said instead. "So what about He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named? Not as bad as he was made out to be?"

Draco looked bitter, at that. "So you think it's all just making Father's side look good and Dumbledore's side look bad, and that I believe it all myself just because Father told me."

"It's a possibility I'm considering," Harry said evenly.

Draco's voice was low and intense. "They knew. My father knew, his friends knew. They knew the Dark Lord was evil. But he was the only chance anyone had against Dumbledore! The only wizard anywhere who was powerful enough to fight him! Some of the other Death Eaters were truly evil too, like Bellatrix Black – Father isn't like that – but Father and his friends had to do it, Harry, they had to, Dumbledore was taking over everything, the Dark Lord was the only hope anyone had left!"

Draco was staring hard at Harry. Harry met the gaze, trying to think. Nobody ever thought of themselves as the villain of their own story – maybe Lord Voldemort did, maybe Bellatrix did, but Draco certainly didn't. That the Death Eaters were bad guys was not in question. The question was whether they were the bad guys; whether there was one villain in the story, or two...

"You're not convinced," Draco said. He looked worried, and a little angry. Which didn't surprise Harry. He was pretty sure Draco himself believed all this.

"Should I be convinced?" Harry said. He didn't look away. "Just because you believe it? Are you a strong enough rationalist now that your belief is strong evidence to me, because you'd be very unlikely to believe it if it weren't true? When I met you, you weren't that strong. Everything you told me, did you rethink it after you awakened as a scientist, or is it just something you grew up believing? Can you look me in the eyes and swear to me upon the honor of House Malfoy that if there's one untruth buried in what you said, one thing that got added on just to make Dumbledore look a little worse, you would have noticed?"

Draco started to open his mouth, and Harry said, "Don't. Don't stain the honor of House Malfoy. You're not that strong yet, and you should know it. Listen, Draco, I've started to notice some worrying things myself. But there's nothing definite, nothing certain, it's all just deductions and hypotheses and untrustworthy witnesses... And there's nothing certain in your story, either. Dumbledore might've had some other good reason not to fight Grindelwald years earlier – though it would have to be a pretty good excuse, especially considering what was happening on the Muggle side of things... but still. Is there one clearly evil thing that Dumbledore's done for certain, so I don't have to wonder?"

Draco's breathing was harsh. "All right," Draco said in an uneven voice, "I'll tell you what Dumbledore did." From Draco's robes came a wand, and Draco said "Quietus", then "Quietus" again, but he got the pronunciation

wrong a second time, and finally Harry took out his own wand and did it.

"There," said Draco hoarsely, "once upon a time there, there was a girl, and her name was Narcissa, and she was the prettiest, the smartest, the most cunning girl that was ever Sorted into Slytherin, and my father loved her, and they married, and she wasn't a Death Eater, she wasn't a fighter, all she ever did was love Father –" Draco stopped there, because he was crying.

Harry felt sick to his stomach. Draco had never talked about his mother, not once, he should have noticed that earlier. "She... got in the way of a curse?"

Draco's voice came out in a scream. "Dumbledore burned her to death in her own bedroom!"



In a classroom filled with soft silver light, one boy is staring at another boy, who is sobbing, wiping frantically at his eyes with the sleeves of his robes.

It was hard for Harry to stay balanced, to keep withholding judgment, it was too emotional, there was something that either wanted to start tears from his own eyes in sympathy with Draco, or know that it wasn't true...

Dumbledore burned her to death in her own bedroom!

That...

...didn't sound like Dumbledore's style...

...but you could only think that thought so many times, before you started to wonder about the trustworthiness of that whole 'style' concept.

"It, it must have hurt horribly," Draco said, his voice shaking, "Father never talks about it at all, you don't ever talk about it in front of him, but Mr. Macnair told me, there were scorch marks all over the bedroom, from how Mother must have struggled while Dumbledore burned her alive. That is the debt Dumbledore owes to House Malfoy and we will have his life for it!"

"Draco," Harry said, he let all of the hoarseness into his own voice, it would be wrong to sound calm, "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry for asking, but I have to know, how do you know it was Dumble-"

"Dumbledore said he did it, he told Father it was a warning! And Father couldn't testify under Veritaserum because he was an Occlumens, he couldn't even get Dumbledore put on trial, Father's own allies didn't believe him after Dumbledore just denied everything in public, but we know, the Death Eaters know, Father wouldn't have any reason to lie about that, Father would want

us to take revenge on the right person, can't you see that Harry?" Draco's voice was wild.

Unless Lucius did it himself, of course, and found it more convenient to blame Dumbledore.

Although... it also didn't seem like Lucius's style. And if he had murdered Narcissa, it would have been smarter to pin the blame on an easier victim instead of losing political capital and credibility by going after Dumbledore...

In time, Draco stopped crying, and looked at Harry. "Well?" said Draco, sounding like he wanted to spit the words. "Is that evil enough for you, Mr. Potter?"

Harry looked down at where his arms rested on the back of his chair. He couldn't meet Draco's eyes any more, the pain in them was too raw. "I wasn't expecting to hear that," Harry said softly. "I don't know what to think any more."

"You don't know?" Draco's voice rose to a shriek, and he stood up abruptly from his desk –

"I remembered the Dark Lord killing my parents," Harry said. "When I went in front of the Dementor the first time, that was what I remembered, the worst memory. Even though it was so long ago. I heard them dying. My mother begged the Dark Lord not to kill me, not Harry, please no, take me, kill me instead! That's what she said. And the Dark Lord mocked her, and laughed. Then, I remember, the flash of green light –"

Harry looked up at Draco.

"So we could fight," Harry said, "we could just keep on with the same fight. You could tell me that it was right for my mother to die, because she was the wife of James, who killed a Death Eater. But bad for your mother to die, because she was innocent. And I could tell you that it was right for your mother to die, that Dumbledore must have had some reason that made it okay to burn her alive in her own bedroom; but bad for my mother to die. But you know, Draco, either way, wouldn't it be obvious that we were just being biased? Because the rule that says that it's wrong to kill innocent people, that rule can't switch on for my mother and off for yours, and it can't switch on for your mother and off for mine. If you tell me that Lily was an enemy of the Death Eaters and it's right to kill your enemies, then the same rule says that Dumbledore was right to kill Narcissa, since she was his enemy." Harry's voice went hoarse. "So if the two of us are going to agree on anything, it's going to be that neither of their deaths were right and that no

one's mother should die any more."



The fury boiling inside Draco was so great that he could barely stop himself from storming out of the room; all that halted him was the recognition of a critical moment; and a small remnant of friendship, a tiny flash of sympathy, for he had forgotten, he'd forgotten, that Harry's mother and father were dead by the Dark Lord's hand.

The silence stretched.

"You can talk," Harry said, "Draco, talk to me, I won't get angry – are you thinking, I don't know, that Narcissa dying was much worse than Lily dying? That it's wrong for me even to make the comparison?"

"I guess I was stupid too," Draco said. "All this time, all this time I forgot that you must hate the Death Eaters for killing your parents, hate Death Eaters the way I hate Dumbledore." And Harry had never said anything, never reacted when Draco talked about Death Eaters, kept it hidden – Draco was a fool.

"No," Harry said. "It's not – it's not like that, Draco, I, I don't even know how to explain to you, except to say that a thought like that, wouldn't," Harry's voice choked, "you wouldn't ever be able to use it, to cast the Patronus Charm..."

Draco felt a sudden wrench in his heart, unwanted but he felt it. "Are you pretending you're just going to forget about your own parents? Are you saying I should just forget about Mother?"

"So you and I have to be enemies then?" Now Harry's voice was growing equally wild. "What have we ever done to each other that means we have to be enemies? I refuse to be trapped like that! Justice can't mean that both of us should attack each other, it doesn't make sense!" Harry stopped, took a deep breath, ran his fingers back through the deliberate mess of his hair – the fingers came away sweaty, Draco could see it. "Draco, listen, we can't expect to meet on everything right away, you and I. So I won't ask you to say that the Dark Lord was wrong to kill my mother, just say that it was... sad. We won't talk about whether or not it was necessary, whether it was justified. I'll just ask you to say that it was sad that it happened, that my mother's life was valuable too, you'll just say that for now. And I'll say it was sad that Narcissa died, because her life was also worth something. We can't expect to agree on everything right away, but if we start out by saying that every life is precious,

that it's sad when anyone dies, then I know we'll meet someday. That's what I want you to say. Not who was right. Not who was wrong. Just that it was sad when your mother died, and sad when my mother died, and it would be sad if Hermione Granger died, every life is precious, can we agree on that and let the rest go by for now, is it enough if we just agree on that? Can we, Draco? That seems... more like a thought someone could use to cast the Patronus Charm."

There were tears in Harry's eyes.

And Draco was getting angry again. "Dumbledore killed Mother, it's not enough to just say it's sad! I don't understand what you think you have to do, but the Malfoys have to take revenge!" Not avenging the deaths of family went beyond weakness, beyond dishonor, you might as well not exist.

"I'm not arguing with that," Harry said quietly. "But will you say that Lily Potter's death was sad? Just say that one thing?"

"That's..." Draco was having difficulty finding words again. "I know, I know how you feel, but don't you see Harry, even if I just say that Lily Potter's death was sad, that's already going against the Death Eaters!"

"Draco, you've got to be able to say the Death Eaters were wrong about some things! You have to, you can't progress as a scientist otherwise, there'll be a roadblock in your way, an authority you can't contradict. Not every change is an improvement, but every improvement is a change, you can't do anything better unless you can manage to do it differently, you've got to let yourself do better than other people! Even your father, Draco, even him. You've got to be able to point to something your father did and say it was mistaken, because he wasn't perfect, and if you can't say that, you can't do better."

Father had warned him, every night before he went to sleep for a month before he went to Hogwarts, that there would be people with this goal.

"You're trying to break me loose of Father."

"Trying to break a part of you loose," said Harry. "Trying to let you fix some things your father got mistaken. Trying to let you do better. But not... trying to break your Patronus!" Harry's voice got softer. "I wouldn't want to break something bright like that. Who knows, fixing Slytherin House might need that, too..."

It was getting to Draco, that was the thing, despite everything it was getting to him, you had to be really careful around Harry because his arguments sounded so convincing even when he was wrong. "And what you're not

admitting is that Dumbledore told you that you could avenge your parents' deaths by taking Lord Malfoy's son from him –"

"No. No. That part's just wrong." Harry took a deep breath. "I did not know who Dumbledore was, or who the Dark Lord was, or who the Death Eaters were, or how my parents died, until three days before I came to Hogwarts. The day you and I first met in the clothes shop, that was the day I learned. And Dumbledore doesn't even like Muggle science, or he says he doesn't, I got a chance to probe him on it once. The thought of taking revenge on the Death Eaters through you has never crossed my mind, not even once until now. I didn't know who the Malfoys were when I met you in the clothes shop, and then I liked you."

There was a long silence.

"I wish I could trust you," Draco said. His voice was shaking. "If I could just know you were telling the truth, everything would be so much simpler –"

And then suddenly it came to Draco.

The way to know whether Harry Potter really meant everything he said, about wanting to fix Slytherin House, about being sad that Mother had died.

It would be illegal, and since he'd have to do it without Father's help, it would be dangerous, he couldn't even trust Harry Potter to help, but...

"All right," Draco said. "I've thought of a definitive experiment."

"What is it?"

"I want to give you a drop of Veritaserum," Draco said. "Just one drop, so you can't lie, but not enough to make you answer anything. I don't know where I'll get it, but I'll make certain it's safe –"

"Um," Harry said. There was a helpless look on his face. "Draco, um –"

"Don't say it," Draco said. His voice was firm and calm. "If you say no, that's my experimental result right there."

"Draco, I'm an Occlumens –"

"OH THAT IS SUCH A LIE –"

"I was trained by Mr. Bester. Professor Quirrell set it up. Look, Draco, I'll take one drop of Veritaserum if you can get it, I'm just warning you that I'm an Occlumens. Not a perfect Occlumens, but Mr. Bester said I was putting up a complete block, and I could probably beat Veritaserum."

"You're in your first year at Hogwarts! That's just crazy!"

"Know a Legilimens you can trust? I'll be happy to demonstrate – look, Draco, I'm sorry, but doesn't the fact that I told you count for something? I

could have just let you do it, you know.”

“WHY? Why are you always like this, Harry? Why do you have to mess everything up even when it’s IMPOSSIBLE? And stop smiling, this isn’t funny!”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I know it’s not funny, I –”

It took a while for Draco to get himself under control.

But Harry was right. Harry could have just let Draco administer the Veritaserum. If he really was an Occlumens... Draco didn’t know who he could ask to try Legilimency, but he could at least ask Professor Quirrell if it was true... Could Draco trust Professor Quirrell? Maybe Professor Quirrell would just say anything Harry asked him to.

Then Draco remembered the other thing Harry had told him to ask Professor Quirrell, and thought of a different test.

“You know,” said Draco. “You know what it costs me, if I agree that the poison in Slytherin’s House is hating Muggleborns, and say that Lily Potter’s death was sad. And that’s part of your plan, don’t tell me it’s not.”

Harry said nothing, which was wise of him.

“There’s something I want from you in return,” said Draco. “And before then, an experimental test I want to try –”



Draco pushed open the door to which the portraits had directed them, and this time it was the right door. Before them was a small empty place of stone set against the night sky. Not a roof like the one he’d dropped Harry from, but a tiny and proper courtyard, far above the ground. With proper railings, elaborate traceries of stone that flushed seamlessly into the stone floor... How so much artistry had been infused into the creation of Hogwarts was something that still awed Draco every time he thought about it. There must have been some way to do it all at once, no one could have detailed so much piece by piece, the castle changed and every new piece was like that. It was so far beyond the wizardry of these fading days that no one would have believed it if they hadn’t seen the proof in Hogwarts itself.

Cloudless and cold, the winter night sky; it got dark long before students’ curfew, in the final days of January.

The stars shining brightly, in the clear air.

Harry had said that being under the stars would help him.

Draco touched his chest with his wand, slid his fingers in a practiced motion, and said, "Thermos." A warmth spread through him, starting from his heart; the wind went on blowing on his face, but he was no longer cold.

"Thermos," Harry's voice said behind him.

They went together to the railing, to look down at the ground a long way below. Draco tried to figure if they were in one of the towers that could be seen from outside, and found that right now he couldn't quite seem to picture how Hogwarts looked from outside. But the ground below was always the same; he could see the Forbidden Forest as a vague outline, and moonlight glittering from the Hogwarts Lake.

"You know," Harry's voice said quietly from beside him where his arms leaned on the railing next to Draco's, "one of the things that Muggles get really wrong, is that they don't turn all their lights out at night. Not even for one hour every month, not even for fifteen minutes once a year. The photons scatter in the atmosphere and wash out all but the brightest stars, and the night sky doesn't look the same at all, not unless you go far away from any cities. Once you've looked up at the sky over Hogwarts, it's hard to imagine living in a Muggle city, where you wouldn't be able to see the stars. You certainly wouldn't want to spend your whole life in Muggle cities, once you'd seen the night sky over Hogwarts."

Draco glanced at Harry, and found that Harry was craning his neck to stare up at where the Milky Way arched across the darkness.

"Of course," Harry went on, his voice still quiet, "you can't ever see the stars properly from Earth, either, the air always gets in the way. You have to look from somewhere else, if you want to see the real thing, the stars burning hard and bright, like their true selves. Have you ever wished that you could just whisk yourself up into the night sky, Draco, and go look at what there is to see around other Suns than ours? If there were no limit to the power of your magic, is that one of the things you would do, if you could do anything?"

There was a silence, and then Draco realized that he was expected to answer. "I didn't think of it before," Draco said. Without any conscious decision, his voice came out as soft and hushed as Harry's. "Do you really think anyone would ever be able to do that?"

"I don't think it'll be that easy," said Harry. "But I know I don't mean to spend my whole life on Earth."

It would have been something to laugh at, if Draco hadn't known that some Muggles had already left, without even using magic.

“To pass your test,” Harry said, “I’m going to have to say what it means to me, that thought, the whole thing, not the shorter version I tried to explain to you before. But you should be able to see it’s the same idea, only more general. So my version of the thought, Draco, is that when we go out into the stars, we might find other people there. And if so, they certainly won’t look like we do. There might be things out there that are grown from crystal, or big pulsating blobs... or they might be made of magic, now that I think about it. So with all that strangeness, how do you recognize a person? Not by the shape, not by how many arms or legs it has. Not by the sort of substance it’s made out of, whether that’s flesh or crystal or stuff I can’t imagine. You would have to recognize them as people from their minds. And even their minds wouldn’t work just like ours do. But anything that lives and thinks and knows itself and doesn’t want to die, it’s sad, Draco, it’s sad if that person has to die, because it doesn’t want to. Compared to what might be out there, every human being who ever lived, we’re all like brothers and sisters, you could hardly even tell us apart. The ones out there who met us, they wouldn’t see British or French, they wouldn’t be able to tell the difference, they’d just see a human being. Humans who can love, and hate, and laugh, and cry; and to them, the ones out there, that would make us all as alike as peas in the same pod. They would be different, though. Really different. But that wouldn’t stop us, and it wouldn’t stop them, if we both wanted to be friends together.”

Harry raised his wand then, and Draco turned, and looked away, as he had promised; looked toward the stone floor and stone wall in which the door was set. For Draco had promised not to look, and not to tell anyone of what Harry had said, or anything at all of what happened here this night, though he didn’t know why it was to be so secret.

“I have a dream,” said Harry’s voice, “that one day sentient beings will be judged by the patterns of their minds, and not their color or their shape or the stuff they’re made of, or who their parents were. Because if we can get along with crystal things someday, how silly would it be not to get along with Muggleborns, who are shaped like us, and think like us, as alike to us as peas in a pod? The crystal things wouldn’t even be able to tell the difference. How impossible is it to imagine that the hatred poisoning Slytherin House would be worth taking with us to the stars? Every life is precious, everything that thinks and knows itself and doesn’t want to die. Lily Potter’s life was precious, and Narcissa Malfoy’s life was precious, even though it’s too late for them now, it was sad when they died. But there are other lives that are

still alive to be fought for. Your life, and my life, and Hermione Granger's life, all the lives of Earth, and all the lives beyond, to be defended and protected, EXPECTO PATRONUM!"

And there was light.

Everything turned to silver in that light, the stone floor, the stone wall, the door, the railings, so dazzling just in the reflection that you could hardly even see them, even the air seemed to shine, and the light grew brighter, and brighter, and brighter –

When the light ended it was like a shock, Draco's hand went automatically to his robe to bring out a handkerchief, and it was only then that he realized he was crying.

"There is your experimental result," Harry's voice said quietly. "I really did mean it, that thought."

Draco slowly turned toward Harry, who had lowered his wand now.

"That, that's got to be a trick, right?" Draco said. He couldn't take many more of these shocks. "Your Patronus – can't really be that bright –" And yet it had been Patronus light, once you knew what you were looking at, you couldn't mistake it for anything else.

"That was the true form of the Patronus Charm," Harry said. "Something that lets you put all your strength into the Patronus, without hindrance from within yourself. And before you ask, I did not learn it from Dumbledore. He does not know the secret, and could not cast the true form if he did. I solved the puzzle for myself. And I knew, once I understood, that this spell must not be spoken of. For your sake, I undertook your test; but you must not speak of it, Draco."

Draco didn't know any more, he didn't know where the true strength lay, or the right of things. Double vision, double vision. Draco wanted to call Harry's ideals weakness, Hufflepuff foolishness, the sort of lie that rulers told to placate the populace and that Harry had been silly enough to believe for himself, foolishness taken seriously and raised up to insane heights, projected out onto the stars themselves –

Something beautiful and hidden, mysterious and bright –

"Will I," whispered Draco, "be able to cast a Patronus like that, someday?"

"If you always keep seeking the truth," Harry said, "and if you don't refuse the warm thoughts when you find them, then I'm sure you will. I think a person could get anywhere if they just kept going long enough, even to the stars."

Draco wiped his eyes with his handkerchief again.

"We should go back inside," Draco said in an unsteady voice, "someone could've seen it, all that light –"

Harry nodded, and moved to and through the door; and Draco looked up at the night sky one last time before he followed.

Who was the Boy-Who-Lived, that he was already an Occlumens, and could cast the true form of the Patronus Charm, and do other strange things? What was Harry's Patronus, why must it stay unseen?

Draco didn't ask any of those questions, because Harry might have answered, and Draco just couldn't take any more shocks today. He just couldn't. One more shock and his head was going to just fall right off his shoulders and go bounce, bounce, bounce down the corridors of Hogwarts.



They'd ducked into a small alcove, instead of going all the way back to the classroom, at Draco's request; he was feeling too nervous to put it off any longer.

Draco put up a Quieting barrier, and then looked at Harry in silent question.

"I've been thinking about it," Harry said. "I'll do it, but there are five conditions –"

"Five?"

"Yes, five. Look, Draco, a pledge like this is just begging to go terribly wrong somehow, you know it would go wrong if this were a play –"

"Well, it's not!" Draco said. "Dumbledore killed Mother. He's evil. It's one of those things you talk about that doesn't have to be complicated."

"Draco," Harry said, his voice careful, "all I know is that you say that Lucius says that Dumbledore says he killed Narcissa. To believe that unquestioningly, I have to trust you and Lucius and Dumbledore. So like I said, there are conditions. The first one is that at any point you can release me from the pledge, if it no longer seems like a good idea. It has to be a deliberate and intended decision on your part, of course, not a trick of wording or something."

"Okay," said Draco. That sounded safe enough.

"Condition two is that I'm pledging to take as an enemy whoever actually did kill Narcissa, as determined to the honest best of my ability as a rationalist. Whether that's Dumbledore, or someone else. And you have my word that

I'll exercise my best ability as a rationalist to keep that judgment honest, as a question of simple fact. Agreed?"

"I don't like it," said Draco. He didn't, the whole point was to make sure Harry never went with Dumbledore. Still, if Harry was honest, he'd catch on to Dumbledore soon enough; and if dishonest, he'd already broken his word... "But I'll agree."

"Condition three is that Narcissa has to have been burned alive. If that part of the story turns out to be something exaggerated just to make it sound a little worse, then I get to decide for myself whether or not to still go through with the pledge. Good people sometimes have to kill. But they don't ever torture people to death. It's because Narcissa was burned alive that I know whoever did that was evil."

Draco kept his temper, barely.

"Condition four is that if Narcissa got her own hands dirty, and, say, Crucioed someone's child into insanity, and that person burned Narcissa for revenge, the deal might be off again. Because then it was still wrong for them to burn her, they still should've just killed her without pain; but it wasn't evil the same way as if she was just Lucius's love who never did anything herself, like you said. Condition five is that if whoever killed Narcissa was tricked somehow into doing it, then my enemy is whoever tricked them, not the person who was tricked."

"All this really sounds like you're planning to weasel out of it –"

"Draco, I won't take a good person as an enemy, not for you or anyone. I have to really believe they're in the wrong. But I've thought about it, and it seems to me that if Narcissa didn't do any evil with her own hands, just fell in love with Lucius and chose to stay his wife, then whoever burned her alive in her own bedroom isn't likely to be a good guy. And I'll pledge to take as my enemy whoever made that happen, whether it's Dumbledore or anyone else, unless you deliberately release me from that pledge. Hopefully that won't go wrong the way it would if this were a play."

"I'm not happy," said Draco. "But okay. You pledge to take my mother's murderer as your enemy, and I'll –"

Harry waited, with a patient look on his face, while Draco tried to make his voice work again.

"I'll help you fix the problem with Slytherin House hating Muggleborns," Draco finished in a whisper. "And I'll say it was sad that Lily Potter died."

"So be it," said Harry.

And it was done.

The break, Draco knew, had just widened a little more. No, not a little, a lot. There was a sensation of drifting away, of being lost, further and further from shore, further and further from home...

"Excuse me," Draco said. He turned away from Harry, and then tried to calm himself, he had to do this test, and he didn't want to fail it from being nervous or ashamed.

Draco raised his wand into the starting position for the Patronus Charm.

Remembered falling from his broomstick, the pain, the fear, imagined it coming from a tall figure in a cloak, looking like a dead thing left in water.

And then Draco closed his eyes, the better to remember Father holding his small, cold hands in his own warm strength.

Don't be frightened, my son, I'm here...

The wand swung up in a broad brandish, to drive the fear away, and Draco was surprised at the strength of it; and he remembered in that moment that Father wasn't lost, would never be lost, would always be there and strong in his own person, no matter what happened to Draco, and his voice cried, "Expecto Patronum!"

Draco opened his eyes.

A shining snake looked back at him, no less bright than before.

Behind him, he heard Harry exhale a breath, as though in relief.

Draco gazed into the white light. It seemed he wasn't lost completely, after all.

"That reminds me," said Harry after a while. "Can we test my hypothesis about how to use a Patronus to send messages?"

"Is it going to surprise me?" said Draco. "I don't want any more surprises today."



Harry had claimed that the idea wasn't all that strange and he didn't see how it could possibly shock Draco in any way, which made Draco feel even more nervous, somehow; but Draco could see how important it was to have a way of sending messages in emergencies.

The trick – or so Harry hypothesized – was wanting to spread the good news, wanting the recipient to know the truth of whatever happy thought you'd used to cast the Patronus Charm. Only instead of telling the recipient

in words, the Patronus itself was the message. By wanting them to see that, the Patronus would go to them.

“Tell Harry,” said Draco to the luminous snake, even though Harry was standing only a few paces away on the other side of the room, “to, um, beware the green monkey,” this being a sign from a play Draco had once seen.

And then, just like at King’s Cross station, Draco wanted Harry to know that Father had always cared for him; only this time he didn’t try to say it in words, but wanted to say it with the happy thought itself.

The bright snake slithered across the room, looking more like it was slithering through the air rather than the stone itself; it got to Harry after traveling that short distance –

– and said to Harry, in a strange voice that Draco recognized as how he himself probably sounded to other people, “Beware the green monkey.”

“Hsssss ssss sshssshssss,” said Harry.

The snake slithered back across the floor to Draco.

“Harry says the message is received and acknowledged,” said the shining Blue Krait in Draco’s voice.

“Huh,” Harry said. “Talking to Patronuses feels odd.”

...
...
...
...

“Why are you looking at me like that?” said the Heir of Slytherin.



Aftermath:

Harry stared at Draco.

“You mean just magical snakes, right?”

“N-no,” said Draco. He was looking rather pale, and was still stammering, but had at least stopped the incoherent noises he’d been making earlier. “You’re a Parselmouth, you can speak Parseltongue, it’s the language of all snakes everywhere. You can understand any snake when it talks, and they can understand when you talk to them... Harry, you can’t possibly believe you were Sorted into Ravenclaw! You’re the Heir of Slytherin!”

...
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“SNAKES ARE SENTIENT?”

UTILITARIAN PRIORITIES

IT was Saturday, the first morning of February, and at the Ravenclaw table, a boy bearing a breakfast plate heaped high with vegetables was nervously inspecting his servings for the slightest trace of meat.

It might have been an overreaction. After he'd gotten over the raw shock, Harry's common sense had woken up and hypothesized that "Parseltongue" was probably just a linguistic user interface for controlling snakes...

...after all, snakes couldn't really be human-level intelligent, someone would have noticed by now. The smallest-brained creatures Harry had ever heard of with anything like linguistic ability were the African grey parrots taught by Irene Pepperberg. And that was unstructured protolanguage, in a species that played complex games of adultery and needed to model other parrots. While according to what Draco had been able to remember, snakes spoke to Parselmouths in what sounded like normal human language – i.e., full-blown recursive syntactical grammar. That had taken time for hominids to evolve, with huge brains and strong social selection pressures. Snakes didn't have much society at all that Harry had ever heard. And with thousands upon thousands of different species of snakes all over the world, how could they all use the same version of their supposed language, "Parseltongue"?

Of course that was all merely common sense, in which Harry was starting to lose faith entirely.

But Harry was sure he'd heard snakes hissing on the TV at some point – after all, he knew what that sounded like from somewhere – and that hadn't sounded to him like language, which had seemed a good deal more reassuring...

...at first. The problem was that Draco had also asserted that Parselmouths could send snakes on extended complex missions. And if that was true, then Parselmouths had to make snakes persistently intelligent by talking to them. In the worst-case scenario that would make the snake self-aware, like what Harry had accidentally done to the Sorting Hat.

And when Harry had offered that hypothesis, Draco had claimed that he could remember a story – Harry hoped to Cthulhu that this one story was

just a fairy tale, it had that ring to it, but there was a story – about Salazar Slytherin sending a brave young viper on a mission to gather information from other snakes.

If any snake a Parselmouth had talked to, could make other snakes self-aware by talking to them, then...

Then...

Harry didn't even know why his mind was going all "then... then..." when he knew perfectly well how the exponential progression would work, it was just the sheer moral horror of it that was blowing his mind.

And what if someone had invented a spell like that to talk to cows?

What if there were Poultrymouths?

Or for that matter...

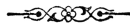
Harry froze in sudden realization just as the forkful of carrots was about to enter his mouth.

That couldn't, couldn't possibly be true, surely no wizard would be stupid enough to do THAT...

And Harry knew, with a dreadful sinking feeling, that of course they would be that stupid. Salazar Slytherin had probably never considered the moral implications of snake intelligence for even one second, just like it hadn't ever occurred to Salazar that Muggleborns were intelligent enough to deserve personhood rights. Most people just didn't see moral issues at all unless someone else was pointing them out...

"Harry?" said Terry from beside him, sounding like he was afraid he would regret asking. "Why are you staring at your fork like that?"

"I'm starting to think magic should be illegal," said Harry. "By the way, have you ever heard any stories about wizards who could speak with plants?"



Terry hadn't heard of anything like that.

Neither had any seventh-year Ravenclaws that Harry had asked.

And now Harry had returned to his place, but not yet sat down again, staring at his plate of vegetables with a forlorn expression. He was getting hungrier, and later in the day he would be visiting Mary's Place for one of their incredibly tasty dishes... Harry was finding himself sorely tempted to just revert back to yesterday's eating habits and be done with it.

You've got to eat something, said his inner Slytherin. And it's not all that much more likely that anyone sneezed self-awareness onto poultry than onto

plants, so as long as you're eating food of questionable sentience either way, why not eat the delicious deep-fried Diracawl slices?

I'm not quite sure that's valid utilitarian logic, there –

Oh, you want utilitarian logic? One serving of utilitarian logic coming up: Even in the unlikely chance that some moron did manage to confer sentience on chickens, it's your research that stands the best chance of discovering the fact and doing something about it. If you can complete your work even slightly faster by not messing around with your diet, then, counterintuitive as it may seem, the best thing you can do to save the greatest number of possibly-sentient who-knows-whats is not wasting time on wild guesses about what might be intelligent. It's not like the house elves haven't prepared the food already, regardless of what you take onto your plate.

Harry considered this for a moment. It was a rather seductive line of reasoning –

Good! said Slytherin. I'm glad you see now that the most moral thing to do is to sacrifice the lives of sentient beings for your own convenience, to feed your dreadful appetites, for the sick pleasure of ripping them apart with your teeth –

What? Harry thought indignantly. Which side are you on here?

His inner Slytherin's mental voice was grim. You too will someday embrace the doctrine... that the end justifies the means. This was followed by some mental snickering.

Ever since Harry had started worrying that plants might also be sentient, his non-Ravenclaw components had been having trouble taking his moral caution seriously. Hufflepuff was shouting Cannibalism! every time Harry tried to think about any food item whatsoever, and Gryffindor would visualize it screaming while he ate it, even if it was, say, a sandwich –

Cannibalism!

IIIIIIIIII DON'T EAT ME –

Ignore the screams, eat it anyway! It's a safe place to compromise your ethics in the service of higher goals, everyone else thinks it's okay to eat sandwiches so you can't use your usual rationalization about a small probability of a large downside if you get caught –

Harry gave a mental sigh, and thought, Just so long as you're okay with us being eaten by giant monsters that didn't do enough research into whether we were sentient.

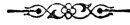
I'm okay with that, said Slytherin. Is everyone else okay with that? (Internal mental nods.) Great, can we go back to deep-fried Diracawl slices now?

Not until I've done some more research into what's sentient and what isn't. Now shut up. And Harry turned firmly away from his plate full of oh-so-tempting vegetables to head toward the library –

Just eat the students, said Hufflepuff. There's no doubt about whether they're sentient.

You know you want to, said Gryffindor. I bet the young ones are the tastiest.

Harry was starting to wonder if the Dementor had somehow damaged their imaginary personalities.



"Honestly," said Hermione. The young girl's voice sounded a little acerbic as her gaze scanned the bookshelves of the Herbology stacks in the Hogwarts library. Harry had left her a message asking if she could come to the library after she'd finished breakfast, which Harry had skipped; but then when Harry had introduced the day's topic she'd seemed a bit nonplussed. "You know your problem, Harry? You've got no sense of priorities. An idea gets into your head and you just go running straight off after it."

"I've got a great sense of priorities," said Harry. His hand reached out and grabbed *Vegetable Cunning* by Casey McNamara, and began to flip through the starting pages, searching for the table of contents. "That's why I want to find out whether plants can talk before I eat my carrots."

"Don't you think that maybe the two of us have more important things to worry about?"

You sound just like Draco, Harry thought, but of course didn't say out loud. Out loud he said, "What could possibly be more important than plants turning out to be sentient?"

There was a pregnant silence from beside him, as Harry's eyes went down the table of contents. There was indeed a chapter on Plant Language, causing Harry's heart to skip a beat; and then his hands began to rapidly turn the pages, heading for the appropriate page number.

"There are days," said Hermione Granger, "when I really, truly, have absolutely no idea what goes on inside that head of yours."

“Look, it’s a question of multiplication, okay? There’s a lot of plants in the world, if they’re not sentient then they’re not important, but if plants are people then they’ve got more moral weight than all the human beings in the world put together. Now, of course your brain doesn’t realize that on an intuitive level, but that’s because the brain can’t multiply. Like if you ask three separate groups of Canadian households how much they’ll pay to save two thousand, twenty thousand, or two hundred thousand birds from dying in oil ponds, the three groups will respectively state that they’re willing to pay seventy-eight, eighty-eight, and eighty dollars. No difference, in other words. It’s called scope insensitivity. Your brain imagines a single bird struggling in an oil pond, and that image creates some amount of emotion that determines your willingness to pay. But no one can visualize even two thousand of anything, so the quantity just gets thrown straight out the window. Now try to correct that bias with respect to a hundred trillion sentient blades of grass, and you’ll realize that this could be thousands of times more important than we used to think the whole human species was... oh thank Azathoth, this says it’s just mandrakes that can talk and they speak regular human language out loud, not that there’s a spell you can use to talk with any plant –”

“Ron came to me at breakfast yesterday morning,” Hermione said. Now her voice sounded a little quiet, a little sad, maybe even a little scared. “He said he’d been dreadfully shocked to see me kiss you. That what you said while you were Demented should’ve shown me how much evil you were hiding inside. And that if I was going to be a follower of a Dark Wizard, then he wasn’t sure he wanted to be in my army anymore.”

Harry’s hands had stopped turning pages. It seemed that Harry’s brain, for all its abstract knowledge, was still incapable of appreciating scope on any real emotional level, because it had just forcibly redirected his attention away from trillions of possibly-sentient blades of grass who might be suffering or dying even as they spoke, and toward the life of a single human being who happened to be nearer and dearer.

“Ron is the world’s most gigantic prat,” Harry said. “They won’t be printing that in the newspaper anytime soon, because it’s not news. So after you fired him, how many of his arms and legs did you break?”

“I tried to tell him it wasn’t like that,” Hermione went on in the same quiet voice. “I tried to tell him you weren’t like that, and that it wasn’t like that between the two of us, but it just seemed to make him even more... more like he was.”

“Well, yes,” Harry said. He was surprised that he wasn’t feeling angrier at Captain Weasley, but his concern for Hermione seemed to be overriding that, for now. “The more you try to justify yourself to people like that, the more it acknowledges that they have the right to question you. It shows you think they get to be your inquisitor, and once you grant someone that sort of power over you, they just push more and more.” This was one of Draco Malfoy’s lessons which Harry had thought was actually pretty smart: people who tried to defend themselves got questioned over every little point and could never satisfy their interrogators; but if you made it clear from the start that you were a celebrity and above social conventions, people’s minds wouldn’t bother tracking most violations. “That’s why when Ron came over to me as I was sitting down at the Ravenclaw table, and told me to stay away from you, I held my hand out over the floor and said, ‘You see how high I’m holding my hand? Your intelligence has to be at least this high to talk to me.’ Then he accused me of, quote, sucking you into the darkness, unquote, so I pursed my lips and went schluuuuurp, and after that his mouth was still making those talking noises so I put up a Quieting Charm. I don’t think he’ll be trying his lectures on me again.”

“I understand why you did that,” Hermione said, her voice tight, “I wanted to tell him off too, but I really wish you hadn’t, it will make things harder for me, Harry!”

Harry looked up from Vegetable Cunning again, he wasn’t getting any reading done at this rate; and he saw that Hermione was still reading whatever book she had, not looking up at him. Her hands turned another page even as he watched.

“I think you’re taking the wrong approach by trying to defend yourself at all,” Harry said. “I really do think that. You are who you are. You’re friends with whoever you choose. Tell anyone who questions you to shove it.”

Hermione just shook her head, and turned another page.

“Option two,” Harry said. “Go to Fred and George and tell them to have a little talk with their wayward brother, those two are genuine good guys –”

“It’s not just Ron,” Hermione said in almost a whisper. “Lots of people are saying it, Harry. Even Mandy is giving me worried looks when she thinks I’m not looking. Isn’t it funny? I keep worrying that Professor Quirrell is sucking you into the darkness, and now people are warning me just the same way I try to warn you.”

“Well, yeah,” said Harry. “Doesn’t that reassure you a bit about me and

Professor Quirrell?"

"In a word," said Hermione, "no."

There was a silence that lasted long enough for Hermione to turn another page, and then her voice, in a real whisper this time, "And, and Padma is going around telling everyone that, that since I couldn't cast the P-Patronus Charm, I must only be p-pretending to be n-nice..."

"Padma didn't even try herself!" Harry said indignantly. "If you were a Dark Witch who was just pretending, you wouldn't have tried in front of everyone, do they think you're stupid?"

Hermione smiled a little, and blinked a few times.

"Hey, I have to worry about actually going evil. Here the worst case scenario is that people think you're more evil than you really are. Is that going to kill you? I mean, is it all that bad?"

The young girl nodded, her face screwed up tight.

"Look, Hermione... if you worry that much about what other people think, if you're unhappy whenever other people don't picture you exactly the same way you picture yourself, that's already dooming yourself to always be unhappy. No one ever thinks of us just the same way we think of ourselves."

"I don't know how to explain to you," Hermione said in a sad soft voice. "I'm not sure it's something you could ever understand, Harry. All I can think of to say is, how would you feel if I thought you were evil?"

"Um..." Harry visualized it. "Yeah, that would hurt. A lot. But you're a good person who thinks about that sort of thing intelligently, you've earned that power over me, it would mean something if you thought I'd gone wrong. I can't think of a single other student, besides you, whose opinion I'd care about the same way -"

"You can live like that," whispered Hermione Granger. "I can't."

The girl had gone through another three pages in silence, and Harry had returned his eyes to his own book and was trying to regain his focus, when Hermione finally said, in a small voice, "Are you really sure I mustn't know how to cast the Patronus Charm?"

"I..." Harry had to swallow a sudden lump in his throat. He suddenly saw himself not knowing why the Patronus Charm didn't work for him, not being able to show Draco, just being told that there was a reason, and nothing more. "Hermione, your Patronus would shine with the same light but it wouldn't be normal, it wouldn't look like people think Patronuses should look, anyone who saw it would know there was something strange going on. Even if I

told you the secret you couldn't demonstrate to anyone, unless you made them face the other way so they could only see the light, and... and the most important part of any secret is the knowledge that a secret exists, you could only show one or two friends if you swore them to secrecy..." Harry's voice trailed off helplessly.

"I'll take it." Her voice was still small.

It was very hard not to just blurt out the secret, right there in the library.

"I, I shouldn't, I really shouldn't, it's dangerous, Hermione, it could do a lot of harm if that secret got out! Haven't you heard the saying, three can keep a secret if two are dead? That telling just your closest friends is the same as telling everyone, because you're not just trusting them, you're trusting everyone they trust? It's too important, too much of a risk, it's not the sort of decision that should be made for the sake of fixing someone's reputation at school!"

"Okay," Hermione said. She closed the book and put it back on the shelf. "I can't concentrate right now, Harry, I'm sorry."

"If there's anything else I can do –"

"Be nicer to everyone."

The girl didn't look back as she walked out of the stacks, which might have been a good thing, because the boy was frozen in place, unmoving.

After a while, the boy started turning pages again.

PRIOR INFORMATION

A boy waits at a small clearing at the edge of the non-forbidden forest, beside a dirt trail that runs back to the gates of Hogwarts in one direction, and off into the distance in another. There is a carriage nearby, and the boy is standing well away from it, looking at it, his eyes seldom wavering from its direction.

In the distance, a figure is approaching along the dirt path: A man wearing professorial robes, trudging slowly with his shoulders slumped low, his formal shoes kicking up small clouds of dust as he walks.

Half a minute later, the boy darts another quick glance before returning to his surveillance; and this glimpse shows that the man's shoulders have straightened, his face unslackened, and that his shoes are now walking lightly across the dirt, leaving not a trace of dust in the air behind.

"Hello, Professor Quirrell," Harry said without letting his eyes move again from the direction of their carriage.

"Salutations," said the calm voice of Professor Quirrell. "You seem to be keeping your distance, Mr. Potter. I don't suppose you see something odd about our conveyance?"

"Odd?" Harry echoed. "Why no, I can't say I see anything odd. There seem to be even numbers of everything. Four seats, four wheels, two huge skeletal winged horses..."

A skin-wrapped skull turned to look at him and flashed teeth, solid and white in that black cavernous mouth, as though to indicate that it was just about as fond of him as he was of it. The other black leathery horse-skeleton tossed its head like it was whickering, but there was no sound.

"They are Thestrals, and they have always drawn the carriage," Professor Quirrell said, sounding quite undisturbed as he climbed into the front bench of the carriage, sitting down as far to the right as possible. "They are visible only to those who have seen death and comprehended it, a useful defense against most animal predators. Hm. I suppose that the first time you went in front of the Dementor, your worst memory proved to be the night of your encounter with He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named?"

Harry nodded grimly. It was the right guess, even if for the wrong reasons. Those who have seen Death...

"Did you recall anything of interest, thereby?"

"Yes," Harry said, "I did," only that and nothing more, for he was not ready as yet to make accusations.

The Defense Professor smiled one of his dry smiles, and beckoned with an impatient finger.

Harry closed the distance and climbed into the carriage, wincing. The sense of doom had grown significantly stronger after the day of the Dementor, even though it had been slowly weakening before then. The greatest distance that the carriage allowed him from Professor Quirrell no longer seemed like nearly far enough.

Then the skeletal horses trotted forward and the carriage started in motion, taking them toward the outer bounds of Hogwarts. As it did, Professor Quirrell slumped back down into zombie-mode, and the sense of doom retreated, though it still hovered at the edge of Harry's perceptions, unignorable...

The forest scrolled by as the carriage rolled along, the trees moving past at a speed that seemed positively glacial by comparison to broomsticks or even cars. There was something oddly relaxing, Harry thought, about traveling that slowly. It had certainly relaxed the Defense Professor, who was slumped over with a small stream of drool coming out of his slack mouth and puddling on his robes.

Harry still hadn't decided what he was allowed to eat for lunch.

His library research hadn't turned up any sign of wizards speaking to non-magical plants. Or any other nonmagical animals besides snakes, although *Spell and Speak* by Paul Breedlove had recounted the probably-mythical tale of a sorceress called the Lady of Flying Squirrels.

What Harry wanted to do was ask Professor Quirrell. The problem was that Professor Quirrell was too smart. Judging by what Draco had said, the Heir of Slytherin business was a major bombshell, and Harry wasn't sure he wanted anyone else to know. And the instant Harry asked about Parseltongue, Professor Quirrell would fix him with those pale blue eyes and say, 'I see, Mr. Potter, so you taught Mr. Malfoy the Patronus Charm and accidentally spoke to his snake.'

It wouldn't matter that it shouldn't be enough evidence to locate the true explanation as a hypothesis, let alone overcome its burden of prior

improbability. Somehow the Defense Professor would deduce it anyway. There were times when Harry suspected that Professor Quirrell had way more background information than he was telling, his priors were simply too good. Sometimes he got his amazing deductions right even when his reasons were wrong. The problem was that Harry couldn't see how Professor Quirrell could've snuck in an extra clue about half the stuff he guessed. Just once Harry would have liked to make some sort of incredible deduction from something Professor Quirrell said which would catch him completely off guard.



"I shall have a bowl of green lentil soup, with soy sauce," Professor Quirrell said to the waitress. "And for Mr. Potter, a plate of Tenorman's family chili."

Harry hesitated in sudden dismay. He'd resolved to stick to vegetarian dishes for the moment, but he'd forgotten in his deliberations that Professor Quirrell did the actual ordering – and it would be awkward if he protested now –

The waitress bowed to them, and turned to go –

"Erm, excuse me, any meat in that from snakes or flying squirrels?"

The waitress didn't so much as blink an eye, only turned back to Harry, shook her head, bowed politely to him again, and resumed her walk toward the door.

(The other parts of Harry were snickering at him. Gryffindor was making sardonic comments about how a little social discomfort was enough to get him to resort to Cannibalism! (shouted by Hufflepuff), and Slytherin was remarking on how nice it was that Harry's ethics were flexible when it came to important goals like maintaining his relationship with Professor Quirrell.)

After the waitress had closed the door behind her, Professor Quirrell waved a hand to slide home the locking bar, spoke the usual four Charms to ensure privacy, and then said, "An interesting question, Mr. Potter. I wonder why you asked it?"

Harry kept his face steady. "I was looking up some facts about the Patronus Charm earlier," he said. "According to *The Patronus Charm: Wizards Who Could and Couldn't*, it turns out that Godric couldn't and Salazar could. I was surprised, so I looked up the reference, in *Four Lives of Power*. And then I discovered that Salazar Slytherin could supposedly talk to snakes." (Temporal sequence wasn't the same as causation, it wasn't Harry's fault if

Professor Quirrell missed that.) “Further research turned up an old story about a mother goddess type who could talk to flying squirrels. I was a bit worried about the prospect of eating something that could talk.”

And Harry took a casual sip of his water –

– just as Professor Quirrell said, “Mr. Potter, would I be correct in guessing that you are also a Parselmouth?”

When Harry was done coughing, he set his glass of water back down on the table, fixed his gaze on Professor Quirrell’s chin rather than looking him in the eyes, and said, “So you are able to perform Legilimency through my Occlumency barriers, then.”

Professor Quirrell was grinning widely. “I shall take that as a compliment, Mr. Potter, but no.”

“I’m not buying this anymore,” Harry said. “There’s no way you came to that conclusion based on that evidence.”

“Of course not,” Professor Quirrell said equably. “I had planned to ask you that question today in any case, and simply chose an opportune moment. I have suspected since December, in fact –”

“December?” said Harry. “I found out yesterday!”

“Ah, so you did not realize the Sorting Hat’s message to you was in Parseltongue?”

The Defense Professor had timed it exactly right the second time, too, just as Harry was taking a gulp of water to clear out his throat from the first coughing fit.

Harry hadn’t realized, not until just now. Of course it was obvious the instant Professor Quirrell said it. Right, Professor McGonagall had even told him not to talk to snakes where anyone could see him, but he’d thought she’d meant not to be seen talking to any statues or architectural features in Hogwarts that looked like snakes. Double illusion of transparency, he’d thought he understood her, she’d thought he understood her – but how the hell –

“So,” Harry said, “you performed Legilimency on me during my first Defense class, to find out what happened with the Sorting Hat –”

“Then I would not have found out in December.” Professor Quirell leaned back, smiling. “This is not a puzzle you can solve on your own, Mr. Potter, so I will reveal the answer. Over the winter holiday, I was alerted to the fact that the Headmaster had filed a request for a closed judicial panel to review the case of one Mr. Rubeus Hagrid, whom you know as the Keeper of Keys

and Grounds at Hogwarts, and who was accused of the murder of Abigail Myrtle in 1943.”

“Oh, of course,” said Harry, “that makes it downright obvious that I’m a Parselmouth. Professor, what the sweet slithering snakes –”

“The other suspect for that murder was Slytherin’s Monster, the legendary inhabitant of Slytherin’s Chamber of Secrets. Which is why certain sources alerted me to the fact, and why it caught my attention sufficiently that I spent a good deal of bribe money to learn the details of the case. Now in point of fact, Mr. Potter, Mr. Hagrid is innocent. Ridiculously obviously innocent. He is the most blatantly innocent bystander to be convicted by the magical British legal system since Grindelwald’s Confunding of Neville Chamberlain was pinned on Amanda Knox. Headmaster Dippet prompted a student puppet to accuse Mr. Hagrid because Dippet needed a scapegoat to take the blame for the death of Miss Myrtle, and our marvelous justice system agreed that this was plausible enough to warrant Mr. Hagrid’s expulsion and the snapping of his wand. Our current Headmaster needs merely provide some new item of evidence significant enough to reconvene the case; and with Dumbledore applying pressure instead of Dippet, the result is a foregone conclusion. Lucius Malfoy has no particular reason to fear Mr. Hagrid’s vindication; thus Lucius Malfoy will only resist to the extent that he can do so costlessly in order to impose costs on Dumbledore, and Dumbledore is clearly willing to prosecute the case regardless.”

Professor Quirrell took a sip of his water. “But I digress. The new evidence that the Headmaster promises to provide is to exhibit a previously undetected spell on the Sorting Hat, which, the Headmaster asserts, he has personally determined to respond only to Slytherins who are also Parselmouths. The Headmaster further argues that this favors the interpretation that the Chamber of Secrets was indeed opened in 1943, approximately the right time frame for He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, a known Parselmouth, to have attended Hogwarts. It is a rather questionable logic, but a judicial panel may rule that it swings the case far enough to bring Mr. Hagrid’s guilt into doubt, if they can manage to keep a straight face as they say it. And now we come to the key question: how did the Headmaster discover this hidden spell on the Sorting Hat?”

Professor Quirrell was smiling thinly now. “Well now, let us suppose that there was a Parselmouth in this year’s crop of students, a potential Heir of Slytherin. You must admit, Mr. Potter, that you stand out as a possibility

whenever extraordinary people are considered. And if I then further ask myself which new Slytherin would be most likely to have his mental privacy invaded by the Headmaster, specifically hunting the memories of his Sorting, why, you stand out even more.” The smile vanished. “So you see, Mr. Potter, it was not I who invaded your mind, though I will not ask you to apologize. It is not your fault that you believed Dumbledore’s protestations of respecting your mental privacy.”

“My sincere apologies,” Harry said, keeping his face expressionless. The rigid control was a confession in its own right, as was the sweat beading his forehead; but he didn’t think the Defense Professor would take any evidence from that. Professor Quirrell would just think Harry was nervous at having been discovered as the Heir of Slytherin. Rather than being nervous that Professor Quirrell might realize that Harry had deliberately betrayed Slytherin’s secret... which itself was no longer seeming like such a smart move.

“So, Mr. Potter. Any progress on finding the Chamber of Secrets?”

No, thought Harry. But to maintain plausible deniability, you needed a general policy of sometimes evading questions even when you had nothing to hide... “With respect, Professor Quirrell, if I had made such progress, it is not quite obvious to me that I should tell you about it.”

Professor Quirrell sipped from his own waterglass again. “Well then, Mr. Potter, I shall freely tell you what I know or suspect. First, I believe the Chamber of Secrets is real, as is Slytherin’s Monster. Miss Myrtle’s death was not discovered until hours after her demise, even though the wards should have alerted the Headmaster instantly. Therefore her murder was performed either by Headmaster Dippet, which is unlikely, or by some entity which Salazar Slytherin keyed into his wards at a higher level than the Headmaster himself. Second, I suspect that contrary to popular legend, the purpose of Slytherin’s Monster was not to rid Hogwarts of Muggleborns. Unless Slytherin’s Monster were powerful enough to defeat the Headmaster of Hogwarts and all the teachers, it could not triumph by force. Multiple murders in secrecy would result in the school’s closure, as nearly happened in 1943, or in the placing of new wards. So why Slytherin’s Monster, Mr. Potter? What true purpose does it serve?”

“Ah...” Harry dropped his gaze to his waterglass and tried to think. “To kill anyone who got into the Chamber and didn’t belong there –”

“A monster powerful enough to defeat a team of wizards that had broken past the best wards Salazar could place on his Chamber? Unlikely.”

Harry was feeling a bit pressured now. “Well, it’s called the Chamber of Secrets, so maybe the Monster has a secret, or is a secret?” For that matter, just what sort of secrets were in the Chamber of Secrets in the first place? Harry hadn’t done a lot of research on the subject, in part because he’d gotten the impression that nobody knew anything –

Professor Quirrell was smiling. “Why not just write the secret down?”

“Ahhh...” said Harry. “Because if the Monster spoke Parseltongue, that would ensure that only a true descendant of Slytherin could hear the secret?”

“Easy enough to key the wards on the Chamber to a phrase spoken in Parseltongue. Why go to the trouble of creating Slytherin’s Monster? It cannot have been easy to create a creature with a lifespan of centuries. Come, Mr. Potter, it should be obvious; what are the secrets that can be told from one living mind to another, but never written down?”

Harry saw it then, with a burst of adrenaline that started his heart racing, his breath coming faster. “Oh.”

Salazar Slytherin had been very cunning indeed. Cunning enough to come up with a way to bypass the Interdict of Merlin.

Powerful wizardries couldn’t be transmitted through books or ghosts, but if you could create a long-lived enough sentient creature with a good enough memory –

“It seems very probable to me,” said Professor Quirrell, “that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named began his climb to power with secrets obtained from Slytherin’s Monster. That Salazar’s lost knowledge is the source of You-Know-Who’s extraordinarily powerful wizardry. Hence my interest in the Chamber of Secrets and the case of Mr. Hagrid.”

“I see,” Harry said. And if he, Harry, could find Salazar’s Chamber of Secrets... then all of the lost knowledge that Lord Voldemort had obtained would be his as well.

Yes. That was just how the story should go.

Add in Harry’s superior intelligence and some original magical research and some Muggle rocket launchers, and the resulting fight would be completely one-sided, which was exactly how Harry wanted it.

Harry was grinning now, a very evil grin. New priority: Find everything in Hogwarts that looks remotely like a snake and try speaking to it. Starting with everything you’ve already tried, only this time be sure to use Parseltongue instead of English – get Draco to let you into the Slytherin dorms

–

“Don’t become too excited, Mr. Potter,” said Professor Quirrell. His own face had become expressionless, now. “You must continue thinking. What were the Dark Lord’s parting words to Slytherin’s Monster?”

“What?” Harry said. “How could either of us possibly know that?”

“Visualize the scene, Mr. Potter. Let your imagination fill in the details. Slytherin’s Monster – probably some great serpent, so that only a Parselmouth may speak to it – has finished imparting all of the knowledge it possesses to He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. It conveys to him Salazar’s final benediction, and warns him that the Chamber of Secrets must now remain closed until the next descendant of Salazar should prove cunning enough to open it. And he who will become the Dark Lord nods, and says to it –”

“Avada Kedavra,” said Harry, suddenly feeling sick to his stomach.

“Rule Twelve,” Professor Quirrell said quietly. “Never leave the source of your power lying around where someone else can find it.”

Harry’s gaze dropped to the tablecloth, which had decorated itself in a mournful pattern of black flowers and shadows. Somehow that seemed... too sad to be imagined, Slytherin’s great snake had only wanted to help Lord Voldemort, and Lord Voldemort had just... there was something unbearably sorrowful about it, what sort of person would do that to a being who’d offered them nothing but friendship... “Do you think the Dark Lord would have –”

“Yes,” Professor Quirrell said flatly. “He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named left quite a trail of bodies behind him, Mr. Potter; I doubt he would have omitted that one. If there were any artifacts left there that could be moved, the Dark Lord would have taken those with him as well. There might still be something worth seeing in the Chamber of Secrets, and to find it would prove yourself the true Heir of Slytherin. But do not raise your hopes too high. I suspect that all you will find is the remains of Slytherin’s Monster resting quietly in its grave.”

They sat in silence for a while.

“I could be wrong,” said Professor Quirrell. “In the end it is only a guess. But I did wish to warn you, Mr. Potter, so that you would not be too sorely disappointed.”

Harry nodded shortly.

“One might even regret your infant self’s victory,” said Professor Quirrell. His smile twisted. “If only You-Know-Who had lived, you might have persuaded him to teach you some of the knowledge that would have been your heritage, from one Heir of Slytherin to another.” The smile twisted further,

as though to mock the obvious impossibility, even given the premise.

Note to self, thought Harry, with a slight chill and an edge of anger, make sure to extract my heritage out of the Dark Lord's mind, one way or another.

There was another silence. Professor Quirrell was looking at Harry as though waiting for him to ask something.

"Well," said Harry, "so long as we're on the topic, can I ask how you think the whole Parselmouth business actually –"

There came a knock at the door, then. Professor Quirrell raised a cautionary finger, then opened the door with a wave. The waitress entered, balancing a huge platter with their meals as though the whole assembly weighed nothing (which was in fact probably the case). She gave Professor Quirrell his bowl of green soup, and a glass of his usual Chianti; and set down before Harry a plate of small meat strips smothered in a heavy-looking sauce, plus a glass of his accustomed treacle soda. Then she bowed, managing to make it seem like sincere respect rather than perfunctory acknowledgment, and departed.

When she was gone, Professor Quirrell held up a finger for silence again, and drew his wand.

And then Professor Quirrell began performing a certain series of incantations that Harry recognized, making him take a sharp breath. It was the series and ordering that Mr. Bester had used, the full set of twenty-seven spells that you would perform before discussing anything of truly great import.

If the discussion of the Chamber of Secrets hadn't counted as important –

When Professor Quirrell was done – he'd performed thirty spells, three of which Harry hadn't heard before – the Defense Professor said, "Now we shall not be interrupted for a time. Can you keep a secret, Mr. Potter?"

Harry nodded.

"A serious secret, Mr. Potter," Professor Quirrell said. His eyes were intent, his face grave. "One which could potentially send me to Azkaban. Think about it before you reply."

For a moment Harry didn't even see why the question should be hard, given his growing collection of secrets. Then –

If this secret could send Professor Quirrell to Azkaban, that means he's done something illegal...

Harry's brain performed a few calculations. Whatever the secret, Professor Quirrell did not think his illegal act would reflect badly on him in Harry's eyes. There was no advantage to be gained from not hearing it. And if it did

reveal something wrong with Professor Quirrell, then it was very much to Harry's advantage to know it, even if he had promised not to tell anyone.

"I never had very much respect for authority," Harry said. "Legal and governmental authority included. I will keep your secret."

Harry didn't bother asking whether the revelation was worth the danger it would pose to Professor Quirrell. The Defense Professor wasn't stupid.

"Then I must test whether you are truly a descendant of Salazar," said Professor Quirrell, and stood up from his chair. Harry, prompted more by reflex and instinct than calculation, shoved himself up out of his own chair as well.

There was a blur, a shift, a sudden motion.

Harry aborted his panicked backward leap halfway through, leaving him windmilling his arms and trying not to fall over, a frantic flush of adrenaline running through him.

At the other end of the room swayed a snake a meter high, bright green and intricately banded in white and blue. Harry didn't know enough snakelore to recognize it, but he knew that 'brightly colored' meant 'poisonous'.

The constant sense of doom had diminished, ironically enough, after the Defense Professor of Hogwarts had turned into a venomous snake.

Harry swallowed hard and said, "Greetings – ah, hssss, no, ah, greetingsss."

"Sso," hissed the snake. "You sspeak, I hear. I sspeak, you hear?"

"Yess, I hear," hissed Harry. "You are an Animaguss?"

"Obviousslly," hissed the snake. "Thirty-sseven ruless, number thirty-four: Become Animaguss. All ssensible people do, if can. Thusss, very rare." The snake's eyes were flat surfaces ensconced within dark pits, sharp black pupils in dark gray fields. "This iss mosst ssecure way to sspeak. You ssee? No othersss undersstand uss."

"Even if they are ssnaake Animagi?"

"Not unless heir of Sslytherin willss." The snake gave a series of short hisses which Harry's brain translated as sardonic laughter. "Sslytherin not sstupid. Ssnake Animaguss not ssame as Parssselmouth. Would be huge flaw in sscheme."

Well that definitely argued that Parseltongue was personal magic, not snakes being sentient beings with a learnable language –

"I am not regisstered," hissed the snake. The dark pits of its eyes stared at Harry. "Animaguss musst be regisstered. Penalty is two yearsss imprisson-

ment. Will you keep my ssecret, boy?"

"Yess," hissed Harry. "Would never break promisse."

The snake seemed to hold still, as though in shock, and then began to sway again. "We come here next in sseven dayss. Bring cloak to passs unseen, bring hourglasss to move through time –"

"You know?" hissed Harry in shock. "How –"

Again the series of short quick hisses that translated as sardonic laughter. "You arrive in my firsst classs while sstill in other classs, sstrike down enemy with pie, two ballss of memory –"

"Never mind," hissed Harry. "Sstupid question, forgot you were ssmart."

"Foolissh thing to forget," said the snake, but the hiss did not seem of-fended.

"Hourglasss is resstricted," Harry said. "Cannot usse until ninth hour."

The snake twitched its head, a snakish nod. "Many resstrictionss. Locked to your usse only, cannot be sstolen. Cannot transsport other humans. But ssake carried in pouch, I ssuspect will go with. Think possibble to hold hourglasss motionless within sshell, without dissturbng wardss, while you turn sshell around it. We will tesst in sseven dayss. Will not sspeak of planss beyond thiss. You ssay nothing, to no one. Give no ssign of expectancy, none. Undersstand?"

Harry nodded.

"Answwer in sspeech."

"Yess."

"Will do as I ssaid?"

"Yess. But," Harry gave a wobbling rasp that was how his mind had translated a hesitant 'Ahhh' into snakish, "I do not promisse to do whatever thiss iss, you have not ssaid –"

The snake performed a shiver that Harry's mind translated as a severe glare. "Of coursse not. Will disscusss sspecificss at next meeting."

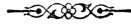
The blur and motion reversed itself, and Professor Quirrell was standing there once more. For a moment the Defense Professor himself seemed to sway, as the snake had swayed, and his eyes seemed cold and flat; and then his shoulders straightened and he was human once more.

And the aura of doom had returned.

Professor Quirrell's chair scooted back for him, and he sat down in it. "No sense in letting this go to waste," Professor Quirrell said as he picked up

his spoon, "though at the moment I would much prefer a live mouse. One can never quite disentangle the mind from the body it wears, you see..."

Harry slowly took his seat and began eating.



"So the line of Salazar did not die with You-Know-Who after all," said Professor Quirrell after a time. "It would seem that rumors have already begun to spread, among our fine student body, that you are Dark; I wonder what they would think, if they knew that."

"Or if they knew that I had destroyed a Dementor," Harry said, and shrugged. "I figure all the fuss will blow over over the next time I do something interesting. Hermione is having trouble, though, and I was wondering if you might have any suggestions for her."

The Defense Professor ate several spoonfuls of soup in silence, then; and when he spoke again, his voice was oddly flat. "You really care about that girl."

"Yes," Harry said quietly.

"I suppose that is why she was able to bring you out of your Dementation?"

"More or less," Harry said. The statement was true in a way, just not exact; it was not that his Demented self had cared, but that it had been confused.

"I did not have any friends like that when I was young." Still the same emotionless voice. "What would have become of you, I wonder, if you had been alone?"

Harry shivered before he could stop himself.

"You must be feeling grateful to her."

Harry just nodded. Not quite exact, but true.

"Then here is what I might have done at your age, if there had been anyone to do it for –"

SELF CENTEREDNESS

PADMA Patil had finished her dinner a little late, getting on toward seventy-three, and was now striding quickly out of the Great Hall on her way to the Ravenclaw dorm and the study rooms. Gossiping was fun and destroying Granger's reputation was more fun, but it could distract from schoolwork. She'd put off a six-inch essay on lomillialor wood due in next morning's Herbology class, and she needed to finish it tonight.

It was while she was passing through a long, twisting, narrow stone corridor that the whisper came, sounding like it was coming from right behind her.

"Padma Patil..."

She spun around quick as lightning, her wand already snatched up from a pocket of her robes and leaping into her hands, if Harry Potter thought he could sneak up on and scare her that easily –

There was no one there.

Instantly Padma spun around and looked in the other direction, if it had been a Ventriloquism Charm –

There was no one there, either.

The whispering sigh came again, soft and dangerous with a slight hissing undertone.

"Padma Patil, Slytherin girl..."

"Harry Potter, Slytherin boy," she said out loud.

She'd fought Potter and his Chaos Legion a dozen times over, and she knew that this was Harry Potter doing this somehow...

...even though the Ventriloquism Charm was only line-of-sight, and in the winding corridor, she could easily see all the way to the nearest twist both forward and backward, and there was no one there...

...it didn't matter. She knew her enemy.

There was a whispery chuckle, now coming from beside her, and she spun around and pointed her wand at the whisper and shouted "Lumos!"

The red bolt of light shot out and struck the wall, which lit with a crimson glow that soon faded.

She hadn't really expected it to work. Harry Potter couldn't possibly be invisible, not really invisible, that was magic most grownups couldn't do, and she'd never believed nine-tenths of the stories about him.

The whispery voice laughed again, now on her other side.

"Harry Potter stands on the precipice," whispered the voice, now sounding very close to her ear, "he is wavering, but you, you are already falling, Slytherin girl..."

"The hat never called out Slytherin for my name, Potter!" She backed up against the wall, so she wouldn't have to watch behind herself, and raised her wand in an attack stance.

Again the soft laugh. "Harry Potter has been in the Ravenclaw common room for the last half-hour, helping Kevin Entwhistle and Michael Corner rehearse Potions recipes. But it matters not. I am here to deliver a warning to you, Padma Patil, and if you choose to ignore it, that is your own affair."

"Fine," she said coldly. "Go ahead and warn me, Potter, I'm not afraid of you."

"Slytherin was a great House, once," said the whisper; it sounded sadder, now. "Slytherin was once a House you would have been proud to choose, Padma Patil. But something turned wrong, something turned sour; do you know what went awry in Slytherin House, Padma Patil?"

"No, and I don't care!"

"But you should care," said the whisper, now sounding like it was coming from just behind her head where it stood almost pressed against the wall. "For you are still that girl whom the Sorting Hat offered that choice. Do you think that just choosing Ravenclaw means that you are not Pansy Parkinson, and will not ever become Pansy Parkinson, no matter how you conduct yourself otherwise?"

Despite everything, now, small chills of fear were spreading out from her spine and running over her skin. She'd heard those stories about Harry Potter too, that he was a secret Legilimens. But she still stood straight, and she put all the bite she could into her voice when she said, "The Slytherins went Dark to get power, just like you did, Potter. And I won't, not ever."

"But you'll spread vicious rumors about an innocent girl," whispered the voice, "even though it will not help you attain any of your own ambitions, and without considering that she has powerful allies who might take offense. That is not the proud Slytherin of the old days, Padma Patil, that is not the pride of Salazar, that is Slytherin gone rotten, Padma Parkinson not Padma

Malfoy...”

She was getting more creeped out than she ever had been in her life, and the possibility was starting to occur to her that this might really be a ghost. She hadn't ever heard that ghosts could hide themselves like this, but maybe they just didn't usually do it – not to mention that most ghosts weren't this eerie, they were just dead people after all – “Who are you? The Bloody Baron?”

“When Harry Potter was bullied and beaten,” the voice whispered, “he commanded all his allies to refrain from vengeance; do you remember that, Padma Patil? For Harry Potter is wavering, but not yet lost; he is struggling, he knows himself to be in peril. But Hermione Granger made no such request of her own allies. Harry Potter is angered with you now, Padma Patil, more angered than he would ever be on his own behalf... and he has allies of his own.”

A shudder went through her, she knew that it was visible and she hated herself for it.

“Oh, don't be afraid,” breathed the voice. “I will not hurt you. For you see, Padma Patil, Hermione Granger truly is innocent. She does not stand on the precipice, she is not falling. She did not ask her allies to refrain from hurting you, because the thought did not even occur to her as a possibility. And Harry Potter knows very well that if he hurt you or caused you to be hurt, for Hermione Granger's sake, then she would never speak to him again until the Sun burned low and the last star failed in the night sky.” The voice was very sad now. “She truly is a kindly girl, a person such as I could only wish to be...”

“Granger can't cast the Patronus Charm!” said Padma. “If she was really as nice as she pretends to be –”

“Can you cast the Patronus Charm, Padma Patil? You dared not even attempt it, you feared what the result would be.”

“That's not true! I didn't have time, that was all!”

The whisper continued. “But Hermione Granger did try, openly before her friends, and when her magic failed she was surprised and dismayed. For there are secrets to the Patronus Charm that few ever knew, and maybe none now know but I.” A soft, whispery chuckle. “Let it stand that it is no stain of her spirit that halts her light from coming forth. Hermione Granger cannot cast the Patronus Charm for the very same reason that Godric Gryffindor, who raised these halls, never could.”

The corridor was becoming colder, she was certain of it, as though someone were using the Chilling Charm.

"And Harry Potter is not Hermione Granger's only ally." Now there was an undertone of dry amusement in that whisper, it reminded her suddenly and frighteningly of Professor Quirrell. "Filius Flitwick and Minerva McGonagall are quite fond of her, I do believe. Did it occur to you that if those two learned what you were doing to Hermione Granger, they might become less fond of you? They might not intervene openly, perhaps; but they might be a little slower to award you House Points, a little slower to steer opportunities your way –"

"Potter snarked on me?"

A ghostly chuckle, a dry heh-heh-heh. "Do you think those two are stupid, deaf and blind?" In a sadder whisper, "Do you think Hermione Granger is not precious to them, that they will not see her hurting? As they might have been fond of you once, their bright young Padma Patil, but you are throwing it away..."

Padma's throat was dry. She hadn't thought of that, not at all.

"I wonder how many people will end up caring for you, Padma Patil, on this path that you now tread. Is it worth that much, just to distance yourself further from your sister? To be the shadow to Parvati's light? Your deepest fear has always been to fall into harmony with her, back into harmony with her I should say; but is it worth hurting an innocent girl, just to make yourself that much more different? Must you be the evil twin, Padma Patil, can you not find a different good to pursue?"

Her heart was hammering in her chest. She'd, she'd never talked about that with anyone –

"I have always wondered at how students bully each other," sighed the voice. "How children make life difficult for themselves, how they turn their schools into prisons even with their own hands. Why do human beings make their own lives so unpleasant? I can give you a part of the answer, Padma Patil. It is because people do not stop and think before causing pain, if they do not imagine that they themselves could also be hurt, that they might also suffer from their own misdeeds. But suffer you will, oh, yes, Padma Patil, suffer you will, if you stay on this road. You will suffer the same pain of loneliness, the same pain of others' fear and distrust, that you now inflict on Hermione Granger. Only for you it will be deserved."

Her wand was shaking in her hand.

"You did not choose sides when you went to Ravenclaw, girl. You choose your side by the way you live your life, what you do to other people and what you do to yourself. Will you illuminate others' lives, or darken them? That is the choice between Light and Dark, not any word the Sorting Hat cries out. And the hard part, Padma Patil, is not saying 'Light', the hard part is deciding which is which, and admitting it to yourself when you begin down the wrong road."

There was silence. It went on for a time, and Padma realized that she had been dismissed.

Padma almost dropped her wand, when she tried to put it back into her pocket. She almost fell, when she took a step forward away from the wall, and turned to go –

"I have not always chosen rightly between Light and Dark," the whisper said, now loud and harsh directly into her ear. "Do not take my wisdom as a final word, girl, do not fear to question it, for though I tried I have sometimes failed, oh, yes, I have failed. But you are hurting a true innocent, and you will achieve none of your ambitions by doing so, it is not for any cunning plan. You are inflicting pain purely for the sake of the pleasure it brings you. I have not always chosen rightly between Light and Dark, but that I know for darkness, for certain. You are hurting an innocent girl, and escaping retribution only because she is too kindly to tolerate her allies moving against you. I cannot hurt you for that, so know only that I cannot respect it. You are unworthy of Slytherin; go and do your Herbology homework, Ravenclaw girl!"

The final whisper came out in a louder hiss that sounded almost like a snake, and Padma fled, she fled down the corridors like Lethifolds were chasing her, she ran heedless of the rules about running in the corridors, even when she passed other students who looked at her in surprise, she did not stop, she ran all the way to the Ravenclaw dorms with her pulse pounding in her neck, the door asked her "Why does the Sun shine in the day instead of the nighttime?" and it took her three tries before she could make her answer coherent, and then the door came open and she saw –

– a few girls and boys, some young and some old, all staring at her, and in one corner at the pentagonal table, Harry Potter and Michael Corner and Kevin Entwhistle, looking up from their textbooks.

"Sweet Merlin!" exclaimed Penelope Clearwater, rising from a couch. "What happened to you, Padma?"

"I," she stuttered, "I, I heard – a ghost –"

"It wasn't the Bloody Baron, was it?" said Clearwater. She drew her wand and a moment later she was holding a cup, and then an Aguamenti later the cup was filled with water. "Here, drink this, sit down –"

Padma was already striding toward the pentagonal table. She looked at Harry Potter, who was looking at her with his own gaze, calm and grave and a little sad.

"You did this!" Padma said. "How – you – how dare you!"

There was a sudden hush in the Ravenclaw dorm.

Harry just looked at her.

And said, "Is there anything I can help you with?"

"Don't deny it," Padma said, her voice shaking, "you set that ghost on me, it said –"

"I mean it," Harry said. "Can I help you with anything? Get you some food, or go fetch a soda for you, or help you with your homework, or anything like that?"

Everyone was staring at the two of them.

"Why?" Padma said. She couldn't think of anything else to say, she didn't understand.

"Because some of us are standing on the precipice," Harry said. "And the difference is what you do for other people. Will you let me help you with something, Padma, please?"

She stared at him, and knew, in that moment, that he'd gotten his own warning, same as her.

"I..." she said. "I've got to write six inches on Iomillialor –"

"Let me run up to my dorm room and get my Herbology stuff," Harry said. He rose from the pentagonal table, looked at Entwistle and Corner. "Sorry, guys, I'll see you later."

They didn't say anything, just stared, along with everyone else in the dorm room, as Harry Potter walked over to the stairs.

And just as he started up, he said, "And no one's to pester her with questions unless she wants to talk about it, I hope everyone's got that?"

"Got it," said most of the first years and some of the older students, a few of them sounding quite scared.



And she talked about a lot of things with Harry Potter besides Iomillialor wood – even her fear of falling back into harmony with Parvati, which she'd never talked about with anyone before, but then Harry's ghostly ally already knew. And Harry had reached into his pouch and pulled out some odd books, loaning them to her on condition of complete secrecy, saying that if she could comprehend those books it would change the pattern of her thinking enough that she'd never fall into harmony with Parvati again...

At nine o' clock, when Harry said he had to go, the essay was only half done.

And when Harry paused, and looked at her on the way out, and said that he thought she was worthy of Slytherin, it made her feel good for a whole minute before she realized what had just been said to her and who had said it.



When Padma got down to breakfast, that morning, she saw Mandy see her and whisper something to the girl sitting beside her at the Ravenclaw table.

She saw that girl get up from the bench and walk toward her.

Last night Padma had been glad that girl roomed in the other dorm; but now that she thought about it, this was worse, now she had to do it in front of everyone.

But even though Padma was sweating, she knew what she had to do.

The girl came closer –

"I'm sorry."

"What?" said Padma. That was her line.

"I'm sorry," repeated Hermione Granger. Her voice was loud so that everyone could hear. "I... I didn't ask Harry to do that, and I was angry with him when I found out, and I made him promise not to do it again to anyone, and I'm not talking to him for a week... I'm really, really sorry, Miss Patil."

Hermione Granger's back was stiff, her face was stiff, you could see the sweat on her face.

"Um," said Padma. Her own thoughts were pretty much scrambled, now...

Padma's gaze flicked to the Ravenclaw table, where one boy was watching them with tight eyes and his hands clenched in his lap.



Earlier:

"I told you to be nicer!" shrieked Hermione.

Harry was starting to sweat. He'd never actually heard Hermione scream at him before, and it was quite loud in the empty classroom.

"I – but – but I was nice!" Harry protested. "I practically redeemed her, Padma was going down the wrong path and I turned her off it! I probably changed her whole life to be happier! Besides, you should've heard the original version of what Professor Quirrell suggested I do –" at which point Harry realized what he was saying and closed his mouth a second too late.

Hermione clutched at her chestnut curls, a gesture Harry hadn't seen from her before. "What'd he say to do? Kill her?"

The Defense Professor had suggested that Harry identify all the key influential students inside and outside his year and try to gain control of the entire Hogwarts rumor mill, remarking that this was a generally useful and amusing challenge for any true Slytherin attending Hogwarts.

"Nothing like that," Harry said quickly, "he just said in a general way that I should get influence over the people spreading rumors, and I decided that the nice version of that would be to just inform Padma directly about the meaning of what she was doing, and the possible consequences of her actions, instead of trying to threaten her or anything like that –"

"You call that not threatening someone?" Hermione's hands were pulling at her hair now.

"Um..." Harry said. "I guess she might've felt a little threatened, but Hermione, people will do whatever they think they can get away with, they don't care about how much it hurts other people if it doesn't hurt themselves, if Padma thinks there's no consequences to spreading lies about you then of course she'll just go on doing it –"

"And you think there's going to be no consequences to what you did?"

Harry got a sudden sick feeling to his stomach.

Hermione had the angriest look on her that he'd ever seen. "What do you think the other students think of you now, Harry? Of me? If Harry doesn't like the way you talk about Hermione, you'll get ghosts set on you, is that what you want them to think?"

Harry opened his mouth and no words came out, he just... hadn't thought about it that way, actually...

Hermione reached down to grab her books from the table where she'd slammed them. "I'm not talking to you for a week, and I'll tell everyone I'm not talking to you for a week, and I'll tell them why, and maybe that'll undo

some of what you just did. And after that week, I'll – I'll decide then what to do, I guess –"

"Hermione!" Harry's own voice rose to a shriek of desperation. "I was trying to help!"

The girl turned back and looked at him as she opened the classroom door.

"Harry," she said, and her voice trembled a little beneath the anger, "Professor Quirrell is sucking you into the darkness, he really is, I mean it, Harry."

"This... wasn't him, this wasn't what he said to do, this was just me –"

Hermione's voice was almost a whisper now. "Someday you're going to go out to lunch with him, and it will be your dark side that comes back, or maybe even you won't come back at all."

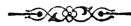
"I promise you," Harry said, "that I will come back from lunch."

He wasn't even thinking as he said it.

And Hermione just turned around and strode out and slammed the door behind her.

Way to invoke the laws of dramatic irony, moron, observed Harry's Internal Critic. Now you're going to die this Saturday, your last words will be 'I'm sorry, Hermione', and she'll always regret that the last thing she did was slam the door –

Oh, shut up.



And afterward people did say fewer nasty things about Hermione, at least in the first year, at least in public where Harry Potter might hear about it.

When Professor Flitwick asked Harry if he was responsible for what had happened to Padma, and Harry said yes, Professor Flitwick told him that he was to serve two days' detention. Even if it had only been a ghost and Padma hadn't been hurt, still, that wasn't acceptable behavior for a Ravenclaw student. Harry nodded and said that he understood why the Professor had to do that, and wouldn't protest; but considering that it did seem to have turned Padma around, did Professor Flitwick really think, off the record, that he'd done the wrong thing? And Professor Flitwick paused, seeming to actually think about it, and then said to Harry, in a solemnly squeaky voice, that he needed to learn how to relate to other students the normal way.

And Harry couldn't help but think that this was advice that Professor Quirrell would never give him.

Harry couldn't help but think that if he'd done it Professor Quirrell's way, the normal Slytherin way, a mixture of positive and negative incentives to bring Padma and the other rumor-mongers under his explicit control, then Padma wouldn't have talked about it, and Hermione would have never found out...

...in which case Padma wouldn't have been redeemed, she would have stayed on the wrong path, and she herself would have suffered from that eventually. It wasn't as if Harry had lied to Padma in any way, when he was Time-Turned and invisible and using the Ventriloquism Charm.

Harry still wasn't sure whether he'd done the right thing, or a right thing, and Hermione hadn't relented on not talking to him – though she was talking a lot with Padma. It hurt more than Harry had expected, going back to studying by himself; like his brain had already started to forget its long-honed skill of being alone.

The days until Saturday's lunch with Professor Quirrell seemed to go by very, very slowly.

THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT, PART I

SATURDAY.

Harry had run into trouble falling asleep Friday night, which he had anticipated might happen, and so he had decided to take the obvious advance precaution of buying a sleeping potion; and to prevent it from constituting a visible sign that he was nervous, he had decided to buy it off Fred and George a couple of months earlier. (Be prepared, that's the Boy Scout's marching song...)

Thus Harry was fully rested, and his pouch contained almost everything which he owned and might conceivably need. Harry had, in fact, run into the volume limitation on the pouch; and keeping in mind that he would need to store a large snake, and might need to store who-knew-what-else, he had removed some of the bulkier items, like the car battery. He was up to the point now where he could Transfigure something the size of a car battery in four minutes flat, so it wasn't much of a loss.

Harry had kept the emergency flares and the oxyacetylene welding torch and fuel tank, since you couldn't just Transfigure things that were to be burned.

(Be prepared, as through life you march along...)

Mary's Place.

After the waitress had taken their order and bowed to them and left the room, Professor Quirrell had performed only four Charms, and then they'd talked about nothing of any vast consequence, just Professor Quirrell's complex thesis about how the Dark Lord's curse on the Defense position had led to the decline of dueling and how this had changed social customs in magical Britain. Harry listened and nodded and said intelligent things, while he tried to control the pounding of his heart.

Then the waitress came in again bearing their food, and this time, a minute after the waitress had departed, Professor Quirrell gestured for the door to close and lock, and began to speak twenty-nine security Charms,

one of the ones in Mr. Bester's sequence being left out this time, which somewhat puzzled Harry.

Professor Quirrell finished his Charms –
 – stood up from his chair –
 – blurred into a green snake, banded in blue and white –
 – hissed, "Hungry, boy? Eat your fill sswiftly, we sshall need both sstrength and time."

Harry's eyes were a bit wide, but he hissed, "I ate well at breakfasst," and then rapidly began forking noodles into his mouth.

The snake watched him for a moment, with those flat eyes, and then hissed, "Do not wissh to explain here. Prefer to be elsewhere firsst. Need to leave unobsserved, without ssign we have ever departed room."

"Sso no one can track uss," hissed Harry.

"Yess. Do you trusst me that much, boy? Think before ansswer. I will have important requesst of you, which requiress trusst; if ssay no regardless, then ssay no now."

Harry dropped his gaze from the snake's flat eyes, and looked back down at his sauce-coated noodles, and ate another bite, then another, while he thought.

The Defense Professor... was an ambiguous figure, to put it mildly; Harry thought he had unraveled some of his goals, but others remained mysterious.

But Professor Quirrell had knocked down two hundred girls to stop the ones summoning Harry. Professor Quirrell had deduced that the Dementor was draining Harry through his wand. The Defense Professor had saved Harry's life, twice, in a two-week period.

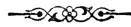
Which could mean that the Defense Professor was just saving Harry for later, that there were ulterior motives. Indeed, it was certain that there were ulterior motives. Professor Quirrell wasn't doing this on a whim. But then Professor Quirrell had also seen Harry taught Occlumency, he had taught Harry how to lose... if the Defense Professor wanted to make some use of Harry Potter, it was a use that required a strengthened Harry Potter, not a weakened one. That was what it meant to be used by a friend, that they would want the use to make you stronger instead of weaker.

And if there was sometimes a cold atmosphere about the Defense Professor, bitterness in his voice or emptiness in his gaze, then Harry was the only one who Professor Quirrell allowed to see it.

Harry didn't quite know how to describe in words the sense of kinship he felt with Professor Quirrell, except to say that the Defense Professor was the only clear-thinking person Harry had met in the wizarding world. Sooner or later everyone else started playing Quidditch, or not putting protective shells on their time machines, or thinking that Death was their friend. It didn't matter how good their intentions were. Sooner or later, and usually sooner, they demonstrated that something deep inside their brain was confused. Everyone except Professor Quirrell. It was a bond that went beyond anything of debts owed, or even anything of personal liking, that the two of them were alone in the wizarding world. And if the Defense Professor occasionally seemed a little scary or a little Dark, well, that was just the same thing some people said about Harry.

"I trusst you," hissed Harry.

And the snake explained the first stage of the plan.



Harry took a final forkful of noodles, chewed. Beside him, Professor Quirrell, now in human form again, was eating his soup placidly, as though nothing of special interest were occurring.

Then Harry swallowed, and in the same moment stood up from his chair, already feeling his heart start to hammer hard in his chest. The security precautions they were taking were literally the most stringent possible...

"Are you ready to test it, Mr. Potter?" Professor Quirrell said calmly.

It wasn't a test, but Professor Quirrell wouldn't say that, not out loud in human speech, even in this room screened to the limit that Professor Quirrell had secured with further Charms.

"Yep," Harry said as casually as he could.

Step one.

Harry said "Cloak" to his pouch, drew forth the Cloak of Invisibility, and then unstuck the pouch from his belt and threw it toward the other side of the table.

The Defense Professor stood up from his own seat, drew his wand, bent down, and touched his wand to the pouch, murmuring a quiet incantation. The new enchantments would ensure that Professor Quirrell could enter the pouch on his own in snakeform, and leave it on his own, and hear what went on outside while he was in the pouch.

Step two.

As Professor Quirrell stood up from where he'd bent over by the pouch, and put away his wand, his wand happened to point in Harry's direction, and there was a brief crawling sensation on Harry's chest near where the Time-Turner lay, like something creepy had passed very close by without touching him.

Step three.

The Defense Professor turned into a snake again, and the sense of doom diminished; the snake crawled to the pouch and into it, the pouch's mouth opening to admit the green shape, and as the mouth closed again behind the tail, the sense of doom diminished further.

Step four.

Harry drew his wand, being careful to stand still as he did it, so that the Time-Turner would not move from where Professor Quirrell had anchored the hourglass within the shell in its current orientation. "Wingardium Leviosa," murmured Harry, and the pouch began to float toward him.

Slowly, slowly, as Professor Quirrell had instructed, the pouch began to float toward Harry, who waited alert for any sign the pouch was opening, in which case Harry was to use the Hover Charm to propel it away from him as fast as possible.

As the pouch came within a meter of Harry, the sense of doom returned.

As Harry reattached the pouch to his belt, the sense of doom was stronger than it had ever been, but still not overwhelming; it was tolerable.

Even with Professor Quirrell's Animagus form lying within the extended space of the pouch resting on Harry's very hip.

Step five.

Harry sheathed his wand. His other hand still held the Cloak of Invisibility, and Harry drew that cloak over himself.

Step six.

And so in that room shielded from every possible scrying, which Professor Quirrell had personally and further secured, it was not until after Harry was wearing the true Cloak of Invisibility that he reached beneath his shirt and twisted the outer shell of the Time-Turner just once.

The Time-Turner's inner hourglass stayed anchored and motionless, the setting twisted around it –

The food vanished from the table, the chairs leaped back into place, the door sprang open.

Mary's Room was deserted, as it should have been, because Professor Quirrell had earlier contacted Mary's Place under a false name to inquire whether the room would be available at this hour – not to reserve it, not to place a canceled reservation that might be noted, but only to inquire.

Step seven.

Staying under the Cloak of Invisibility, Harry left through the open door. He navigated the tiled hallways of Mary's Place to the well-stocked bar that greeted new entrants, tended by the owner, Jake. There were only a few people at the bar, in the morning before proper lunchtime, and Harry had to wait invisibly by the door for several minutes, listening to the murmur of conversation and the gurgle of alcohol, before the door opened to admit a huge genial Irishman, and Harry slipped out silently in his wake.

Step eight.

Harry walked for a while. He was well away from Mary's Place when he turned off Diagon Alley into a smaller alley, at the end of which lay a shop that was dark, the windows enchanted to blackness.

Step nine.

"Sword fish melon friend," Harry spoke the passphrase to the lock, and it clicked open.

Within the shop was also darkness, the light from the open door briefly illuminating it to show a wide, empty room. The furniture shop which had once operated here had gone bankrupt a few months ago, according to the Defense Professor, and the shop had been repossessed, but not yet resold. The walls were painted a simple white, the wooden floor scratched and unpolished, a single closed door set in the back wall; this had been a showroom, once, but now it showed nothing.

The door clicked shut behind Harry, and then the darkness was pitch and complete.

Step ten.

Harry took out his wand and said "Lumos", lighting the room with white glow; he took his pouch from his belt (the sense of doom growing a little sharper as he grasped it with his fingers) and lightly tossed it to the opposite side of the room (the sense of doom fading almost completely). And then he began to take off the Cloak of Invisibility, even as his voice hissed, "It is done."

Step eleven.

From the pouch poked a green head, followed shortly by a meter-long green body as the snake slithered out. A moment later, the snake blurred into Professor Quirrell.

Step twelve.

Harry waited in silence while the Defense Professor recited thirty Charms.

"All right," Professor Quirrell said calmly, when he had finished. "If anyone is still watching us now, we are in any case doomed, so I will speak plainly and in human form. Parseltongue does not quite suit me, I fear, as I am neither a descendant of Salazar nor a true snake."

Harry nodded.

"So, Mr. Potter," said Professor Quirrell. His gaze intent, his pale blue eyes dark and shadowed in the white light coming from Harry's wand. "We are alone and unobserved, and I have an important question to ask you."

"Go ahead," said Harry, his heart starting to beat faster.

"What is your opinion of the government of magical Britain?"

That wasn't quite what Harry had been expecting, but it was close enough, so Harry said, "Based on my limited knowledge, I would say that both the Ministry and the Wizengamot appear to be stupid, corrupt, and evil."

"Correct," Professor Quirrell said. "Do you understand why I ask?"

Harry took a deep breath, and looked Professor Quirrell straight in the eyes, unflinching. Harry had finally worked out that the way to make amazing deductions from scanty evidence was to know the answer in advance, and he had guessed this answer fully a week ago. It needed only a slight adjustment...

"You are about to invite me to join a secret organization full of interesting people like yourself," said Harry, "one of whose goals is to reform or overthrow the government of magical Britain, and yes, I'm in."

There was a slight pause.

"I'm afraid that is not quite where I intended to direct this conversation," said Professor Quirrell. The corners of his lips were twitching slightly. "I merely planned to ask for your help in doing something extremely treasonous and illegal."

Darn, thought Harry. Still, Professor Quirrell hadn't denied it... "Go on."

"Before I do," said Professor Quirrell. There was no levity in his voice, now. "Are you open to such requests, Mr. Potter? I say again that if you are likely to say no regardless, you must say no now. If your curiosity impels you otherwise, squash it."

"Treasonous and illegal doesn't bother me," said Harry. "Risks bother me and the stakes would need to be commensurate, but I can't imagine you taking risks frivolously."

Professor Quirrell nodded. "I would not. It is a terrible abuse of my friendship with you, and of such trust as is placed in my teaching position at Hogwarts –"

"You can skip this part," Harry said.

The lips twitched again, and then went flat. "Then I shall skip it. Mr. Potter, you sometimes make a game of lying with truths, playing with words to conceal your meanings in plain sight. I, too, have been known to find that amusing. But if I so much as tell you what I hope we shall do this day, Mr. Potter, you will lie about it. You will lie straight out, without hesitation, without wordplay or hints, to anyone who asks about it, be they foe or closest friend. You will lie to Malfoy, to Granger, and to McGonagall. You will speak, always and without hesitation, in exactly the fashion you would speak if you knew nothing, with no concern for your honor. That also is how it must be."

There was silence, then, for a time.

That was a price measured in a fraction of Harry's soul.

"Without telling me yet..." said Harry. "Can you say if the need is desperate?"

"There is someone in the most terrible want of your help," Professor Quirrell said simply, "and there is no one who can help them but you."

There was another silence, but not a long one.

"All right," Harry said quietly. "Tell me of the mission."

The dark robes of the Defense Professor seemed to blur against the shadow on the wall, cast by his silhouette blocking the white light of Harry's wand. "The ordinary Patronus Charm, Mr. Potter, wards off a Dementor's fear. But the Dementors still see you through it, they know that you are there. Only not your Patronus Charm. It blinds them, or more than blinds them. What I saw beneath the cloak wasn't even looking in our direction as you killed it; as though it had forgotten our existence, even as it died."

Harry nodded. That wasn't surprising, not when you confronted a Dementor on the level of its true existence, beyond anthropomorphism. Death might be the last enemy, but it wasn't a sentient enemy. When humanity had wiped out smallpox, smallpox hadn't fought back.

"Mr. Potter, the central branch of Gringotts is guarded by every spell high and low that the goblins know. Even so those vaults have been successfully

robbed; for what wizardry can do, wizardry can undo. And yet no one has ever escaped from Azkaban. No one. For every Charm there is a counter-Charm, for every ward there is a bypass. How can it be that no one has ever been rescued from Azkaban?"

"Because Azkaban has something invincible," Harry said. "Something so terrible that no one can defeat it."

That was the keystone of their perfect security, it had to be, nothing human. It was Death that guarded Azkaban.

"The Dementors don't like their meals being taken away from them," Professor Quirrell said. Coldness had entered that voice, now. "They know if anyone tries. There are more than a hundred Dementors there, and they speak to the guards as well. It's that simple, Mr. Potter. If you're a powerful wizard then Azkaban isn't hard to enter, and it isn't hard to leave. So long as you don't try to take anything out of it that belongs to the Dementors."

"But the Dementors are not invincible," said Harry. He could have cast the Patronus Charm with that thought, in that very moment. "Never believe that they are."

Professor Quirrell's voice was very quiet. "Do you remember what it was like when you went before the Dementor, the first time, when you failed?"

"I remember."

And then with a sudden sickening lurch in his stomach, Harry knew where this was going; he should have seen it before.

"There is an innocent person in Azkaban," Professor Quirrell said.

Harry nodded, there was a burning sensation in his throat, but he didn't cry.

"The one of whom I speak was not under the Imperius Curse," said the Defense Professor, dark robes silhouetted against a greater shadow. "There are surer ways to break wills than the Imperius, if you have the time for torture, and Legilimency, and rituals of which I will not speak. I cannot tell you how I know this, how I know any of this, cannot hint at it even to you, you will have to trust me. But there is a person in Azkaban who never once chose to serve the Dark Lord, who has spent years suffering alone in the most terrible cold and darkness imaginable, and never deserved a single minute of it."

Harry saw it in a single leap of intuition, his mouth racing almost ahead of his thoughts.

There was no hint, no warning, we all thought –

“A person by the name of Black,” Harry said.

There was silence. Silence, while the pale blue eyes stared at him.

“Well,” said Professor Quirrell after a while. “So much for not telling you the name until after you had accepted the mission. I would ask whether you’re reading my mind, but that’s flatly impossible.”

Harry said nothing, but it was simple enough if you believed in the processes of modern democracy. The most obvious person in Azkaban to be innocent was the one who hadn’t gotten a trial –

“I am certainly impressed, Mr. Potter,” said Professor Quirrell. His face was grave. “But this is a serious matter, and if there is some way others could make the same deduction, I must know. So tell me, Mr. Potter. How in the name of Merlin, of Atlantis, and the void between the stars, did you guess that I was talking about Bellatrix?”

THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT, PART II

THE adrenaline was already flowing in Harry's veins, his heart already hammering in his chest, there in that darkened and bankrupt store. Professor Quirrell had finished explaining, and in one hand, Harry held a tiny wooden twig that would be the key. This was it, this was the day and the moment when Harry started acting the part. His first true adventure, a dungeon to be pierced, an evil government to be defied, a maiden in distress to be rescued. Harry should have been more frightened, more reluctant, but instead he felt only that it was time and past time to start becoming the people he had read about in his books; to begin his journey toward what he had always known he was meant to be, a hero. To take the first step on the road that led to Kimball Kinnison and Captain Picard and Liono of Thundera and definitely not Raistlin Majere. So far as Harry's brain knew from watching early morning cartoons, when you grew up you were supposed to gain amazing powers and save the universe, that was what Harry's brain had seen adults doing and adopted as its role model for the maturation process, and Harry very much wanted to start growing up.

And if the pattern of the story called for the hero to lose some part of his innocence, as the result of his first adventure; then for now, at least, in this still-innocent moment, it seemed time and past time for him to experience that pain. Like casting off clothes too small for him; or like finally advancing to the next stage of the game, after being stuck for eleven years on world 3, level 2 of Super Mario Brothers.

Harry had read enough novels to suspect that he wouldn't feel this enthusiastic afterward, so he was enjoying it while it lasted.

There was a popping sound as something near Harry disappeared, and then there was no more time for heroic brooding.

Harry's hand snapped the small wooden twig.

A hook yanked motionlessly at Harry's abdomen as the portkey activated, feeling like a much harder pull this time than the smaller transports between

the Hogwarts grounds and Diagon Alley –

– and dropped him into the middle of a huge roll of thunder dying away, and a lash of cold rain whipping him across the face, the water coating Harry's glasses and blinding him in an instant, turning the world into a blur even as he began to fall toward the raging ocean waves far below.

He had arrived high, high, high above the empty North Sea.

The shock of the blasting storm almost made Harry let go of the broomstick that Professor Quirrell had given him, which would not have been a good idea. It took nearly a full second for Harry to get his wits together and bring his broomstick back up in an easy swoop.

"I'm here," said an unfamiliar voice from a patch of empty air above him; low and gravelly, the voice of the sallow lanky bearded man Professor Quirrell had Polyjuiced into before Disillusioning himself and his broomstick.

"I'm here," Harry said from beneath the Cloak of Invisibility. He hadn't used Polyjuice himself. Wearing a different body hindered your magic, and Harry might need all of his little magic about him; thus the plan called for Harry to stay invisible at nearly all times, instead of Polyjuicing.

(Neither of them had spoken the other's name. You simply didn't use your names at any point during an illegal mission, even invisibly hovering over an anonymous patch of water in the North Sea. You simply didn't. It would be stupid.)

Carefully keeping a grip on the broomstick with one hand, while the rain and wind howled around him, Harry raised his wand in an equally careful grip and Imperviused his glasses.

Then, with the lenses clear, Harry looked around.

He was surrounded by wind and rain, it might have been five degrees Celsius if he was lucky; he'd already had a Warming Charm cast on himself just from being outside in February, but it wasn't standing up to the driving cold droplets. Worse than snow, the rain soaked into every exposed surface. The Cloak of Invisibility turned all of you invisible, but it didn't cover all of you, and that meant it didn't protect all of you from rain. Harry's face was exposed to the full force of the driven water, and it was driving straight into his neck and soaking down into his shirt, also the sleeves of his robes and the cuffs of his pants and his shoes, the water took every bit of cloth as an avenue to sneak in.

"This way," said the Polyjuiced voice, and a spark of green light lit up in front of Harry's broomstick, and then darted away in a direction that seemed

to Harry like every other direction.

Through the blinding rain, Harry followed. He lost it sometimes, that small green spark, and each time he did, Harry called out, and the spark would reappear in front of him a few seconds later.

When Harry had caught the trick of following the spark, it accelerated, and Harry kicked the broomstick into high gear and followed. The rain whipped him harder, feeling like Harry imagined it must feel to get a faceful of shotgun pellets, but his glasses stayed clear and protected his eyes.

It was only a few minutes later, at the broomstick's full speed, that Harry caught a glimpse of a huge shadow through the rain, towering far across the waters.

And felt a distant, hollow echo of emptiness radiating from where Death waited, washing over Harry's mind and parting around it, like a wave breaking on stone. Harry knew his enemy this time, and his will was steel and all of the light.

"I can already feel the Dementors," said the gravelly voice of the Polyjuiced Quirrell. "I did not expect that, not this soon."

"Think of the stars," Harry said, over a distant rumble of thunder. "Don't allow any anger in you, nothing negative, just think of the stars, what it feels like to forget yourself and fall bodilessly through space. Hold to that thought like an Occlumency barrier across your entire mind. The Dementors will have some trouble reaching past that."

There was silence for a moment, then, "Interesting."

The green spark lifted, and Harry inclined his broomstick slightly upward to follow, even as it steered them into a fogbank, a cloud hovering low on the waters.

Soon they were hovering above and slightly oblique of the huge three-sided metal building, as it loomed far below. The triangle of steel was hollow, not solid, it was a building of three thick solid walls and no center. The Aurors on guard roomed in the top level and southern side of the building, Professor Quirrell had said, protected by their Patronus Charms. The legal entrance into Azkaban was on the roof of the southwest corner of the building. Which the two of them wouldn't use, of course. Instead they would use a corridor that ran directly beneath the northern corner of the building. Professor Quirrell would go down first, and puncture a hole in the roof and its wards right at the northern tip, leaving behind an illusion to cover the gap.

The prisoners were kept in the side of the building, in levels corresponding to their crimes. And at the bottom, in the uttermost center and depth of Azkaban, lay a nest of more than a hundred Dementors. Loads of dirt were occasionally dropped in to keep up the level, as the matter directly exposed to the Dementors broke down into mud and nothingness...

"Wait one minute," said the rough voice, "follow me at speed, and pass through with care."

"Got it," Harry said lowly.

The spark winked out, and Harry began to count, one one thousand, two one thousand, three one thousand...

...sixty one thousand, and Harry dived, the wind shrieking around him as he dived, down toward the vast metal structure, down toward where he could feel the shadows of Death waiting for him, draining light and radiating emptiness, as the metal structure grew larger and larger. Plain and featureless loomed the vast grey shape, but for a single raised boxlike structure in the southwest corner. The north corner was simply blank, Professor Quirrell's hole undetectable.

Harry pulled up sharply as he approached the north corner, giving himself more safety margin than he would have bothered with in flying classes, but not too much. As soon as he'd come to a halt, he began to slowly lower his broomstick again, toward what looked like the solid roof of the tip of the north corner.

Descending through the illusory roof while invisible was a strange experience, and then Harry found himself in a metal corridor lighted with a dim orange light – which, Harry realized after a startled glance, was coming from an old-fashioned mantled gas lamp...

...for magic would fail, be drained away after a time, in the presence of Dementors.

Harry dismounted his broom.

The pull of the emptiness was stronger now, as it parted and flowed around Harry without touching him. They were distant but they were many, the wounds in the world; Harry could have pointed to them with his eyes closed.

"Casst your Patronuss," hissed a snake from the floor, looking more discolored than green in the dim orange light.

The note of stress came through even in Parseltongue. Harry was surprised; Professor Quirrell had said that Animagi in their Animagus forms

were much less vulnerable to Dementors. (For the same reason the Patronuses were animals, Harry assumed.) If Professor Quirrell was in this much trouble in his snake form, what had been happening to him while he was in the human form that let him use his magic...?

Harry's wand was already rising in his hand.

This would be the beginning.

Even if it was only one person, just one person that he could save from the darkness, even if he wasn't powerful enough yet to teleport all of Azkaban's prisoners to safety and burn the triangular hell down to bedrock...

Even so it was a start, it was a beginning, it was a down payment on everything that Harry meant to accomplish with his life. No more waiting, no more hoping, no more mere promising, it would all begin here. Here and now.

Harry's wand slashed down to point at where the Dementors waited far below.

"Expecto Patronum!"

The glowing humanoid figure blazed up into existence. It wasn't the sun-bright thing that it had been before... probably because Harry hadn't quite been able to stop himself from thinking about all the other prisoners in their cells, the ones that he wasn't here to save.

It might be for the best, though. Harry would need to keep this Patronus going for a while, and it might be better if it wasn't quite so bright.

The Patronus dimmed a little further, at that thought; and then further again, as Harry tried to put a little less of his strength into it, until finally the brilliant humanoid figure was glowing only slightly brighter than the brightest animal Patronus, and Harry felt that he could dim it no further without risking losing it entirely.

And then, "It iss sstable," Harry hissed, and began feeding his broomstick into his pouch. His wand stayed in his hand, and a slight, sustainable flow from him replaced the slight losses from his Patronus.

The snake blurred into the form of a lanky, sallow man, holding Professor Quirrell's wand in one hand and a broomstick in the other. The lanky man staggered as he came back into existence, and went to lean against the wall for a moment.

"Well done, if perhaps a trifle slow," murmured the gravelly voice. Professor Quirrell's dryness was in it, even though it didn't fit the voice, nor did the grave look on the thickly bearded face. "I cannot feel them at all, now."

A moment later, the broomstick went into the man's robes and vanished. Then the man's wand rose and tapped on his head, and with a sound like a cracking eggshell he disappeared once more.

Within the air blossomed a faint green spark, and Harry, still enshrouded in the Cloak of Invisibility, followed after.

If you had been watching from outside, you would have seen nothing but a small green spark drifting through the air, and a brilliantly silver humanoid walking after it.



They went down, and down, and down, passing gas lamp after gas lamp, and the occasional huge metal door, descending into Azkaban within what seemed like utter silence. Professor Quirrell had set up some type of barrier by which he could hear what went on nearby, but no sounds could pass outward, and no sounds could reach Harry.

Harry hadn't quite been able to stop his mind from wondering why the silence, or stop his mind from giving the answer. The answer he'd already known on some wordless level of anticipation that had prompted him to futilely try not to think about it.

Somewhere behind those huge metal doors, people were screaming.

The silver humanoid figure wavered, brightening and dimming, every time Harry thought about it.

Harry had been told to cast a Bubble-Head Charm on himself. To prevent himself from smelling anything.

All the enthusiasm and heroism had worn off already, as Harry had known it would, it hadn't taken long even by his standards, the process had completed itself the very first time they passed one of those metal doors. Every metal door was locked with a huge lock, a lock of simple unmagical metal that wouldn't have stopped a first-year Hogwarts student – if you still had a wand, if you still had your magic, which the prisoners didn't. Those metal doors were not the doors of individual cells, Professor Quirrell had said, each one opened into a corridor in which there would be a group of cells. Somehow that helped a little, not thinking that each door corresponded directly to a prisoner who was waiting right behind it. Instead there might be more than one prisoner, which diminished the emotional impact; just like the study showing that people contributed more when they were told that a

given amount of money was required to save one child's life, than when told the same total amount was needed to save eight children...

Harry was finding it increasingly hard not to think about it, and every time he did, the light of his Patronus fluctuated.

They came to the place where the passageway turned left, at the corner of the triangular building. Once again there were descending metal steps, another flight of stairs; once again they went down.

Mere murderers were not put into the lowest of cells. There was always a lower place you could go, an even worse punishment to fear. No matter how low you had already sunk, the government of magical Britain had some threat remaining against you if you did even worse.

But Bellatrix Black had been the Death Eater who inspired more fear than anyone save Lord Voldemort himself, a beautiful and deadly sorceress absolutely loyal to her master; she had been, if such a thing were possible, more sadistic and evil even than You-Know-Who, as though she were trying to outdo her master...

...that was what the world knew of her, what the world believed of her.

But before then, Professor Quirrell had told Harry, before the debut of the Dark Lord's most terrible servant, there had been a girl in Slytherin who had been quiet, keeping mostly to herself, harming no one. Afterward there had been made-up stories told about her, memories changing in retrospect (Harry knew well the research on that). But at the time, while she still attended school, the most talented witch in Hogwarts had been known as a gentle girl (Professor Quirrell had said). Her few friends had been surprised when she'd joined the Death Eaters, and more surprised that she'd been hiding so much darkness behind that sad, wistful smile.

That was who Bellatrix had once been, the most promising witch of her own generation, before the Dark Lord stole her and broke her, shattered her and reshaped her, binding her to him on a deeper level and with darker arts than any Imperius.

Ten years Bellatrix had served the Dark Lord, killing who he bade her kill, torturing who he bade her torture.

And then the Dark Lord had finally been defeated.

And Bellatrix's nightmare had continued.

Somewhere inside Bellatrix there might be something that was still screaming, that had been screaming the whole time, something a psychiatric Healer could bring back; or there might not be, Professor Quirrell had

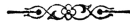
no way of knowing. But either way, they could...

...they could at least get her out of Azkaban...

Bellatrix Black had been put into the lowest level of Azkaban.

Harry was having trouble not imagining what he would see when they got to her cell. Bellatrix must have had almost no fear of death, in the beginning, if she was still alive at all.

They descended another flight of stairs, coming that much closer to Death and Bellatrix, the clacking of their invisible shoes the only sound that Harry could hear. Dim orange light coming from the gas lights, the faint green spark drifting through the air, the shining figure following with its silver light fluctuating from time to time.



After descending many times, they came in time to a corridor that did not end in stairs, and a final metal door, and the green spark halted before it.

Harry's heart had calmed a little, as they descended far into the depths of Azkaban without anything happening. But now it was hammering his chest once more. They were at the bottom, and the shadows of Death were very close at hand.

A soft metal click came from the lock, as Professor Quirrell opened the way.

Harry took a deep breath and remembered everything that Professor Quirrell had told him. The hard part wouldn't just be getting the pretended personality right enough to fool Bellatrix Black herself, the hard part would be keeping his Patronus going at the same time...

The green spark winked out, and a moment later a meter-high snake shimmered into existence, no longer invisible.

The metal door moved with a slow creaking sound as Harry pushed on it with his invisible hand, opened it just a crack, and peered through.

He saw a straight corridor that terminated in solid stone. There was no light there but what crept in from Harry's Patronus. That was bright enough for him to see the outer bars of the eight cells set into the corridor, but he couldn't see the insides; more importantly, though, he didn't see anyone in the corridor itself.

"I see nothing," hissed Harry.

The snake darted on ahead, swiftly twisting across the floor.

A moment later –

"Sshe iss alone," hissed the snake.

Stay, Harry thought to his Patronus, which took up a position just to one side of the door, as though guarding it; and then Harry pushed the door open further, and followed within.

The first cell Harry looked at contained a dessicated corpse, skin gone grey and mottled, flesh worn through in places to expose the bone beneath, no eyes –

Harry shut his eyes. He could still do that, he was still invisible, he wasn't betraying anything by shutting his eyes.

He'd known it already, he'd read it on page six of his Transfiguration book, that you stayed in Azkaban until your prison term was done. If you died before it was up they kept you there until they released your corpse. If your term was for life, they just left the body in the cell until the cell was needed, at which point they threw your body into the Dementors' pit. But it was still a shock to see, that corpse had been a person who'd just been left there –

The light in the room wavered.

Steady, thought Harry in his core. It wouldn't be good for Professor Quirrell if that Patronus went out from his thinking sad thoughts. This near to the Dementors the Defense Professor might just fall dead where he stood. Steady, Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres, steady!

With that thought, Harry opened his eyes again, there wasn't time to waste.

The second cell he looked at contained only a skeleton.

And behind the bars of the third cell he saw Bellatrix Black.

Something precious and irreplaceable inside Harry withered like dry grass.

You could tell the woman wasn't a skeleton, that her head wasn't a skull, because the texture of skin was still different from the texture of bone, no matter how white and pale she'd become, waiting in the dark alone. Either they weren't feeding her much, or what she ate, the shadows of Death drained from her; for her eyes seemed shrunken below their lids, her lips looked too shriveled to close over her teeth. The color seemed leached out of the black clothing she had worn into prison, like the Dementors had drained that too. They'd been meant to be daring, those clothes, and now they lay loosely over a skeleton, exposing shriveled skin.

I'm here to save her, I'm here to save her, I'm here to save her, Harry thought to himself, desperately, over and over with an effort like Occlumency, willing his Patronus not to go out, to stay and protect Bellatrix from the Dementors –

In his heart, in his core, Harry held to all his pity and his compassion, his will to save her from the darkness; the silver radiance coming in through the open door brightened, even as he thought it.

And in another part of him, like he was just letting another part of his mind carry out a habit without paying much attention to it...

A cold expression came over Harry's face, invisibly beneath the hood.

"Hello, my dear Bella," said a chill whisper. "Did you miss me?"

THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT, PART III

THE corpse of a woman opened her eyes, and the dull sunken orbs gazed out at nothing.

“Mad,” Bellatrix muttered in a cracked voice, “It seems that little Bella is going mad...”

Professor Quirrell had instructed Harry, calmly and precisely, how he was to act in Bellatrix’s presence; how to form the pretense he would maintain in his mind.

You found it expedient, or perhaps just amusing, to make Bellatrix fall in love with you, to bind her to your service.

That love would have persisted through Azkaban, Professor Quirrell had said, because to Bellatrix it would not be a happy thought.

She loves you utterly, completely, with her whole being. You do not return her love, but consider her useful. She knows this.

She was the deadliest weapon you possessed, and you called her your dear Bella.

Harry remembered it from the night the Dark Lord killed his parents: the cold amusement, the contemptuous laughter, that high-pitched voice of deathly hate. It didn’t seem at all difficult to guess what the Dark Lord would say.

“I hope you are not mad, Bella dear,” said the chill whisper. “Mad is not useful.”

Bellatrix’s eyes flickered, tried to focus on empty air.

“My... Lord... I waited for you but you did not come... I looked for you but I could not find you... you are alive...” All her words came out in a low mutter, if there was emotion in it, Harry could not tell.

“Sshow her your face,” hissed the snake at Harry’s feet.

Harry cast back the hood of the Cloak of Invisibility.

The part of him that Harry had placed in control of his facial expressions looked at Bella without the slightest trace of pity, only cool, calm interest.

(While in his core, Harry thought, I will save you, I will save you no matter what...)

"The scar..." muttered Bellatrix. "That child..."

"So they all still think," said Harry's voice, and gave a thin little chuckle. "You looked for me in the wrong place, Bella dear."

(Harry had asked why Professor Quirrell couldn't be the one to play the part of the Dark Lord, and Professor Quirrell had pointed out that there was no plausible reason for him to be possessed by the shade of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.)

Bellatrix's eyes remained fixed on Harry, she said no word.

"Ssay ssomething in Parssel tongue," hissed the snake.

Harry's face turned to the snake, to make it clear that he was addressing it, and hissed, "One two three four five ssix sseven eight nine ten."

There was a pause.

"Those who do not fear the darkness..." murmured Bellatrix.

The snake hissed, "Will be consumed by it."

"Will be consumed by it," whispered the chill voice. Harry didn't particularly want to think about how Professor Quirrell had gotten that password. His brain, which thought about it anyway, suggested that it had probably involved a Death Eater, a quiet isolated place, and some lead-pipe Legilimency.

"Your wand," murmured Bellatrix, "I took it from the Potters' house and hid it, my lord... under the tombstone to the right of your father's grave... will you kill me, now, if that was all you wished of me... I think I must have always wanted you to be the one to kill me... but I can't remember now, it must have been a happy thought..."

Harry's heart wrenched inside him, it was unbearable, and – and he couldn't cry, couldn't let his Patronus fade –

Harry's face showed a flicker of annoyance, and his voice was sharp as it said, "Enough foolishness. You're to come with me, Bella dear, unless you prefer the company of the Dementors."

Bellatrix's face twitched in brief puzzlement, the shrunken limbs did not stir.

"You'll need to float her out," Harry hissed to the snake. "Sshe can no longer think of esscaping."

"Yess," hissed the snake, "but do not underesstimate her, sshe wass the deadliesst of warriorss." The green head dipped in warning. "One would be

wisse to fear me, boy, even were I starved and nine-tenths dead; be wary of her, allow no single flaw in your pretense.”

The green snake smoothly glided out of the door.

And shortly after, a man with sallow skin and a fearful expression on his bearded face cringed into the room with his wand in hand.

“My Lord?” the servant said falteringly.

“Do as you were instructed,” the Dark Lord whispered in that chill voice, sounding even more terrible coming from a child’s body. “And do not let your Patronus falter. Remember, if I do not return there will be no reward for you, and it will be long before your family is allowed to die.”

Having spoken those dreadful words, the Dark Lord pulled his invisibility cloak over his head, and disappeared.

The cringing servant opened the door to Bellatrix’s cage, and pulled a tiny needle from his robes with which he poked the human skeleton. The single drop of red blood produced was soon absorbed into a small doll, which was laid upon the floor, and the servant began to chant in a whisper.

Soon another living skeleton lay upon the floor, motionless. Afterward the servant seemed to hesitate for a moment, until from the empty air hissed an impatient command. Then the servant pointed his wand at Bellatrix and spoke a word, and the living skeleton lying on the bed was naked, and the skeleton lying on the floor was clothed in her faded dress.

The servant tore a small strip of cloth from the dress, as it lay upon the seeming corpse; and from his own robes, the fearful man then produced an empty glass flask with small traces of golden fluid clinging to its inside. This flask was concealed in a corner, the strip of skirt laid over it, the leached cloth nearly blending with the gray metal wall.

Another wave of the servant’s wand floated the human skeleton lying on the bed into the air, and in almost the same motion clothed her in new black robes. An ordinary-looking bottle of chocolate milk was put into her hand, and a chill whisper ordered Bellatrix to grasp the bottle and begin drinking it, which she did, her face still looking only puzzled.

Then the servant turned Bellatrix invisible, and turned himself invisible, and they left. The door closed behind them all and clicked as it locked, plunging the corridor into darkness once more, unchanged but for a small flask concealed in the corner of one cell, and a fresh corpse lying upon its floor.



Earlier, in the deserted shop, Professor Quirrell had told Harry that they were going to commit the perfect crime.

Harry had unthinkingly started to repeat back the standard proverb that there was no such thing as a perfect crime, before he actually thought about it for two-thirds of a second, remembered a wiser proverb, and shut his mouth in midsentence.

What do you think you know, and how do you think you know it?

If you did commit the perfect crime, nobody would ever find out – so how could anyone possibly know that there weren't perfect crimes?

And as soon as you looked at it that way, you realized that perfect crimes probably got committed all the time, and the coroner marked it down as death by natural causes, or the newspaper reported that the shop had never been very profitable and had finally gone out of business...

When Bellatrix Black's corpse was found dead in her cell the next morning, there within the prison of Azkaban from which (everyone knew) no one had ever escaped, nobody bothered doing an autopsy. Nobody thought twice about it. They just locked up the corridor and left, and the Daily Prophet reported it in the obituary column the next day...

...that was the perfect crime which Professor Quirrell had planned.

And it wasn't Professor Quirrell who screwed it up.

THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT, PART IV

A faint green spark moved forward to set the pace, and behind it followed a brilliant silver figure, all other entities invisible. They had traversed five legs of corridor, turned right five times and gone up five flights of stairs; and when Bellatrix had finished her second bottle of chocolate milk, she had been given solid bars of chocolate to eat.

It was after her third bar of chocolate that strange noises began to come from Bellatrix's throat.

It took a moment for Harry to understand, to process the sounds, it didn't sound like anything he'd ever heard before; the rhythm of it was shattered, almost unrecognizable, it took him that long to realize that Bellatrix was crying.

Bellatrix Black was crying, the Dark Lord's most terrible weapon was crying, she was invisible but you could hear it, tiny pathetic sounds she was trying to suppress, even now.

"It's real?" said Bellatrix. Tonality had returned into her voice, no longer a dead mutter, it rose up at the end to form the question. "It's real?"

Yes, thought the part of Harry simulating the Dark Lord, now be silent –

He couldn't make those words pass his lips, he just couldn't.

"I knew – you would – come to me – someday," Bellatrix's voice quavered and fractured as she drew breath for quiet sobs, "I knew – you were alive – that you would come – to me – my Lord..." there was a long inhalation like a huge gasp, "and that even – when you came – you still wouldn't love me – never – you would never love me back – that was why – they couldn't take – my love from me – even though I can't remember – can't remember so many other things – though I don't know what I forgot – but I remember how much I love you, Lord –"

There was a knife stabbing through Harry's heart, he'd never heard anything so terrible, he wanted to hunt down the Dark Lord and kill him just for this...

“Do you still – have use for me – my Lord?”

“No,” hissed Harry’s voice, without him even thinking, it just seemed to be operating on automatic, “I entered Azkaban on a whim. Of course I have use for you! Don’t ask foolish questions.”

“But – I’m weak,” said Bellatrix’s voice, and a full sob escaped her, it sounded much too loud in the corridors of Azkaban, “I can’t kill for you, my Lord, I’m sorry, they ate it all, ate me all up, I’m too weak to fight, what good am I to you now –”

Harry’s brain cast about desperately for some way to reassure her, from the lips of a Dark Lord who would never speak a single word of caring.

“Ugly,” said Bellatrix. Her voice said that word like it was the final nail in her coffin, the last despair. “I’m ugly, they ate that too, I’m, I’m not pretty any more, you won’t even, be able, to use me, as a reward, for your servants – even the Lestranges, won’t want, to hurt me, any more –”

The brilliant silver figure stopped walking.

Because Harry had stopped walking.

The Dark Lord, he... The part of Harry’s self that was soft and vulnerable was screaming in disbelieving horror, trying to reject reality, refuse the understanding, even as a colder and harder part completed the pattern: She obeyed him in that as she obeyed him in all things.

The green spark bobbed urgently, darted forward.

The silver humanoid stayed in place.

Bellatrix was sobbing harder.

“I’m, I’m not, I can’t be, useful, any more...”

Giant hands were squeezing Harry’s chest, wringing him like a washcloth, trying to crush his heart.

“Please,” whispered Bellatrix, “just kill me...” Her voice seemed to calm, once she said that. “Please Lord, kill me, I’ve no reason to live if I’m no use to you... I only want it to stop... please hurt me one last time, my Lord, hurt me until I stop... I love you...”

It was the saddest thing Harry had ever heard.

The bright silver shape of Harry’s Patronus flickered –

Wavered –

Brightened –

The fury that was rising in Harry, his rage against the Dark Lord who had done this, the rage against the Dementors, against Azkaban, against the world that allowed such horror, it all seemed to be pouring straight through

his arm and into his wand without there being any way of blocking it, he tried willing it to stop and nothing happened.

"My Lord!" whispered the disguised voice of Professor Quirrell. "My spell is going out of control! Help me, my Lord!"

Brighter the Patronus, brighter and brighter, it was waxing faster than on the day that Harry had destroyed a Dementor.

"My Lord!" the silhouette said in a terrified whisper. "Help me! Everyone will feel it, my Lord!"

Everyone will feel it, thought Harry. His imagination could picture it clearly, the prisoners in their cells stirring as the cold and darkness fell away, replaced by healing light.

Every exposed surface now burned like a white sun in the reflections, the silhouette of Bellatrix's skeleton and the sallow man now clearly visible in the blaze, the Disillusionment spells unable to keep pace with the unearthly brilliance; only the Cloak of Invisibility out of the Deathly Hallows withstood it.

"My Lord! You must stop it!"

But Harry could no longer will it to stop, he no longer wanted it to stop. He could sense it, more and more of the sparks of life in Azkaban being sheltered by his Patronus, as it unfolded like spreading wings of sunlight, the air turned to absolute silver as he thought it, Harry knew what he had to do.

"Please, my Lord!"

The words went unheard.

They were far from him, the Dementors in their pit, but Harry knew that they could be destroyed even at this distance if the light blazed bright enough, he knew that Death itself could not face him if he stopped holding back, so he unsealed all the gates inside him and sank the wells of his spell into all the deepest parts of his spirit, all his mind and all his will, and gave over absolutely everything to the spell –

And in the interior of the Sun, an only slightly dimmer shadow moved forward, reaching out an entreating hand.

WRONG

DON'T

The sudden sense of doom clashed with Harry's steel determination, dread and uncertainty striving against the bright purpose, nothing else might have reached him but that. The silhouette took another step forward and another, the sense of doom rising to a point of terrible catastrophe; and in

the drench of cold water, Harry saw it, he realized the consequences of what he was doing, the danger and the trap.

If you had been watching from outside you would have seen the interior of the Sun brightening and dimming...

Brightening and dimming...

...and finally fading, fading into ordinary moonlight that seemed like pitch darkness by contrast.

Within the darkness of that moonlight stood a sallow man with his hand outstretched in entreaty, and the skeleton of a woman, lying upon the floor, a puzzled look upon her face.

And Harry, still invisible, fallen to his knees. The greater danger had passed, and now Harry was just trying not to collapse, to keep the spell going at the lower level. He'd drained something, hopefully not lost something – he should have known, should have remembered, that it wasn't mere magic that fueled the Patronus Charm –

"Thank you, my Lord," whispered the sallow man.

"Fool," said the hard voice of a boy pretending to be a Dark Lord. "Did I not warn you that the spell could prove fatal if you failed to control your emotions?"

Professor Quirrell's eyes did not widen, of course.

"Yes, my Lord, I understand," said the Dark Lord's servant in a faltering voice, and turned to Bellatrix –

She was already pushing herself off the floor, slowly, like an old, old Muggle woman. "How funny," Bellatrix whispered, "you were almost killed by a Patronus Charm..." A giggle that sounded like it was blowing dust out of her giggle pipes. "I could punish you, maybe, if my Lord froze you in place and I had knives... maybe I can be useful after all? Oh, I feel a little better now, how strange..."

"Be silent, dear Bella," Harry said in a chill voice, "until I give you leave to speak."

There was no reply, which was obedience.

The servant levitated the human skeleton, and made her invisible once more, followed shortly by his own disappearance with the sound of another cracking egg.

They passed on through the corridors of Azkaban.

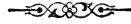
And Harry knew that as they passed, the prisoners were stirring in their cells as the fear lifted for one precious moment, maybe even feeling a small

touch of healing as his light passed them by, and then collapsing down again as the cold and darkness pressed back in.

Harry was trying very hard not to think about it.

Otherwise his Patronus would wax until it burned away every Dementor in Azkaban, blazing bright enough to destroy them even at this distance...

Otherwise his Patronus would wax until it burned away every Dementor in Azkaban, taking all of Harry's life as fuel.



In the Auror's quarters at the top of Azkaban, one Auror trio was snoring in the barracks, one Auror trio was resting in the breakroom, and one Auror trio was on duty in the command room, keeping their watch. The command room was simple but large, with three chairs at back where three Aurors sat, their wands always in hand to sustain their three Patronuses, as the bright white forms paced in front of the open window, sheltering them all from the Dementors' fear.

The three of them usually stuck to the back, and played poker, and didn't look out the window. You could have seen some sky there, sure, and there was even an hour or two every day where you could've seen some sun, but that window also looked down on the central pit of hell.

Just in case a Dementor wanted to float up and talk to you.

There was no way that Auror Li would have agreed to serve duty here, triple pay or no triple pay, if he hadn't had a family to support. (His real name was Xiaoguang, and everyone called him Mike instead; he'd named his children Su and Kao, which hopefully would serve them better.) His only consolation, besides the money, was that at least his mates played an excellent game of Dragon Poker. Though it would be hard not to, at this point.

It was their 5,366th game and Li had what would probably be his best hand of the 5300s. It was a Saturday in February and there were three players, which let him shift the suit of any one hole card except a two, three, or seven; and that was enough to let him build a Corps-a-Corps with Unicorns, Dragons, and sevens...

Across the table from him, Gerard McCusker looked up from the table cards toward the direction of the window, staring.

The sinking feeling came over Li's stomach with surprising speed.

If his seven of hearts got hit by a Dementor Modifier and turned into a six, he was going straight down to two pair and McCusker might beat that –

"Mike," said McCusker, "what's with your Patronus?"

Li turned his head and looked.

His soft silver badger had turned away from its watch over the pit and was staring downward at something only it could see.

A moment later, Bahry's moonlit duck and McCusker's bright anteater followed suit, staring in the same downward direction.

They all exchanged glances, and then sighed.

"I'll tell them," said Bahry. Protocol called for sending the three Aurors who were off-duty but not sleeping to investigate anything anomalous. "Maybe relieve one of them and take the C spiral, if you two don't mind."

Li exchanged a glance with McCusker, and they both nodded. It wasn't too hard to break into Azkaban, if you were wealthy enough to hire a powerful wizard, and well-intentioned enough to recruit someone who could cast the Patronus Charm. People with friends in Azkaban would do that, break in just to give someone a half-day's worth of Patronus time, a chance at some real dreams instead of nightmares. Leave them a supply of chocolate to conceal in their cell, to increase the chance they lived through their sentence. And the Aurors on guard... well, even if you got caught, you could probably convince the Aurors to overlook it, in exchange for the right bribe.

For Li, the right bribe tended to be in the range of two Knuts and a silver Sickle. He hated this place.

But Bahry One-Hand had a wife and the wife had healer's bills, and if you could afford to hire someone who could break into Azkaban, then you could afford to grease Bahry's remaining palm pretty hard, if he was the one who caught you.

By unspoken agreement, none of them giving anything away by being the first to propose it, the three of them finished out their poker hand first. Li won, since no Dementors had actually shown up. And by then the Patronuses had stopped staring and gone back to their normal patrol, so it was probably nothing, but procedure was procedure.

After Li raked in the pot, Bahry gave them all formal nods, and stood up from the table. The older man's long white locks brushed against his fancy red robes, his robes brushed the metal floor of the command room, as Bahry went through the separating door that led to the formerly off-duty Aurors.

Li had been Sorted into Hufflepuff, and he sometimes felt a little queasy about this kind of business. But Bahry had shown them all the pictures, and

you had to let a man do what he could for his poor sick wife, especially when he only had seven months left before his retirement.



The faint green spark floated through the metal corridors, and the silver humanoid, seeming a little dimmer now, followed after it. Sometimes the bright figure would flare, especially when they passed one of the huge metal doors, but it always died back down again.

Mere eyes could not have seen the invisible others: the eleven-year-old Boy-Who-Lived, and the living skeleton that was Bellatrix Black, and the Polyjuiced Defense Professor of Hogwarts, all traveling together through Azkaban. If that was the beginning of a joke, Harry didn't know the punchline.

They'd gone up another four flights of stairs before the rough voice of the Defense Professor said, simply and without emphasis, "Auror coming."

It took too long, a whole second maybe, for Harry to understand, for the jolt of adrenaline to pump into his blood, and for him to remember what Professor Quirrell had already discussed with him and told him to do in this case, and then Harry spun on his heel and flew back the way they'd come.

Harry reached the flight of stairs, and frantically laid himself down on the third step from the top, the cold metal feeling hard even through his cloak and robes. Trying to move his head up, to peer over the lip of the stairs, showed that he couldn't see Professor Quirrell; and that meant that Harry was out of the line of any stray fire.

His shining Patronus followed after him, and lay down beside him on the step just beneath him; for it too must not be seen.

There was a faint sound as of wind or whooshing, and then the sound of Bellatrix's invisible body coming to rest on a stair further below, she had no place in this except –

"Stay still," said the cold high whisper, "stay silent."

There was stillness, and silence.

Harry pressed his wand against the side of the metal step just above him. If he was anyone else he would have needed to take a Knut out of his pocket... or rip off a bit of cloth from his robe... or bite off one of his nails... or find a speck of rock large enough that he could see it and solid enough to stay in one place and orientation while it touched his wand. But with Harry's almighty power of partial Transfiguration, this was not necessary; he could skip that particular step of the operation and use any material near to hand.

Thirty seconds later Harry was the proud new owner of a curved mirror, and...

"Wingardium Leviosa," Harry whispered as quietly as he could.

...was levitating it just above the steps, and watching, in that curved surface, almost the whole corridor where Professor Quirrell invisibly waited.

Harry heard it in the distance, then, the sound of footsteps.

And saw the form (a little hard to see in the mirror) of a person in red robes, coming down the stairs, entering the seemingly empty corridor; accompanied by a small Patronus animal that Harry couldn't quite make out.

The Auror was protected by a blue shimmer, it was hard to see the details but Harry could see that much, the Auror had shields already raised and strengthened.

Crap, thought Harry. According to the Defense Professor, the essential art of dueling consisted of trying to put up defenses that would block whatever someone was likely to throw at you, while trying in turn to attack in ways that were likely to go past their current set of defenses. And by far the easiest way to win any sort of real fight – Professor Quirrell had said this over and over – was to shoot the enemy before they raised a shield in the first place, either from behind or from close enough range that they couldn't dodge or counter in time.

Though Professor Quirrell might still be able to get in a shot from behind, if –

But the Auror halted after taking three steps into the corridor.

"Nice Disillusionment," said a hard male voice that Harry didn't recognize. "Now show yourself, or you'll be in real trouble."

The form of the sallow, bearded man became visible then.

"And you with the Patronus," said the hard voice. "Come out too. Now."

"Wouldn't be smart," said the gravelly voice of the sallow man. It was no longer the terrified voice of the Dark Lord's servant; it had suddenly become the professional intimidation of a competent criminal. "You don't want to see who's behind me. Trust me, you don't. Five hundred Galleons, cold cash up front, if you turn around and walk away. Big trouble for your career if you don't."

There was a long pause.

"Look, whoever you are," said the hard voice. "You seem confused about how this works. I don't care if that's Lucius Malfoy behind you or Albus

bloody Dumbledore. You all come out, I scan the whole lot of you, and then we talk about how much this is going to cost you –”

“Two thousand Galleons, final offer,” said the gravelly voice, taking on a warning undertone. “That’s ten times the going rate and more than you make in a year. And believe me, if you see something you shouldn’t, you’re going to regret not taking that –”

“Shut it!” said the hard voice. “You’ve got exactly five seconds to drop that wand before I drop you. Five, four –”

What are you doing, Professor Quirrell? Harry thought frantically. Attack first! Cast a shield at least!

“– three, two, one! Stupefy!”



Bahry stared, a chill running down his spine.

The man’s wand had moved so fast that it was like it had Apparated into place, and Bahry’s stunner was currently sparkling tamely at the end of it, not blocked, not countered, not deflected, caught like a fly in honey.

“My offer has gone back down to five hundred Galleons,” said the man in a colder, more formal voice. He smiled dryly, and the smile looked wrong on that bearded face. “And you shall need to accept a Memory Charm.”

Bahry had already swapped the harmonics on his shields so that his own stunner couldn’t pass back through, already tilted his wand back into a defensive position, already raised his hardened artificial hand into position to block anything blockable, and was already thinking wordless spells to put more layers on his shields –

The man wasn’t looking at Bahry. Instead he was poking curiously at Bahry’s stunner where it still wavered on the end of his wand, drawing out red sparks and flicking them away with his fingers, slowly disassembling the hex like a child’s rod puzzle.

The man hadn’t raised any shields of his own.

“Tell me,” the man said in a disinterested voice that didn’t seem to quite fit the rough throat – Polyjuice, Bahry would have called it, if he’d thought that anyone could possibly do magic that delicate from inside someone else’s body – “what did you do in the last war? Put yourself in harm’s way, or stay out of trouble?”

"Harm's way," said Bahry. His voice kept the iron calm of an Auror with nearly a hundred full years on the force, seven months short of mandatory retirement, Mad-Eye Moody couldn't have said it with any more hardness.

"Fight any Death Eaters?"

Now a grim smile graced Bahry's own face. "Two at once." Two of You-Know-Who's own warrior-assassins, personally trained by their dark master. Two Death Eaters at once against Bahry alone. It had been the toughest fight of Bahry's life, but he'd stood his ground, and walked away with only the loss of his left hand.

"Did you kill them?" The man sounded idly curious, and he continued to draw threads of fire out of the much-diminished stunbolt still captive on the end of his wand, his fingers now weaving small patterns of Bahry's own magic before flicking to disperse them.

Sweat broke out on Bahry's skin beneath his robes. His metal hand flashed downward, ripped the mirror from his belt – "Bahry to Mike, I need backup!"

There was a pause, and silence.

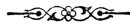
"Bahry to Mike!"

The mirror lay dull and lifeless in his hand. Slowly, Bahry put it back on his belt.

"It's been quite a while since I had a serious fight with a serious opponent," the man said, still not looking up at Bahry. "Try not to disappoint me too much. You can attack whenever you're ready. Or you can walk away with five hundred Galleons."

There was a long silence.

Then the air screamed like metal cutting glass as Bahry slashed his wand downward.



Harry could hardly see it, could hardly make out anything amid the lights and flashes, his mirror's curve was perfect (they'd practiced that tactic before in the Chaos Legion) but the scene was still too small, and Harry had the feeling he wouldn't be able to understand even if he was watching from a meter away, it was all happening too fast, red blasts deflecting from blue shields, green bars of light clashing together, shadowy forms appearing and vanishing, he couldn't even tell who was casting what, except that the Auror was shouting incantation after incantation and frantically dodging while

Professor Quirrell's Polyjuiced form stood in one place and flicked his wand, mostly silently, but now and then pronouncing words in unrecognizable languages that would white out the whole mirror and show half the Auror's shielding torn away as he staggered back.

Harry had seen exhibition duels between the strongest seventh-year students, and this was so far above it that Harry's mind felt numbed, looking at how far he had left to go. There wasn't a single seventh-year student who could have lasted half a minute against the Auror, all three seventh-year armies put together might not be able to scratch the Defense Professor...

The Auror had fallen to the ground, one knee and one hand supporting himself as the other hand gestured frantically and his mouth shouted desperate words, the few incantations that Harry recognized were all shield spells, as a flock of shadows spun around the Auror like a whirlwind of razors.

And Harry saw Professor Quirrell's Polyjuiced form deliberately point his wand at where the Auror kneeled and fought the last moments of his battle.

"Surrender," said the gravelly voice.

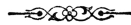
The Auror spat something unspeakable.

"In that case," said the voice, "Avada –"

Time seemed to move very slowly, like there was time to hear the individual syllables, Ke, and Da, and Vra, time to watch the Auror starting to throw himself desperately aside; and even though it was all happening so slowly, somehow there wasn't time to do anything, no time for Harry to open his lips and scream NO, no time to move, maybe even not any time to think.

Only time for one desperate wish that an innocent man should not die –
And a blazing silver figure stood before the Auror.

Stood there just a fraction of a second before the green light struck home.



Bahry was twisting frantically aside, not knowing if he was going to make it

–

His eyes were focused on his opponent and his onrushing death, so Bahry only briefly saw the outline of the brilliant silhouette, the Patronus brighter than any he'd ever seen, saw it just barely long enough to recognize the impossible shape, before the green and the silver light collided and both lights vanished, both lights vanished, the Killing Curse had been blocked, and then Bahry's ears were pierced as he saw his terrible opponent screaming,

screaming, screaming, clutching at his head and screaming, starting to fall as Bahry was already falling –

Bahry hit the ground, falling from his own frantic lunge, and his dislocated left shoulder and broken rib screamed in protest. Bahry ignored the pain, managed to scramble back to his knees, brought up his wand to stun his opponent, he didn't understand what was happening but he knew that this was his only chance.

“Stupefy!”

The red bolt struck out toward the man's falling body, and was torn apart in midair and dissipated – and not by any shield. Bahry could see it, the wavering in the air that surrounded his fallen and screaming opponent.

Bahry could feel it like a deadly pressure on his skin, the flux of magic building and building and building toward some terrible breaking point. His instincts screamed at him to run before the explosion came, this was no Charm, no Curse, this was wizardry run wild, but before Bahry could even finish getting to his feet –

The man threw his wand away from himself (he threw away his wand!) and a second later, his form blurred and vanished entirely.

A green snake lay motionless on the ground, unmoving even before Bahry's next stunner spell, fired in sheer reflex, hit it without resistance.

As the dreadful flux and pressure began to dissipate, as the wild wizardry died back down, Bahry's dazed mind noticed that the scream was continuing. Only it sounded different, like the scream of a young boy, coming from the stairs leading down to the next lower level.

That scream choked off too, and then there was silence except for Bahry's frantic panting.

His thoughts were slow, confused, disarrayed. His opponent had been insanely powerful, that hadn't been a duel, it had been like his first year as a trainee Auror trying to fight Madam Tarma. The Death-Eaters hadn't been a tenth that good, Mad-Eye Moody wasn't that good... and who, what, how in the name of Merlin's balls had anyone blocked a Killing Curse?

Bahry managed to summon the energy to press his wand against his rib, mutter the healing spell, and then press it again to his shoulder. It took more out of him than it should have, took far too much out of him, his magic was within a bare breath of utter exhaustion; he didn't have anything left for his minor cuts and bruises or even to reinforce the scraps left of his shielding. It was all he could do not to let his Patronus go out.

Bahry breathed deeply, heavily, steadied his breath as much as he could before he spoke.

"You," Bahry said. "Whoever you are. Come out."

There was silence, and it occurred to Bahry that whoever it was might be unconscious. He didn't understand what had just happened, but he'd heard the scream...

Well, there was one way to test that.

"Come out," said Bahry, making his voice harder, "or I start using area-effect curses." He probably couldn't have managed one if he'd tried.

"Wait," said a boy's voice, a young boy's voice, high and thin and wavering, like someone was holding back exhaustion or tears. The voice now seemed to be coming from closer to hand. "Please wait. I'm – coming out –"

"Drop the invisibility," growled Bahry. He was too tired to bother with anti-Disillusionment Charms.

A moment later, a young boy's face emerged from within an unfolding invisibility cloak, and Bahry saw the black hair, the green eyes, the glasses, and the angry red lightning-bolt scar.

If he'd had twenty fewer years of experience under his belt he might have blinked. Instead he just spat something that he probably shouldn't ought to say in front of the Boy-Who-Lived.

"He, he," the boy's wavering voice said, his young face looked frightened and exhausted and tears were still trickling down his cheeks, "he kidnapped me, to make me cast my Patronus... he said he'd kill me if I didn't... only I couldn't let him just kill you..."

Bahry's mind was still dazed, but things were slowly starting to click into place.

Harry Potter, the only wizard ever to survive a Killing Curse. Bahry might have been able to dodge the green death, he'd certainly been trying, but if the matter came up before the Wizengamot, they'd rule it was a life debt to a Noble House.

"I see," Bahry said in a much gentler growl. He started to walk toward the boy. "Son, I'm sorry for what you've been through, but I need you to drop the cloak and drop your wand."

The rest of Harry Potter emerged from invisibility, showing the sweat-soaked blue-trimmed Hogwarts robes, and his right hand clutching an eleven-inch holly wand so hard his knuckles were white.

"Your wand," Bahry repeated.

“Sorry,” whispered the eleven-year-old boy, “here,” and he held out the wand toward Bahry.

Bahry barely stopped himself from snarling at the traumatized boy who’d just saved his life. Instead he overrode the impulse with a sigh, and just stretched out a hand to take the wand. “Look, son, you’re really not supposed to point a wand at –”

The wand’s end twisted lightly beneath Bahry’s hand just as the boy whispered, “Somnium.”



Harry stared at the Auror’s crumpled body, there was no sense of triumph, just a crushing sense of despair.

(Even then it might not have been too late.)

Harry turned to look at where the green snake lay motionless.

“Teacher?” hissed Harry. “Friend? Please, are you alive?” An awful fear was taking hold in Harry’s heart; in that moment he had entirely forgotten that he’d just seen the Defense Professor try to kill a police officer.

Harry pointed his wand at the snake, and his lips even began to shape the word *Innervate*, before his brain caught up with him and screamed at him.

He didn’t dare use magic on Professor Quirrell.

Harry had felt it, the burning, tearing pain in his head, like his brain was about to split in half. He’d felt it, his magic and Professor Quirrell’s magic, matched and anti-harmonized in a fulfillment of doom. That was the mysterious terrible thing that would happen if Harry and Professor Quirrell ever got too close to each other, or if they ever cast magic on each other, or if their spells ever touched, their magic would resonate out of control –

Harry stared at the snake, he couldn’t tell if it was breathing.

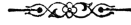
(The last seconds ticked away.)

He turned to stare at the Auror, who had seen the Boy-Who-Lived, who knew.

The full magnitude of the disaster crushed in on Harry like a thousand hundred-ton weights, he’d managed to stun the Auror but now there was nothing left to do, no way to recover, the mission had failed, everything had failed, he had failed.

Shocked, dismayed, despairing, he didn’t think of it, didn’t see the obvious, didn’t remember where the hopeless feelings were coming from, didn’t realize that he still needed to recast the True Patronus Charm.

(And then it was already too late.)



Auror Li and Auror McCusker had rearranged their chairs around the table, and so they both saw it at the same time, the naked, skeletally thin horror rising up to hover outside the window, the headache already hitting them from seeing it.

They both heard the voice, like a long-dead corpse had spoken words and those words themselves had aged and died.

The Dementor's speech hurt their ears as it said, "Bellatrix Black is out of her cell."

There was a split second of horrified silence, and then Li tore out of his chair, heading for the communicator to call in reinforcements from the Ministry, even as McCusker grabbed his mirror and started frantically trying to raise the three Aurors who'd gone on patrol.

THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT, PART V

IN a scarred and ruined corridor, lit by dim gas lights, a boy slowly crept forward, one hand stretched out, toward the unmoving snake that was the body of his teacher.

Harry was only a meter away from the snake's body when he first felt it, tickling at the edge of his perception.

Ever so weakly, a sense of doom...

Professor Quirrell was alive, then.

The thought engendered no feeling of joy, only a sort of empty despair.

Harry would still be caught soon, and no matter how he tried to explain, it still wouldn't look good. No one would trust him again, they would think he was the next Dark Lord, they wouldn't help him when it came time to fight Lord Voldemort, Hermione would give up on him, probably even Dumbledore would look for another hero...

...maybe they'd just send him home to his parents.

He had failed.

Harry looked at the crumpled body of the police officer he'd stunned, the already-drying blood from the minor cuts and slashes, the burned places on the intricately embroidered red robes.

He'd been stupid. He shouldn't have stunned the police officer, should have just stayed with his original story about being kidnapped by Professor Quirrell...

It might not be too late, whispered a voice inside him. You might still be able to fix your mistake. The Auror saw you, he remembers that you stunned him... but if he were dead, if Professor Quirrell were dead, if Bellatrix were dead, there would be no one to contradict your story.

Slowly, Harry's hand started to rise, pointing his wand at the police officer and –

Harry's hand halted.

He had a distant sense he was behaving uncharacteristically of himself, somehow. Like there was something he'd forgotten, something important, but he was having trouble remembering what it was, exactly.

Oh. That was right. He was someone who believed in the value of human life.

A sense of puzzlement accompanied the thought, he couldn't quite remember why other people's lives had seemed valuable...

All right, said the logical part of him, why has my mind changed between then and now?

Because he was in Azkaban...

And he'd forgotten to recast the Patronus Charm...

Doing anything at all, somehow, seemed like a tremendous effort, like the thought of action itself was a weight too heavy to lift; but it did seem like a good idea to recast the Patronus Charm, for he was still able to be afraid of Dementors. And though he couldn't remember what it was like to be happy, he knew that this wasn't it.

Harry's hand rose to hold his wand level before him, his fingers took the starting positions.

And then Harry paused.

He couldn't... quite remember... what he'd used as his happy thought.

That was odd, it had been something very important, he really ought to be able to remember it... something to do with death? But that wasn't happy...

His body was shivering, Azkaban hadn't seemed so cold before, and it seemed to be getting colder even as he thought. It was too late for him, he'd already sunk too far, he'd never be able to cast the Patronus Charm now –

That may be the Dementation talking rather than an accurate estimate, observed the logical part of himself, habits that had been encoded into sheer reflex, requiring no energy to activate. Think of the Dementors' fear as a cognitive bias, and try to overcome it the way you would overcome any other cognitive bias. Your hopeless feelings may not indicate that the situation is actually hopeless. It may only indicate that you are in the presence of Dementors. All negative emotions and pessimistic estimates must now be considered suspect, fallacious until proven valid.

(If you'd been watching the boy as he thought, you would have seen a distant, abstract, puzzled frown move across his face, below the glasses

and the lightning-bolt scar. His hand stayed in the starting position for the Patronus Charm, and did not move.)

The presence of Dementors interferes with the part of you that processes happiness. If you cannot retrieve your happy thought by mnemonic association on the key of happiness, perhaps you can get at the memory some other way instead. When was the last time you talked to someone about the Patronus Charm?

Harry couldn't seem to remember that either.

A crushing wave of despair swept over him, and was dismissed by the logical part of himself as untrustworthy, external, not-Harry, the dull weight still pressed him down but his mind went on thinking, it didn't take much effort to think...

When was the last time you talked to someone about Dementors?

Professor Quirrell had said that he was already able to feel the presence of Dementors, and Harry had said to Professor Quirrell... he'd told Professor Quirrell...

...to hold to the memory of the stars, of falling bodilessly through space, like an Occlumency barrier across his entire mind.

His second Defense class of the year, on Friday, that was when Professor Quirrell had shown him the stars, and again on Christmas.

It didn't take much effort to remember them, the searing points of white against perfect blackness.

Harry remembered the great cloudy wash of the Milky Way.

Harry remembered the peace.

Some of the coldness at the fringes of his limbs seemed to retreat.

There were words he had spoken out loud on the day he'd first cast the Patronus Charm, his mind could remember the sounds and the speech even as the feelings seemed distant...

...I thought of my absolute rejection of death as the natural order.

You cast the True Patronus Charm by thinking about the value of human life.

...But there are other lives that are still alive to be fought for. Your life, and my life, and Hermione Granger's life, all the lives of Earth, and all the lives beyond, to be defended and protected.

Then the idea of killing everyone... that hadn't been his true self, that had been the Dementation talking...

Despair was the Dementors' influence.

Where there's life, there's hope. The Auror is still alive. Professor Quirrell is still alive. Bellatrix is still alive. I'm still alive. No one's actually died yet...

Harry could picture the Earth, now, in the midst of the starfield, the blue-white orb.

...and I won't let them!

"Expecto Patronum!"

The words came out a little halting, and when the human shape burst back into existence it was dim at first, moonlight instead of sunlight, white instead of silver.

But it strengthened, slowly, as Harry breathed in deliberate rhythm, recovering. Letting the light drive back the darkness from his mind. Remembering the things that he had almost forgotten, and channeling them back into the Patronus Charm.

Even when the light blazed full and silver once more, illuminating the corridor more brightly than the gas lamps, banishing fully the cold, Harry's limbs still shook. That had been too close.

Harry took a deep breath. All right. It was time to reconsider the situation now that his thoughts were no longer being artificially darkened by Dementors.

Harry reviewed the situation.

...still looked pretty hopeless, actually.

It wasn't the crushing despair of before, but Harry still felt wobbly, to put it mildly. He didn't dare go dark and it was his dark side that had the ability to take this level of problem in stride. It was his dark side that would have laughed scornfully at the very concept of giving up just because he'd lost Professor Quirrell and was marooned in the depths of Azkaban and had been seen by a police officer. The ordinary Harry was not able to take that sort of thing in stride.

But there wasn't any option except to keep moving forward anyway. You couldn't get any more pointless than giving up before you'd actually lost.

Harry looked around.

Dim gas lights lit a corridor of grey metal, whose sides and floor and ceiling were slashed in places, gouged and melted, telling anyone who cared to look that there had been battle here.

Professor Quirrell could have repaired it easily enough, if he'd...

The sense of betrayal struck Harry with full force, then.

Why... why did he... why...

Because he's evil, said Gryffindor and Hufflepuff, quietly and sadly. We told you so.

No! thought Harry desperately. No, it doesn't make sense, we were going to commit the perfect crime, the Auror could have been Obliviated, the corridor repaired, it wasn't too late but it would have BEEN too late if he'd died!

But Professor Quirrell was never really planning to commit the perfect crime, said the grim voice of Slytherin. He wanted the crime to be noticed. He wanted everyone to know that someone had killed an Auror and broken Bellatrix Black out of Azkaban. He would have prepared some kind of evidence, some proof he could reveal of your involvement, to use as blackmail against you; and you would have been bound to him forever.

Harry's Patronus almost went out, then.

No... Harry thought.

Yes, said the other three parts of him sadly.

No. It still doesn't make sense. Professor Quirrell had to know I would turn against him the instant I saw him kill an Auror. That I might very well go ahead and confess to Dumbledore, hoping to plead the true fact that I was tricked. And... in terms of blackmail, does his killing an Auror against my will, really add all that much to breaking Bellatrix out of Azkaban with my willing help? It would have been more cunning to keep the evidence of my involvement with the basic crime, but still pretend to be my ally for as long as he could, saving the blackmail to use only if it became necessary...

Rationalization, said Slytherin. So why did Professor Quirrell do it, then?

And Harry thought with a tinge of desperation – knowing, even as he thought it, that he was motivated in part by a desire to reject reality, and that wasn't how the technique was meant to be wielded – I notice that I am confused.

There was internal silence. None of the parts of himself seemed to have anything to add to that.

And Harry continued to take stock of the moderately hopeless-looking situation.

Did Harry need to re-evaluate the probability that Bellatrix was evil?

...not in any mission-relevant sense. It was a given that Bellatrix was currently evil. Whether she was an innocent who'd been made that way by torture and Legilimency and unspeakable rituals, or whether she'd chosen it of her own will, didn't have much bearing on the current situation. The key

fact was that while Bellatrix thought Harry was the Dark Lord, she would obey him.

That was one resource, then. But Bellatrix was starved and nine-tenths dead...

‘Oh, I feel a little better now, how strange...’

Bellatrix had said that, in her shattered voice, after Harry’s Patronus had blazed out of control.

Harry thought, and he couldn’t have quite said why he thought this, it might have just been his own mind making things up, but... it seemed likely that what the Dementors had taken from you long ago was lost forever. But what the Dementors had taken from you recently, the True Patronus Charm might give back. Like the difference between emptying a cup, and the unused cup fading away. Bellatrix, then, might have got back what she’d lost in just the last week or so. Not any happy memories, those would have been eaten years ago. But whatever strength and magic had been drained from her in just the last week, she might have regained. Like the equivalent of getting a week of rest, a week to build up her magic again...

Harry looked at Professor Quirrell’s snake form.

...maybe enough for an Innervate.

If awakening Professor Quirrell was, in fact, a smart thing to do.

Some of the despair came back to Harry, then. He couldn’t trust Professor Quirrell, couldn’t trust that reviving him would be wise, not after what had just happened.

Steady, Harry thought to himself, and looked at the crumpled form of the Auror.

Bellatrix might also be able to manage a Memory Charm.

That could be step one, anyway. It wasn’t exactly getting everyone safely out of Azkaban, and the Aurors would know afterward that something strange had happened, they might suspect Bellatrix’s body and perform an autopsy. But it was a step.

...and would it be all that hard to get out of Azkaban? If they could get to the top of Azkaban quickly enough, before the Auror was supposed to report back in, before anyone noticed him missing, then they could just fly out through the hole Professor Quirrell had made, and get far enough away from Azkaban to activate the portkey Harry already had in his possession. (Both Professor Quirrell and Harry had portkeys, and both were powerful enough to transport two humans, plus or minus a snake. As with their

doubly-concealed departure from Mary's Room, Professor Quirrell had put enough safety margin in his plans to impress even Harry.)

Bellatrix could carry Professor Quirrell's snake form, which Harry dared not touch or levitate.

Harry turned and strode quickly toward where Bellatrix was waiting on the stairs. He could feel his spirits reviving a little. It was starting to look like a good plan, and there was no time to waste in going about it.

What to do with Professor Quirrell, or for that matter Bellatrix, after the portkey took them to where they were supposed to hand Bellatrix over to the psychiatric healer... well, Harry could work that out along the way. Harry would probably have to bamboozle the healer into doing something – which was going to take one hell of a bamboozling, and Harry wasn't even sure what he wanted done – but he and Bellatrix had to get moving now.

The main problem Harry saw, as he quickly ran the whole process forward in his imagination, would come when they reached the roof. Professor Quirrell had been supposed to sneak around invisibly and Confund the monitors that would notice visitors in the aerial surroundings of Azkaban, causing them to see a repeating loop of scenery for a few minutes. Professor Quirrell had said that he couldn't Disillusion Harry's Patronus; and if they switched off the Patronus, the Dementors would notice Bellatrix was missing, and alert the Aurors...

Harry's train of thought stumbled.

There were times when 'Aw, crap' just didn't seem to cover it.



Li's hands were sure despite the adrenaline, as he unlocked the bars on the Vanishing Cabinet that linked Azkaban to a well-guarded room in the interior of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. (A one-way Vanishing Cabinet, of course. The wards permitted a few fast ways into Azkaban, all of them highly restricted, and no fast ways out.)

Li stepped well back, pointed his wand at the Cabinet, spoke the incantation "Harmonia Nectere Passus", and not a second later –

The door of the Cabinet burst open with a bang, and into the room strode a heavy-set, square-jawed witch with greyed hair cropped close around her head. She wore no rank signs as she wore no jewelry or other ornamentation, it was only an ordinary Auror's robes that she deemed fit to grace herself: Director Amelia Bones, head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement

and said to be the only witch in the DMLE who could take Mad-Eye Moody in a fair fight (not that either of those two were the sort to fight fairly). Li had heard rumors that Amelia could Apparate within the bounds of the DMLE, and this was the sort of thing that gave rise to rumors like that, he'd called in the alarm not fifty seconds ago.

"Get into the air, now!" Amelia barked over her shoulder at the female Auror trio following behind her with police broomsticks, they must have all been crushed in there, waiting for Li to activate the Cabinet. "I want more aerial coverage on this place! And make sure you keep up your anti-Disillusionment Charms!" Then her head turned toward him. "Report, Auror Li! Do we know how they got in yet?"

Another Auror trio holding broomsticks materialized in the Vanishing Cabinet and strode out after them even as Li began talking.

They were followed by a trio of Hit Wizards in full battle gear.

Then another trio of Hit Wizards.

Then another broomstick team.



The emaciated form that was Bellatrix Black was resting motionless on the stairs when Harry got there, eyes closed, and when Harry asked in a cold, high whisper whether she was awake, he got no response.

A brief twitch of panic was countered by the thought that Professor Quirrell had knocked her out to prevent her from hearing the Dark Lord's cringing servant suddenly turn into a hardened criminal and then an expert battlemage. Which was good, because she wouldn't have heard Harry's voice saying 'Expecto Patronum'.

Harry drew back the hood of the Cloak, pointed his wand at Bellatrix, and whispered as gently as he could, "Innervate."

From the way Bellatrix's body jerked a little, Harry didn't think he'd managed to get it quite gentle enough.

The sunken dark eyes opened.

"Bella dear," Harry said in his cold, high voice, "I am afraid we've run into a bit of a problem. Have you recovered enough to do small magics?"

There was a pause, and then Bellatrix's pale head nodded.

"Very good," Harry said dryly. "I won't ask you to walk unaided, Bella dear, but I am afraid you must walk." He pointed his wand at her. "Wingardium Leviosa."

Harry kept the flow of force down to something he could sustain for a while, and it was still probably lifting two-thirds of her current body weight. She was... thin.

Slowly, as though for the first time in years, Bellatrix Black pushed herself to her feet.

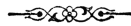


Amelia strode into the duty room, Auror Li and his silver badger following behind her. She'd spun her Time-Turner the moment she'd heard the alarm, and then spent a tense hour preparing her forces for entry. You couldn't loop time within Azkaban itself, Azkaban's future couldn't interact with its past, so she hadn't been able to arrive before the DMLE had gotten the message, but she should have arrived in time...

Her eyes went straight to the corpse, uncloaked and looking very dead, floating beyond the viewing window.

"Where is Bellatrix Black?" Amelia demanded, showing no fear before the creature of fear.

Even her own blood froze for an instant, as the corpse parted its lips, and gurgled, "Do not know."



Harry watched, now fully invisible once more, as Bellatrix slowly leaned down, took Professor Quirrell's wand (which Harry dared not touch), and slowly straightened again.

Then Bellatrix pointed the wand at the snake, and said, her voice precise though it was still a whisper, "Innervate."

The snake did not stir.

"Shall I try again, my Lord?" she whispered.

"No," Harry said. He swallowed the sick feeling. Harry had decided to say the hell with it and try to revive Professor Quirrell after he'd realized that the Dementors had probably alerted the Aurors by now. His high, cold voice went on, unperturbed, "Do you think you are able to perform a Memory Charm, dear Bella?"

Bellatrix paused, and then said, hesitantly, "I think so, my Lord."

"Eliminate that Auror's last half-hour of memory," Harry commanded. He'd thought a bit about whether he wanted to provide any justification for that, what he would say if Bellatrix asked why they weren't just killing him, in

which case Harry would explain that they were pretending to be a different power group and then tell her to shut up –

But Bellatrix simply pointed her wand at the Auror, stood silently for a time, and finally whispered, “Obliviate.”

She swayed, then, but did not fall.

“Very good, my dear Bella,” Harry said, and chuckled thinly. “And I will ask you to carry that snake.”

Again, the woman said nothing, demanded no explanations, didn’t ask why Harry or the apparently-invisible Patronus caster couldn’t do it. She only staggered to where the long snake lay, slowly bent over, picked it up, draped it over her shoulder.

(A tiny little part of Harry observed that it was very relaxing to have a minion that would just follow orders so unquestioningly, and even got as far as thinking that he could totally get used to having a minion like Bellatrix, before that mind-fraction was screamed into silence by his mortally offended remainder.)

“Follow,” the boy commanded his minion, and began to walk.



It was starting to get crowded in the duty room, almost too crowded to breathe, though there was still space around Amelia herself; if needing to breathe meant that you had to crowd Director Bones, it was better not to breathe.

Amelia looked at where Ora was fiddling with Auror McCusker’s mirror. “Specialist Weinbach,” she barked, causing the young witch to start. “Any response from One-Hand’s mirror?”

“None,” Ora said nervously, “it’s... I mean it has to be jammed, not dead, carefully jammed because it didn’t set off the alarms, but the line is so blank the mirror might as well be broken...”

Amelia didn’t let her expression change, though the part of her that was already mourning One-Hand got a little sadder and a lot more angry. Seven months, he’d had seven months left until his retirement after a full century of service. She remembered him as an eager young Auror, so very long ago, and his whole career he’d served the DMLE with perfect loyalty, at least when it came to anything really important...

Someone would burn for this.

The Dementor still hovered outside the window, casting its useless shadow of dread over their operations; all the creature could do was gurggle its lack of knowledge or fail to reply at all, when asked questions like ‘Did Bellatrix Black escape?’ and ‘Why can’t you find her?’ and ‘How is she being hidden?’ Amelia was starting to worry that the criminals were already gone, when –

“We found a hole in the roof over C spiral!” someone shouted from the doorway. “Still open, ward circumventions still active!”

Amelia’s lips peeled back in a smile like a wolf opening its jaws to eat.

Bellatrix Black was still in Azkaban.

And in Azkaban, Bellatrix Black would remain forever.

She took a stride toward the window, ignoring the Dementor now, and looked up at the sky above, to check with her own eyes the patrolling broomsticks. She couldn’t see the whole sky from here, but she saw ten brooms go past on a patrol pattern and that already ought to be enough to catch anyone, though she fully meant to put every broom she could in the air. Her Aurors were equipped with the fastest racing broom currently on the market, the Nimbus 2000; no unsuccessful chases for her people.

Amelia turned back from the window, and frowned. The room was getting ridiculously crowded, and two thirds of these people didn’t need to be here, they just wanted to be close to the center of the action. If there was one thing Amelia couldn’t tolerate, it was people who did what they wanted instead of what was needed.

“All right, you lot!” Amelia bellowed at them. “Stop hanging around here and start securing the top level of each spiral! That’s right,” she said to the looks of surprise, “all three! They could tunnel through a floor or a ceiling to go between them, in case you hadn’t worked that out! We’re going down level by level until we catch them! I’ll take C spiral, Scrimgeour, you’re on B...” She paused, then, remembering that Mad-Eye had retired last year, who could she... “Shacklebolt, you’re on the A spiral, take with the strongest other fighters! Check every set of cells you pass, look under blankets, do the full set of detection Charms in every corridor! Nobody leaves Azkaban until the criminals are caught, nobody! And...” People looked at Amelia in surprise as her voice trailed off.

The criminals had invented some way to prevent the Dementors from finding Bellatrix Black.

That ought to have been impossible.

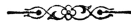
It chilled her blood, contemplating that. It was like...

Amelia took a deep breath, and spoke once more, in a voice of steel command. "And when you catch them, make bloody sure they're the real criminals and not our own people forced to take Polyjuice. Anyone behaves oddly, check them for the Imperius Curse. Keep each other in sight at all times. Don't assume an Auror uniform is friendly if you don't recognize the face." She turned to the communications specialist. "Tell the broomsticks. If one of the brooms peels off for no reason, half of them are to hunt it down while the rest keep patrolling. And change the harmonics on everything changeable, they may have stolen our keys." Then back to the rest of the room. "No Auror is above suspicion unless they have no family left to threaten."

She saw it, the cold looks that came over the older faces, saw some of the younger Aurors flinch, and knew that they understood.

But she said it out loud, just to be sure.

"We're fighting the old Wizarding War today, everyone. Just because You-Know-Who is dead doesn't mean the Death Eaters have forgotten his tricks. Now go!"



Harry walked in silence through the gas-lit grey corridor, invisible beside Bellatrix and the silver shape following them, trying to think of a better plan.

At first, when he'd realized that the Aurors probably knew already, and that moreover, Professor Quirrell wasn't waking up...

His thoughts had frozen up there, for a second.

And then stayed frozen, even as he'd gotten himself and Bellatrix heading downward, to buy as much time as possible; the Aurors, Harry figured, would start at the top and move down level by level. The Aurors could afford to move slowly and securely; they knew their prey had no way out.

Harry hadn't been able to think of any way out.

Until Harry had said to himself, well, if it was just a war game, what would General Chaos do?

From which an answer had followed instantly.

And then Harry had thought, but if it's that easy, why hasn't anyone broken out of Azkaban before?

And after he'd realized the possible problem: Fine, what would General Chaos do about that?

Whereupon General Chaos had come up with an amendment to his first plan.

It was...

It was the most insanely Gryffindor thing Harry had ever...

So now he was trying to think of a better plan, and not having much luck.

Picky picky picky, said Gryffindor. Who was complaining about not having any plan one minute earlier? You should be glad we came up with anything at all, Mister Now-We're-Doomed.

"My Lord," Bellatrix whispered haltingly, as she navigated the next flight of stairs downward, "am I going back to my cell, my Lord?"

Harry's brain was distracted, so it took him that long to process the words, and then another moment to process the horror, while Bellatrix continued speaking.

"I would... please, my Lord, I would very much rather die," her voice said. And then, in a smaller voice, a whisper that was barely there, "but I will go back if you ask it of me, my Lord..."

"We are not going back to your cell," hissed Harry's voice, on automatic. Nothing of what he felt was allowed to reach his face.

Um... said Hufflepuff. Did you seriously just think, 'You ought to work for me, I would appreciate you?'

A stone would respond to that kind of loyalty, Harry thought. Even if I'm only getting it by mistake, I can't help but –

She's the Dark Lord's loyal killer and torturer, and the supposed reason she's loyal is because an innocent girl was broken into pieces and used as raw material to make her, said Hufflepuff. Did you forget?

If someone shows me that much loyalty, even by mistake, there's a part of me that can't help but feel something. The Dark Lord must have been... evil doesn't seem like a strong enough word, he must have been empty... to not appreciate her loyalty, artificial or not.

The better parts of Harry didn't have much to say to that.

And that was when Harry heard it.

It was faint, and it grew louder with every step they took forward.

A woman's voice, distant, indistinct.

His ears, automatically, strained to make out the words.

"...please don't..."

"...didn't mean..."

"...don't die..."

Then his brain knew who he was hearing, and in almost the same moment, figured out what he was hearing.

Because Professor Quirrell wasn't there to keep the silence any more, and Azkaban was not, in fact, silent.

Faint the woman's voice, repeating:

"No, I didn't mean it, please don't die!"

"No, I didn't mean it, please don't die!"

It got louder with every step Harry took, he could hear the emotion in the words now, the horror, the remorse, the desperation of...

"No, I didn't mean it, please don't die!"

...the woman's worst memory, rehearsing over and over again...

"No, I didn't mean it, please don't die!"

...the murder that had sent her to Azkaban...

"No, I didn't mean it, please don't die!"

...where she was sentenced by the Dementors to watch whoever she'd killed, die and die and die in an infinite repeating loop. Though she must have been put in Azkaban recently, from the amount of life left in her voice.

The thought came to Harry, then, that Professor Quirrell had passed those doors, heard those sounds, and given not the slightest sign of disturbance; and Harry would have called it a positive proof of evil, if Harry's own lips hadn't remained silent in the presence of Bellatrix, his breathing regular, while something inside him screamed and screamed and screamed.

The Patronus brightened, not out of control, but it brightened, with every step Harry took forward.

It brightened further as Harry and Bellatrix descended the stairs, she stumbled and Harry offered her his left arm thrust outside the Cloak, braving the sense of doom from being that close to the snake draped around her neck. There was a surprised look on her face, but she accepted it, and said nothing.

It helped Harry, being able to help Bellatrix, but it wasn't enough.

Not when he saw the huge metal door in the center of that level's corridor.

Not when they came closer, and the woman's voice fell silent, because there was a Patronus near her now, and she wasn't reliving her worst memory any more.

Good, said a voice inside him. That was step one.

Harry's steps carried him inevitably forward toward the metal door.

And...

Now unlock the door –

...Harry kept walking...

What do you think you're doing? Go back and get her out of there!

...kept walking...

Save her! What are you doing? She's hurting YOU HAVE TO SAVE HER!

The portkey Harry was carrying could transport two humans, only two, plus or minus a snake. If they'd had Professor Quirrell's portkey too... but they didn't, Professor Quirrell's human form was carrying that, there was no way to get it... Harry could only save one person today, and there was only one person on the lowest level of Azkaban, in the most desperate need...

"DON'T GO!" The voice came in a scream from behind the metal door. "No, no, no, don't go, don't take it away, don't don't don't -"

There was a light in the corridor and it grew brighter.

"Please," sobbed the woman's voice, "please, I can't remember my children's names any more -"

"Sit down, Bella," Harry's voice said, somehow he kept his voice in a cold whisper, "I must deal with this," the Hover Charm diminishing and switching off even as Bella obediently sat down, her skeletal form dark against the brightening air.

I'll die, thought Harry.

The air went on brightening.

After all, it wasn't a certainty that Harry would die.

It was just a probability of death, and weren't some things worth a probability of dying?

The air went on brightening, the greater Patronus was beginning to form around him, the brilliant human shape was becoming indistinct within the burning air, as Harry's life went to feed the fire.

If I wipe out the Dementors, then even if I live, they'll know it was me, that I was the one who did this... I'll lose my support, lose the war...

Yeah? said the inner voice that was urging him on. After you destroy all the Dementors in Azkaban? I'd think that'd tend to prove your credentials as a Light Lord, actually, so SAVE HER SAVE HER YOU HAVE TO SAVE HER -

The humanoid shape could no longer be seen as a separate entity.

The corridor couldn't be seen.

Harry's own body was invisible within the Cloak.

There was only a bodiless viewpoint within an infinite expanse of silver light.

Harry could feel the life leaving him, fueling the spell; far away, he could feel the shadows of Death begin to fray.

I meant to accomplish more with my life than this... I was going to fight the Dark Lord, I was going to merge the wizarding and Muggle worlds...

Lofty goals seemed very distant, very abstract, compared to one woman begging him for help, it wasn't certain that Harry would ever do anything more important than this one thing, this one thing that he could do now and here.

And with what might have been his last breath, Harry thought:

There are other Dementors, probably other Azkabans... if I'm going to do this, I should do it when I'm closer to the central pit, it will take less of my life that way, which increases the probability that I'll survive to destroy other Dementors... even assuming this is the optimal thing to do, if there's a right time and place to do this, it isn't now and here, IT ISN'T NOW AND HERE!

What? said the other part of him indignantly, as it searched for a counterargument that didn't exist –

Slowly the light died back down, as Harry concentrated on that one indisputable fact, the one obvious truth that they weren't in the optimal place, the time couldn't be now...

Slowly the light died back down.

Part of Harry's life flowed back into him.

Part had been lost as radiation.

But Harry had enough left to stay on his feet, and keep the silver human shape bright; and when his wand arm raised and his voice whispered "Wingardium Leviosa", the magic flowed obediently out of him and helped Bellatrix to her feet. (For it wasn't his magic he had expended, it had never been his magic that fueled the Patronus Charm.)

I swear, Harry thought, breathing as regularly as he could in Bellatrix's presence, while tears streamed down his invisible cheeks, I swear upon my life and my magic and my art as a rationalist, I swear by everything I hold sacred and all my happy memories, I give my oath that someday I will end this place, please, please may I be forgiven...

And the two of them walked on, as a murderess's voice screamed and begged someone to come back and save her.

There should have been more time, there should have been a ceremony, for Harry's sacrifice of that piece of himself, but Bellatrix was beside him

and so Harry just had to keep on walking without a pause, saying nothing, breathing evenly.

So Harry walked on, leaving a piece of himself behind. It would dwell in this place and time forever, he knew. Even after Harry came back someday with a company of other True Patronus casters and they destroyed all the Dementors here. Even if he melted the triangular building and burned the island low enough that the sea would wash over it, leaving no trace that such a place as this had ever once existed. Even then he wouldn't get it back.



The flock of luminous creatures stopped staring downward, and began patrolling the metal corridor as if nothing had happened.

"Just like last time?" Director Bones snapped in the direction of Auror Li, and the young Auror replied, "Yes, ma'am."

The Director fired off another query to see if the Dementors could now find their target, and looked unsurprised to hear a negative reply a few seconds later.

Emmeline Vance was feeling torn between her loyalties.

Emmeline wasn't a member of the Order of the Phoenix any more, they had disbanded after the end of the last war. And during the war, she'd known, they'd all known, that Director Crouch had quietly approved of their off-the-books battle.

Director Bones wasn't Crouch.

But they were hunting Bellatrix Black now, who had been a Death Eater, and who was certainly being rescued by Death Eaters. Their Patronuses were behaving oddly – all the bright creatures stopping and staring off downward, before they'd gone back to following their masters. And the Dementors couldn't find their target.

It seemed to her that this would be an extremely good time to consult Albus Dumbledore.

Should she just suggest to Director Bones that they contact Dumbledore? But if Director Bones hadn't contacted him already...

Emmeline wavered for a while, probably too long, and then finally decided. The hell with it, she thought. We're all on the same side, we need to stick together whether Director Bones likes it or not.

At a thought, her silver sparrow fluttered onto her shoulder.

“Drop behind us to guard our rear,” Emmeline murmured softly, almost without moving her lips, “wait until no one is looking directly at you, then go to Albus Dumbledore. If he is not already by himself, wait until he is. And tell him this: Bellatrix Black is breaking out of Azkaban, and the Dementors cannot find her.”

THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT, CONSTRAINED OPTIMIZATION, PART VI

SILENT, it was thankfully silent, the metal door on the next level down. Either there wasn't someone behind there, or they were hurting quietly, maybe they were screaming but their voice had given out already, or they were just muttering quietly to themselves in the dark...

I'm not sure I can do this, Harry thought, and he couldn't blame the despairing thought on the Dementors either. It would be better to be lower, safer to be lower, his plan would take time to implement and the Aurors were probably already working their way down. But if Harry had to pass any more of those metal doors while staying silent and keeping his breathing perfectly regular, he might go mad; if he had to leave a piece of himself behind at each one, soon there wouldn't be anything left of him –

A luminous moonlit cat leaped into existence and landed in front of Harry's Patronus. Harry almost screamed, which wouldn't have helped his image with Bellatrix.

"Harry!" said the voice of Professor McGonagall, sounding as alarmed as Harry had ever heard from her. "Where are you? Are you all right? This is my Patronus, answer me!"

With a convulsive effort, Harry cleared his mind, repurposed his throat, forced calm, swapped in a different personality like an Occlumency barrier. It took a few seconds and he hoped like hell that Professor McGonagall didn't notice a problem with that thanks to the communications delay, just as he hoped like hell that Patronuses didn't report on their surroundings.

A young boy's innocent voice said, "I'm in Mary's Place, Professor, in Diagon Alley. Going to the restroom actually. What's wrong?"

The cat leaped away, and Bellatrix began to chuckle softly, dusty appreciative laughter, but she cut herself off abruptly at a hiss from Harry.

A moment later the cat returned, and said in Professor McGonagall's voice, "I'm coming to pick you up right now. Don't go anywhere, if you're not around the Defense Professor don't go back to him, don't say anything

to anyone, I'll be there as quickly as I can!"

And the bright cat blurred forward and vanished.

Harry glanced down at his watch, noting down the time, so that after he got everyone out of here, and Professor Quirrell anchored the Time-Turner again, he could go back and be in the restroom of Mary's Place at the appropriate time...

You know, said the problem-solving part of his brain, there's a limit to how many constraints you can add to a problem before it really is impossible, you know that?

It shouldn't have mattered, and it didn't really, it didn't compare to the suffering of a single prisoner in Azkaban, and yet Harry still found himself feeling very aware that if his plan didn't end with him being picked up from Mary's Place just like he'd never left, and the Defense Professor looking completely innocent of any and all wrongdoing, Professor McGonagall was going to kill him.



As their team prepared to eat another bite of territory out of C spiral, shielding and scanning before dispelling the previous shield to their rear, Amelia was tapping her fingers on her hip and wondering if she ought to consult the obvious expert. If only he wasn't so –

Amelia heard the familiar crack of fire and knew what she would see as she turned.

A third of her Aurors were spinning around and leveling their wands on the old wizard in half-moon glasses and a long silver beard who had appeared directly within their midst, a bright red-golden phoenix on his shoulder.

"Hold your fire!" Polyjuice made it easy to forge the face, but faking the phoenix travel would have been rather more difficult – the wards permitted it as one of the fast ways into Azkaban, though there were no fast ways out.

The old witch and the old wizard stared at each other for a long moment.

(Amelia wondered, in the back of her mind, which of her Aurors had sent the word, there were several former members of the Order of the Phoenix with her; she tried to remember, in the back of her mind, if she'd seen Emeline's sparrow or Andy's cat missing from the flock of bright creatures; but she knew that it was futile. It might not even be any of her people, for the old meddler often knew things he had no way at all of knowing.)

Albus Dumbledore inclined his head to Amelia in a courteous gesture. "I hope I am not unwelcome here," the wizard said calmly. "We are all on the same side, are we not?"

"That depends," Amelia said in a hard voice. "Are you here to help us catch criminals, or to protect them from the consequences of their actions?" Are you going to try to stop the killer of my brother from getting her well-deserved Kiss, old meddler? From what Amelia heard, Dumbledore had gotten smarter toward the end of the war, mostly due to Mad-Eye's nonstop nagging; but had relapsed into his foolish mercies the instant Voldemort's body was found.

A dozen small points of white and silver, reflections of the shining animals, gleamed off the old wizard's half-moon glasses as he spoke. "Even less than you would I see Bellatrix Black freed," the old wizard said. "She must not leave this prison alive, Amelia."

Before Amelia could speak again, even to express her surprised gratification, the old wizard gestured with his long black wand and a blazing silver phoenix sprang into existence, brighter perhaps than all their other Patronuses put together. It was the first time she'd seen that spell cast wordlessly. "Order all your Aurors to cancel their Patronus Charms for ten seconds," said the old wizard. "What darkness cannot find, the light may."

Amelia snapped off the order to the communications officer, who would notify all Aurors through their mirrors, commanding Dumbledore's will to be done.

That took a few moments, and it became a period of awful silence, none of the Aurors daring to speak, while Amelia tried to weigh her own thoughts. She must not leave this prison alive... Albus Dumbledore wouldn't turn into Bartemius Crouch without a strong reason. If he'd meant to tell her why, he already would have; but it certainly wasn't a positive sign.

Still, it was good to know they'd be able to work together on this one.

"Now," said a chorus of mirrors, and all the Patronus Charms winked out except that blazing silver phoenix.

"Is there another Patronus still present?" the old wizard said clearly to the bright creature.

The bright creature dipped its head in a nod.

"Can you find it?"

The silver head nodded again.

"Will you remember it, should it depart and come again?"

A final nod from the blazing phoenix.

"It is done," Dumbledore said.

"Over," said all the mirrors a moment later, and Amelia raised her wand and began recasting her own Patronus. (Though it took some extra concentration, with that wolfish smile already on her face, to think of the first time Susan had kissed her cheek, instead of dwelling on the looming fate of Bellatrix Black. That other Kiss was a happy thought indeed, but not quite the right kind for the Patronus Charm.)



They hadn't even gotten to the end of that corridor before Harry's Patronus raised its hand, politely, as though in a classroom.

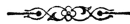
Harry thought quickly. The question was how to – no, that was also obvious.

"It seems," Harry said in a coldly amused voice, "that someone has instructed this Patronus to speak its message only to me." He chuckled. "Well then. Pardon me, dear Bella. Quietus."

At once the silver humanoid said in Harry's own voice, "There is another Patronus which seeks this Patronus."

"What?" said Harry. And then, without pausing to think about what was happening, "Can you block it? Stop it from finding you?"

The silver humanoid shook its head.



No sooner did Amelia and the other Aurors finish recasting their Patronus Charms, when –

The blazing silver phoenix flew off, and the true red-golden phoenix followed it, and the old wizard calmly strode after both of them with his long wand gripped low.

The shields around their territory parted around the old wizard like water, and closed behind him with hardly a ripple.

"Albus!" shouted Amelia. "What do you think you're doing?"

But she already knew.

"Do not follow me," the old wizard's voice said sternly. "I can protect myself, I cannot protect others."

The curse Amelia shouted after him made even her own Aurors flinch.



This isn't fair, isn't fair, isn't fair! There's a limit to how many constraints you can add to a problem before it really is impossible!

Harry blocked off the useless thoughts, ignored the fatigue he was feeling, and forced his mind to confront the new requirements, he had to think fast, use the adrenaline on following the chains of logic quickly and without hesitation, instead of wasting it on despair.

For the mission to succeed,

(1) Harry would have to dispel his Patronus.

(2) Bellatrix needed to be hidden from the Dementors after the Patronus was dispelled.

(3) Harry needed to resist the Dementors' drain after his Patronus was dispelled.

...

If I solve this one, said Harry's brain, I want a cookie afterward, and if you make the problem any more difficult than this, I mean the slightest bit more difficult, I am climbing out of your skull and heading for Tahiti.

Harry and his brain considered the problem.

Azkaban had stood invincible for centuries, relying upon the impossibility of evading the Dementors' gaze. So if Harry found another way to hide Bellatrix from the Dementors, it would rely on either his scientific knowledge or his realization that the Dementors were Death.

Harry's brain suggested that an obvious way to stop the Dementors from seeing Bellatrix was to make her stop existing, i.e., kill her.

Harry congratulated his brain on thinking outside the box and told it to continue searching.

Kill her and then bring her back, came the next suggestion. Use Frigideiro to cool Bellatrix down to the point where her brain activity stops, then warm her up afterward using Thermos, just like people who fall into very cold water can be successfully revived half-an-hour later without noticeable brain damage.

Harry considered this. Bellatrix might not survive in her debilitated state. And it might not stop Death from seeing her. And he'd have trouble carrying a cold unconscious Bellatrix very far. And Harry couldn't remember the research on which exact body temperature was supposed to be nonfatal but temporarily-brain-halting.

It was another good outside-the-box idea, but Harry told his brain to keep thinking of...

...ways to hide from Death...

A frown moved over Harry's face. He'd heard something about that, somewhere.

One of the requisites for becoming a powerful wizard is an excellent memory, Professor Quirrell had said. The key to a puzzle is often something you read twenty years ago in an old scroll, or a peculiar ring you saw on the finger of a man you met only once...

Harry focused as hard as he could, but he couldn't remember, it was on the tip of his tongue but he couldn't remember; so he told his subconscious to go on trying to recollect it, and refocused his attention on the other half of the problem.

How can I protect myself from the Dementors without a Patronus Charm?

The Headmaster had been repeatedly exposed to a Dementor from a few steps away, over and over throughout a whole day, and had come out of it looking merely tired. How had the Headmaster done that? Could Harry do it too?

It could just be some random genetic thing, in which case Harry was screwed. But assuming the problem was solvable...

Then the obvious answer was that Dumbledore wasn't afraid of death.

Dumbledore really wasn't afraid of death. Dumbledore honestly, truly believed that death was the next great adventure. Believed it in his core, not just as convenient words used to suppress cognitive dissonance, not just pretending to be wise. Dumbledore had decided that death was the natural and normative order, and whatever tiny lingering fear was still in him, it had taken a long time and repeated exposures for the Dementor to drain him through that small flaw.

That avenue was closed to Harry.

And then Harry thought of the flip side, the obvious inverse question:

Why am I so much more vulnerable than average? Other students didn't fall over when they faced the Dementor.

Harry meant to destroy Death, to end it if he could. He meant to live forever, if he could; he had hope of it, the thought of Death brought him no sense of despair or inevitability. He was not blindly attached to his own life; indeed it had taken an effort not to burn away all his life on the need to protect others from Death. Why did the shadows of Death have such power over Harry? He would not have thought himself so afraid.

Was it Harry, all along, who'd been rationalizing? Who was secretly so afraid of death that it was twisting his own thoughts, as Harry had accused Dumbledore?

Harry considered this, preventing himself from flinching away. It felt uncomfortable, but...

But...

But uncomfortable thoughts weren't always true, and this one didn't sound exactly right. Like there was a grain of truth, but it wasn't hiding where the hypothesis said it was –

And that was when Harry realized.

Oh.

Oh, I understand now.

The one who is afraid, is...

Harry asked his dark side what it thought of death.

And Harry's Patronus wavered, dimmed, almost went out upon the instant, for that desperate, sobbing, screaming terror, an unutterable fear that would do anything not to die, throw everything aside not to die, that couldn't think straight or feel straight in the presence of that absolute horror, that couldn't look into the abyss of nonexistence any more than it could have stared straight into the Sun, a blind terrified thing that only wanted to find a dark corner and hide and not have to think about it any more –

The silver figure had darkened to moonlight, was flickering like a failing candle –

It's all right, thought Harry, it's all right.

Visualizing himself cradling his dark side like a frightened child in his arms.

It's right and proper to be horrified, because death is horrible. You don't have to hide your horror, you don't have to feel ashamed of it, you can wear it as a badge of honor, openly in the Sun.

It was strange, to feel himself split in two like this, the track of his thoughts that gave the comfort, the track of his thoughts that followed his dark side's incomprehension at the alienness of the ordinary Harry's thoughts; of all the things that his dark side associated with its own fear of death, the one thing it had never expected or imagined that it might find, was acceptance and praise and help...

You don't have to fight alone, Harry said silently to his dark side. The rest of me will back you up on this. I won't let myself die, and I won't let my

friends die either. Not you/I, not Hermione, not Mum or Dad, not Neville or Draco or anyone, this is the will to protect... Visualizing wings of sunlight, like the wings of the Patronus he had spread, to give shelter to that frightened child.

The Patronus brightened again, the world spun around Harry or it was his own mind that was spinning?

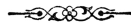
Take my hand, Harry thought and visualized, come with me, and we will do this thing together...

There was a lurch in Harry's mind, like his brain had taken one step to the left, or the universe had taken one step to the right.

And in a brightly lit corridor in Azkaban, the dim gas lights far outshone by the steady and unwavering light of a human-shaped Patronus, an invisible boy stood with a strange small smile on his face, shaking only slightly.

Harry knew, somehow, that he'd just done something significant, something that went beyond just strengthening his resistance to Dementors.

And more than that, he'd remembered. Thinking of Death as an anthropomorphic figure had done the trick, ironically enough. Now Harry could remember it, what was reputed to hide someone from the gaze of Death himself...



In a corridor of Azkaban, a wizard's striding legs came to an abrupt halt; for the bright silver thing that was his guide, had halted in midair, fluttering its wings in distress. The brilliant white phoenix craned its head, looking backward and forward as though confused; and then it turned to its master and shook its head in apology.

Without another word, the old wizard turned and strode back the way he came.



Harry stood straight and upright, feeling the fear wash over him and around him. Some tiny part of him might have been eroded a little by the waves of emptiness that broke continually upon his unmoving stone, but his limbs were not cold, and his magic was with him. In time those waves might corrode him and consume him, sneaking through whatever tiny part of him still cowered before Death instead of using its fear to energize itself for battle. But that doom would take time, with the shadows of Death far away and

uncaring of him. The flaw, the crack, the fault-line that was in him had been repaired, and the stars blazed brightly in his mind, vast and unafraid, and brilliant in the midst of cold and darkness.

To anyone else's eyes, it would have seemed that the boy stood alone in the dimly lit metal corridor, wearing that strange smile.

For Bellatrix Black and the snake draped around her shoulders were concealed by the Cloak of Invisibility, one of the three Deathly Hallows and reputed to hide its wearer from the gaze of Death himself. The riddle whose answer had been lost, and which Harry had found anew.

And Harry knew, now, that the concealment of the Cloak was more than the mere transparency of Disillusionment, that the Cloak kept you hidden and not just invisible, as unseeable as were Thestrals to the unknowing. And Harry also knew that it was Thestral blood which painted the symbol of the Deathly Hallows on the inside of the Cloak, binding into the Cloak that portion of Death's power, enabling the Cloak to confront the Dementors on their own level and block them. It had felt like guessing, and yet a certain guess, the knowledge coming to him in the instant of solving the riddle.

Bellatrix was still transparent within the Cloak, but to Harry she was no longer hidden, he knew that she was there, as obvious to him as a Thestral. For Harry had only loaned his Cloak, not given it; and he had comprehended and mastered the Deathly Hallow that had been passed down through the Potter line.

Harry gazed directly at the invisible woman, and said, "Can the Dementors reach you, Bella?"

"No," said the woman in a soft, wondering voice. Then, "But my Lord... you..."

"If you say anything foolish, it will annoy me," Harry said coldly. "Or are you under the impression that I would sacrifice myself for you?"

"No, my Lord," the Dark Lord's servant replied, sounding puzzled, and perhaps awed.

"Follow," spoke Harry's cold whisper.

And they continued their journey downward, as the Dark Lord reached into his pouch, and took a cookie, and ate it. If Bellatrix had asked, Harry would have claimed it was for the chocolate, but she didn't ask.



The old wizard strode back into the midst of the Aurors, the silver and the red-golden phoenixes now following behind.

"You –" Amelia began to bellow.

"They have dismissed their Patronus," said Dumbledore. The old wizard didn't seem to raise his voice but his calm words somehow overrode her own. "I cannot find them now."

Amelia gritted her teeth, and put a number of scathing remarks on hold, and turned to the communications officer. "Tell the duty room to ask the Dementors again if they can sense Bellatrix Black."

The communications specialist spoke to her mirror for a moment, and a few seconds later, looked up, surprised. "No –"

Amelia was already cursing violently in her mind.

"– but they can see someone else on the lower levels who isn't a prisoner."

"Fine!" snapped Amelia. "Tell the Dementor that a dozen of its kind are authorized to enter Azkaban and seize whoever that is and anyone in their company! And if they see Bellatrix Black, they're to Kiss her immediately!"

Amelia turned and glared toward Dumbledore, then, daring him to argue; but the old wizard only looked at her a bit sadly, and held his peace.



Auror McCusker finished speaking to the corpse that drifted outside the window, conveying the Director's orders.

The corpse gave him a deathly smile that almost unstrung his limbs, and then floated downward.

Soon after, a dozen Dementors arose from where they had drifted in the central pit of Azkaban, and headed outward, toward the walls of the vast metal structure that towered above them.

Entering through holes set into the base of Azkaban, the darkest of all creatures began their march of horror.

THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT, CONSTRAINED COGNITION, PART VII

HARRY had hoped that he'd just achieved fusion with his mysterious dark side and would be enabled to draw on all of its benefits with none of its drawbacks, call up the crystal clarity and indomitable will on demand, without needing to go cold or angry.

Once again, he'd overestimated how much progress he'd made. Something had happened, but Harry still had a mysterious dark side, it was still separate from him, and his ordinary self was still domitable. And despite the repair work he'd done on his dark side's fear of death, he didn't dare go dark while unshielded in Azkaban, that was tempting fate way too much.

Which was unfortunate, because a bit of nondomitability would have sure come in handy about now.

What made it harder was that he couldn't slump against a wall, couldn't break into tears, couldn't even heave a sigh. His dear Bella was watching him and that wasn't the sort of thing her Dark Lord would do.

"My Lord –" Bellatrix said. Her low voice was strained. "The Dementors – they are coming – I can feel them, my Lord –"

"Thank you, Bella," said a dry voice, "I already know that."

Harry couldn't sense the holes in the world the same way as when he'd been wearing the Deathly Hallow, but he could feel the empty pull increasing in intensity. At first he'd mistaken it for the result of descending a stairwell, until he and Bellatrix had finished descending and the pull had gone on increasing. Then decreased, as the Dementors moved away along the spiral, then increased as they went up another flight of stairs... There were Dementors within Azkaban itself now, and they were coming for him. Of course they were. Harry might be resistant now, but he was not hidden.

New requirement, Harry told his brain. Find a way of defeating Dementors that doesn't invoke my Patronus Charm. Alternatively, find yet another way of hiding someone from Dementors, besides the Cloak of Invisibility –

I quit, said his brain. Find yourself another piece of computing substrate to solve your ridiculously overconstrained problems.

I mean it, thought Harry.

So do I, said his brain. Put up your Patronus Charm and wait for the Aurors to find you. Be sensible. It's over.

Give up...

The sucking emptiness seemed to pull harder, as he thought it; and Harry realized what was happening, concentrated more intensely on the stars, turned his mind away from the despair –

You know, observed the logical side of him, if you're not allowed to think any negative thoughts because that will open your mind to the Dementors, that's a cognitive bias too, how would you know if it actually was time to give up?

A desperate sobbing scream rose up from below, words mixed in like "no" and "away". The prisoners knew, the prisoners could feel it.

The Dementors were coming.

"My Lord, you – you should not risk yourself for me – take back your Cloak –"

"Be silent, fool," hissed an angry voice. "When I decide to sacrifice you I will tell you so."

She's got a valid point, said Slytherin. You shouldn't risk yourself for her, there's no way her life is as valuable as yours.

For an instant Harry considered sacrificing Bellatrix to save himself –

And in that moment, some of the dim orange gas-light seemed to flee the corridor, a touch of cold crept over Harry's fingertips. And he knew, then, that to think of leaving Bellatrix to the shadows of Death, would make him vulnerable once more. Even in the moment of making the decision, he might become unable to cast the Patronus Charm, for he would have given up the thought that had saved him before.

It occurred to Harry that he could still take the Cloak from Bellatrix afterward, even if he couldn't cast the Patronus Charm; and then he had to wrench his thoughts away from that option, focus firmly on his decision not to do it, or he might have just fallen over where he stood. For the whirlpool of emptiness swirling around him was now deadly strong; there were screams coming from above, and the screams below had stopped.

This is ridiculous, said his logical side. Rational agents shouldn't have to put up with this sort of censored reasoning process, all the theorems assume

that how you think doesn't affect reality apart from your actual actions, which is why you're free to choose an optimal algorithm without worrying about how your thoughts interact with Dementors –

...

That is a really dumb idea, said Gryffindor. Even I think it's a dumb idea and I'm your Gryffindor side. You're not seriously going to just stand there and –



"We have a fix!" shouted Ora, holding up her magic mirror as though in triumph. "The Dementor outside the inner wall pointed to level seven, C spiral, that's where they are!"

Her Aurors were looking at her expectantly.

"No," Amelia said in a level voice. "That's where one of them is. The Dementors still can't find Bellatrix Black. We are not running down there and letting her through in the confusion, and we are not dividing our forces to be ambushed. So long as we move with caution, we can't lose. Tell Scrimgeour and Shacklebolt to keep going down level by level, same as before –"

The old wizard was already striding forward. Amelia didn't even bother cursing him, this time, as once again their carefully constructed shields parted like water and rippled gently in his wake.



Harry waited at the beginning of the corridor, just next to the stairs leading upward. Bellatrix and the snake were behind him, concealed by the Deathly Hallow that Harry had mastered; he knew, though he could not see, that the emaciated sorceress was sitting upon the stairs, slumped back, since Harry had withdrawn his Hover Charm to free up his mind and magic.

Harry's eyes were fixed on the far end of the corridor, next to the stairs that led downward. Not in his mind now, but in true reality, the light in the corridor had dimmed, the temperature had fallen. The fear thundered over him and around him like a sea whipped by hurricane winds, and the sucking emptiness had become a howling draw toward some approaching black hole.

Up the stairs at the far end, floating smoothly through the dying air, came the voids, the absences, the wounds in the world.

And Harry expected them to stop.

With all the will and focus he could muster, Harry expected them to stop.

Anticipated their stopping.

Believed they would stop.

...that was the idea, anyway...

Harry shut down the dangerous stray thought, and expected the Dementors to halt. They had no intelligence of their own, they were just wounds in the world, their form and structure was borrowed from others' expectations. People had been able to negotiate with them, offer them victims in exchange for cooperation, only because they believed Dementors would bargain. So if Harry believed hard enough that the voids would turn and go, they would turn and go.

But the wounds in the world kept coming, the swirling fear seemed like a solid thing now, the emptiness tearing at matter as well as mind, substance as well as spirit, you could see the metal beginning to tarnish as the holes in the world passed.

A small sound came from behind him, from Bellatrix, but she said no word, for she had been instructed to remain silent.

Don't think of them as creatures, think of them as psychosensitive objects, they can be controlled if I can control myself –

The problem was that he couldn't control himself so easily, couldn't make himself believe blue was green by an act of will. Couldn't suppress all those thoughts about how irrational it was to make yourself believe something. How impossible it was to trick yourself into believing something if you knew that was what you were doing. All the training Harry had given himself against self-deception was refusing to switch off no matter how harmful it was in this unique special case –

The shadows of Death crossed the halfway point of the corridor, and Harry held up his hand, fingers spread, and said in a voice of firm and confident command, "Stop."

The shadows of Death stopped.

Behind Harry, Bellatrix gave a strangled gasp, like it was being torn out of her.

Harry gestured to her, the signal he had set up in advance which meant, repeat what you heard the Dementors say.

"They say," Bellatrix said, her voice was shaking, "they said, 'Bellatrix Black was promised us. Tell us where she hides, and you will be spared.'"

"Bellatrix?" Harry said, making his voice sound amused. "She escaped a while ago."

A moment later, Harry realized that he should have said that Bellatrix was among the Aurors in the top level, that would have caused more confusion –

No, it was wrong to think of the Dementors as trickable, they were merely things, they were controlled only by expectations –

“They say,” Bellatrix said in a cracked voice, “they say they know you’re lying.”

The voids began to move forward again.

Her anticipations are more solidly believed than mine; she is controlling them, unwittingly –

“Don’t resist,” Harry said, pointing his wand behind him.

“I, I love you, farewell, my Lord –”

“Somnium.”

It had helped, strangely enough, hearing those particular awful words, understanding Bellatrix’s mistake; it reminded Harry why he was fighting.

“Stop,” Harry said again. Bellatrix was asleep; now only his own will, his own expectations rather, should control those spheres of annihilation –

But they kept on gliding forward, and Harry couldn’t stop himself from worrying that the previous experience had damaged his confidence, which meant that he wouldn’t be able to stop them, and as he noticed himself thinking that, he doubted even more – he needed more time to prepare, really ought to practice controlling just one Dementor in a cage first –

There was only a quarter of corridor now between Harry and the shadows of death, the empty winds were so strong that Harry could feel the erosion beginning in the cracks of himself.

And the thought came to Harry that maybe he was wrong, maybe Dementors did have their own desires and planning capability. Or maybe they were controlled by how everyone thought they worked, not just whoever was closest to them. And in either case –

Harry drew up his wand into the starting position for the Patronus Charm, and spoke.

“One of your number went to Hogwarts and did not return. It no longer exists; that Death is dead.”

The Dementors halted, a dozen wounds in the world stood motionless, while the emptiness screamed around them like a deadly wind to nowhere.

“Turn and go and do not speak of this to anyone, little shadows, or I will destroy you as well.”

Harry's fingers slid into the starting position for the Patronus Charm, and readied himself to cast it; in his mind, the Earth shone among the stars, the day side bright and blue with reflected sunlight, the night side glimmering with the light of human cities. Harry wasn't bluffing, wasn't trying to do anything tricky with his thoughts. The shadows of Death would move forward and be annihilated, or they would depart, he was equally ready for either...

And the voids retreated back as smoothly as they came, the winds of nothingness lessening with each meter they traversed, as they slid back down the stairs, and departed.

Whether they truly had their own pseudo-intelligence, or whether Harry had finally succeeded in expecting them to go... that, Harry didn't know.

But they were gone.

Harry took a moment to sit down beside the unconscious Bellatrix on the stairs, and slumped down as she was slumped, closing his eyes for a moment, only a moment, he sure as hell wasn't planning to sleep in Azkaban, but he needed to take that moment. The Aurors would still be going down the stairs slowly, Harry hoped, so it wouldn't hurt to take just five minutes to rest. Harry was careful to keep his thoughts positive, cheerful, my, I'll just have some nice regenerative rest here, and then I'll feel better, rather than, say, my, I'll just collapse in emotional and physical exhaustion, because the Dementors hadn't yet retreated very far.

And by the way, Harry said to his brain, you're fired.



"I found him!" cried the old wizard's voice.

Who? thought Amelia, as she turned to see Dumbledore's return, carrying in his arms –

– the one sight, the one person, she would never have expected to behold –

– a man in torn red robes, looking scorched like he'd fought a small war, blood dried on many cuts. His eyes were open, and he was chewing on a bar of chocolate, held in his one living hand.

Bahry One-Hand was alive.

A glad cry went up, her Aurors lowering their wands, some of them already starting to rush forward.

"Stay on guard!" bellowed Amelia. "Check them both for Polyjuice – scan Bahry for small Animagi or traps –"



“Innervate. Wingardium Leviosa.”

There was a pause. Harry sensed, though he could not quite see, that the invisible woman was pushing herself to her feet, and turning her head to look around. “I’m... alive...?”

Harry was sorely tempted to say no, just to see what she made of that. Instead he hissed, “Don’t ask stupid questions.”

“What happened?” whispered Bellatrix.

And the Dark Lord gave a wild, high-pitched laugh, and said, “I scared the Dementors away, my dear Bella.”

There was a pause. Harry wished he could see Bellatrix’s face; had he said the wrong thing?

After a time, in a quavering voice, “Could it be, my Lord, that in your new form, you have begun to care for me –”

“No,” Harry said coldly, and turned from her (though he kept his wand on her), and began walking. “And take care that you do not offend me again, or I will abandon you here, use or no use. Now follow, or be left behind; I have work to do.”

Harry strode forward, not listening to the gasping sounds that came from behind him; he knew Bellatrix was following.

...because the last thing that woman needed, the very last thing she needed to start thinking before the psychiatric healer began trying to deprogram her, was to believe that her Dark Lord could ever love her back.



The old wizard smoothed his silver beard contemplatively, looking at where Auror Bahry was being carried out of the room by two strong Aurors.

“Do you understand this, Amelia?”

“No,” she said simply. She suspected some trap they hadn’t yet been able to fathom, which was why Auror Bahry was going to be kept outside the main party and guarded.

“Perhaps,” the old wizard said at length, “whichever of their number can cast the Patronus Charm, is more than a simple hostage. Someone who was tricked into this, mayhap? For whatever reason, they left your Auror alive; let us not be the first to wield deadly curses, when we find them –”

“I see,” said the old witch in sudden realization, “that was their plan. It costs them nothing to Oblivate him and leave him alive, and makes us hesitate –” Amelia nodded decisively, and said to her people, “We carry on as before.”

The old wizard sighed. "Any news from the Dementors?"

"If I tell you," Amelia snapped, "will you run off again?"

"It costs you nothing, Amelia," the old wizard said quietly, "and may save one of your own people the fight."

Costs me nothing except my chance at vengeance –

But that was nothing compared to the other, the annoying old wizard was often right in the end, it was part of what made him so annoying.

"The Dementors have ceased to answer questions about the other person they said they saw," Amelia told him, "and they will not say why, nor where."

Dumbledore turned to the blazing silver phoenix on his shoulder, whose light illuminated the whole corridor, and received a silent headshake in reply. "I cannot detect them either," said Dumbledore. Then he shrugged. "I suppose I shall just walk the whole spiral from top to bottom and see if anything turns up, shall I?"

Amelia would have ordered him not to do it, if she thought that would have made the tiniest difference.

"Albus," said Amelia as the old wizard turned to depart, "even you can be ambushed."

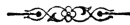
"Nonsense, my dear," the old wizard said cheerfully as he strode off yet again, waving as though in admonition his fifteen-inch wand of unidentifiable dark-grey wood, "I'm invincible."

There was a pause.

("He didn't just really say that –" whispered the newest Auror present, a still-prim young lady by the name of Noelle Curry, to the senior member of her trio, Auror Brooks. "Did he?")

("He can get away with it," Isabel whispered back to her, "he's Dumbledore, not even Fate takes him seriously anymore.")

"And that," Amelia said heavily, for the benefit of the younger Aurors, "is why we never call him in on anything unless we absolutely must."



Harry lay very still on the hard bench that served as the bed of this cell, a blanket pulled over him, staying as absolutely motionless as he could while he waited for the fear to return. There was a Patronus approaching, and a powerful one. Bellatrix was hidden by a Deathly Hallow, no easy Charm would penetrate that; but Harry did not know what other arts the Aurors might employ to detect his own self, and dared not reveal his ignorance by

asking her. So Harry lay on a hard bed, in a cell with a locked door, and the mighty metal door locked behind him, in absolute darkness, with a thin blanket pulled over him, hoping that whoever it was wouldn't look in, or wouldn't look too closely if they did –

That wasn't a point Harry could affect, really, that part of his fate lay entirely in the hands of the Hidden Variables. Most of his mind was concentrating on the ongoing Transfiguration he was performing.

Listening in the silence, Harry heard the quick footsteps approach; they paused outside his door, and then –

– continued onward.

Soon the fear returned.

Harry didn't allow himself to notice his own relief, any more than he allowed himself to notice the fear. He was holding in his mind the form of a Muggle device rather larger than a car battery, and slowly applying that Form to the substance of an ice cube (which Harry had frozen using *Frigideiro* on water from a bottle in his pouch). You weren't supposed to Transfigure things to be burned, but between the original substance being water, and the Bubble-Head Charm to protect their air supply, Harry hoped that this wouldn't make him or anyone else sick.

Now it was just a question of whether there would be enough time before the Aurors did a detailed check on this cell block, for Harry to finish this Transfiguration, and the partial Transfiguration he would do after that –



When the old wizard strode back empty-handed, even Amelia began to feel a twinge of worry. She and the other two Auror teams had worked a third of the way down the three spirals, in synchrony so as not to allow any gap in their coverage that could be jumped by cutting through a ceiling, and they'd yet to find any sign.

"Might I ask you to report?" Amelia said, keeping the edge out of her voice.

"First a simple walk from top to bottom," said the old wizard. He was frowning, wrinkling his face even more than usual. "I examined Bellatrix's cell, and found a death doll left in her place. This escape was meant to go unremarked, I think. There is something hidden in the corner beneath a scrap of cloth; I left that undisturbed for your Aurors to examine. On the

return trip, I opened each door and looked within the cells. I saw nothing Disillusioned, only the prisoners –”

They were interrupted by a scream from the red-golden phoenix, and all her Aurors flinched from it. Condemnation was in it, and an urgent demand that almost started Amelia running from the corridor on the spot.

“– in rather distressing condition,” Dumbledore said quietly. For a moment the blue eyes were very cold beneath the half-moon glasses. “Will any of you speak to me of the consequences of their actions?”

“I did not –” Amelia began.

“I know,” said the old wizard. “My apologies, Amelia.” He sighed. “Some of the more recent prisoners had scraps of their magic left, when I looked upon them, but I sensed no uneaten power; the strongest had only as much magic left as a first-year child. I heard Fawkes scream in distress many times, but never challenge. It seems you shall have to continue your search; they can hide well enough to escape my mere glance.”



When Harry finished his first Transfiguration, he sat up, pulled back the blanket that had covered him, cast a quick Lumos, glanced at his watch, and was shocked to see that nearly an hour and thirty minutes had passed. How much of that time had gone by since someone had opened the door and then closed it again – Harry hadn’t been looking in that direction, of course – that, Harry couldn’t guess.

“My Lord...?” whispered Bellatrix’s voice, soft and very tentative.

“You may speak now,” Harry said. He’d told her to remain silent while he worked.

“That was Dumbledore who looked upon us.”

Pause.

“Interesting,” Harry said neutrally. He was glad he had not noticed this at the time. That sounded like a rather close shave.

Harry said a word to his pouch, and began drawing forth the magical device that he would mate to the product of his hour’s labor. Then, when that was drawn forth, another word brought forth a tube of industrial-strength glue; before using it, Harry cast the Bubble-Head Charm on himself and Bellatrix, and had Bellatrix cast the same Charm on the snake, so that the glue fumes in the enclosed cell would not harm them.

When the glue had begun to set, binding technology to magic, Harry laid it down upon the bed, and sat down on the floor, resting his magic and will for a moment before essaying the next Transfiguration.

“My Lord...” Bellatrix said hesitantly.

“Yes?” said the dry voice.

“What is that device you made?”

Harry thought rapidly. It seemed like a good chance to check his plans with her, under the guise of leading questions.

“Consider, my dear Bella,” said Harry smoothly. “How difficult is it for a powerful wizard to cut the walls of Azkaban?”

There was a pause, and then Bellatrix’s voice came, slow and puzzled, “Not difficult at all, my Lord...?”

“Indeed,” said the dry, high voice of Bella’s master. “Suppose one were to do this, and fly through the hole on a broomstick, and soar up and away. Rescuing a prisoner from Azkaban would seem easy then, would it not?”

“But my Lord...” said Bella. “The Aurors would – they have their own broomsticks, my Lord, fast ones –”

Harry listened, it was as he had thought. The Dark Lord replied, again in tones of smoothly Socratic inquiry, and Bellatrix asked a further question, which Harry had not expected, but Harry’s own counterquestion showed that it should not matter in the end. And in response to Bellatrix’s last question, the Dark Lord only smiled, and said that it was time for him to resume his work.

And then Harry got up from the floor of the cell, went to the far end of the cells, and touched his wand to the hard surface of the wall – the wall of Azkaban, the solid metal that separated them from direct exposure to the Dementors’ pit.

And Harry began a partial Transfiguration.

This spell would go faster, Harry hoped. He’d spent hours and hours practicing the unique magic, which had made it routine, not much more difficult for him than ordinary Transfiguration. The shape he was changing had not all that much total volume, the Transfigured shape might be tall and wide and long, but it was very thin. Half a millimeter, Harry had thought, would be enough, considering the perfect smoothness...

On the long bench that served as a prison bed, where Harry had set down the Transfigured technological device and the mated magic item for the glue to dry, tiny letters in golden script gleamed on the Muggle artifact. Harry

hadn't really planned for them to be there, but they'd kept running through the back of his mind, and so seemed to have become part of the Transfigured form.

There were many different things Harry could have said before using this particular triumph of technological ingenuity. Any number of things that would be, in one sense or another, appropriate. Or at least things that Harry could have said, would have said, if Bellatrix had not been there.

But there was only one thing to say, that Harry would only get the chance to say just this once, and probably never get a better chance to say ever again. (Or think, anyway, if he couldn't say it.) He hadn't seen the actual movie, but he'd seen a preview, and for some reason the phrase had stuck in his mind.

The tiny golden letters upon the Muggle device said,
All right, you primitive screwheads! Listen up!

THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT, CONSTRAINED COGNITION, PART VIII

IN darkness absolute, a boy stood holding his wand to the solid metal wall of Azkaban, essaying a magic that only three other people in the world would have believed possible, and that none save he alone could wield.

Of course a powerful wizard could've cut through the wall in seconds, with a gesture and a word.

For an average adult it might have been a matter of a few minutes' work, and afterward they would have been winded.

But to accomplish the same end as a first-year Hogwarts student, you had to be efficient.

Luckily – well, not luckily, luck had nothing to do with it – conscientiously, Harry had practiced Transfiguration for an extra hour every day, to the point where he was ahead of even Hermione in that one class; he'd practiced partial Transfiguration to the point where his thoughts had begun taking the true universe for granted, so that it required only slightly more effort to keep its timeless quantum nature in mind, even as he kept a firm mental separation between the concept of Form and the concept of substance.

And the problem with that art having become so routine...

...was that Harry could think about other things while he was doing it.

Somehow his thoughts had managed to not go there, to not confront the obvious, until he was faced with the prospect of really actually doing it in just a few minutes.

What Harry was about to do...

...was dangerous.

Really dangerous.

Someone-might-actually-genuinely-get-killed dangerous.

Facing down twelve Dementors without a Patronus Charm had been scary, but merely scary. Harry could have cast the Patronus Charm, would have cast it as soon as he thought he was in danger of not being able to do so, as soon as he felt his resistance beginning to fail. And even if that hadn't

worked... even so, unless the Dementors had been instructed to Kiss anyone they found, failure shouldn't have been fatal.

This was different.

The Transfigured Muggle device could explode and kill them.

The interface between the technology and the magic could fail in any number of ways and kill them.

The Aurors could get in a lucky shot.

It was just, well...

Seriously dangerous.

Harry had caught his mind trying to argue itself into believing that it was safe.

And sure, the whole thing could work, but...

But even leaving out that rationalists weren't ever allowed to argue themselves into things, Harry knew he couldn't possibly have argued himself into estimating less than a 20% probability of dying.

Lose, said Hufflepuff.

Lose, said the voice of Professor Quirrell in his mind.

Lose, said his mental model of Hermione and Professor McGonagall and Professor Flitwick and Neville Longbottom and, well, basically everyone Harry knew except for Fred and George, who would have gone for it in a hot second.

He should just go find Dumbledore and turn himself in. He should, he really really should, it was the only sane thing to do at this point.

And if it'd been only Harry on the mission, only his own life that'd been at stake, he would have; he surely would have.

The part that was almost causing him to lose his concentration on the partial Transfiguration he was performing, the part that was threatening to open him to the Dementors...

...was Professor Quirrell, still unconscious, still a snake.

If Professor Quirrell went to Azkaban for his part in the escape, he would die. He probably wouldn't last even a week. He was that sensitive.

It was that simple.

If Harry lost here...

He lost Professor Quirrell.

Even though he's probably evil, said the Hufflepuff part of him quietly. Even so?

It wasn't a decision that Harry had made in any conscious way. He just couldn't do it. Losing was for House points, not people.

If you think your own life is valuable enough that you're not willing to take on an eighty percent probability of dying in order to protect all the prisoners in Azkaban, his Slytherin side observed, there's no way you can justify taking a twenty percent risk to your life to save Bellatrix and Professor Quirrell. The math doesn't add up, you can't be assigning consistent utilities over outcomes here.

The logical side of him noted that Slytherin had just won the argument.

Harry kept the Form in his mind, kept on casting the spell. He could always just abort the mission when he was done with the Transfiguration, he didn't want to lose the effort he'd already invested.

And then Harry thought of something else that suddenly made it very hard to keep the magic going, very hard to keep up his resistance to the Dementors.

What if the portkey doesn't take us where Professor Quirrell said it did?

It was obvious in retrospect the moment he thought about it.

Even if the planned escape went completely right, even if the Muggle device worked and didn't explode and didn't interact badly with the mated magic item, even if the Aurors didn't get in a lucky shot, even if Harry made it far enough away from Azkaban to use the portkey...

...there might not be a psychiatric healer at the end of it.

That was something Harry had believed when he'd trusted Professor Quirrell, and he'd forgotten to re-evaluate it after Professor Quirrell was no longer to be trusted.

You can't do this, said Hufflepuff. At this point we're talking mere stupidity.

Cold seemed to spread through the room, but Harry kept the Transfiguration going, even as his resistance against the Dementors faltered.

I can't lose Professor Quirrell.

He tried to kill a police officer, said Hufflepuff. You already lost him, in that moment. Bellatrix is probably just what everyone thinks she is. Just take your Cloak back, go find Dumbledore and tell him you were tricked.

No, thought Harry desperately, not without talking to Professor Quirrell, there might be an explanation, I don't know, maybe he was standing far enough away from my Patronus that the Dementors got to him... I don't

understand, it doesn't make sense on any hypothesis, why he would do that... I can't just...

Harry turned his mind away from that chain of thought before it completely broke his resistance to the fear, because he couldn't think of feeding Professor Quirrell to Dementors while staying resolved against Death, it was a cognitive impossibility.

Your reasoning is artificially impaired, observed the logical part of him calmly, find a way to unimpair it.

All right, let's just generate alternatives, Harry thought. Not choose, not weigh, certainly not commit... just think about what else I might be able to do besides the original plan.

And Harry went on cutting the hole in the wall. He was using partial Transfiguration on a thin cylindrical shell of metal, two meters in diameter and half a millimeter thick, running all the way through the wall. He was Transfiguring that half-millimeter thickness of metal into motor oil. Motor oil was a liquid and you weren't to Transfigure liquids because they might evaporate, but he and Bellatrix and the snake all had Bubble-Head Charms. And Harry would cast Finite on the oil immediately after, dispelling his own Transfiguration...

...as soon as the separated and lubricated hunk of metal slid out of the wall and onto the floor of their cell, he'd slanted it so gravity would pull it in, once the Transfiguration was done.

If Harry and Bellatrix didn't exit on his broomstick through the resulting hole in the wall...

Harry's brain suggested that he could try to Transfigure a surface cover over the hole in the wall, leaving a space for Bellatrix and Professor Quirrell to hide in, wearing the Cloak, while Harry turned himself in. And Professor Quirrell would eventually wake up, and he and Bellatrix could try to figure out how to exit Azkaban on their own.

It was, first of all, a dumb idea, and second, there would still be a huge hunk of metal on the floor of the cell, which would give it away.

And then Harry's brain saw the obvious.

Let Bellatrix and Professor Quirrell use the escape route you invented. You stay behind, and turn yourself in.

Bellatrix and Professor Quirrell were the ones whose lives were at stake. They were gaining, not losing, from taking the risk.

And there was no reason, no sane reason at all, for Harry to go with them.

A calm came over Harry as he thought it, the cold and darkness that had been wavering around the fringes of his mind retreated. Yes, that was it, that was the creative outside-the-box route, that was the hidden third alternative. The falseness of the dilemma was obvious in retrospect. If Harry turned himself in, he didn't have to turn in Bellatrix and Professor Quirrell. If Bellatrix and Professor Quirrell took a dangerous escape route, Harry didn't need to go with them.

Harry didn't even need to face the embarrassment of admitting he'd been tricked, if he ordered Bellatrix to remove the memory. Everyone would just assume he'd been kidnapped, including Harry himself. Admittedly, there was no plausible reason why the Dark Lord would ever ask Bellatrix to do that; but Harry could simply smile and tell Bellatrix she wasn't allowed to know, and that would be that...



Her Auror team had gotten around three-quarters of the way down Azkaban, as had the other two teams on the other two spirals. Amelia was feeling tenser already, though she was betting on the criminals hiding on the second-to-lowest floor, part of her wished Dumbledore had thought to check that specific floor more carefully and part of her was glad he hadn't.

And then there was a distant sound, like a tiny 'tink' noise coming from far away. Like a very loud sound coming from the second-to-lowest floor, say.

Amelia looked at Dumbledore before she realized, before she managed to stop herself.

The old wizard shrugged, gave her a small smile, said, "Since you asked it, Amelia," and went off yet again.



"Finite Incantatem," Harry said to the oil coating the giant chunk of metal on the floor. He hardly heard himself speak, his ears were still ringing from the gigantic thud of the solid metal sliding out of the wall and falling. (He should have put up a Quieting Charm, in retrospect, though that wouldn't have stopped the noise from spreading through the solid metal floor.) And then Harry said it again, "Finite Incantatem" to the oil coating the two-meter hole in the wall, spreading the effect wide; it was his own magic Harry was canceling, which made the spell almost effortless. Harry was feeling a bit

tired now, but that was the last use of magic he would need. He hadn't even needed to do it, really, but Harry didn't want to leave Transfigured liquid lying around, and he didn't want to betray the secret of partial Transfiguration either.

It seemed very... inviting, that two-meter hole leading to freedom.

The light from outside coming in... wasn't exactly the Sun shining on his face, but it was brighter than anything of Azkaban's interior.

Harry was tempted to just go with, just hop on the broomstick with Bellatrix and the snake. Chances were that they would get out safely. And if they did get out safely, and Harry came with, then he and Professor Quirrell could go back in time and look perfectly innocent, everything could go back to normal.

If Harry stayed behind and turned himself in... then even if everyone assumed Harry had been a hostage, assumed Harry had lied to Professor McGonagall's Patronus at wandpoint... even if Harry himself got off lightly, well...

It wasn't likely that the Defense Professor would go on teaching at Hogwarts.

Professor Quirrell would have reached the predestined end of his career, in February of the school year.

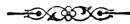
And yes, Professor McGonagall would kill Harry, and yes, it would be slow and painful.

But staying behind was the sensible, safe, sane thing to do, and Harry was feeling more relaxed than regretful.

Harry turned to Bellatrix; he opened his mouth to instruct her a final time –

And there was a hiss, a weak hiss, a hiss that sounded slow and confused, and the hiss said,

“What wass... that noise?”



Through the corridor the old wizard strode. He came to a metal door and opened it, already knowing from memory that the cells within were empty.

Seven mighty and discerning incantations the wizard spoke then, before he moved on; it would be little enough exertion in total, with so few cells left to check.



"Teacher," Harry hissed. So many emotions bubbling up in him, all at once. He knew, though he could not see, that the green snake around Bellatrix's shoulders, was slowly lifting its head to look around. "Are you... all right, teacher?"

"Teacher?" came the weak, confused hiss. "Where iss this?"

"Prisson," Harry hissed, "the prisson with life-eaterss, we were to resscue a woman, you and I. You tried to sslay the protector man, I blocked your killing curss, there was a ressonance between uss... you fell unconssciouss, I had to defeat the protector man mysself... my guardian Charm was disspelled, the life-eaterss could tell the protectorss that the woman had esscaped. There iss ssomeone here who can ssense my guardian Charm, probably the sschoolmasster... so had to disspell my guardian Charm, find different way to hide you and the woman from life-eaterss without guardian Charm, learn to protect mysself without guardian Charm, sscafe off life-eaterss without guardian Charm, then devisse new esscape plan for you and the woman, and finally, cut hole in thick metal wall of prisson even though I am only firsst-year sstudent. No time to explain, you musst go now. If we never meet again, teacher, then I was glad to know you for a time, even though you are probably evil. It iss good to have the chance to ssay thiss much: Goodbye."

And Harry took the broomstick and presented it to Bellatrix, saying simply, "Get on."

He had decided to keep the memories. For one thing, they were important. For another, he and the Defense Professor had started planning this a week ago, and Harry wasn't about to obliterate the whole last week, or explain to Bellatrix exactly what needed to be Obliviated. Harry could probably fool Veritaserum, and if Dumbledore insisted that Harry drop his Occlumency shields for a deeper examination... well, Harry had acted heroically throughout.

"Sstop!" said the snake. Its voice was stronger now. "Sstop, sstop, sstop! What do you mean, goodbye?"

"Esscape plan iss rissky," said Harry. "My life iss not at ssake, only yourss and herss. Sso I am ssaying, turning mysself in -"

"No!" said the snake. The hiss was forceful. "Musst not! Not permitted!"

Bellatrix mounted the broomstick; Harry could sense (but never see) her head turning to look at him, she said no word. Awaiting him, perhaps, or merely awaiting his orders.

"No longer trusst you," Harry said simply. "Not ssince you tried to sslay

the protector man.”

And the snake hissed, “I did not sseek to sslay the protector man! Are you fool, boy? Sslaying him would not make ssensse, evil or no!”

The Earth ceased to turn on its axis, paused in its orbit around the Sun.

The snake’s hiss was now more furious than anything Harry had ever heard from the human Professor Quirrell. “Sslay him? Had I ssought to sslay him he would have been dead within ssecondss, fool boy, he wass no match for me! I ssought to ssbdue, to dominate, force him to drop sshieldss upon hiss mind, needed to read him, to know who awaited hiss reply, learn detailss for memory sspell –”

“You casst killing cursse!”

“Knew he would dodge!”

“Wass hiss life worth sso little? What if he did not dodge?”

“Would have pushshed him out of the way with own magic, fool boy!”

Again the pause in the planet’s spin. Harry hadn’t thought of that.

“Witlesss dunce of a plotter,” hissed the snake, so angrily that the hisses seemed to overlap and slither over each other’s tails, “clever imbecile, cunning idiot, fool of an untrained Sslytherin, your missplaced misstrust hass ruined –”

“Thiss iss not a fair time to argue,” Harry observed mildly. The surge of relief trying to flood through him was canceled by the increased tension. “Ssince I cannot get angry at you properly, without opening myssself to life-eaterss. Musst russh, ssomeone may have heard noisse –”

“Explain esscape plan,” the snake said imperiously. “Sswiftly!”

Harry explained. Parseltongue didn’t have words for the Muggle technology, but Harry described the function and Professor Quirrell seemed to understand.

There were a few short hisses, the snakish equivalent of a bark of surprised laughter, and then, snapped commands. “Tell woman to look away, casst sspell of ssilence, sset guardian Charm outside door. Will transsform myssself, make few sswift improvementss to your invention, give woman emergency potion sso sshe can sshield uss, transsform back before you disspell Charm. Plan will be ssafer, then.”

“And am I to believe,” Harry hissed, “that healer for woman truly awaitss uss?”

“Usse ssensse, boy! Ssupposse I am evil. To end usse of you here iss obvioussly not what I planned. Misssion iss target of opportunity, invented

after ssaw your guardian Charm, whole affair meant to be unnoticed, hid when left eating-place. Obviously you will ssee persson pretending to be healer on arrival! Go back to eating-place afterward, original plan carriess on undissturbed!"

Harry stared at the invisible snake.

On the one hand, saying it like that made Harry feel rather dumb.

And on the other hand, it wasn't exactly reassuring.

"Sso," Harry hissed, "what iss your plan for me, precissely?"

"You ssaid no time," came the snake's hiss, "but plan iss for you to rule country, obviously, even your young noble friend hass undersstood that by now, assk him on return if you wissh. Will ssay no more now, iss time to fly, not sspeak."



The old wizard reached out toward another metal door, from behind which came a endless dead mutter, "I'm not serious, I'm not serious, I'm not serious..." The red-golden phoenix on his shoulder was already screaming urgently, and the old wizard was already wincing, when –

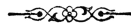
Another cry pierced the corridor, phoenix-like but not the true phoenix's call.

The wizard's head turned, looked at the blazing silver creature on his other shoulder, even as ephemeral and substanceless talons launched the spell-entity into the air.

The false phoenix flew down the corridor.

The old wizard raced off after, legs churning like a spry young man of sixty.

The true phoenix screamed once, twice, and a third time, hovering before the metal door; and then, when it became clear that its master would not return for all its calling, flew reluctantly after.



Professor Quirrell had assumed his true form, this time – Polyjuice only lasted for an hour without redosing – and though the Defense Professor was pale, leaning against the metal bars of the nearest cell, his magic was strong enough to seize his wand without a word, even as Bellatrix doffed the Cloak and placed it obediently in Harry's waiting hand. The sense of doom was building once more, though not in full force, as the Defense Professor's power

returned, the fringes of its vast force clashing with Harry's slight childish aura.

Harry said aloud the description of his Muggle device, naming it to the observing wizard, and then a Finite from Harry turned all his hard work back into an ice cube. Professor Quirrell could not cast spells on something Harry had Transfigured, for that would be an interaction, however slight, between their magics, but –

Three seconds after, Professor Quirrell was holding his own Transfigured version of the Muggle device. A single barked word and a sweep of his wand, and the residue of glue was gone from the magical item; three more incantations later, the magical and technological were fused together as though into a single thing, and Charms of Unbreakability and flawless function had been cast upon the Muggle device.

(Harry felt a lot better about doing this under adult supervision.)

A potion was thrown to Bellatrix, and Professor Quirrell and Harry both commanded, "Drink," as though speaking in the same voice. The emaciated woman had already been lifting it to her lips, without waiting; for it was evident to anyone that this snake Animagus was a servant of the Dark Lord, and a powerful and trusted one.

Harry finished pulling the hood of the Cloak of Invisibility over his head.

A brief and terrible magic lashed out from the Defense Professor's wand, scouring the hole in the wall, scarring the huge chunk of metal that lay in the room's midst; as Harry had requested, saying that the method he'd used might identify him.

"Left-hand glove," Harry said to his pouch, and drew it forth, and put it on.

A gesture from the Defense Professor made a harness appear upon Bellatrix's shoulders, and another, smaller cloth device upon her hand, and something like handcuffs on her wrists, even as the woman finished drinking the potion.

A strange, unhealthy color seemed to come over Bellatrix's pale face, she straightened, her sunken eyes seemed brighter and far more dangerous...

...small wisps of steam were coming out of her ears...

(Harry decided not to think about that part.)

...and Bellatrix Black laughed, then, sudden mad laughter that rang much too loudly amid the small prison cells of Azkaban.

(Very soon, the Defense Professor had said, Bellatrix would fall unconscious and stay that way for quite awhile, the price of the potion she had taken; but for just a few moments she would regain perhaps a twentieth part of the power she had once wielded.)

The Defense Professor threw his wand toward Bellatrix, and an instant later blurred into a green snake.

An instant after that the Dementors' fear returned to the room.

Bellatrix flinched only slightly, caught the wand, and gestured without a word; the snake flew up and was inserted into the harness on her back.

Harry said "Up!" to the broomstick.

Bellatrix attached the wand to the holster on her hand.

Harry leaped onto the two-person broomstick in the lead position.

Bellatrix followed behind him, she took the cufflike devices on her wrists and chained her hands to the grips of the broomstick, even as Harry's right hand shoved his wand into his pouch.

And the three shot forward through the hole in the wall –

– emerging into the open air, directly above the Dementors' pit, in the interior of the vast triangular prism that was Azkaban, the blue sky now clearly visible above them, shining down its daylight.

Harry angled the broomstick and began accelerating, upward and toward the center of the triangular space. His left hand, gloved to prevent direct contact between his skin and something which Professor Quirrell had Transfigured, held the switch of the control on the Muggle device.

Far above them, distant shouts rang out.

All right, you primitive screwheads!

Aurors on fast racing broomsticks angled out of the sky, diving straight down toward them, faint sparks of light already blazing downward as the first shots were fired.

Listen up!

"Protego Maximus!" shouted Bellatrix in a mighty, cracked voice, followed by a cackling laugh as a shimmering blue field surrounded them.

You see this?

From the decaying pit in the center of Azkaban, over a hundred Dementors rose into the air, appearing to some as a great mass of corpses, a flying graveyard; appearing to another as a conglomerate of absences that seemed to form one vast rip in the world as they slid upward.

This...

The voice of an ancient and powerful wizard bellowed a terrible incantation, and a great blast of white-golden fire shot out of the hole in Azkaban's wall, shapeless for only a moment before it began to form wings.

Is...

And the Aurors activated the Anti-Anti-Gravity Jinx that had been built into the wards of Azkaban, disabling all flying spells whose enchantment had not been cast with the recently changed passphrase.

The lift on Harry's broom switched off.

Gravity, on the other hand, stayed on.

Their broom's upward rise slowed, started to decelerate, began the process of turning into a fall.

My...

But the enchantments that kept the broom pointed in a direction and allowed steering, the enchantments that kept the riders attached and somewhat protected them from acceleration, those enchantments were still functioning.

BROOMSTICK!

Harry hit the ignition switch on the General Technics made, model Berserker PFRC, N-class, ammonium perchlorate composite propellant, solid-fuel rocket that had been mated to his Nimbus X200 two-person broomstick.

And there was noise.

THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT, CURIOSITY, PART IX

BROOMSTICKS had been invented during what a Muggle would have called the Dark Ages, supposedly by a legendary witch named Celestria Relevo, allegedly the great-great-granddaughter of Merlin.

Celestria Relevo, or whichever person or group had really invented those enchantments, hadn't known a darned thing about Newtonian mechanics.

Broomsticks, therefore, worked by Aristotelian physics.

They went where you pointed them.

If you wanted to move straight forward, you pointed them straight forward; you didn't worry about keeping some of the thrust going downward to cancel out the effect of gravity.

If you turned a broomstick, all of its new velocity was in the new direction of pointing, it didn't go sideways based on its old momentum.

Broomsticks had maximum speeds, not maximum accelerations. Not because of anything to do with air resistance, but because a broomstick had some maximum Aristotelian impetus its enchantments could exert.

Harry had never explicitly noticed that before, despite being dextrous enough to get the best grades in flying class. Broomsticks worked so much like the human mind instinctively expected them to work that his brain had managed to entirely overlook their physical absurdity. Harry, on his first Thursday of broomstick lessons, had been distracted by more interesting-seeming phenomena, words written on paper and a glowing red ball. So his brain had simply suspended its disbelief, marked the reality of broomsticks as accepted, and proceeded to have its fun, without ever once thinking of the question whose answer would have been obvious. For it is a sad fact that we only ever think about a tiny fraction of all the phenomena we encounter...

That is the story of how Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres was almost killed by his own lack of curiosity.

Because rockets did not work by Aristotelian physics.

Rockets did not work like a human mind instinctively thought a flying thing should work.

A rocket-assisted broomstick, therefore, did not move like the magical broomsticks upon which Harry was such a very good flyer.

None of this actually went through Harry's mind at the time.

For one thing, the loudest noise he'd ever heard in his life was preventing him from hearing himself think.

For another thing, accelerating upward at four gravities meant that he had around two and a half seconds, total, to go from the bottom to the top of Azkaban.

And even if they were two and a half of the longest seconds in the history of Time, that wasn't enough room to do much thinking.

There was time only to see the lights of the Aurors' curses arrowing down at him, slightly angle the broomstick to avoid them, realize that the broomstick was simply continuing on with mostly the same momentum instead of going in the direction he pointed it, and activate the wordless concepts

crap

and

Newton

whereupon Harry angled the broomstick much harder and then they started to very quickly approach the wall so he angled it back the other way and there were more lights coming down and the Dementors were sliding smoothly up toward them along with some kind of giant winged creature of white-golden flame so Harry wrenched the broomstick back toward the sky but now he was still sliding toward another wall so he tilted the broom slightly and he stopped approaching but he was too close so he tilted it again and then the distant Aurors on their broomsticks weren't very distant at all and he was going to crash into that woman so he spun his broomstick straight away from her and then in another instant he realized his rocket was an extremely powerful flamethrower and in a fraction of a second it would be pointing directly at the Auror so he spun the broomstick sideways as he kept going up and he couldn't remember if it was pointing at any Aurors now but at least it wasn't pointing at her

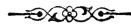
Harry missed another Auror by about a meter, zipping past him on a sideways-pointed flamethrower moving upward at, Harry would later guess, around 300 kilometers per hour.

If there were any screams of roasted Aurors he didn't hear them, but this was not evidence one way or another, because all that Harry was hearing at the moment was an extremely loud noise.

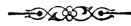
A couple of calmer if not quieter seconds later, there didn't seem to be any Aurors around, or any Dementors, or any giant winged flame creatures, and the vast and terrible edifice of Azkaban looked surprisingly tiny from this height.

Harry got the broomstick pointed toward the Sun, faintly visible through the clouds, it wasn't high in the sky at this time of day and month of winter, and the broomstick accelerated for another two seconds in that direction and picked up an amazing amount of speed very quickly before the solid-fuel rocket burned itself out.

After that, once Harry could hear himself think again, when there was only the howling wind from their ridiculous speed, and Harry's enchantment-assisted fingers gripping the broomstick were merely resisting the decelerating drag of moving way faster than terminal velocity, that was when Harry actually thought all that stuff about Newtonian mechanics and Aristotelian physics and broomsticks and rocketry and the importance of curiosity and how he was never going to do anything this Gryffindor ever again or at least not until after he learned the Dark Lord's secret of immortality and why had he listened to Professor Quirinus "I assure you, boy, I would not attempt this if I did not anticipate my own survival" Quirrell instead of Professor Michael "Son, if you try anything to do with rockets on your own, I mean anything whatsoever without a trained professional watching, you will die and that will make Mum sad" Verres-Evans.



"WHAT?" shrieked Amelia at the mirror.



The wind had died down to a bearable level as the air resistance slowed them, giving Harry plenty of opportunity to listen to the buzzing, ringing sound that seemed to fill his whole brain.

Professor Quirrell had been supposed to cast a Quieting Charm on the rocket exhaust... apparently there were limits to what Quieting Charms could do... in retrospect, Harry should have Transfigured a pair of earplugs,

not just trusted to the Quieting Charm, though that probably wouldn't have been enough either...

Well, magical healing probably had something to treat permanent hearing damage.

No, really, magical healing probably had something to treat that. He'd seen students go to Madam Pomfrey with injuries that sounded a lot worse...

Is there some way of transplanting an imaginary personality to someone else's head? asked Hufflepuff. I don't want to live in yours anymore.

Harry shoved it all into the back of his mind, there really wasn't anything he could do about it right now. Was there anything he should be worrying about –

Then Harry glanced behind him, remembering for the first time to check whether Bellatrix or Professor Quirrell had been blown off the broomstick.

But the green snake was still in its harness, and the emaciated woman was still clinging to the broomstick, her face still charged with unhealthy color and her eyes still bright and dangerous. Her shoulders were shaking like she was laughing hysterically, and her lips were moving as though to shout, but no sound was coming out –

Oh, right.

Harry took off the hood of his cloak, tapped his ears to let her know he couldn't hear.

Whereupon Bellatrix grasped her wand, pointed it at Harry, and suddenly the ringing in his ears diminished, he could hear her.

A moment later he regretted it; the imprecations she was screaming at Azkaban, Dementors, Aurors, Dumbledore, Lucius, Bartemy Couch, something called the Order of the Phoenix, and all who stood in the way of her Dark Lord, et cetera, were not suitable for younger and more sensitive listeners; and her laughter was hurting his newly healed ears.

"Enough, Bella," Harry finally said, and her voice stopped on the instant.

There was a pause. Harry pulled the Cloak back over his head, just on general principles; and realized in the same instant that they might have telescopes down there or something, in retrospect pulling down his hood for even a moment had been an incredibly dumb move, he hoped the whole mission didn't end up failing because of that one error...

We're not really cut out for this, are we? observed Slytherin.

Hey, Hufflepuff objected in sheer reflex, we can't expect to do anything perfectly the first time, we probably just need more practice FORGET I SAID

THAT.

Harry looked back again, saw Bellatrix looking around with a puzzled, wondering look on her face. Her head kept turning, turning.

And finally Bellatrix said, her voice now lower, "My Lord, where are we?"

What do you mean? was what Harry wanted to say, but the Dark Lord would never admit to not understanding anything, so Harry replied, dryly, "We are on a broomstick."

Does she think she's dead, that this is Heaven?

Bellatrix's hands were still chained to the broomstick, so it was only a finger that came up and pointed when she said, "What is that?"

Harry followed the direction of her finger and saw... nothing in particular, actually...

Then Harry realized. After they'd gone up high enough, there hadn't been any clouds to obscure it any more.

"That is the Sun, dear Bella."

It came out remarkably controlled, the Dark Lord sounding perfectly calm and maybe a little impatient with her, even as the tears started down Harry's cheeks.

In the endless cold, in the pitch blackness, the Sun would surely have been...

A happy memory...

Bellatrix's head kept turning.

"And the fluffy things?" she said.

"Clouds."

There was a pause, and then Bellatrix said, "But what are they?"

Harry didn't answer her, there was no way his voice could have been steady, would have been steady, it was all he could do to keep his breathing perfectly regular while he cried.

After a while, Bellatrix breathed, so softly Harry almost didn't hear, "Pretty..."

Her face slowly relaxed, the color leaving its paleness almost as quickly as it had arrived.

Her skeletal body slumped down against the broomstick.

The borrowed wand dangled lifelessly from the strap attached to her unmoving hand.

YOU HAVE GOT TO BE KIDDING –

Harry's mind remembered then, the Pepper-Up potion came at a cost; Bellatrix would sleep for a considerable time, Professor Quirrell had said.

And in the same instant another part of Harry became utterly convinced, looking back at the chalk-white emaciated woman, seeming dead in the bright sunlight than anything Harry had ever seen alive, that she was dead, that she had just uttered her last word, that Professor Quirrell had misjudged the dosage –

– or deliberately sacrificed Bellatrix to guard their own escape –

Is she breathing?

Harry couldn't see if she was breathing.

There was no way, on the broomstick, to reach back and take her pulse.

Harry looked ahead to make sure they weren't about to run into any flying rocks, kept on steering the broomstick toward the Sun, the invisible boy and the possibly dead woman riding off into the afternoon, while his fingers gripped the wood so hard they turned white.

He couldn't reach back and perform artificial respiration.

He couldn't use anything from his healer's kit.

Trust Professor Quirrell to have not endangered her?

Strange, it was strange, that even genuinely believing that Professor Quirrell hadn't meant to kill the Auror (for it would have been stupid), thinking of the Defense Professor's reassurances no longer felt reassuring.

Then it occurred to Harry that he had yet to check –

Harry looked back, and hissed, "Teacher?"

The snake did not stir within its harness, and said no word.

...maybe the snake, not being an actual rider, hadn't been protected from the acceleration. Or maybe coming that close to the Dementors without a shield, even for a moment in Animagus form, had knocked out the Defense Professor.

That wasn't good.

It was to have been Professor Quirrell who told Harry when it was safe to use the portkey.

Harry steered the broomstick with whitened fingers, and thought, he thought very hard for a small unmeasured length of time, during which Bellatrix might or might not have been breathing, during which Professor Quirrell himself might have already been not-breathing for a while.

And Harry decided that while it was possible to recover from the error of wasting the portkey in his possession, it was not possible to recover from

the error of letting a brain go too long without oxygen.

So Harry took the next portkey in the sequence from his pouch, as he slowed his broomstick to a halt in the bright blue air (Harry didn't know, when he thought about it, whether a portkey's ability to adjust for the Earth's rotation also included the ability to match velocity in general with its new surroundings), touched the portkey to the broomstick, and...

Harry paused, still holding the twig, the mate of the twig he had snapped what seemed like two weeks ago. He was feeling a sudden reluctance; his brain seemed to have learned the rule, by some purely neural process of operant conditioning, that Snapping Twigs Is A Bad Idea.

But that wasn't actually logical, so Harry snapped the twig anyway.



There was a thunderous boom from behind the nearby metal door, causing Amelia to drop the mirror she was holding and spin around with her wand in hand, and then that door burst open to reveal Albus Dumbledore, standing there in front of a great smoking hole in the prison wall.

"Amelia," said the old wizard. There was no trace of any of his customary levity, his eyes were hard as sapphires beneath his half-moon glasses. "I must leave Azkaban and I must do so now. Is there any faster way than a broomstick to get beyond the wards?"

"No –"

"Then I require your fastest broomstick, at once!"

The place where Amelia wanted to be was with the Auror who had been injured by that Fiendfyre or whatever it had been.

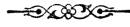
What she needed to do was find out what Dumbledore knew.

"You!" the old witch barked at the team around her. "Keep clearing the corridors until you're at bottom, they may not all have escaped yet!" And then, to the old wizard, "Two broomsticks. You can brief me once we're in the air."

There was a match of stares, but not a long one.



A sickeningly hard yank caught at Harry's abdomen, considerably harder than the yank that had transported him to Azkaban, and this time the distance traversed was great enough that he could hear an instant of silence, watch the unseeable space between spaces, in the crack between one place and another.



The Sun, which had shone on the two only briefly, was swiftly occluded by a raincloud as they shot away from Azkaban, in the direction of the wind and faster than the wind.

"Who's behind it?" shouted Amelia to the broomstick flying a pace away from her.

"One of two people," Dumbledore said back, "I know not, at this instant, who. If the first, then we are in trouble. If the second, we are all in far greater trouble."

Amelia didn't spare any breath for sighs. "When will you know?"

The old wizard's voice was grim, quiet and yet somehow rising above the wind. "Three things they need for perfection, if it is that one: The flesh of the Dark Lord's most faithful servant, the blood of the Dark Lord's greatest foe, and access to a certain grave. I had thought Harry Potter safe, with their attempt on Azkaban all but failed – though I still set guards upon him – but now I am fearful indeed. They have access to Time, someone with a Time-Turner is sending messages for them; and I suspect the kidnap attempt on Harry Potter has already taken place some hours ago. Which is why we have not heard about it, being in Azkaban where Time cannot knot itself. That past came after our own future, you see."

"And if it is the other?" shouted Amelia. What she had heard already was worrying enough; that sounded like the darkest of Dark rituals, and centering on the dead Dark Lord himself.

The old wizard, his face now even grimmer, said nothing, only shook his head.



When the portkey's yank had subsided, the Sun was only just peeking over the horizon, looking more like dawn than sunset, as their broom hovered low above a brief expanse of dark-orange rock and sand, arranged into lumpy hills like someone had kneaded the land's dough a few times and then forgotten to roll it flat. In the near distance, waves rolled past in an endless vista of water, though the ground over which the broomstick hovered was above sea level by meters at the least.

Harry blinked at the dawn colors, and then realized the portkey had been international.

“Oy!” came a brisk, female shout from behind him, and Harry spun the broomstick to look. A middle-aged lady was holding up one hand to her mouth in a deliberate calling gesture, and bustling forward. Her kindly features, narrow eyes, and umber skin marked a race unfamiliar to Harry; she was clad in brilliant purple robes of a style Harry had never seen before; and when her lips opened again she spoke with an accent that Harry couldn’t place, for he was not widely traveled. “Where were you? You’re two hours late! I almost gave up on the lot of you... hello?”

There was a brief pause. Harry’s thoughts seemed to be moving oddly, too slow, everything felt distant, like there was a thick pane of glass between himself and the world, and another thick pane of glass between himself and his feelings, so that he could see, but not touch. It had come over him upon seeing the dawn’s light and the kindly witch, and thinking that it all seemed like a proper end to the adventure.

Then the witch was rushing forward and drawing her wand; a muttered word severed the cuffs that bound the emaciated woman to the broomstick, and Bellatrix was being floated down onto the sandy rock with her skeletal arms and pale legs dangling like lifeless things. “Oh, Merlin,” whispered the witch, “Merlin, Merlin, Merlin...”

She appears concerned, thought an abstract, distant thing between two panes of glass. Is that what a real healer would say, or is it what someone told to put on a performance would say?

As though it wasn’t Harry who spoke, but some other part of himself behind yet another pane of glass, a whisper came from his lips. “The green snake on her back is an Animagus.” Not high the whisper, not cold, only quiet. “He is unconscious.”

The witch’s head twitched up, to look at where that voice had seemed to speak out of empty air, and then looked back down at Bellatrix. “You’re not Mister Jaffe.”

“That would be the Animagus,” whispered Harry’s lips. Oh, thought the Harry behind glass, listening to the sound of his own lips, that makes sense; Professor Quirrell must have used a different name.

“Since when is he a – bah, forget it.” The witch laid her wand on the snake’s nose for a moment, then shook her head sharply. “Nothing wrong with him that a day’s rest won’t cure. Her...”

“Can you wake him up now?” whispered Harry’s lips. Is that a good idea? thought Harry, but his lips definitely seemed to think so.

Again the sharp headshake. "If an Innervate didn't work on him –" began the witch.

"I did not attempt one," whispered Harry's lips.

"What? Why – oh, never mind. Innervate."

There was a pause, and then a snake slowly crawled out of its harness. Slowly the green head came up, looked around.

A blur later, Professor Quirrell was standing, and a moment later had sagged to his knees.

"Lie down," said the witch without looking up from Bellatrix. "That you in there, Jeremy?"

"Yes," said the Defense Professor rather hoarsely, as he carefully laid himself down on a relatively flat patch of sandy orange rock. He was not so pale as Bellatrix, but his face was bloodless in the dim dawn light. "Salutations, Miss Camblebunker."

"I told you," said the witch, sharpness in her voice and a slight smile on her face, "call me Crystal, this isn't Britain and we'll have none of your formality here. And it's Doctor now, not Miss."

"My apologies, Doctor Camblebunker." This was followed by a dry chuckle.

The witch's smile grew a little wider, her voice that much sharper. "Who's your friend?"

"You don't need to know." The Defense Professor's eyes were closed, where he lay on the ground.

"How wrong did it go?"

Very dryly indeed: "You can read about it tomorrow in any newspaper with an international section."

The witch's wand was tapping here, there, poking and prodding all over Bellatrix's body. "I missed you, Jeremy."

"Truly?" said the Defense Professor, sounding slightly surprised.

"Not even a tiny little bit. If I didn't owe you –"

The Defense Professor started to laugh, and then it turned into more of a coughing fit.

What do you think? said Slytherin to the Inner Critic, while Harry listened from behind the glass walls. Performance, or reality?

Can't tell, said Harry's Inner Critic. I'm not in top critical form right now.

Can anyone think of a good probe to gather more information? said Ravenclaw.

Again that whisper from the empty air above the broomstick: "What is the chance of undoing all that was done to her?"

"Oh, let's see. Legilimency and unknown Dark rituals, ten years for that to set in place, followed by ten years of Dementor exposure? Undo that? You're out of your skull, Mister Whoever-You-Are. The question is whether there's anything left, and I'd call that maybe one chance in three –" The witch suddenly cut herself off. Her voice, when it spoke again, was quieter. "If you were her friend, before... then no, you're never getting her back. Best understand that now."

I'm voting that this is a performance, said the Inner Critic. She wouldn't just blurt all that out in response to one question unless she was looking for an opportunity.

Noted, but I'm putting a low weight of confidence on that, said Ravenclaw. It's very hard not to let your suspicions control your perceptions when you're trying to weigh evidence that subtle.

"What potion did you give her?" the witch said after opening Bellatrix's mouth and peering inside, her wand flashing multiple colors of illumination.

The man lying on the ground calmly said, "Pepper-Up –"

"Were you out of your mind?"

Again the coughing laugh.

"She'll sleep for a week if she's lucky," the witch said, and clucked her tongue. "I'll owl you when she opens her eyes, I suppose, so you can come back and talk her into that Unbreakable Vow. Have you got anything to stop her from killing me on the spot, if she manages to even move for another month?"

The Defense Professor, eyes still closed, took a sheet of paper from his robes; a moment later, words began to appear on it, accompanied by tiny wisps of smoke. When the smoke had stopped rising, the paper floated over toward the woman.

The woman looked over the paper with raised eyebrows, gave a sardonic snort. "This had better work, Jeremy, or my last will and testament says that my whole estate goes into putting a bounty on your head. Speaking of which –"

The Defense Professor reached again into his robes and tossed the witch a bag that made a clinking sound. The witch caught it, weighed it, made a pleased sound.

Then she stood up, and the pale skeletal woman floated off the ground beside her. "I'm heading back," said the witch. "I can't start my work here."

"Wait," said the Defense Professor, and with a gesture retrieved his wand from Bellatrix's hand and harness. Then his hand pointed the wand at Bellatrix, and moved in a small circular gesture, accompanied by a quiet, "Obliviate."

"That's it," snapped the witch, "I'm taking her out of here before anyone does her any more damage –" One arm came around to hug the bony form of Bellatrix Black to her side, and they both disappeared with the loud POP! of Apparition.

And there was silence in that lumpy place, but for the gentle rush of the passing waves, and a little breath of wind.

I think the performance is finished, said the Inner Critic. I give it two and a half out of five stars. She's probably not a very experienced actor.

I wonder if a real healer would seem more fake than an actor told to play one? mused Ravenclaw.

Like watching a television show, that was how it felt, like watching a television show whose characters you didn't particularly empathize with, that was all that could be seen and felt from behind the glass walls.

Somehow, Harry managed to move his lips himself, send his own voice out into the still dawn air, and then was surprised to hear his own question. "How many different people are you, anyway?"

The pale man lying on the ground didn't laugh, but from the broomstick Harry's eyes saw the sides of Professor Quirrell's lips curling up, the edge of that familiar sardonic smile. "I cannot say that I bothered keeping count. How many are you?"

It shouldn't have shaken the inner Harry so much, hearing that response, and yet he felt – he felt – unstable, like his own center had been subtracted – Oh.

"Excuse me," said Harry's voice. It now sounded as distant and detached as the fading Harry felt. "I'm going to faint in a few seconds, I think."

"Use the fourth portkey I gave you, the one I said was our fallback refuge," said the man lying on the ground, calmly but swiftly. "It will be safer there. And continue wearing your cloak."

Harry's free hand retrieved another twig from his pouch and snapped it.

There was another portkey yank, internationally long, and then he was somewhere black.

“Lumos,” said Harry’s lips, some part of him looking out for the safety of the whole.

He was inside what looked like a Muggle warehouse, a deserted one.

Harry’s legs climbed off the broomstick, lay on the floor. His eyes closed, and some tidy fraction of self willed his light to fail, before the darkness took him.



“Where will you go?” yelled Amelia. They were almost at the edge of the wards.

“Backward in time to protect Harry Potter,” said the old wizard, and before Amelia could even open her lips to ask if he wanted help, she felt the boundary of the wards as they crossed them.

There was a pop of Apparition, and the wizard and the phoenix vanished, leaving behind the borrowed broomstick.

THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT, PART X

“WAKE.”

Harry’s eyes flew open as he came awake with a choking gasp, a jerking start of his prone body. He couldn’t remember any dreams, maybe his brain had been too exhausted to dream, it seemed like he’d only closed his eyes and then heard that word spoken a moment after.

“You must awaken,” said the voice of Quirinus Quirrell. “I gave you as much time as I could, but it would be wise to reserve at least one use of your Time-Turner. Soon we must go backward four hours to Mary’s Place, appearing in every way as though we have done nothing interesting this day. I wished to speak to you before then.”

Harry slowly sat up in the midst of darkness. His body ached, and not only in the places where it had laid on the hard concrete. Images tumbled over each other in his memory, everything his unconscious brain had been too tired to discharge into a proper nightmare.

Twelve terrible voids floating down a metal corridor, tarnishing the metal around them, light dimmed and temperature falling as the emptiness tried to suck all life out of the world –

Chalk-white skin, stretched just above the bone that had remained after fat and muscle faded –

A metal door –

A woman’s voice –

No, I didn’t mean it, please don’t die –

I can’t remember my children’s names any more –

Don’t go, don’t take it away, don’t don’t don’t –

“What was that place?” Harry said hoarsely, in a voice pushed out of his throat like water forced through a too-thin pipe, in the darkness it sounded almost as shattered as Bellatrix Black’s voice had been. “What was that place? That wasn’t a prison, that was HELL!”

“Hell?” said the calm voice of the Defense Professor. “You mean the Christian punishment fantasy? I suppose there is a similarity.”

“How –” Harry’s voice was blocking, there was something huge lodged in his throat. “How – how could they –” People had built that place, someone had made Azkaban, they’d made it on purpose, they’d done it deliberately, that woman, she’d had children, children she wouldn’t remember, some judge had decided for that to happen to her, someone had needed to drag her into that cell and lock its door while she screamed, someone fed her every day and walked away without letting her out –

“HOW COULD PEOPLE DO THAT?”

“Why shouldn’t they?” said the Defense Professor. A pale blue light lit the warehouse, then, showing a high, cavernous concrete ceiling, and a dusty concrete floor; and Professor Quirrell sitting some distance away from Harry, leaning his back against a painted wall; the pale blue light turned the walls to glacier surfaces, the dust on the floor to speckled snow, and the man himself had become an ice sculpture, shrouded in darkness where his black robes lay over him. “What use are the prisoners of Azkaban to them?”

Harry’s mouth opened in a croak. No words exited.

A faint smile twitched on the Defense Professor’s lips. “You know, Mr. Potter, if He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named had come to rule over magical Britain, and built such a place as Azkaban, he would have built it because he enjoyed seeing his enemies suffer. And if instead he began to find their suffering distasteful, why, he would order Azkaban torn down the next day. As for those who did make Azkaban, and those who do not tear it down, while preaching lofty sermons and imagining themselves not to be villains... well, Mr. Potter, I think if I had my choice of taking tea with them, or taking tea with You-Know-Who, I should find my sensibilities less offended by the Dark Lord.”

“I don’t understand,” Harry said, his voice was shaking, he’d read about the classic experiment on the psychology of prisons, the ordinary college students who had turned sadistic as soon as they were assigned the role of prison guards; only now he realized that the experiment hadn’t examined the right question, the one most important question, they hadn’t looked at the key people, not the prison guards but everyone else, “I really don’t understand, Professor Quirrell, how can people just stand by and let this happen, why is the country of magical Britain doing this –” Harry’s voice stopped.

The Defense Professor’s eyes appeared to be the same color as always, in

the pale blue light, for that light was the same color as Quirinus Quirrell's irises, those never-thawing chips of ice. "Welcome, Mr. Potter, to your first encounter with the realities of politics. What do the wretched creatures in Azkaban have to offer any faction? Who would benefit from aiding them? A politician who openly sided with them would associate themselves with criminals, with weakness, with distasteful things that people would rather not think about. Alternatively, the politician could demonstrate their might and cruelty by calling for longer sentences; to make a display of strength requires a victim to crush beneath you, after all. And the populace applauds, for it is their instinct to back the winner." A coldly amused laugh. "You see, Mr. Potter, no one ever quite believes that they will go to Azkaban, so they see no harm in it for themselves. As for what they inflict on others... I suppose you were once told that people care about that sort of thing? It is a lie, Mr. Potter, people don't care in the slightest, and if you had not led a vastly sheltered childhood you would have noticed that long ago. Console yourself with this: those now prisoner in Azkaban voted for the same Ministers of Magic who pledged to move their cells closer to the Dementors. I admit, Mr. Potter, that I see little hope for democracy as an effective form of government, but I admire the poetry of how it makes its victims complicit in their own destruction."

Harry's recently cohered self was threatening to shatter into fragments again, the words falling like hammerstrikes on his consciousness, driving him back, step by step, over the precipice where lurked some vast abyss; and he was trying to find something to save himself, some clever retort that would refute the words, but it did not come.

The Defense Professor watched Harry, the gaze reflecting more curiosity than command. "It is very simple, Mr. Potter, to understand how Azkaban was built, and how it continues to be. Men care for what they, themselves, expect to suffer or gain; and so long as they do not expect it to redound upon themselves, their cruelty and carelessness is without limit. All the other wizards of this country are no different within than he who sought to rule over them, You-Know-Who; they only lack his power and his... frankness."

The boy's hands were clenched into fists so tightly that the nails cut into his palm, if his fingers were white or his face was pale you couldn't have seen that, for the dim blue light cast all into ice or shadow. "You once offered to support me if my ambition were to be the next Dark Lord. Is that why, Professor?"

The Defense Professor inclined his head, a thin smile on his lips. "Learn

all that I have to teach you, Mr. Potter, and you will rule this country in time. Then you may tear down the prison that democracy made, if you find that Azkaban still offends your sensibilities. Like it or not, Mr. Potter, you have seen this day that your own will conflicts with the will of this country's populace, and that you do not bow your head and submit to their decision when that occurs. So to them, whether or not they know it, and whether or not you acknowledge it, you are their next Dark Lord."

In the monochromatic light, unwavering, the boy and the Defense Professor both seemed like motionless ice sculptures, the irises of their eyes reduced to similar colors, looking very much the same in that light.

Harry stared directly into those pale eyes. All the long-suppressed questions, the ones he'd told himself he was putting on hold until the Ides of May. That had been a lie, Harry now knew, a self-deception, he had kept silent for fear of what he might hear. And now everything was coming forth from his lips, all at once. "On our first day of class, you tried to convince my classmates I was a killer."

"You are." Amusedly. "But if your question is why I told them that, Mr. Potter, the answer is that you will find ambiguity a great ally on your road to power. Give a sign of Slytherin on one day, and contradict it with a sign of Gryffindor the next; and the Slytherins will be enabled to believe what they wish, while the Gryffindors argue themselves into supporting you as well. So long as there is uncertainty, people can believe whatever seems to be to their own advantage. And so long as you appear strong, so long as you appear to be winning, their instincts will tell them that their advantage lies with you. Walk always in the shadow, and light and darkness both will follow."

"And," said the boy, his voice level, "just what do you want out of all this?"

Professor Quirrell had leaned further back against the wall from where he sat, casting his face into shadow, his eyes changing from pale ice into dark pits like those of his snake form. "I wish for Britain to grow strong under a strong leader; that is my desire. As for my reasons why," Professor Quirrell smiled without mirth, "I think they shall stay my own."

"The sense of doom that I feel around you." The words were becoming harder and harder to say, as the subject danced closer and closer to something terrible and forbidden. "You always knew what it meant."

"I had several guesses," said Professor Quirrell, his expression unreadable. "And I will not yet say all I guessed. But this much I will tell you: it is your doom which flares when we come near, not mine."

For once Harry's brain managed to mark this as a questionable assertion and possible lie, instead of believing everything it heard. "Why do you sometimes turn into a zombie?"

"Personal reasons," said Professor Quirrell with no humor at all in his voice.

"What was your ulterior motive for rescuing Bellatrix?"

There was a brief silence, during which Harry tried hard to control his breathing, keep it steady.

Finally the Defense Professor shrugged, as though it were of no account. "I all but spelled it out for you, Mr. Potter. I told you everything you needed to deduce the answer, if you had been mature enough to consider that first obvious question. Bellatrix Black was the Dark Lord's most powerful servant, her loyalty the most assured; she was the single person most likely to be entrusted with some part of the lost lore of Slytherin that should have been yours."

Slowly the anger crept over Harry, slowly the wrath, something terrible beginning to boil his blood, in just a few moments he would say something that he really shouldn't say while the two of them were alone in a deserted warehouse –

"But she was innocent," said the Defense Professor. He was not smiling. "And the degree to which all her choices were taken away from her, so that she never had a chance to suffer for her own mistakes... it struck me as excessive, Mr. Potter. If she tells you nothing of use –" The Defense Professor gave another small shrug. "I shall not consider this day's work a waste."

"How altruistic of you," Harry said coldly. "So if all wizards are like You-Know-Who inside, are you an exception to that, then?"

The Defense Professor's eyes were still in shadow, dark pits that could not be met. "Call it a whim, Mr. Potter. It has sometimes amused me to play the part of a hero. Who knows but that You-Know-Who would say the same."

Harry opened his mouth a final time –

And found that he couldn't say it, he couldn't ask the last question, the last and most important question, he couldn't make the words come out. Even though a refusal like that was forbidden to a rationalist, for all that he'd ever recited the Litany of Tarski or the Litany of Gendlin or sworn that whatever could be destroyed by the truth should be, in that one moment, he could not bring himself to say his last question out loud. Even though he knew he was thinking wrongly, even though he knew he was supposed to be better than

this, he still couldn't say it.

"Now it is my turn to inquire of you." Professor Quirrell's back straightened from where it had leaned back against the glacier wall of painted concrete. "I was wondering, Mr. Potter, if you had anything to say about nearly killing me and ruining our mutual endeavor. I am given to understand that an apology, in such cases, is considered a sign of respect. But you have not offered me one. Is it just that you have not yet gotten around to it, Mr. Potter?"

The tone was calm, the quiet edge so fine and sharp that it would slice all the way through you before you realized you were being murdered.

And Harry just looked at the Defense Professor with cool eyes that would never flinch from anything; not even death, now. He was no longer in Azkaban, no longer fearful of the part of himself that was fearless; and the solid gemstone that was Harry had rotated to meet the stress, turning smoothly from one facet to another, from light to darkness, warm to cold.

A calculated ploy on his part, to make me feel guilty, put me in a position where I must submit?

Genuine emotion on his part?

"I see," said Professor Quirrell. "I suppose that answers –"

"No," said the boy in a cool, collected voice, "you do not get to frame the conversation that easily, Professor. I went to considerable lengths to protect you and get you out of Azkaban safely, after I thought you had tried to kill a police officer. That included facing down twelve Dementors without a Patronus Charm. I wonder, if I had apologized when you demanded it, would you have said thank-you in turn? Or am I correct in thinking that it was my submission you demanded there, and not only my respect?"

There was a pause, and then Professor Quirrell's voice came in reply, openly icy with danger no longer veiled. "It seems you still cannot bring yourself to lose, Mr. Potter."

Darkness stared out of Harry's eyes without flinching, the Defense Professor himself reduced to a mortal thing within them. "Oh, and are you pondering now, whether you should pretend to lose to me, and pretend to humble yourself before my own anger, in order to preserve your own plans? Did the thought of a calculated false apology even cross your mind? Me neither, Professor Quirrell."

The Defense Professor laughed, low and humorless, emptier than the void between the stars, dangerous as any vacuum filled with hard radiation. "No, Mr. Potter, you have not learned your lesson, not at all."

"I thought of losing many times, in Azkaban," said the boy, his voice level. "That I ought to simply give up, and turn myself over to the Aurors. Losing would have been the sensible thing to do. I heard your voice saying it to me, in my mind; and I would have done it, if I had been there by myself. But I could not bring myself to lose you."

There was silence, then, for a time; as though even the Defense Professor could not quite think of what to say to that.

"I am curious," said Professor Quirrell at last. "What do you think that I should apologize for, precisely? I gave you explicit instructions in the event of a fight. You were to stay down, stay out of the way, cast no magic. You violated those instructions and brought down the mission."

"I made no decision," the boy said evenly, "there was no choice in it, only a wish that the Auror should not die, and my Patronus was there. For that wish to have never occurred, you should have warned me that you might bluff using a Killing Curse. By default, I assume that if you point your wand at someone and say Avada Kedavra, it is because you want them dead. Shouldn't that be the first rule of Unforgivable Curse Safety?"

"Rules are for duels," said the Defense Professor. Some of the coldness had returned to his voice. "And dueling is a sport, not a branch of Battle Magic. In a real fight, a curse which cannot be blocked and must be dodged is an indispensable tactic. I would have thought this obvious to you, but it seems I misjudged your intellect."

"It also seems to me imprudent," said the boy, continuing as though the other had not spoken, "to not tell me that my casting any spell on you might kill us both. What if you had suffered some mishap, and I had tried an Innervate, or a Hover Charm? That ignorance, which you permitted for purposes I cannot guess, played also some part in this catastrophe."

There was another silence. The Defense Professor's eyes had narrowed, and there was a faintly puzzled look on his face, as though he had encountered some completely unfamiliar situation; and still the man spoke no word.

"Well," said the boy. His eyes had not wavered from the Defense Professor's. "I certainly regret hurting you, Professor. But I do not think the situation calls for me to submit to you. I never really did understand the concept of apology, still less as it applies to a situation like this; if you have my regrets, but not my submission, does that count as saying sorry?"

Again that cold, cold laugh, darker than the void between the stars.

"I wouldn't know," said the Defense Professor, "I, too, never understood

the concept of apology. That ploy would be futile between us, it seems, with both of us knowing it for a lie. Let us speak no more of it, then. Debts will be settled between us in time."

There was silence for a time.

"By the way," said the boy. "Hermione Granger would never have built Azkaban, no matter who was going to be put in it. And she'd die before she hurt an innocent. Just mentioning that, since you said before that all wizards are like You-Know-Who inside, and that's just false as a point of simple fact. Would've realized it earlier if I hadn't been," the boy gave a brief grim smile, "stressed out."

The Defense Professor's eyes were half-lidded, his expression distant. "People's insides are not always like their outsides, Mr. Potter. Perhaps she simply wishes others to think of her as a good girl. She cannot use the Patronus Charm –"

"Hah," said the boy; his smile seemed realer now, warmer. "She's having trouble for exactly the same reason I did. There's enough light in her to destroy Dementors, I'm sure. She wouldn't be able to stop herself from destroying Dementors, even at the cost of her own life..." The boy trailed off, and then his voice resumed. "I might not be such a good person, maybe; but they do exist, and she's one of them."

Dryly. "She is young, and to make a show of kindness costs her little."

There was a pause at this. Then the boy said, "Professor, I have to ask, when you see something all dark and gloomy, doesn't it ever occur to you to try and improve it somehow? Like, yes, something goes terribly wrong in people's heads that makes them think it's great to torture criminals, but that doesn't mean they're truly evil inside; and maybe if you taught them the right things, showed them what they were doing wrong, you could change –"

Professor Quirrell laughed, then, and not with the emptiness of before. "Ah, Mr. Potter, sometimes I do forget how very young you are. Sooner you could change the color of the sky." Another chuckle, this one colder. "And the reason it is easy for you to forgive such fools and think well of them, Mr. Potter, is that you yourself have not been sorely hurt. You will think less fondly of commonplace idiots after the first time their folly costs you something dear. Such as a hundred Galleons from your own pocket, perhaps, rather than the agonizing deaths of a hundred strangers." The Defense Professor was smiling thinly. He took a pocket-watch out of his robes, looked at it. "Let us depart now, if there is nothing more to say between us."

"You don't have any questions about the impossible things I did to get us out of Azkaban?"

"No," said the Defense Professor. "I believe I have solved most of them already. As for the rest, it is too rare that I find a person whom I cannot see through immediately, be they friend or foe. I shall unravel the puzzles about you for myself, in due time."

The Defense Professor shoved himself up, pushing back on the wall with both hands and rising to his feet, smoothly if too slowly. The boy, less gracefully, did the same.

And the boy blurted out the last most terrible question which he had earlier been unable to ask; as though to say it aloud would make it real, and as though it were not, already, vastly obvious.

"Why am I not like the other children my own age?"



In a deserted side-road of Diagon Alley, where scraps of un-Vanished trash could be seen lodged into the edges of the brick street and the blank brick building-sides that surrounded it, along with scattered dirt and other signs of neglect, an ancient wizard and his phoenix Apparated into existence.

The wizard was already reaching within his robes for his hourglass when, in habit, his eyes jumped to a random spot between the road and the wall, to memorize it –

And the old wizard blinked in surprise; there was a scrap of parchment in that spot.

A frown crossed Albus Dumbledore's face as he took a step forward and took the crumpled scrap, unfolding it.

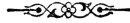
On it was the single word "NO", and nothing more.

Slowly the wizard let it flutter from his fingers. Absently he reached down to the pavement, and picked up the nearest scrap of parchment, which looked remarkably similar to the one he had just taken; he touched it with his wand, and a moment later it was inscribed with the same word "NO", in the same handwriting, which was his own.

The old wizard had planned to go back three hours to when Harry Potter first arrived in Diagon Alley. He had already watched, upon his instruments, the boy leaving Hogwarts, and that could not be undone (his one attempt to fool his own instruments, and so control Time without altering its appearance to himself, had ended in sufficient disaster to convince him to never again try

such trickery). He had hoped to retrieve the boy at the first possible moment after his arrival, and take him to another safe location, if not Hogwarts (for his instruments had not shown the boy's return). But now –

“A paradox if I retrieve him immediately after he arrives in Diagon Alley?” murmured the old wizard to himself. “Perhaps they did not set in motion their plan to rob Azkaban, until after they had confirmed his arrival here... or else... perhaps...”



Painted concrete, hard floor and distant ceilings, two figures facing off across from each other. One entity who wore the shape of a man in his late thirties and already balding, and another mind that wore the form of an eleven-year-old boy with a scar upon his forehead. Ice and shadow, pale blue light.

“I don't know,” said the man.

The boy just looked at him. And then said, “Oh, really?”

“Truly,” said the man. “I know nothing, and of my guesses I will not speak. Yet I will say this much –”

THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT, SECRECY AND OPENNESS, PART XI

THROUGH green flame they whirled, through the Floo network they spun, Minerva's heart racing with a pounding horror that she hadn't felt in ten years and three months, the corridors between space coughed and spit them out into the lobby of Gringotts (the safest Floo receiver in Diagon Alley, the connection most difficult to intercept, the fastest way out of Hogwarts without a phoenix). A goblin attendant turned toward them, his eyes widened, he began a slightly respectful bow –

Determination, Destination, Deliberation!

And the two of them were in the alley just in back of Mary's Place, wands already out and raised, spinning around back-to-back and the words of an Anti-Disillusionment Charm already rising to Severus's lips.

The alley was empty.

When she turned back to look at Severus, his wand was already cracking down on his own head with a sound like smashing an egg, as his lips chanted words of invisibility; he took on the colors of his surroundings, became a blur of his surroundings, the blur moved and matched what was behind him and then there was nothing there.

She lowered her wand and stepped forward to receive her own Disillusionment –

From behind her, the unmistakable sound of a burst of flame.

She spun and saw Albus there, his long wand already drawn and raised in his right hand. His eyes were grim beneath the half-circles of his glasses, and Fawkes upon his shoulder had spread his fire-colored wings in readiness for flight and fight.

"Albus!" she said. "I thought –" She'd just seen him depart for Azkaban, and she'd thought not even phoenixes could return from there so easily.

Then she realized.

"She escaped," said Albus. "Did your Patronus reach him?"

The pounding in her heart grew stronger, the horror in her veins solidified. “He said he was here, in the washroom –”

“Let us hope he spoke true,” said Albus, the wand tapped her head with a sensation like water trickling over her, and a moment later the four of them (even Fawkes had been rendered invisible, though sometimes you saw a flicker of something like fire in his air) were racing to the front of the restaurant. They paused before the door while Albus whispered something, and a moment later one of the customers visible through the windows stood up with a vague look on his face and opened the door as though taking a quick look outside for some friend; and the four of them were through, racing past the unwitting customers (Severus was marking their faces, Minerva knew, and Albus would see any Disillusioned) toward the sign that pointed to the washroom –

An old wooden door marked with the sign of a toilet burst open with a slam, and four invisible rescuers stormed through it.

The small but clean wooden room was empty, fresh droplets of water showed in the sink but there was no sign of Harry, only a sheet of paper left on the closed lid of the toilet.

She couldn’t breathe.

The sheet of paper rose up into the air as Albus took it, and a moment later was thrust in her own direction.

M: What did the hat tell me to tell you?

– H

“Ah,” Minerva said aloud in surprise, her mind taking a moment to place the question, it wasn’t the sort of thing you’d forget but she hadn’t been thinking in that mode, really – “I’m an impudent youngster and I should get off its lawn.”

“Eh?” said the air in Albus’s voice, as if even he could be shocked.

And then Harry Potter’s head appeared, suspended next to the air beside the toilet, his face was cold and alert, the too-adult Harry she’d seen sometimes, eyes darting back and forth and around.

“What’s going on –” the boy began.

Albus, now visible once more along with her and Fawkes, was moving forward in an instant, his left hand reached forward and plucked a hair from Harry’s head (producing a startled yelp from the boy), Minerva accepted the

hair in her own hand, and a moment later Albus swept up the mostly-invisible boy in his arms and there was a flash of red-golden fire.

And Harry Potter was safe.

Minerva took a few steps forward, leaned against the wall where Albus and Harry had been, trying to recover her poise.

She'd... lost some habits, in the ten years since the Order of the Phoenix had disbanded.

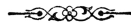
Beside her, Severus shimmered into visibility. His right hand was already drawing forth the flask from his robes, his left hand already stretching forth in demand. She gave him Harry's hair, and a moment later, it dropped into the flask of unfinished Polyjuice, which at once began fizzing and bubbling as it settled into the potency that would enable Severus to act his part as bait.

"That was unexpected," the Potions Master said slowly. "Why did our Headmaster not retrieve Mr. Potter earlier, I wonder, if he was going so far as to twist Time? There should have been nothing preventing him from doing so... indeed, your Patronus should have found Mr. Potter already safe..."

She hadn't thought of that, a different realization having jumped to the forefront of her mind. It wasn't nearly as horrifying as Bellatrix Black having escaped from Azkaban, but still –

"Harry has an invisibility cloak?" she said.

The Potions Master did not answer; he was shrinking.



Tick-snick, drip-blip, ding-ring-ting-

It still annoyed her, though it faded past attention after a while; and when and if she became Headmistress, she intended to Silence the whole lot. Which Head of Hogwarts, she wondered, had first been so inconsiderate as to create a device that made noise, to pass on to their successors?

She was sitting in the Headmaster's office with a quickly Transfigured desk of her own, doing some of the hundred little pieces of necessary paperwork that kept Hogwarts from grinding to a halt; she could lose herself in it easily, and it prevented her from thinking about other things. Albus had once remarked, sounding rather wry, that Hogwarts seemed to run even more smoothly when there was an outside crisis for her to avoid thinking about...

...ten years ago, that was the last time Albus had said that.

There was the chime that indicated an approaching visitor.

Minerva kept reading her current parchment.

The door slammed open, revealing Severus Snape, who took three steps inward and demanded without the slightest pause, "Any word from Mad-Eye?"

Albus was already rising from his chair, even as she tucked away her parchments and dispelled the desk. "Moody's Patronus is reporting to the me in Azkaban," Albus said. "His Eye saw nothing; and if the Eye of Vance does not see a thing, then that thing does not exist. Yourself?"

"No one has tried to forcibly take my blood," Severus said. He gave a quick grimace of a smile. "Except the Defense Professor."

"What?" said Minerva.

"He saw me for an impostor before I could even open my lips, and quite reasonably attacked me on the spot, demanding to know the whereabouts of Mr. Potter." Another grimace of a smile. "Shouting that I was Severus Snape did not seem to reassure him, for some reason. I do believe that man would kill me for a Sickle and give back five Knuts change. I had to stun our good Professor Quirrell, which was not easy, and then he reacted poorly to the hex. 'Harry Potter', naturally alarmed, ran out and told the owner, and the Defense Professor was taken to St. Mungos –"

"St. Mungos?"

"– which said he had probably been overworking himself for weeks before he collapsed, such was his state of exhaustion. Your precious Defense Professor is fine, Minerva, the stunner may have helped him by forcing him to take a few days off. Afterward I declined the offer of a Floo to Hogwarts, and went back to Diagon Alley and wandered; but no one seems to have wanted Mr. Potter's blood today."

"Our Defense Professor is in the best of hands, I am sure," said Albus. "Greater matters command our attention, Minerva."

It took considerable effort for her to wrench her attention back, but she sat back down, and Severus gestured up a chair for himself as well, and the three of them drew together to begin their council.

She felt like a Polyjuiced impostor, sitting with those two. War was not her art, nor plotting. She had to strain to keep one step ahead of the Weasley twins, and sometimes she failed at that. She was sitting here, ultimately, only because she had heard the prophecy...

"We are faced," the Headmaster spoke first, "with a rather alarming mystery. I can think of only two wizards who might have engineered this escape."

Minerva drew in her breath sharply. "There is a chance it is not You-Know-Who?"

"I'm afraid so," said the Headmaster.

She glanced to her side and saw that Severus looked as puzzled as herself. Afraid the Dark Lord was not rising again? She would have given almost anything for that to be true.

"So," Albus said heavily. "Our first suspect is Voldemort, risen again and seeking to resurrect himself. I have studied many books I wish I had not read, seeking his every possible avenue of return, and I have found only three. His strongest road to life is the Philosopher's Stone, which Flamel assures me that not even Voldemort could create on his own; by that road he would rise greater and more terrible than ever before. I would not have thought Voldemort able to resist the temptation of the Stone, still less because such an obvious trap is a challenge to his wit. But his second avenue is nearly as strong: The flesh of his servant, willingly given; the blood of his foe, forcibly taken; and the bone of his ancestor, unknowingly bequeathed. Voldemort is a perfectionist –" Albus glanced at Severus, who nodded agreement, "– and he would certainly seek the most powerful combination: the flesh of Bellatrix Black, the blood of Harry Potter, and the bone of his father. Voldemort's final avenue is to seduce a victim and drain the life from them over a long period; in which case Voldemort would be weak compared to his former power. His motive to spirit away Bellatrix is clear. And if he is keeping her in reserve, to use only in case he cannot attain the Stone, that would explain why no kidnap attempt was made on Harry this day."

Minerva glanced again at Severus, saw him listening attentively but without surprise.

"What is not clear," the Headmaster continued, "is how Voldemort could have engineered this escape. A death doll was left in Bellatrix's place, her escape was meant to be undetected; and even though that went wrong, the Dementors could not find her after their first warning. Azkaban has stood impenetrable for centuries, and I cannot imagine any means by which Voldemort could have accomplished this."

"That may mean little," Severus said, expressionless. "For the Dark Lord to do what we cannot imagine requires only that he has a better imagination."

Albus nodded grimly. "Unfortunately there is now another wizard who laughs at impossibilities. A wizard who, not long ago, developed a new and powerful Charm which could have blinded the Dementors to Bellatrix Black's

escape. And he is implicated for other reasons, as well.”

Minerva’s heart was skipping beats, she didn’t know how, or why, but a terrible apprehension was dawning on her as to who –

“Who would that be?” said Severus, sounding puzzled.

Albus leaned back and said the fatal words, even as she had feared them: “Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres.”

“Potter?” demanded the Potions Master, as much shock in that usually-silken voice as she had ever heard from him. “Headmaster, is this one of your jokes? He is in his first year at Hogwarts! A temper tantrum and a few childish pranks with an invisibility cloak does not make him –”

“It is no joke,” said Minerva, her voice barely above a whisper. “Harry is already making original discoveries in Transfiguration, Severus. Though I did not know he was researching Charms as well.”

“Harry is no ordinary first-year,” the Headmaster said solemnly. “He is marked as the Dark Lord’s equal, and he has power the Dark Lord knows not.”

Severus was looking at her, and you would have needed to know him well to recognize that his glance was pleading. “Am I to take this seriously?”

Minerva simply nodded.

“Does anyone else know of this... new and powerful Charm?” Severus demanded.

The Headmaster glanced at her apologetically –

Somehow she knew, she knew before he even said it, and she wanted to scream at the top of her lungs.

– and said, “Quirinus Quirrell.”

“Why,” she said, in a voice that should have melted half the devices in the office, “did Mr. Potter even TELL our Defense Professor about his brilliant new Charm for breaking out of prisons –”

The Headmaster passed a weary wrinkled hand across his equally wrinkled forehead. “Quirinus just happened to be there, Minerva. Even I saw no harm in it at the time.” The Headmaster hesitated. “And Harry said his Charm was too dangerous to be explained to either of us; and when I asked him again, this day, he insisted he had still not explained it to Quirinus, nor had he ever dropped his Occlumency barriers in the Defense Professor’s presence –”

“Mr. Potter is an Occlumens? You gave him an invisibility cloak and he is immune to Veritaserum and he is friends with the Weasley twins? Albus,

do you have any idea what you have unleashed upon this school?" Her voice was nearly shrieking, now. "By his seventh year there won't be anything left of Hogwarts but a smoking hole in the ground!"

Albus leaned back in his great cushioned chair, and said, smiling, "Don't forget the Time-Turner."

She did scream then, but quietly.

Severus drawled, "Should I teach him to brew Polyjuice, Headmaster? I ask only for the sake of completeness, in case you are not satisfied with the magnitude of your pet disaster."

"Perhaps next year," said Albus. "My dearest friends, the question before us is whether Harry Potter has spirited Bellatrix Black out of Azkaban, which is more than youthful high spirits even by my tolerant standards."

"Excuse me, Headmaster," Severus said with one of the dryer smiles she had ever seen him deliver to Albus, "but I will register my opinion that the answer is no. This is the Dark Lord's work, pure and simple."

"Then why," Albus said, and now there was no humor at all in his voice, "when I planned to retrieve Harry immediately after his arrival in Diagon Alley, did I find that this would result in paradox?"

Minerva sank further back into her chair, dropped her left elbow onto the hard uncushioned armrest, leaned her head into her hand, and shut her eyes in despair.

There was a narrowly circulated proverb to the effect that only one Auror in thirty was qualified to investigate cases involving Time-Turners; and that of those few, the half who weren't already insane, soon would be.

"So you suspect," Severus's voice was saying, "that Potter went from Diagon Alley to Azkaban, then looped back to Diagon Alley afterward to be picked up by us –"

"Precisely," said Albus's voice. "Though it is also possible that Voldemort or his servants watched to make sure Harry did arrive in Diagon Alley, before they began their attempt on Azkaban. And that they had someone with a Time-Turner who would send back the message of their success, to trigger the abduction. Indeed, it was my suspicion of this possibility that caused me to dispatch you and Minerva on your own mission, before I myself went to Azkaban. I thought then that their breakout would fail, but if retrieving Harry Potter meant observing the fact of their eventual failure, then I myself could not have gone to Azkaban after I had interacted with him, for Azkaban's future cannot touch its past. When, in Azkaban, I received no report from you

or Minerva, nor from Flitwick whom I told to try contacting you, I knew that your interaction with Harry Potter had been an interaction with Azkaban's future, meaning that someone was sending messages through Time –"

Then Albus's voice stopped.

"But Headmaster," said Severus, "you came back from Azkaban's future and interacted with us..."

The Potions Master's voice trailed off.

"But Severus, if I had received reports from you and Minerva of Harry's safety, I would not, in the first place, have gone backward in time to –"

"Headmaster, I think we must draw diagrams for this."

"I agree, Severus."

There was the sound of parchment being spread on a table, and then quills scratching, and more arguing.

Minerva sat in her chair, head resting in her hand, eyes shut.

There was a story she'd once heard about a criminal who had possessed a Time-Turner which the Department of Mysteries had sealed to him, in a case of extremely bad judgment as to who needed one; and there had been an Auror assigned to track down this unknown time-criminal, who had also been given a Time-Turner; and the story ended with both of them in St. Mungo's ward for Total Unrecoverable Nutcases.

Minerva sat there with her eyes shut, trying not to listen, trying not to think about it, and trying not to go insane.

After awhile, when the argument seemed to have wound down, she said aloud, "Mr. Potter's Time-Turner is restricted to the hours of nine pm through midnight. Was the shell tampered with, Albus?"

"Not to my most discerning Charms," said Albus. "But the shells are new things; and to defeat the Unspeakables' precautions and leave no trace of the defeat... might not be impossible."

She opened her eyes, and saw Severus and the Headmaster staring intently at a parchment covered with tangled squiggles that would have no doubt driven her mad to comprehend.

"Have you come to any conclusions?" Minerva said. "And please don't tell me how you arrived at them."

Severus and the Headmaster looked at each other, then turned to look at her.

"We have concluded," the Headmaster said gravely, "that either Harry was involved or he was not; that either Voldemort has access to a Time-Turner

or he does not; and that regardless of what could have happened within Azkaban, nobody would have visited the Little Hangleton graveyard during the period Moody has already watched over it within my own past.”

“In short,” Severus drawled, “we know nothing, dear Minerva; though it seems at least likely that another Time-Turner was involved, somehow. My own suspicion is that Potter has been bribed, tricked, or threatened into conveying messages backward in time, perhaps even regarding this very prison break. I shall not make the obvious suggestion as to who is pulling his strings. But I suggest that at nine o’ clock tonight, we test whether Potter is able to travel the full six hours backward to three o’ clock, to see if he has yet used his Time-Turner.”

“That seems wise to do in any case,” said Dumbledore. “See that done, Minerva, and tell Harry to stop in my office at his convenience, afterward.”

“But you still suspect Harry of direct involvement in the prison break itself?” Minerva said.

“Possible but unlikely,” said Severus, at the same time Albus said, “Yes.”

Minerva pinched the bridge of her nose, took a deep breath, let it out. “Albus, Severus, what possible reason has Mr. Potter to do such a thing!”

“None that I can think of,” said Albus, “but it remains that Harry’s magics alone, of all the means known to me, might have –”

“Hold,” said Severus. All expression vanished from his face. “A thought occurs to me, I must check –” The Potions Master seized a pinch of Floo powder, strode across the room toward the fireplace – Albus hastily waved his wand to light it – and then in a flare of green flame, and the words “Slytherin Head of House office”, Severus was gone.

She and Albus looked at each other and both shrugged; and then Albus turned back to studying the parchment.

It was only a few minutes later that Severus spun back out of the Floo, brushing traces of ash from himself.

“Well,” said the Potions Master. Again the expressionless face. “I am afraid that Mr. Potter does have a motive.”

“Speak!” said Albus.

“I found Lesath Lestrangle in the Slytherin common room, studying,” Severus said. “He was not reluctant to meet my eyes. And it seems that Mr. Lestrangle did not like to think of his parents in Azkaban, in the cold and the darkness, with the Dementors sucking away their life, hurting every second of every day, and he told Mr. Potter so in as many words, and begged him to get

them out. Since, you see, Mr. Lestrangle had heard that the Boy-Who-Lived could do anything.”

She and Albus exchanged glances.

“Severus,” Minerva said, “surely... even Harry... has more common sense than that...”

Her voice trailed off.

“Mr. Potter thinks he is God,” Severus said without expression, “and Lesath Lestrangle fell to his knees before him in a heartfelt cry of prayer.”

Minerva stared at Severus, feeling sick to her stomach. She had studied Muggle religion – it was the most common reason for needing to Memory-Charm the parents of Muggleborns – and she knew enough to understand what Severus had just said.

“In any case,” said the Potions Master. “I looked within Mr. Lestrangle to see if he knew anything of his mother’s escape. He has heard nothing. But the instant he learns, he will conclude that the person responsible was Harry Potter.”

“I see...” Albus said slowly. “Thank you, Severus. That is good news.”

“Good news?” Minerva burst out.

Albus looked at her, his face as expressionless as Severus’s, now; and she remembered, with a shock, that Albus’s own – “It is the best reason I can possibly imagine for removing Bellatrix from Azkaban,” Albus said quietly. “And if it is not Harry, let us recall, then it is certainly Voldemort himself making his first moves. But let us not be hasty in judgment while there is much we do not yet know, but soon will.”

Albus once more stood up from behind his desk, strode to the fireplace still alight, cast in another pinch of green powder, and stuck his head into the flames. “Department of Magical Law Enforcement,” he said, “Director’s office.”

After a moment, the voice of Madam Bones came through clear and sharp, “What is it, Albus? I am somewhat busy.”

“Amelia,” said Albus, “I beg of you to share any discoveries you have made concerning this matter.”

There was a pause. “Oh,” said the cold voice of Madam Bones from the blazing fire, “and is that a two-way road then, Albus?”

“It may be,” the old wizard said calmly.

“If any Auror dies of your reticence, old meddler, I will hold you responsible in full measure.”

"I understand, Amelia," Albus said, "but I have no wish to spark needless alarm and incredulity –"

"Bellatrix Black has escaped from Azkaban! What alarm or incredulity do you think I will call needless, in the face of that?"

"I may call on you to remember those words," said the old wizard into the green flames. "For if I learn that my fears are not needless, I will tell you. Now, Amelia, I beg you, if you have learned anything whatsoever upon this matter, please share it."

There was another pause, and then Madam Bones's voice said, "I have information which I learned four hours into the future, Albus. Do you still want it?"

Albus paused –

(weighing, Minerva knew, the possibility that he might want to go back more than two hours from this instant; for you couldn't send information further back in time than six hours, not through any chain of Time-Turners)

– and finally said, "Yes, please."

"We had a lucky break," said Madam Bones's voice, "one of the Aurors who witnessed the escape was a Muggleborn, and she told us that the Flying-Fire spell, as we were calling it, might be no spell at all, but a Muggle artifact."

Like a punch in the stomach, that was how it felt, and the sickness in Minerva's belly redoubled. Anyone who'd watched a Chaos Legion battle knew whose hand that showed...

Madam Bones's voice continued. "We brought in Arthur Weasley from Misuse of Muggle Artifacts – he knows more about Muggle artifacts than any wizard alive – and gave him the descriptions from the Aurors on the scene, and he cracked it. It was a Muggle artifact called a rocker, and they call it that because you'd have to be off your rocker to ride one. Just six years ago one of their rockers blew up, killed hundreds of Muggles in a flash and almost set fire to the Moon. Weasley says that rockers use a special kind of science called opposite reaction, so the plan is to develop a jinx which will prevent that science from working around Azkaban."

"Thank you, Amelia," Albus said gravely. "Is that everything?"

"I'll check if we have anything from six hours forward," said the voice of Madam Bones, "if so they wouldn't have told me, but I'll have them tell you. Do you have anything you want to tell me, Albus? Which of those two possibilities is it looking like?"

"Not yet, Amelia," Albus said, "but I may have word for you soon."

He straightened up from the fire, then, which faded back to ordinary yellow flames. Every minute of the old wizard's years, every natural second since his birth and every second which Time-Turning had added, all of that plus a few extra decades for stress, was visible on his lined face.

"Severus?" the old wizard said. "What was it actually?"

"A rocket," said the half-blood Potions Master, who had grown up in the Muggle town of Spinner's End. "One of the most impressive Muggle technologies."

"How likely is Harry to know such arts?" said Minerva.

Severus drawled, "Oh, a boy like Mr. Potter knows all about rockets; that, dear Minerva, is a certainty. You must remember that things are done differently in the Muggle world." Severus frowned. "But rockets are dangerous, and expensive..."

"Harry has stolen and hidden an unknown amount of money from his Gringotts vault, perhaps thousands of Galleons," said the Headmaster, and then, to their twin stares, "That was not in my plan, but I made the mistake of sending the Defense Professor to supervise Harry's withdrawal of five Galleons for Christmas presents..." The Headmaster shrugged. "Yes, I agree, sheer folly in retrospect, let us continue."

Minerva quietly thudded her head a few times against the headrest of her chair.

"Nonetheless, Headmaster," Severus said. "Just because the Death Eaters never used Muggle artifacts in the first war, that does not mean he is ignorant. Rockets fell on Britain as weapons, in the Muggle side of Grindelwald's war. If he spent the summers of those years in a Muggle orphanage, as you told us, Headmaster... then he, too, has heard of rockets. And if he has been listening to reports of Mr. Potter and his mock battles using Muggle artifacts, he would certainly learn his enemy's strengths and try to redouble them himself. That is just how he thinks; any power he sees he will try to take for his own."

The old wizard was standing stock still, utterly motionless, even the hairs of his beard frozen in place like solid wires; and the thought came to Minerva, as frightening as any thought she'd ever had, that Albus Dumbledore was rooted to the spot in horror.

"Severus," Albus Dumbledore said, and his voice almost cracked, "do you realize what you are saying? If Harry Potter and Voldemort fight their war with Muggle weapons there will be nothing left of the world but fire!"

“What?” said Minerva. She had heard of guns, of course, but they weren’t that dangerous to an experienced witch –

Severus spoke as though she weren’t in the room. “Then perhaps, Headmaster, he is sending a deliberate warning to Harry Potter of exactly that; saying that any attack with Muggle weapons will be met with retaliation in kind. Command Mr. Potter to cease his use of Muggle technology in his battles; that will show him the message is received... and not give him any more ideas.” Severus frowned. “Though, come to think of it, Mr. Malfoy – and of course Miss Granger – well, on second thought a blanket prohibition on technology seems wiser –”

The old wizard pressed both his hands to his forehead, and from his lips came an unsteady voice, “I begin to hope that it is Harry behind this escape... oh, Merlin defend us all, what have I done, what have I done, what will become of the world?”

Severus shrugged. “From the rumors I have heard, Headmaster, Muggle weapons are only slightly worse than the more... recondite aspects of wizardry –”

“Worse?” gasped Minerva, and then shut her mouth as though by force.

“Worse than any peril left in these fading years,” said Albus. “Not worse than that which erased Atlantis from Time.”

Minerva stared at him, feeling the sweat break out all along her spine.

Severus continued, still addressing Albus. “All the Death Eaters save Bellatrix would have betrayed him, all his supporters turned against him, all the powers of the world converged to destroy him, if he had been reckless with any truly dangerous potency. Is this so different, then?”

Some motion, some color, had returned to the old wizard’s face. “Perhaps not...”

“And in any case,” Severus said with a slightly condescending smile, “Muggle weapons are not so easy to obtain, not for a thousand Galleons or a thousand thousand.”

Doesn’t Harry just Transfigure the devices he uses in his battles? thought Minerva, but before she could open her mouth to ask –

The fireplace erupted in green flames, then, and the face of Pius Thicknesse, Madam Bones’s assistant, appeared therein. “Chief Warlock?” said Thicknesse. “I have a report for you, transmitted from –” Thicknesse’s eyes flickered over Minerva and Severus, “six minutes ago.”

"Six hours ahead, you mean," said Albus. "These two are meant to hear it; deliver your report."

"We know how it was done," said Thicknesse. "In Bellatrix Black's cell, hidden in one corner, was a potions vial; and testing the traces of remaining fluid shows that it was an Animagus potion."

There was a long pause.

"I see..." Albus said heavily.

"Pardon me?" said Minerva. She didn't.

Thicknesse's head turned toward her. "Animagi, Madam McGonagall, in their Animagus forms, are of less interest to Dementors. All prisoners are tested before their arrival at Azkaban; and if they are Animagi, their Animagus form is destroyed. But we had not considered that someone protected by a Patronus Charm while taking the potion and performing the meditation, might be able to become an Animagus after they went to Azkaban –"

"I understood," Severus said, having by now put on his customary sneer, "that the Animagus meditation required considerable time."

"Well, Mr. Snape," Thicknesse barked, "records show that Bellatrix Black was an Animagus before she was sentenced to Azkaban and her form destroyed; so maybe her second meditation didn't take as much time as her first!"

"I would not have thought it possible for any prisoner of Azkaban to do such a thing..." Albus said. "But Bellatrix Black was a most powerful sorceress before her incarceration, and she might have done it if any witch could. Can Azkaban be secured against this method?"

"Yes," said the confident head of Pius Thicknesse. "Our expert says that it is nigh-unimaginable that an Animagus meditation could be performed in less than three hours, regardless of experience. All visits to prisoners allowed to receive them will be limited to two hours henceforth, and the Dementors will inform us if any Patronus Charm is maintained in the prison areas for longer than that."

Albus looked unhappy at that, but nodded. "I see. There will be no further attempts of that sort, of course, but do not relax your vigilance. And when Amelia has been told all this, tell her that I have information for her."

The head of Pius Thicknesse vanished without another word.

"No further attempts...?" said Minerva.

"Because, dear Minerva," Severus drawled, having not quite taken off his habitual sneer, "if the Dark Lord had planned to free any of his other servants

from Azkaban, he would not have left behind the vial of potion to tell us how it was done." Severus frowned. "I confess... even so I do not see why that vial was left there."

"It is some kind of message..." Albus said slowly. "And I cannot see what it means, not at all..." He drummed his fingers on his desk.

For a long minute or three, the old wizard stared off into nothingness, frowning; while Severus also sat in silence.

Then Albus shook his head in dismay, and said, "Severus, do you comprehend this?"

"No," said the Potions Master, and with a sardonic smile, "which is probably all the better for us; whatever we are intended to conclude from it, that part of his plan has misfired."

"You are certain, now, that it is You-Know... that it is Voldemort?" said Minerva. "It could not be that some other Death Eater conceived this clever notion?"

"And they knew about rockets, too?" Severus said dryly. "I don't believe the other Death Eaters were so fond of Muggle Studies. It is he."

"Aye, it is he," Albus said. "Azkaban has endured impenetrable for ages, only to fall to an ordinary Animagus potion. It is too clever and too impossible, which was ever Voldemort's signature since the days he was known as Tom Riddle. Anyone who wished to forge that signature must be as cunning as Voldemort himself to do so. And there is no one else in the world who would accidentally overestimate my wit, and leave me a message I cannot understand at all."

"Unless he has gauged you exactly," Severus said tonelessly, "in which case all that is just what he intended you to think."

Albus sighed. "Indeed. But even if he has tricked me perfectly, we may at least rely on the conclusion that it was not Harry Potter."

It should have come as a relief, and yet Minerva felt the chill spreading through her spine and her veins, her lungs and her bones.

She remembered conversations like this.

She remembered conversations like this from ten years ago, from a time when blood had run through Britain in wide rivers, when wizards and witches she had once taught in class had been slaughtered by the hundreds, she remembered burning homes and screaming children and flashes of green light –

"What will you tell Madam Bones?" she whispered.

Albus stood from his desk and paced to the center of the room, his hand lightly touching the devices, here an instrument of light, there an instrument of sound; he adjusted his glasses with one hand, used the other to center the long silver beard against his robes, and then finally that ancient wizard turned back and faced them.

"I will tell her what little I know of the Dark Art called horcrux, by which a soul is deprived of death," said Albus Dumbledore, in a soft voice that seemed to fill the whole room, "and I will tell her what may be done with the flesh of the servant."

"I will tell her that I am reconstituting the Order of the Phoenix."

"I will tell her that Voldemort has returned."

"And that the Second Wizarding War is begun."



Some hours later...

The antique old clock upon the wall of the Deputy Headmistress's office had golden hands, and silver numerals to make the clock-face; it ticked and jerked soundlessly through its motions, for there was a Quieting enchantment on it.

The golden hour hand approached the silver numeral of nine, the golden minute hand did the same, the two linked components of Time nearing each other, soon to be in the same place and never to collide.

It was 8:43pm, and the time approached when Harry's Time-Turner would open, to be tested in the one way that no imaginable spell could fool, unless that spell could bypass the laws of Time itself. No body or soul, no knowledge or substance, could stretch an extra seven hours in a single day. She would make up a message on the spot, and tell Harry to take that message back six hours to Professor Flitwick at 3pm, and she would ask Professor Flitwick if he had received it in that hour.

And Professor Flitwick would tell her that he had indeed received it at 3pm.

And she would tell Severus and Albus to have a little more faith in Harry next time.

Professor McGonagall cast the Patronus Charm, and told her shining cat, "Go to Mr. Potter, and tell him this: Mr. Potter, please come to my office as soon as you hear this, without doing anything else along the way."

THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT, FINAL

MINERVA gazed up at the clock, the golden hands and silver numerals, the jerking motion. Muggles had invented that, and until they had, wizards had not bothered keeping time. Bells, timed by a sanded hourglass, had served Hogwarts for its classes when it was built. It was one of the things that blood purists wished not to be true, and therefore Minerva knew it.

She had received an Outstanding on her Muggle Studies N.E.W.T., which now seemed to her a mark of shame, considering how little she knew. Her younger self had realized, even then, that the class was a sham, taught by a pureblood, supposedly because Muggleborns could not appreciate what wizardborns needed to be told, and actually because the Board of Governors did not approve of Muggles at all. But when she was seventeen the Outstanding grade had been the main thing that mattered to her, she was saddened to remember...

If Harry Potter and Voldemort fight their war with Muggle weapons there will be nothing left of the world but fire!

She couldn't imagine it, and the reason she couldn't imagine it was that she couldn't imagine Harry fighting You-Know-Who.

She had encountered the Dark Lord four times and survived each one, three times with Albus to shield her and once with Moody at her side. She remembered the damaged, snakelike face, the faint green scales scattered over the skin, the glowing red eyes, the voice that laughed in a high-pitched hiss and promised nothing but cruelty and torment: the monster pure and complete.

And Harry Potter was easy to picture in her mind, the bright expression on the face of a young boy who wavered between taking the ludicrous seriously and taking the serious ludicrously.

And to think of the two of them facing off at wandpoint was too painful to be imagined.

They had no right, no right at all to set this on an eleven-year-old boy. She knew what the Headmaster had decided for him this day, for she had been told to make the arrangements; and if it had been her at the same age

she would have raged and screamed and cried and been inconsolable for weeks, and...

He is no ordinary first-year, Albus had said. He is marked as the Dark Lord's equal, and he has power the Dark Lord knows not.

The terrible hollow voice booming from Sybill Trelawney's throat, the true and original prophecy, echoed once more through her mind. She had a feeling it didn't mean what the Headmaster thought it did, but there was no way to put the difference into words.

And even so it still seemed true, that if there were any eleven-year-old within the Earth entire who could bear this burden, that boy approached her office now. And if she said anything at all like 'poor Harry' to his face... well, he wouldn't like it.

So now I've got to find some way to kill an immortal Dark Wizard, Harry had said on the day he had first learned. I really wish you had told me that before I started shopping...

She'd been Head of House Gryffindor for long enough, she'd watched enough friends die, to know that there were some people you couldn't save from becoming heroes.

There came a knock at the door, and Professor McGonagall said, "Enter."

When Harry entered, his face had the same cold, alert look she'd seen in Mary's Place; and she wondered for an instant if he'd been wearing that same mask, that same self, this whole day.

The young boy seated himself on the chair before her desk, and said, "So is it time for me to be told what's going on?" Neutral the words, not the sharpness that should have gone with the expression.

Professor McGonagall's eyes rose in surprise before she could stop them, and she said, "The Headmaster told you nothing, Mr. Potter?"

The boy shook his head. "Only that he'd received a warning that I might be in danger, but I was safe now."

Minerva was having trouble meeting his gaze. How could they do this to him, how could they lay this upon an eleven-year-old boy, this war, this destiny, this prophecy... and they didn't even trust him...

She forced herself to look at Harry directly, and saw that his green eyes were calm as they rested on her.

"Professor McGonagall?" the boy said quietly.

"Mr. Potter," said Professor McGonagall, "I'm afraid it is not my place to explain, but if after this the Headmaster still does not tell you anything, you

may come back to me and I will go yell at him for you.”

The boy’s eyes widened, something of the real Harry showing through the crack before the cool mask was set back in place.

“In any case,” Professor McGonagall said briskly. “I’m sorry for the inconvenience, Mr. Potter, but I need to ask you to use your Time-Turner to go back six hours to three o’clock, and give the following message to Professor Flitwick: Silver on the tree. Ask the Professor to note down the time at which you gave him that message. Afterward the Headmaster wishes to meet with you at your convenience.”

There was a pause.

Then the boy said, “I am suspected of misusing my Time-Turner, then?”

“Not by me!” Professor McGonagall said hastily. “I am sorry for the inconvenience, Mr. Potter.”

There was another pause, and then the young boy shrugged. “It’ll play hob with my sleep schedule but I suppose it can’t be helped. Please let the house elves know that if I ask for an early breakfast at, say, three am tomorrow morning, I’m to receive it.”

“Of course, Mr. Potter,” she said. “Thank you for understanding.”

The boy rose up from his chair and gave her a formal nod, then slipped out the door with his hand already going under his shirt to where his Time-Turner waited; and she almost called out Harry! only she wouldn’t have known what to say after.

Instead she waited, her eyes on the clock.

How long did she need to wait for Harry Potter to go back in time?

She didn’t need to wait at all, actually; if he had done it, then it had already happened...

Minerva knew, then, that she was delaying because she was nervous, and the realization saddened her. Mischief, yes, unspeakable unthinkable mischief with all the prudence and foresight of a falling rock – she didn’t know how the boy had tricked the Hat into not Sorting him to Gryffindor where he obviously belonged – but nothing dark or harmful, not ever. Beneath that mischief his goodness ran as deep and as true as the Weasley twins’, though not even the Cruciatus Curse could have gotten her to say that out loud.

“Expecto Patronum,” she said, and then, “Go to Professor Flitwick, and bear back his reply after you ask him this: ‘Did Mr. Potter give you a message from me, what was that message, and when did you receive it?’”



One hour earlier, having used the last remaining spin of his Time-Turner after putting on the Cloak of Invisibility, Harry tucked the hourglass back into his shirt.

And he set out toward the Slytherin dungeons, striding as quickly as his invisible legs could manage, though not running. Thankfully the Deputy Headmistress's office was already on a lower floor of Hogwarts...

A few staircases later, taken two steps but not three steps at once, Harry stopped at a corridor around whose final bend lay the entrance to the Slytherin dorms.

Harry took a piece of parchment (not paper) out of his parch, took a Quotes Quill (not pen) out of his pouch, and told the quill, "Write these letters exactly as I say them: Z-P-G-B-S-Y, space, F-V-Y-I-R-E-B-A-G-U-R-G-E-R-R."

There were two kinds of codes in cryptography, codes that stopped your little brother from reading your message and codes that stopped major governments from reading your message, and this was the first kind of code, but it was better than nothing. In theory, no one should read it anyway; but even if they did, they wouldn't remember anything interesting unless they did cryptography first.

Harry then put that parchment in a parchment envelope, and with his wand melted a little green wax to seal it.

In principle, of course, Harry could've done all that hours earlier, but somehow waiting until after he heard the message from Professor McGonagall's own lips seemed less like *Messing With Time*.

Harry then put that envelope inside another envelope, which already contained another sheet of paper with other instructions, and five silver Sickles.

He closed that envelope (which already had a name written on the outside), sealed it with more green wax, and pressed a final Sickle into that seal.

Then Harry put that envelope into the very last envelope on which was written in large letters the name "Merry Tavington".

And Harry peeked around the bend to where the scowling portrait that served as the door to the Slytherin dorms waited; and as he did not wish the portrait to recall not-seeing anyone invisible, Harry used the Hover Charm to float the envelope to the scowling man, and tap it against him.

The scowling man looked down at the envelope, peering at it through a monocle, and sighed, and turned around to face toward the inside of the

Slytherin dorms, and called, "Message for Merry Tavington!"

The envelope was then allowed to fall to the floor.

A few moments later the portrait door opened, and Merry snatched up the envelope from the floor.

She would open it up and find a Sickle and an envelope addressed to a fourth-year student named Margaret Bulstrode.

(Slytherins did this sort of thing all the time, and a Sickle definitely constituted a rush order.)

Margaret would open her envelope, and find five Sickles along with an envelope to be dropped off in an unused classroom...

...after she used her Time-Turner to go back five hours...

...whereupon she would find another five Sickles waiting for her, if she got there quickly.

And an invisible Harry Potter would be waiting in that classroom from three pm to three-thirty, just in case someone tried the obvious test.

Well, it had been obvious to Professor Quirrell, anyway.

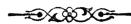
It had also been obvious to Professor Quirrell that (a) Margaret Bulstrode had a Time-Turner and (b) she wasn't very strict about how she used it, e.g. telling her younger sister really good pieces of gossip "before" anyone else had heard.

Some of the tension leaked off Harry as he strode away from the portrait door, still invisible. Somehow his mind had still managed to worry about the plan, even knowing that it had already succeeded. Now there remained only the confrontation with Dumbledore, and then he was done for the day... he'd go to the Headmaster's gargoyles at 9pm, since doing it at 8pm would seem more suspicious. This way he could claim that he'd just misunderstood what Professor McGonagall had meant by "afterward"...

The obscure pain clutched at Harry's heart again as he thought of Professor McGonagall.

So Harry retreated a little further into his dark side, which had worn the calm expression and kept the fatigue off his face, and kept walking.

There would come a reckoning, but sometimes you had to borrow everything you could today, and let the payments come due tomorrow.



Even Harry's dark side was feeling the exhaustion by the time the spiraling staircase had delivered him to the great oaken door that was the final gate

to Dumbledore's office; but since Harry was now legally four hours past his natural bedtime, it was safe to let some of the fatigue show, the physical if not the emotional.

The oaken door swung open –

Harry's eyes had already been focused in the direction of the great desk, the throne behind it; so it took a moment to register that the throne was empty, the desk barren but for a single leatherbound volume; and then Harry shifted his gaze to see the wizard standing among his fiddly things, the mysterious unknown devices in their scores. Fawkes and the Sorting Hat occupied their respective perches, a bright cheerful blaze crackled in a nook that Harry had not before realized was a fireplace, and there were the two umbrellas and three red slippers for left feet. All things in their place and in their customary appearance except the old wizard himself, standing tall and dressed in robes of the most formal black. It came as a shock to the eyes, those robes on that person, it was as if Harry had seen his father wearing a business suit.

Very ancient was the appearance of Albus Dumbledore, and sorrowful.

"Hello, Harry," said the old wizard.

From within an alternate self maintained like an Occlumency construct, an innocent-Harry who had absolutely no idea what was happening inclined his head coldly, and said, "Headmaster. I expect you've heard back from Deputy Headmistress McGonagall by now, so if it's fine by you, I would really like to know what is going on."

"Yes," said the old wizard, "it is time, Harry Potter." The back straightened, only slightly for the wizard had already been standing straight; but somehow even that small change made the wizard seem a foot taller, and stronger if not younger, formidable though not dangerous, his potency gathered about him like a cowl. In a clear voice, then, he spoke: "This day your war against Voldemort has begun."

"What?" said the outer Harry who knew nothing, while something watching from inside thought much the same only with a lot more profanity attached.

"Bellatrix Black has been taken from Azkaban, she has escaped from a prison inescapable," the old wizard said. "It is a feat that bears Voldemort's signature if ever I have seen it; and she, his most faithful servant, is one of three requisites he must obtain to rise again in a new body. After ten years the enemy you once defeated has returned, as was foretold."

Neither part of Harry could think of anything to say to that, at least not for the few seconds before the old wizard continued.

"It need change little for you, for now," said the old wizard. "I have begun reconstituting the Order of the Phoenix that will serve you, I have alerted the few souls who can and should understand: Amelia Bones, Alastor Moody, Bartemius Crouch, certain others. Of the prophecy – yes, there is a prophecy – I have not told them, but they know that Voldemort is returned, and they know that you are to play some vital role. They and I shall fight your war in its lesser beginnings, while you grow stronger, and perhaps wiser, here at Hogwarts." The old wizard's hand came up, as though beseeching. "So to you, for now, there is but one change, and I implore you to understand its necessity. Do you recognize the book on my desk, Harry?"

The inner part of Harry was screaming and banging its head against imaginary walls, while the outer Harry turned and stared at what proved to be –

There was a rather long pause.

Then Harry said, "It is a copy of *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien."

"You recognized a quote from that book," said Dumbledore, an intent look in his eyes, "so I assume you remember it well. If I am mistaken, let me be corrected."

Harry just stared at him.

"It is important to understand," said Dumbledore, "that this book is not a realistic depiction of a wizarding war. John Tolkien never fought Voldemort. Your war will not be like the books you have read. Real life is not like stories. Do you understand, Harry?"

Harry, rather slowly, nodded yes; and then shook his head no.

"In particular," said Dumbledore, "there is a certain very foolish thing that Gandalf does in the first book. He makes many mistakes, does Tolkien's wizard; but this one error is the most unforgivable. That mistake is this: When Gandalf first suspected, even for a moment, that Frodo held the One Ring, he should have moved Frodo to Rivendell at once. He might have been embarrassed, that old wizard, if his suspicions had proven false. He might have found it awkward to so command Frodo, and Frodo would have been greatly inconvenienced, needing to set aside many other plans and pastimes. But a little embarrassment, and awkwardness, and inconvenience, is as nothing compared to the loss of your whole war, when the nine Nazgul swoop down on the Shire while you are reading old scrolls in Minas Tirith,

and take the Ring at once. And it is not Frodo alone who would have been hurt; all Middle-Earth would have fallen into slavery. If it had not been only a story, Harry, they would have lost their war. Do you understand what I am saying?"

"Er..." said Harry, "not exactly..." There was something about Dumbledore when he was like this, which made it hard to stay properly cold; his dark side had trouble with weird.

"Then I will spell it out," said the old wizard. His voice was stern, his eyes were sad. "Frodo should have been moved to Rivendell at once by Gandalf himself – and Frodo should never have left Rivendell without guard. There should have been no night of terror in Bree, no Barrow-downs, no Weathertop where Frodo was wounded, they could have lost their entire war any of those times, for Gandalf's folly! Do you understand now what I am saying to you, son of Michael and Petunia?"

And the Harry who knew nothing did understand.

And the Harry who knew nothing saw that it was the smart, the wise, the intelligent and sane, the right thing to do.

And the Harry who knew nothing said just what an innocent Harry would have said, while the silent watcher screamed in confusion and agony.

"You're saying," Harry said, his voice shaking as the emotions inside burned through the outer calm, "that I'm not going home to my parents for Easter."

"You will see them again," the old wizard said swiftly. "I will beg them to come here to be with you, I will extend them every courtesy during their visits. But you are not going home for Easter, Harry. You are not going home for the summer. You are no longer taking lunches in Diagon Alley, even with Professor Quirrell to watch you. Your blood is the second requisite Voldemort needs to rise as strong as before. So you are never again leaving the bounds of Hogwarts's wards without a vital reason, and a guard strong enough to fend off any attack for long enough to get you to safety."

Water was beginning at the corners of Harry's eyes. "Is that a request?" said his quavering voice. "Or an order?"

"I'm sorry, Harry," the old wizard said softly. "Your parents will see the necessity, I hope; but if not... I am afraid they have no recourse; the law, however wrongly, does not recognize them as your guardians. I am sorry, Harry, and I will understand if you despise me for it, but it must be done."

Harry whirled, looked at the door, he couldn't look at Dumbledore any more, couldn't trust his own face.

This is the cost to yourself, said Hufflepuff within his mind, even as you imposed costs on others. Will that change your whole view of the matter, the way Professor Quirrell thinks it will?

Automatically, the mask of the innocent Harry said exactly what it would have said: "Are my parents in danger? Do they need to be moved here?"

"No," said the old wizard's voice. "I do not think so. The Death Eaters learned, toward the end of the war, not to attack the Order's families. And if Voldemort is now acting without his former companions, he still knows that it is I who make the decisions for now, and he knows that I would give him nothing for any threat to your family. I have taught him that I do not give in to blackmail, and so he will not try."

Harry turned back then, and saw a coldness on the old wizard's face to match the shift in his voice, Dumbledore's blue eyes grown hard as steel behind the glasses, it didn't match the person but it matched the formal black robes.

"Is that everything, then?" said Harry's trembling voice. Later he would think about this, later he would think of some cunning countermeasure, later he would ask Professor Quirrell if there was any way to convince the Headmaster he was mistaken. Right now, maintaining the mask was taking all of Harry's attention.

"Voldemort used a Muggle artifact to escape Azkaban," the old wizard said. "He is watching you and learning from you, Harry Potter. Soon a man named Arthur Weasley at the Ministry will issue an edict that all use of Muggle artifacts must cease in the Defense Professor's battles. In the future, when you have a good idea, keep it closer about yourself."

It didn't seem important by comparison. Harry just nodded, and said again, "Is that everything?"

There was a pause.

"Please," said the old wizard in a whisper. "I have no right to ask your forgiveness, Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres, but please, at least say that you understand why." There was water in the old wizard's eyes.

"I understand," said the voice of the outer Harry who did understand, "I mean... I was sort of thinking about it anyway... wondering whether I could get you and my parents to let me stay over at Hogwarts during the summer like the orphans, so I could read the library here, it's just more interesting at

Hogwarts anyway..."

A choking sound came from Albus Dumbledore's throat.

Harry turned again toward the door. It wasn't escape unscathed, but it was escape.

He took a step forward.

His hand reached to the door-handle.

A piercing cry split the air –

As though in slow motion, as Harry spun, he saw the phoenix already launched through the air and winging toward him.

From the true Harry, the one who knew his own guilt, came a flash of panic, he hadn't thought of that, hadn't anticipated it, he'd prepared to face Dumbledore but he'd forgotten about Fawkes –

Flap, flap, and flap, three times the phoenix's wings flapped like the flaring up and dying down of a fire, duration seemed to pass too slowly as Fawkes soared over the mysterious devices toward where Harry stood.

And the red-golden bird was hovering in front of him with gentle wing-sweeps, bobbing in the air like a candle-flame.

"What is it, Fawkes?" said the false Harry in puzzlement, looking the phoenix in the eyes, as he would if he were innocent. The real Harry, feeling the same awful sickness inside as when Professor McGonagall had expressed her trust in him, thought, Did I turn evil today, Fawkes? I didn't think I was evil... Do you hate me now? If I've become something a phoenix hates, maybe I should just give it up now, give up everything now and confess –

Fawkes screamed, the most terrible cry Harry had ever heard, a scream that set all the devices vibrating and made all the sleeping figures start within their portraits.

It pierced through all of Harry's defenses like a white-hot sword through butter, collapsed all his layers like a punctured balloon popping, reshuffled his priorities in an instant as he remembered the one most important thing; the tears began pouring freely from Harry's eyes, down his cheeks, his voice choked as the words came out of his throat like coughing up lava –

"Fawkes says," Harry's voice said, "he wants me, to do, something, about, the prisoners, in Azkaban –"

"Fawkes, no!" said the old wizard. Dumbledore strode forward, reaching out to the phoenix with a pleading hand. The old wizard's voice was almost as desperate as the phoenix's scream had been. "You cannot ask that of him, Fawkes, he's only a boy still!"

“You went to Azkaban,” Harry whispered, “you took Fawkes with you, he saw – you saw – you were there, you saw – WHY DIDN’T YOU DO ANYTHING? WHY DIDN’T YOU LET THEM OUT?”

When the instruments stopped vibrating, Harry realized that Fawkes had screamed at the same time as his own scream, that the phoenix was now flying next to Harry and facing Dumbledore at his side, the red-golden head level with his own.

“Can you,” whispered the old wizard, “can you truly hear the voice of the phoenix so clearly?”

Harry was sobbing almost too hard to speak, for all the metal doors he’d passed, the voices he’d heard, the worst memories, the desperate begging as he walked away, all of it had burst into his mind like fire at the phoenix’s scream, all the inner bulwarks smashed. Harry didn’t know whether he could truly hear the voice of the phoenix so clearly, whether he would have understood Fawkes without already knowing. All Harry knew was that he had a plausible excuse to say the things Professor Quirrell had told him he must never raise in conversation from this day forth; because this was just what an innocent Harry would have said, would have done, if he had heard so clearly. “They’re hurting – we have to help them –”

“I can’t!” cried Albus Dumbledore. “Harry, Fawkes, I can’t, there’s nothing I can do!”

Another piercing scream.

“WHY NOT? JUST GO IN AND TAKE THEM OUT!”

The old wizard wrenched his gaze from the phoenix, his eyes meeting Harry’s instead. “Harry, tell Fawkes for me! Tell him it’s not that simple! Phoenixes aren’t mere animals but they are animals, Harry, they can’t understand –”

“I don’t understand either,” Harry said, his voice trembling. “I don’t understand why you’re feeding people to Dementors! Azkaban isn’t a prison, it’s a torture chamber and you’re torturing those people to DEATH!”

“Percival,” said the old wizard hoarsely, “Percival Dumbledore, my own father, Harry, my own father died in Azkaban! I know, I know it is a horror! But what would you have of me? To break Azkaban by force? Would you have me declare open rebellion against the Ministry?”

CAW!

There was a pause, and Harry’s trembling voice said, “Fawkes doesn’t know anything about governments, he just wants you – to take the prisoners

out – of their cells – and he'll help you fight, if anyone stands in your way – and – and so will I, Headmaster! I'll go with you and destroy any Dementor that comes near! We'll worry about the political fallout afterward, I bet that you and I together could get away with it –"

"Harry," whispered the old wizard, "phoenixes do not understand how winning a battle can lose a war." Tears were streaming down the old wizard's cheeks, dripping into his silver beard. "The battle is all they know. They are good, but not wise. That is why they choose wizards to be their masters."

"Can you bring out the Dementors to where I can get at them?" Harry's voice was begging, now. "Bring them out in groups of fifteen – I think I could destroy that many at a time without hurting myself –"

The old wizard shook his head. "It was hard enough to pass off the loss of one – they might give me one more, but never two – they are considered national possessions, Harry, weapons in case of war –"

Fury blazed in Harry then, blazed up like fire, it might have come from where a phoenix now rested on his own shoulder, and it might have come from his own dark side, and the two angers mixed within him, the cold and the hot, and it was a strange voice that said from his throat, "Tell me something. What does a government have to do, what do the voters have to do with their democracy, what do the people of a country have to do, before I ought to decide that I'm not on their side any more?"

The old wizard's eyes widened where he stared at the boy with a phoenix upon his shoulder. "Harry... are those your words, or the Defense Professor's –"

"Because there has to be some point, doesn't there? And if it's not Azkaban, where is it, then?"

"Harry, listen, please, hear me! Wizards could not live together if they each declared rebellion against the whole, every time they differed! Always there will be something –"

"Azkaban is not just something! It's evil!"

"Yes, even evil! Even some evils, Harry, for wizards are not perfectly good! And yet it is better that we live in peace, than in chaos; and for you and I to break Azkaban by force would be the beginning of chaos, can you not see it?" The old wizard's voice was pleading. "And it is possible to oppose the will of your fellows openly or in secret, without hating them, without declaring them evil and enemy! I do not think the people of this country deserve that of you, Harry! And even if some of them did – what of the children, what of

the students in Hogwarts, what of the many good people mixed in with the bad?”

Harry looked on his shoulder at where Fawkes had perched, saw the phoenix’s eyes gazing back at him, they did not glow and yet they blazed, red flames in a sea of golden fire.

What do you think, Fawkes?

“Caw?” said the phoenix.

Fawkes didn’t understand the conversation.

The young boy looked at the old wizard, and said in a thick voice, “Or maybe the phoenixes are wiser than us, smarter than us, maybe they follow us around hoping that someday we’ll listen to them, someday we’ll get it, someday we’ll just take, the prisoners, out, of their cells –”

Harry spun and pulled open the oaken door and stepped onto the staircase and slammed the door behind him.

The stairwell began rotating, Harry began descending, and he put his face in his hands, and began to weep.

It wasn’t until he was halfway to the bottom that he noticed the difference, noticed the warmth still spreading through him, and realized that –

“Fawkes?” Harry whispered.

– the phoenix was still on his shoulder, perched there as he had seen him a few times upon Dumbledore’s.

Harry looked again into the eyes, red flames in golden fire.

“You’re not my phoenix now... are you?”

Caw!

“Oh,” Harry said, his voice trembling a little, “I’m glad to hear that, Fawkes, because I don’t think – the Headmaster – I don’t think he deserves –”

Harry stopped, took a breath.

“I don’t think he deserves that, Fawkes, he was trying to do the right thing...”

Caw!

“But you’re angry at him and trying to make a point. I understand.”

The phoenix nestled his head against Harry’s shoulder, and the stone gargoyle walked smoothly aside to let Harry pass back into the corridors of Hogwarts.

THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT, AFTERMATHS

Aftermath, Hermione Granger:

SHE was just starting to close up her books and put away her homework in preparation for sleep, Padma and Mandy stacking up their own books across the table from her, when Harry Potter walked into the Ravenclaw common room; and it was only then that she realized, she hadn't seen him at all since breakfast.

That realization was rapidly stomped-on by a much more startling one.

There was a golden-red winged creature on Harry's shoulder, a bright bird of fire.

And Harry looked sad and worn and really tired like the phoenix was the only thing keeping him on his feet, but there was still a warmth about him, if you crossed your eyes you might have thought you were looking at the Headmaster somehow, that was the impression that went through Hermione's mind even though it didn't make any sense.

Harry Potter trudged across the Ravenclaw common room, past sofas full of staring girls, past cardgame-circles of staring boys, heading for her.

In theory she wasn't talking to Harry Potter yet, his week wasn't up until tomorrow, but whatever was going on was clearly a whole lot more important than that –

"Fawkes," Harry said, just as she was opening her mouth, "that girl over there is Hermione Granger, she's not talking to me right now because I'm an idiot, but if you want to be on a good person's shoulder she's better than me."

So much exhaustion and hurt in Harry Potter's voice –

But before she could figure out what to do about it, the phoenix had glided off Harry's shoulder like a fire creeping up a matchstick on fast-forward, flashing toward her; there was a phoenix flying in front of her and staring at her with eyes of light and flame.

"Caw?" asked the phoenix.

Hermione stared at it, feeling like she was facing a question on a test she'd forgotten to study for, the one most important question and she'd gone her whole life without studying for it, she couldn't find anything to say.

"I'm –" she said. "I'm only twelve, I haven't done anything yet –"

The phoenix just glided gently around, rotating around one wingtip like the being of light and air that it was, and soared back to Harry Potter's shoulder, where it settled down quite firmly.

"You silly boy," said Padma across from her, looking like she was deciding whether to laugh or grimace, "phoenixes aren't for smart girls who do their homework, they're for idiots who charge straight at five older Slytherin bullies. There's a reason why the Gryffindor colors are red and gold, you know."

There was a lot of friendly laughter in the Ravenclaw common room.

Hermione wasn't one of the laughing ones.

Neither was Harry.

Harry had put a hand over his face. "Tell Hermione I'm sorry," he said to Padma, his voice almost fallen to a whisper. "Tell her I forgot that phoenixes are animals, they don't understand time and planning, they don't understand people who are going to do good things later – I'm not sure they understand really the notion of there being something that a person is, all they see is what people do. Fawkes doesn't know what twelve means. Tell Hermione I'm sorry – I shouldn't have – it just all goes wrong, doesn't it?"

Harry turned to go, the phoenix still on his shoulder, began slowly trudging toward the staircase that led up to his dorm.

And Hermione couldn't leave it at that, she just couldn't leave it at that. She didn't know if it was her competition with Harry or something else. She just couldn't leave it with the phoenix turning away from her.

She had to –

Her mind keyed a frantic question to the entirety of her excellent memory, found just one thing –

"I was going to run in front of the Dementor to try and save Harry!" she shouted a little desperately at the red-golden bird. "I mean, I actually did start running and everything! That was stupid and courageous, right?"

With a warbling cry the phoenix launched itself from Harry's shoulder again, back toward her like a spreading blaze, it circled her three times like she was the center of an inferno, and for just a moment its wing brushed against her cheek, before the phoenix soared back to Harry.

There was a hush in the Ravenclaw common room.

"Told you so," Harry said aloud, and then he started climbing the stairs up to his bedroom; he seemed to climb very quickly, like he was very light on his feet for some reason, so that in just a moment he and Fawkes were gone.

Hermione held up a trembling hand to her cheek where Fawkes had brushed her with his wing, a spot of warmth lingering there like that one small patch of skin had been very gently set on fire.

She'd answered the question of the phoenix, she supposed, but it felt to her like she'd just barely squeaked by on the test, like she'd gotten a 62 and she could've gotten 104 if she'd tried harder.

If she'd tried at all.

She hadn't really been trying, when she thought about it.

Just doing her homework –

Who have you saved?



Aftermath, Fawkes:

Nightmares, the boy had expected, screams and begging and howling hurricanes of emptiness, the discharge of the horrors being laid down into memory, and in that fashion, perhaps, becoming part of the past.

And the boy knew that the nightmares would come.

The next night, they would come.

The boy dreamed, and in his dreams the world was on fire, Hogwarts was on fire, his home was on fire, the streets of Oxford were on fire, all ablaze with golden flames that shone but did not consume, and all the people walking through the blazing streets were shining with white light brighter than the fire, like they were flames themselves, or stars.

The other first-year boys came to bed, and saw it for themselves, the wonder whose rumor they had already heard, that in his bed Harry Potter lay silent and motionless, a gentle smile on his face, while perched on his pillow a red-golden bird watched over him, with bright wings swept above him like a blanket pulled over his head.

The reckoning had been put off one more night.



Aftermath, Draco Malfoy:

Draco straightened his robes, making sure the green trim was straight. He

waved his wand over his own head and said a Charm that Father had taught him while other children were still playing in mud, a Charm which ensured that not a single speck of lint or dust would dirty his wizard's robes.

Draco picked up the mysterious envelope that Father had owled him, and tucked it into his robes. He had already used *Incendio* and *Everto* on the mysterious note.

And then he headed off to breakfast, to seat himself on exactly the same tick of the clock where the food appeared, if he could manage it, so that it would seem like all others had been waiting on his appearance to eat. Because when you were the scion of Malfoy you were first in everything, including breakfast, that was why.

Vincent and Gregory were waiting for him outside the door of his private room, up even before he was – though not, of course, dressed quite as sharply.

The Slytherin common room was deserted, anyone who got up this early was heading straight to breakfast anyway.

The dungeon halls were silent but for their own footsteps, empty and echoing.

The Great Hall was a hubbub of alarm despite the relative few arrivals, some younger children crying, students running back and forth between tables or standing in knots shouting at each other, a red-robed prefect was standing in front of two green-trimmed students and yelling at them and Snape was striding toward the mess –

The noise dimmed a little as people caught sight of Draco, as some of the faces turned to stare at him, and fell quiet.

The food appeared on the tables. No one looked at it.

And Snape spun on his heel, abandoning his target, and headed straight toward Draco.

A knot of fear clutched at Draco's heart, had something happened to Father – no, surely Father would have told him – whatever was happening, why hadn't Father told him –

There were bags of fatigue beneath Snape's eyes, Draco saw as their Head of House came close, the Potions Master had never been a sharp dresser (that was an understatement) but his robes were even dirtier and more disarrayed this morning, spotted with extra grease.

"You haven't heard?" hissed their Head of House as he came close. "For pity's sake, Malfoy, don't you have a newspaper delivered?"

"What is it, Profe-"

“Bellatrix Black was taken from Azkaban!”

“What?” said Draco in shock, as Gregory behind him said something he really shouldn’t have and Vincent just gasped.

Snape was gazing at him with narrowed eyes, then nodded abruptly. “Lucius told you nothing, then. I see.” Snape gave a snort, turned away –

“Professor!” said Draco. The implications were just starting to dawn on him, his mind spinning frantically. “Professor, what should I do – Father didn’t instruct me –”

“Then I suggest,” Snape said sneeringly, as he strode away, “that you tell them that, Malfoy, as your father intended!”

Draco glanced back at Vincent and Gregory, though he didn’t know why he was bothering, of course they looked even more confused than he did.

And Draco walked forward to the Slytherin table, and sat down at the far end, which was still empty of sitters.

Draco put a sausage omelet on his plate, began eating it with automatic motions.

Bellatrix Black had been taken from Azkaban.

Bellatrix Black had been taken from Azkaban...?

Draco didn’t know what to make of that, it was as totally unexpected as the Sun going out – well, the Sun would expectedly go out in six billion years but this was as unexpected as the Sun going out tomorrow. Father wouldn’t have done it, Dumbledore wouldn’t have done it, no one should have been able to do it – what did it mean – what use would Bellatrix be to anyone after ten years in Azkaban – even if she got strong again, what use was a powerful sorceress who was completely evil and insane and fanatically devoted to a Dark Lord who wasn’t around anymore?

“Hey,” said Vincent from where he was sitting next to Draco, “I don’t understand, boss, why’d we do that?”

“We didn’t do it, you dolt!” snapped Draco. “Oh, for Merlin’s sake, if even you think we – didn’t your father ever tell you any stories about Bellatrix Black? She tortured Father once, she tortured your father, she’s tortured everyone, the Dark Lord once told her to Crucio herself and she did it! She didn’t do crazy things to inspire fear and obedience in the populace, she did crazy things because she’s crazy! She’s a bitch is what she is!”

“Oh, really?” said an incensed voice from behind Draco.

Draco didn’t look up. Gregory and Vincent would be watching his back.

“I would’ve thought you’d be happy –”

“ – to hear that a Death Eater had been freed, Malfoy!”

Amycus Carrow had always been one of the other problem people; Father had once told Draco to make sure he was never alone in the same room with Amycus...

Draco turned around and gave Flora and Hestia Carrow his Number Three Sneer, the one that said that he was in a Noble and Most Ancient House and they weren't and yes, that mattered. Draco said in their general direction, certainly not deigning to address them in particular, “There's Death Eaters and then there's Death Eaters,” and then turned back to his food.

There were two furious huffs in unison, and then two pairs of shoes stormed off toward the other end of the Slytherin table.

It was a few minutes later that Millicent Bulstrode ran up to them, visibly out of breath, and said, “Mr. Malfoy, did you hear?”

“About Bellatrix Black?” said Draco. “Yeah –”

“No, about Potter!”

“What?”

“Potter was going around with a phoenix on his shoulder last night, looking like he'd been dragged through ten leagues of mud, they say that the phoenix took him to Azkaban to try to stop Bellatrix and he fought a duel with her and they blew up half the fortress!”

“What?” said Draco. “Oh, there is just no way that –”

Draco stopped.

He'd said that a number of times about Harry Potter and had started to notice a trend.

Millicent ran off to tell someone else.

“You don't really think –” said Gregory.

“I honestly don't know anymore,” said Draco.

A few minutes later, after Theodore Nott had sat down across from him and William Rosier had gone to sit with the Carrow twins, Vincent nudged him and said, “There.”

Harry Potter had entered the Great Hall.

Draco watched him closely.

There was no alarm on Harry's face as he saw, no surprise or shock, he just looked...

It was the same distant, self-absorbed look Harry wore when he was trying to figure out the answer to a question Draco couldn't understand yet.

Draco hastily shoved himself up from the bench of the Slytherin table, saying “Stay behind,” and walked with all decorous speed toward Harry.

Harry seemed to notice his approach just as the other boy was turning toward the Ravenclaw table, and Draco –

– gave Harry one quick look –

– and then walked right past him, straight out of the Great Hall.

It was a minute later that Harry peered around the corner of the small stony nook where Draco had waited, it might not fool everyone but it would create plausible deniability.

“Quietus,” said Harry. “Draco, what –”

Draco took the envelope out of his robes. “I have a message for you from Father.”

“Huh?” said Harry, and took the envelope from Draco, and tore it open in a rather un-neat manner, and drew forth a sheet of parchment and unfolded it and –

Harry gave a sharp intake of breath.

Then Harry looked at Draco.

Then Harry looked back down at the parchment.

There was a pause.

Harry said, “Did Lucius tell you to report on my reaction to this?”

Draco paused for a moment, weighing, and then opened his mouth –

“I see he did,” said Harry, and Draco cursed himself, he should’ve known better, only it had been hard to decide. “What are you going to tell him?”

“That you were surprised,” said Draco.

“Surprised,” Harry said flatly. “Yeah. Good. Tell him that.”

“What is it?” said Draco. And then, as he saw Harry looking conflicted, “If you’re dealing with Father behind my back –”

And Harry, without a word, gave Draco the paper.

It said:

I know it was you.

“WHAT THE –”

“I was going to ask you that,” said Harry. “Have you got any idea what’s up with your Dad?”

Draco stared at Harry.

Then Draco said, “Did you do it?”

“What?” said Harry. “What possible reason would I – how would I –”

“Did you do it, Harry?”

"No!" Harry said. "Of course not!"

Draco had listened carefully, but he hadn't detected any hesitation or tremor.

So Draco nodded, and said, "I've got no idea what Father's thinking but it can't, I mean it can't possibly be good. And, um... people are also saying..."

"What," said Harry warily, "are they saying, Draco?"

"Did a phoenix really take you to Azkaban to try to stop Bellatrix Black from escaping –"



Aftermath: Neville Longbottom

Harry had only just sat down at the Ravenclaw table for the first time, hoping to grab a quick bite of food. He knew he needed to go off and think about things, but there was a tiny remaining bit of phoenix's peace (even after the encounter with Draco) that he still wanted to cling to, some beautiful dream of which he remembered nothing but the beauty; and the part of him that wasn't feeling peaceful was waiting for all the anvils to finish dropping on him, so that when he went off to think and be by himself for a while, he could batch-process all the disasters at once.

Harry's hand grasped a fork, lifted a bite of mashed potatoes toward his mouth –

And there was a shriek.

Every now and then someone would shout when they heard the news, but Harry's ears recognized this one –

Harry was up from the bench in an instant, heading toward the Hufflepuff table, a horrible sick feeling dawning in the pit of his stomach. It was one of those things he hadn't considered when he'd decided to commit the crime, because Professor Quirrell had planned for no one to know; and now, afterward, Harry just – hadn't thought of it –

This, Hufflepuff said with bitter intensity, is also your fault.

But by the time Harry got there, Neville was sitting down and eating fried sausage patties with Snippyfig Sauce.

The Hufflepuff boy's hands were trembling, but he cut the food, and ate it, without dropping it.

"Hello, General," Neville said, his voice wavering only slightly. "Did you fight a duel with Bellatrix Black last night?"

"No," Harry said. His own voice was also wavery, for some reason.

“Didn’t think so,” said Neville. There was a scraping sound as his knife cut the sausage again. “I’m going to hunt her down and kill her, can I count on you to help?”

There were startled gasps from the mass of Hufflepuffs who had gathered around Neville.

“If she comes after you,” Harry said hoarsely, if it was all a terrible mistake, if it was all a lie, “I’ll defend you even with my life,” won’t let you get hurt for what I did, no matter what, “but I won’t help you go after her, Neville, friends don’t help friends commit suicide.”

Neville’s fork paused on the way to his mouth.

Then Neville put the bite of food in his mouth, chewed again.

And Neville swallowed it.

And Neville said, “I didn’t mean right now, I mean after I graduate Hogwarts.”

“Neville,” Harry said, keeping his voice under very careful control, “I think, even after you graduate, that might still be a just plain stupid idea. There’s got to be much more experienced Aurors tracking her –” oh, wait, that’s not good –

“Listen to him!” said Ernie Macmillan, and then an older-looking Hufflepuff girl standing close to Neville said, “Nevvy, please, think about it, he’s right!”

Neville stood up.

Neville said, “Please don’t follow me.”

Neville walked away from all of them; Harry and Ernie reaching out involuntarily toward him, and some of the other Hufflepuffs as well.

And Neville sat down at the Gryffindor table, and distantly (though they had to strain to hear) they heard Neville say, “I’m going to hunt her down and kill her after I graduate, anyone want to help?” and at least five voices said “Yes” and then Ron Weasley said loudly, “Get in line, you lot, I got an owl from Mum this morning, she says to tell everyone she’s called dibs” and someone said “Molly Weasley against Bellatrix Black? Who does she even think she’s kidding –” and Ron reached over to a plate and hefted a muffin –

Someone tapped Harry on the shoulder, and he turned around and saw an unfamiliar green-trimmed older girl, who handed him a parchment envelope and then quickly strode away.

Harry stared at the envelope for a moment, then started walking toward the nearest wall. That wasn’t very private, but it should be private enough,

and Harry didn't want to give the impression of having much to hide.

That had been a Slytherin System delivery, what you used if you wanted to communicate with someone without anyone else knowing that the two of you had talked. The sender gave an envelope to someone who had a reputation for being a reliable messenger, along with ten Knuts; that first person would take five Knuts and pass the envelope to another messenger along with the other five Knuts, and the second messenger would open up that envelope and find another envelope with a name written on it and deliver that envelope to that person. That way neither of the two people passing the message knew both the sender and the recipient, so no one else knew that those two parties had been in contact...

When Harry reached the wall, he put the envelope inside his robes, opened it beneath the folds of cloth, and carefully snuck a peek at the parchment he drew forth.

It said,

Classroom to the left of Transfiguration, 8 in the morning.

– LL.

Harry stared at it, trying to remember if he knew anyone with the initials LL.

His mind searched...

Searched...

Retrieved –

"The Quibbler girl?" Harry whispered incredulously, and then shut his mouth. She was only ten years old, she shouldn't be in Hogwarts at all!



Aftermath: Lesath Lestrangle.

Harry was standing in the unused classroom next to Transfiguration at 8am, waiting, he'd at least managed to get some food into himself before facing the next disaster, Luna Lovegood...

The door to the classroom opened, and Harry saw, and gave himself a really hard mental kick.

One more thing he hadn't thought of, one more thing he really should have.

The older boy's green-trimmed formal robes were askew, there were red spots on them looking very much like small dots of fresh blood, and one

corner of his mouth had the look of a place that had been cut and healed, by Episkey or some other minor medical Charm that didn't quite erase all the damage.

Lesath Lestrangle's face was streaked with tears, fresh tears and half-dried tears, and there was water in his eyes, a promise of still more on the way. "Quietus," said the older boy, and then "Homenum Revelio" and some other things, while Harry thought frantically and without much luck.

And then Lesath lowered his wand and sheathed it in his robes, and slowly this time, formally, the older boy dropped to his knees on the dusty classroom floor.

Bowed his head all the way down, until his forehead also touched the dust, and Harry would have spoken but he was voiceless.

Lesath Lestrangle said, in a breaking voice, "My life is yours, my Lord, and my death as well."

"I," Harry said, there was a huge lump in his throat and he was having trouble speaking, "I –" didn't have anything to do with it, he should have been saying, should be saying right now, but then again the innocent Harry would have had trouble speaking too –

"Thank you," whispered Lesath, "thank you, my Lord, oh, thank you," the sound of a choked-off sob came from the kneeling boy, all Harry could see of him was the hair on the back of his head, nothing of his face. "I'm a fool, my Lord, an ungrateful bastard, unworthy to serve you, I cannot abase myself enough, for I – I shouted at you after you helped me, because I thought you were refusing me, and I didn't even realize until this morning that I'd been such a fool as to ask you in front of Longbottom –"

"I didn't have anything to do with it," Harry said.

(It was still very hard to tell an outright lie like that.)

Slowly Lesath raised his head from the floor, looked up at Harry.

"I understand, my Lord," said the older boy, his voice wavering a little, "you do not trust my cunning, and indeed I have shown myself a fool... I only wanted to say to you, that I am not ungrateful, that I know it must have been hard enough to save only one person, that they're alerted now, that you can't – get Father – but I am not ungrateful, I will never be ungrateful to you again. If ever you have a use for this unworthy servant, call me wherever I am, and I will answer, my Lord –"

"I was not involved in any way."

(But it got easier each time.)

Lesath gazed up at Harry, said uncertainly, “Am I dismissed from your presence, my Lord...?”

“I am not your Lord.”

Lesath said, “Yes, my Lord, I understand,” and pushed himself back up from the floor, stood straight and bowed deeply, then backed away from Harry until he turned to open the classroom door.

As Lesath’s hand touched the doorknob, he paused.

Harry couldn’t see Lesath’s face, as the older boy’s voice said, “Did you send her to someone who would take care of her? Did she ask about me at all?”

And Harry said, his voice perfectly level, “Please stop that. I was not involved in any way.”

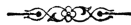
“Yes, my Lord, I’m sorry, my Lord,” said Lesath’s voice; and the Slytherin boy opened the door and went out and shut the door behind him. His feet sped up as he ran away, but not fast enough that Harry couldn’t hear him start sobbing.

Would I cry? wondered Harry. If I knew nothing, if I was innocent, would I cry right now?

Harry didn’t know, so he just kept looking at the door.

And some unbelievably tactless part of him thought, Yay, we completed a quest and got a minion –

Shut up. If you ever want to vote on anything ever again... shut up.



Aftermath, Amelia Bones:

“Then his life isn’t in danger, I take it,” said Amelia.

The healer, a stern-eyed old man who wore his robes white (he was a Muggleborn and honoring some strange tradition of Muggles, of which Amelia had never asked, although privately she thought it made him look too much like a ghost), shook his head and said, “Definitely not.”

Amelia looked at the human form resting unconscious on the healer’s bed, the burned and blasted flesh, the thin sheet that covered him for modesty’s sake having been peeled back at her command.

He might make a full recovery.

He might not.

The healer had said it was too early to say.

Then Amelia looked at the other witch in the room, the detective.

“And you say,” Amelia said, “that the burning matter was Transfigured from water, presumably in the form of ice.”

The detective nodded her head, and said, sounding puzzled, “It could have been much worse, if not for –”

“How very nice of them,” she spat, and then pressed a weary hand to her forehead. No... no, it had been intended as a kindness. By the final stage of the escape there would be no point in trying to fool anyone. Whoever had done this, then, had been trying to mitigate the damage – and they’d been thinking in terms of Aurors breathing the smoke, not of anyone being attacked with the fire. If it had been them still in control, no doubt, they would have steered the rocker more mercifully.

But Bellatrix Black had ridden the rocker out of Azkaban alone, all the watching Aurors had agreed on that, they’d had their Anti-Disillusionment Charms active and there had been only one woman on that rocker, though the rocker had sported two sets of stirrups.

Some good and innocent person, capable of casting the Patronus Charm, had been tricked into rescuing Bellatrix Black.

Some innocent had fought Bahry One-Hand, carefully subduing an experienced Auror without significantly injuring him.

Some innocent had Transfigured the fuel for the Muggle artifact on which the two of them had been to ride out of Azkaban, making it from frozen water for the benefit of her Aurors.

And then their usefulness to Bellatrix Black had ended.

You would have expected anyone capable of subduing Bahry One-Hand to have foreseen that part. But then you wouldn’t have expected anyone who could cast the Patronus Charm to try rescuing Bellatrix Black in the first place.

Amelia passed her hand down over her eyes, closing them for a moment in silent mourning. I wonder who it was, and how You-Know-Who manipulated them... what story they could possibly have been told...

She didn’t even realize until a moment later that the thought meant she was starting to believe. Perhaps because, no matter how difficult it was to believe Dumbledore, it was becoming more difficult not to recognize the hand of that cold, dark intelligence.



Aftermath, Albus Dumbledore:

It might have been only fifty-seven seconds before breakfast ended and he might have needed four twists of his Time-Turner, but in the end, Albus Dumbledore did make it.

"Headmaster?" squeaked the polite voice of Professor Filius Flitwick, as the old wizard passed him by on his way to his seat. "Mr. Potter left a message for you."

The old wizard stopped. He looked inquiringly at the Charms Professor.

"Mr. Potter said that after he woke up, he realized how unfair had been the things he said to you after Fawkes screamed. Mr. Potter said that he wasn't saying anything about anything else, just apologizing for that one part."

The old wizard kept looking at his Charms Professor, and still did not speak.

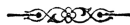
"Headmaster?" squeaked Filius.

"Tell him I said thank you," said Albus Dumbledore, "but that it is wiser to listen to phoenixes than to wise old wizards," and sat down at his place three seconds before all the food vanished.



Aftermath, Professor Quirrell:

"No," Madam Pomfrey snapped at the child, "you may not see him! You may not pester him! You may not ask him one little question! He is to rest in bed and do nothing for at least three days!"



Aftermath, Minerva McGonagall:

She was heading toward the infirmary, and Harry Potter was leaving it, when they passed each other.

The look he gave her wasn't angry.

It wasn't sad.

It didn't say much at all.

It was like... like he was looking at her just long enough to make it clear that he wasn't deliberately avoiding looking at her.

And then he looked away before she could figure out what look to give him in return; as though he wanted to spare her that, as well.

He didn't say anything as he walked past her.

Neither did she.

What could there possibly be to say?



Aftermath, Fred and George Weasley:

They actually yelped out loud, when they turned the corner and saw Dumbledore.

It wasn't that the Headmaster had popped up out of nowhere and was staring at them with a stern expression. Dumbledore was always doing that.

But the wizard was dressed in formal black robes and looking very ancient and very powerful and he was giving the two of them a SHARP LOOK.

"Fred and George Weasley!" spake Dumbledore in a Voice of Power.

"Yes, Headmaster!" they said, snapping upright and giving him a crisp military salute they'd seen in some old pictures.

"Hear me well! You are the friends of Harry Potter, is this so?"

"Yes, Headmaster!"

"Harry Potter is in danger. He must not go beyond the wards of Hogwarts. Listen to me, sons of Weasley, I beg you listen: you know that I am as Gryffindor as yourselves, that I too know there are higher rules than rules. But this, Fred and George, this one thing is of the most terrible importance, there must be no exception this time, small or great! If you help Harry to leave Hogwarts he may die! Does he send you on a mission, you may go, does he ask you to bring him items, you may help, but if he asks you to smuggle his own person out of Hogwarts, you must refuse! Do you understand?"

"Yes, Headmaster!" They said it without even thinking, really, and then exchanged uncertain looks with each other –

The bright blue eyes of the Headmaster were intent upon them. "No. Not without thinking. If Harry asks you to bring him out, you must refuse, if he asks you to tell him the way, you must refuse. I will not ask you to report him to me, for that I know you would never do. But beg him on my behalf to go to me, if it is of such importance, and I will guard him as he walks. Fred, George, I am sorry to strain your friendship so, but it is his life."

The two of them looked at each other for a long while, not communicating, only thinking the same things at the same time.

They looked back at Dumbledore.

They said, with a chill running through them as they spoke the name, "Bellatrix Black."

"You may safely assume," said the Headmaster, "that it is at least that bad."

“Okay –”

“– got it.”



Aftermath, Alastor Moody and Severus Snape:

When Alastor Moody had lost his eye, he had commandeered the services of a most erudite Ravenclaw, Samuel H. Lyall, whom Moody mistrusted slightly less than average because Moody had refrained from reporting him as an unregistered werewolf; and he had paid Lyall to compile a list of every known magical eye, and every known hint to their location.

When Moody had gotten the list back, he hadn't bothered reading most of it; because at the top of the list was the Eye of Vance, dating back to an era before Hogwarts, and currently in the possession of a powerful Dark Wizard ruling over some tiny forgotten hellhole that wasn't in Britain or anywhere else he'd have to worry about silly rules.

That was how Alastor Moody had lost his left foot and acquired the Eye of Vance, and how the oppressed souls of Urulat had been liberated for a period of around two weeks before another Dark Wizard moved in on the power vacuum.

He'd considered going after the Left Foot of Vance next, but had decided against it after he realized that would be just what they were expecting.

Now Mad-Eye Moody was turning slowly, always turning, surveying the graveyard of Little Hangleton. It should have been a lot gloomier, that place, but in the broad daylight it seemed like nothing but a grassy place marked by ordinary tombstones, demarcated by the chained twists of fragile, easily climbable metal that Muggles used instead of wards. (Moody could not comprehend what the Muggles were thinking on that score, if they were pretending to have wards, or what, and he had decided not to ask whether Muggle criminals respected the pretense.)

Moody didn't actually need to turn to survey the graveyard.

The Eye of Vance saw the full globe of the world in every direction around him, no matter where it was pointing.

But there was no particular reason to let a former Death Eater like Severus Snape know that.

Sometimes people called Moody 'paranoid'.

Moody always told them to survive a hundred years of hunting Dark Wizards and then get back to him about that.

Mad-Eye Moody had once worked out how long it had taken him, in retrospect, to achieve what he now considered a decent level of caution – weighed up how much experience it had taken him to get good instead of lucky – and had begun to suspect that most people died before they got there. Moody had once expressed this thought to Lyall, who had done some ciphering and figuring, and told him that a typical Dark Wizard hunter would die, on average, eight and a half times along the way to becoming ‘paranoid’. This explained a great deal, assuming Lyall wasn’t lying.

Yesterday, Albus Dumbledore had told Mad-Eye Moody that the Dark Lord had used unspeakable dark arts to survive the death of his body, and was now awake and abroad, seeking to regain his power and begin the Wizarding War anew.

Someone else might have reacted with incredulity.

“I can’t believe you lot never told me about this resurrection thing,” Mad-Eye Moody said with considerable acerbity. “D’you realize how long it’ll take me to do the grave of every ancestor of every Dark Wizard I’ve ever killed who could’ve been smart enough to make a horcrux? You’re not just now doing this one, are you?”

“I redose this one every year,” Severus Snape said calmly, uncapping the third flask of what the man had claimed would be seventeen bottles, and beginning to wave his wand over it. “The other ancestral graves we’ve been able to locate were poisoned with only the long-lasting substances, since some of us have less free time than yourself.”

Moody watched the fluid spiraling out of the vial and vanishing, to appear within the bones where marrow had once been. “But you think it’s worth the effort of the trap, instead of just Vanishing the bones.”

“He does have other avenues to life, should he perceive this one blocked,” Snape said dryly, uncapping a fourth bottle. “And before you ask, it must be the original grave, the place of first burial, the bone removed during the ritual and not before. Thus he cannot have retrieved it earlier; and also there is no point in substituting the skeleton of a weaker ancestor. He would notice it had lost all potency.”

“Who else knows about this trap?” Moody demanded.

“You. Me. The Headmaster. No one else.”

Moody snorted. “Pfah. Did Albus tell Amelia, Bartemius, and that McGonagall woman about the resurrection ritual?”

“Yes –”

"If Voldie finds out that Albus knows about the resurrection ritual and that Albus told them, Voldie'll figure that Albus told me, and Voldie knows I'd think of this." Moody shook his head in disgust. "What're these other ways Voldie could come back to life?"

Snape's hand paused on the fifth bottle (it was all Disillusioned, of course, the whole operation was Disillusioned, but that meant less than nothing to Moody, it just marked you in his Eye's sight as trying-to-hide), and the former Death Eater said, "You don't need to know."

"You're learning, son," said Moody with mild approval. "What's in the bottles?"

Snape opened the fifth bottle, gestured with his wand to begin the substance flowing toward the grave, and said, "This one? A Muggle narcotic called LSD. A conversation yesterday put me in mind of Muggle things, and LSD seemed the most interesting option, so I hurried to obtain some. If it is incorporated into the resurrection potion, I suspect its effects will be permanent."

"What does it do?" said Moody.

"It is said that the effects are impossible to describe to anyone who has not used it," drawled Snape, "and I have not used it."

Moody nodded approval as Snape opened the sixth flask. "What about that one?"

"Love potion."

"Love potion?" said Moody.

"Not of the standard sort. It is meant to trigger a two-way bond with an unbearably sweet Veela woman named Verdandi who the Headmaster hopes might be able to redeem even him, if they truly loved each other."

"Gah!" said Moody. "That bloody sentimental fool –"

"Agreed," Severus Snape said calmly, his attention focused on his work.

"Tell me you've at least got some Malaclaw venom in there."

"Second flask."

"Iocane powder."

"Either the fourteenth or fifteenth bottle."

"Bahl's Stupefaction," Moody said, naming an extremely addictive narcotic with interesting side effects on people with Slytherin tendencies; Moody had once seen an addicted Dark Wizard go to ridiculous lengths to get a victim to lay hands on a certain exact portkey, instead of just having someone toss the target a trapped Knut on their next visit to town; and after going to

all that work, the addict had gone to the further effort to lay a second Portus, on the same portkey, which had, on a second touch, transported the victim back to safety. To this day, even taking the drug into account, Moody could not imagine what could have possibly been going through the man's mind at the time he had cast the second Portus.

"Tenth vial," said Snape.

"Basilisk venom," offered Moody.

"What?" spat Snape. "Snake venom is a positive component of the resurrection potion! Not to mention that it would dissolve the bone and all the other substances! And where would we even get –"

"Calm down, son, I was just checking to see if you could be trusted."

Mad-Eye Moody continued his (secretly unnecessary) slow turning, surveying the graveyard, and the Potions Master continued pouring.

"Hold on," Moody said suddenly. "How do you know this is really where _"

"Because it says 'Tom Riddle' on the easily moved headstone," Snape said dryly. "And I have just won ten Sickles from the Headmaster, who bet you would think of that before the fifth bottle. So much for constant vigilance."

There was a pause.

"How long did it take Albus to reali-"

"Three years after we learned of the ritual," said Snape, in a tone not quite like his usual sardonic drawl. "In retrospect, we should have consulted you earlier."

Snape uncapped the ninth bottle.

"We poisoned all the other graves as well, with long-lasting substances," remarked the former Death Eater. "It is possible that we are in the correct graveyard. He may not have planned this far ahead back when he was slaughtering his family, and he cannot move the grave itself –"

"The true location doesn't look like a graveyard any more," Moody said flatly. "He moved all the other graves here and Memory-Charmed the Muggles. Not even Bellatrix Black would be told anything about that until just before the ritual started. No one knows the true location now except him."

They continued their futile work.



Aftermath, Blaise Zabini:

The Slytherin common room could be accurately and precisely described as a remilitarized zone; the moment you stepped through the portrait hole you would see that the left half of the room was Definitely Not Talking to the right half and vice versa. It was very clear, it did not need to be explained to anyone, that you did not have the option of not taking sides.

At a table in the exact middle of the room, Blaise Zabini sat by himself, smirking as he did his homework. He had a reputation now, and meant to keep it.



Aftermath, Daphne Greengrass and Tracey Davis:

“You doing anything interesting today?” said Tracey.

“Nope,” said Daphne.



Aftermath, Harry Potter:

If you went high enough in Hogwarts, you didn’t see many other people around, just corridors and windows and staircases and the occasional portrait, and now and then some interesting sight, such as a bronze statue of a furry creature like a small child, holding a peculiar flat spear...

If you went high enough in Hogwarts, you didn’t see many other people around, which suited Harry.

There were much worse places to be trapped, Harry supposed. In fact you probably couldn’t think of anywhere better to be trapped than an ancient castle with a fractal ever-changing structure that meant you couldn’t ever run out of places to explore, full of interesting people and interesting books and incredibly important knowledge unknown to Muggle science.

If Harry hadn’t been told that he couldn’t leave, he probably would’ve jumped at the chance to spend more time in Hogwarts, he would’ve plotted and connived to get it. Hogwarts was literally optimal, not in all the realms of possibility maybe, but certainly on the real planet Earth, it was the Maximum Fun Location.

How could the castle and its grounds seem so much smaller, so much more confining, how could the rest of the world become so much more interesting and important, the instant Harry had been told that he wasn’t allowed to leave? He’d spent months here and hadn’t felt claustrophobic then.

You know the research on this, observed some part of himself, it's just standard scarcity effects, like that time where as soon as a county outlawed phosphate detergents, people who'd never cared before drove to the next county in order to buy huge loads of phosphate detergent, and surveys showed that they rated phosphate detergents as gentler and more effective and even easier-pouring... and if you give two-year-olds a choice between a toy in the open and one protected by a barrier they can go around, they'll ignore the toy in the open and go for the one behind the barrier... salespeople know that they can sell things just by telling the customer it might not be available... it was all in Cialdini's book *Influence*, everything you're feeling right now, the grass is always greener on the side that's not allowed.

If Harry hadn't been told that he couldn't leave, he probably would've jumped at the chance to stay at Hogwarts over the summer...

...but not the rest of his life.

That was sort of the problem, really.

Who knew whether there was still a Dark Lord Voldemort for him to defeat?

Who knew whether He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named still existed outside of the imagination of a possibly-not-just-pretending-to-be-crazy old wizard?

Lord Voldemort's body had been found burned to a crisp, there couldn't really be such things as souls. How could Lord Voldemort still be alive? How did Dumbledore know that he was alive?

And if there wasn't a Dark Lord, Harry couldn't defeat him, and he would be trapped in Hogwarts forever.

...maybe he would be legally allowed to escape after he graduated his seventh year, six years and four months and three weeks from now. It wasn't that long as lengths of time went, it only seemed like long enough for protons to decay.

Only it wasn't just that.

It wasn't just Harry's freedom that was at stake.

The Headmaster of Hogwarts, the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, the Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards, was quietly sounding the alarm.

A false alarm.

A false alarm which Harry had triggered.

You know, said the part of him that refined his skills, didn't you sort of ponder, once, how every different profession has a different way to be

excellent, how an excellent teacher isn't like an excellent plumber; but they all have in common certain methods of not being stupid; and that one of the most important such techniques is to face up to your little mistakes before they turn into BIG mistakes?

...although this already seemed to qualify as a BIG mistake, actually...

The point being, said his inner monitor, it's getting worse literally by the minute. The way spies turn people is, they get them to commit a little sin, and then they use the little sin to blackmail them into a bigger sin, and then they use THAT sin to make them do even bigger things and then the blackmailer owns their soul.

Didn't you once think about how the person being blackmailed, if they could foresee the whole path, would just decide to take the punch on the first step, take the hit of exposing that first sin? Didn't you decide that you would do that, if anyone ever tried to blackmail you into doing something major in order to conceal something little? Do you see the similarity here, Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres?

Only it wasn't little, it already wasn't little, there would be a lot of very powerful people extremely angry at Harry, not just for the false alarm but for freeing Bellatrix from Azkaban, if the Dark Lord did exist and did come after him later, that war might already be lost –

You don't think they'll be impressed by your honesty and rationality and foresight in stopping this before it snowballs even further?

Harry did not, in fact, think this; and after a moment's reflection, whichever part of himself he was talking to, had to agree that this was absurdly optimistic.

His wandering feet took him near an open window, and Harry went over, and leaned his arms on the ledge, and stared down at the grounds of Hogwarts from high above.

Brown that was barren trees, yellow that was dead grass, ice-colored ice that was frozen creeks and frozen streams... whichever school official had dubbed it 'The Forbidden Forest' really hadn't understood marketing, the name just made you want to go there even more. The sun was sinking in the sky, for Harry had been thinking for some hours now, thinking mostly the same thoughts over and over, but with key differences each time, like his thoughts were not going in circles, but climbing a spiral, or descending it.

He still couldn't believe that he'd gone through the entire thing with Azkaban – he'd switched off his Patronus before it took all his life, he'd

stunned an Auror, he'd figured out how to hide Bella from the Dementors, he'd faced down twelve Dementors and scared them away, he'd invented the rocket-assisted broomstick, and ridden it – he'd gone through the entire thing without ever once rallying himself by thinking, I have to do this... because... I promised Hermione I'd come back from lunch! It felt like an irrevocably missed opportunity; like, having done it wrong that time, he would never be able to get it right no matter what sort of challenge he faced next time, or what promise he made. Because then he would just be doing it awkwardly and deliberately to make up for having missed it the first time around, instead of making the heroic declarations he could've made if he'd remembered his promise to Hermione. Like that one wrong turn was irrevocable, you only got one chance, had to do it right on the first try...

He should've remembered that promise to Hermione before going to Azkaban.

Why had he decided to do that, again?

My working hypothesis is that you're stupid, said Hufflepuff.

That is not a useful fault analysis, thought Harry.

If you want a little more detail, said Hufflepuff, the Defense Professor of Hogwarts was all like 'Let's get Bellatrix Black out of Azkaban!' and you were like 'Okay!'

Hold on, THAT'S not fair –

Hey, said Hufflepuff, notice how, once you're all the way up here, and the individual trees sort of blur together, you can actually see the shape of the forest?

Why had he done it...?

Not because of any cost-benefit calculation, that was for sure. He'd been too embarrassed to pull out a sheet of paper and start calculating expected utilities, he'd worried that Professor Quirrell would stop respecting him if he said no or even hesitated too much to help a maiden in distress.

He'd thought, somewhere deep inside him, that if your mysterious teacher offered you the first mission, the first chance, the call to adventure, and you said no, then your mysterious teacher walked away from you in disgust, and you never got another chance to be a hero...

...yeah, that had been it. In retrospect, that had been it. He'd gone and started thinking his life had a plot and here was a plot twist, as opposed to, oh, say, here was a proposal to break Bellatrix Black out of Azkaban. That had been the true and original reason for the decision in the split second where

it had been made, his brain perceptually recognizing the narrative where he said 'no' as dissonant. And when you thought about it, that wasn't a rational way to make decisions. Professor Quirrell's ulterior motive to obtain the last remains of Slytherin's lost lore, before Bellatrix died and it was irrevocably forgotten, seemed impressively sane by comparison; a benefit commensurate with what had appeared at the time as a small risk.

It didn't seem fair, it didn't seem fair, that this was what happened if he lost his grip on his rationality for just a tiny fraction of a second, the tiny fraction of a second required for his brain to decide to be more comfortable with 'yes' arguments than 'no' arguments during the discussion that had followed.

From high above, far enough above that the individual trees blurred together, Harry stared out at the forest.

Harry didn't want to confess and ruin his reputation forever and get everyone angry at him and maybe end up killed by the Dark Lord later. He'd rather be trapped in Hogwarts for six years than face that. That was how he felt. And so it was in fact helpful, a relief, to be able to cling to a single decisive factor, which was that if Harry confessed, Professor Quirrell would go to Azkaban and die there.

(A catch, a break, a stutter in Harry's breathing.)

If you phrased it that way... why, you could even pretend to be a hero, instead of a coward.

Harry lifted his eyes from the Forbidden Forest, looked up at the clear blue forbidden sky.

Stared out the glass panes at the big bright burning thing, the fluffy things, the mysterious endless blue in which they were embedded, that strange new unknown place.

It... actually did help, it helped quite a lot, to think that his own troubles were nothing compared to being in Azkaban. That there were people in the world who were really in trouble and Harry Potter was not one of them.

What was he going to do about Azkaban?

What was he going to do about magical Britain?

...which side was he on, now?

In the bright light of day, everything that Albus Dumbledore had said certainly sounded a lot wiser than Professor Quirrell. Better and brighter, more moral, more convenient, wouldn't it be nice if it were true. And the thing

to remember was that Dumbledore believed things because they sounded nice, but Professor Quirrell was the one who was sane.

(Again the catch in his breathing, it happened each time he thought of Professor Quirrell.)

But just because something sounded nice, didn't make it wrong, either.

And if the Defense Professor did have a flaw in his sanity, it was that his outlook on life was too negative.

Really? inquired the part of Harry that had read eighteen million experimental results about people being too optimistic and overconfident. Professor Quirrell is too pessimistic? So pessimistic that his expectations routinely undershoot reality? Stuff him and put him in a museum, he's unique. Which one of you two planned the perfect crime, and then put in all the error margin and fallbacks that ended up saving your butt, just in case the perfect crime went wrong? Hint hint, his name wasn't Harry Potter.

But "pessimistic" wasn't the correct word to describe Professor Quirrell's problem – if a problem it truly was, and not the superior wisdom of experience. But to Harry it looked like Professor Quirrell was constantly interpreting everything in the worst possible light. If you handed Professor Quirrell a glass that was 90% full, he'd tell you that the 10% empty part proved that no one really cared about water.

That was a very good analogy, now that Harry thought about it. Not all of magical Britain was like Azkaban, that glass was well over half full...

Harry stared up at the bright blue sky.

...although, following the analogy, if Azkaban existed, then maybe it did prove that the 90% good part was there for other reasons, people trying to make a show of kindness as Professor Quirrell had put it. For if they were truly kind they would not have made Azkaban, they would storm the fortress to tear it down... wouldn't they?

Harry stared up at the bright blue sky. If you wanted to be a rationalist you had to read an awful lot of papers on flaws in human nature, and some of those flaws were innocent logical failures, and some of them looked a lot darker.

Harry stared up at the bright blue sky, and thought of the Milgram experiment.

Stanley Milgram had done it to investigate the causes of World War II, to try to understand why the citizens of Germany had obeyed Hitler.

So he had designed an experiment to investigate obedience, to see if Germans were, for some reason, more liable to obey harmful orders from authority figures.

First he'd run a pilot version of his experiment on American subjects, as a control.

And afterward he hadn't bothered trying it in Germany.

Experimental apparatus: A series of 30 switches set in a horizontal line, with labels starting at '15 volts' and going up to '450 volts', with labels for each group of four switches. The first group of four labeled 'Slight Shock', the sixth group labeled 'Extreme Intensity Shock', the seventh group labeled 'Danger: Severe Shock', and the two last switches left over labeled just 'XXX'.

And an actor, a confederate of the experimenter, who had appeared to the true subjects to be someone just like them: someone who had answered the same ad for participants in an experiment on learning, and who had lost a (rigged) lottery and been strapped into a chair, along with the electrodes. The true experimental subjects had been given a slight shock from the electrodes, just so that they could see that it worked.

The true subject had been told that the experiment was on the effects of punishment on learning and memory, and that part of the test was to see if it made a difference what sort of person administered the punishment; and that the person strapped to the chair would try to memorize sets of word pairs, and that each time the 'learner' got one wrong, the 'teacher' was to administer a successively stronger shock.

At the 300-volt level, the actor would stop trying to call out answers and begin kicking at the wall, after which the experimenter would instruct the subjects to treat non-answers as wrong answers and continue.

At the 315-volt level the pounding on the wall would be repeated.

After that nothing would be heard.

If the subject objected or refused to press a switch, the experimenter, maintaining an impassive demeanor and dressed in a gray lab coat, would say 'Please continue', then 'The experiment requires that you continue', then 'It is absolutely essential that you continue', then 'You have no other choice, you must go on'. If the fourth prod still didn't work, the experiment halted there.

Before running the experiment, Milgram had described the experimental setup, and then asked fourteen psychology seniors what percentage of subjects they thought would go all the way up to the 450-volt level, what

percentage of subjects would press the last of the two switches marked XXX, after the victim had stopped responding.

The most pessimistic answer had been 3%.

The actual number had been 26 out of 40.

The subjects had sweated, groaned, stuttered, laughed nervously, bitten their lips, dug their fingernails into their flesh. But at the experimenter's prompting, they had, most of them, gone on administering what they believed to be painful, dangerous, possibly lethal electrical shocks. All the way to the end.

Harry could hear Professor Quirrell laughing, in his mind; the Defense Professor's voice saying something along the lines of: Why, Mr. Potter, even I had not been so cynical; I knew men would betray their most cherished principles for money and power, but I did not realize that a stern look also sufficed.

It was dangerous, to try and guess at evolutionary psychology if you weren't a professional evolutionary psychologist; but when Harry had read about the Milgram experiment, the thought had occurred to him that situations like this had probably arisen many times in the ancestral environment, and that most potential ancestors who'd tried to disobey Authority were dead. Or that they had, at least, done less well for themselves than the obedient. People thought themselves good and moral, but when push came to shove, some switch flipped in their brain, and it was suddenly a lot harder to heroically defy Authority than they thought. Even if you could do it, it wouldn't be easy, it wouldn't be some effortless display of heroism. You would tremble, your voice would break, you would be afraid; would you be able to defy Authority even then?

Harry blinked, then; because his brain had just made the connection between Milgram's experiment and what Hermione had done on her first day of Defense class, she'd refused to shoot a fellow student, even when Authority had told her that she must, she had trembled and been afraid but she had still refused. Harry had seen that happen right in front of his own eyes and he still hadn't made the connection until now...

Harry stared down at the reddening horizon, the Sun was sinking lower, the sky fading, darkening, even if most of it was still blue, soon it would turn to night. The gold and red colors of Sun and sunset reminded him of Fawkes; and Harry wondered, for a moment, if it must be a sad thing to be a phoenix, and call and cry and scream without being heeded.

But Fawkes would never give up, as many times as he died he would always be reborn, for Fawkes was a being of light and fire, and despairing over Azkaban belonged to the darkness just as much as did Azkaban itself.

If you were given a glass half-empty and half-full, then that was the way reality was, that was the truth and it was so; but you still had a choice of how to feel about it, whether you would despair over the empty half or rejoice in the water that was there.

Milgram had tried certain other variations on his test.

In the eighteenth experiment, the experimental subject had only needed to call out the test words to the victim strapped into the chair, and record the answers, while someone else pressed the switches. It was the same apparent suffering, the same frantic pounding followed by silence; but it wasn't you pressing the switch. You just watched it happen, and read the questions to the person being tortured.

37 of 40 subjects had continued their participation in that experiment to the end, the 450-volt end marked 'XXX'.

And if you were Professor Quirrell, you might have decided to feel cynical about that.

But 3 out of 40 subjects had refused to participate all the way to the end.

The Hermiones.

They did exist, in the world, the people who wouldn't fire a Simple Strike Hex at a fellow student even if the Defense Professor ordered them to do it. The ones who had sheltered Gypsies and Jews and homosexuals in their attics during the Holocaust, and sometimes lost their lives for it.

And were those people from some other species than humanity? Did they have some extra gear in their heads, some additional chunk of neural circuitry, which lesser mortals did not possess? But that was not likely, given the logic of sexual reproduction which said that the genes for complex machinery would be scrambled beyond repair, if they were not universal.

Whatever parts Hermione was made from, everyone had those same parts inside them somewhere...

...well, that was a nice thought but it wasn't strictly true, there was such a thing as literal brain damage, people could lose genes and the complex machine could stop working, there were sociopaths and psychopaths, people who lacked the gear to care. Maybe Lord Voldemort had been born like that, or maybe he had known good and yet still chosen evil; at this point it didn't

matter in the slightest. But a supermajority of the population ought to be capable of learning to do what Hermione and Holocaust resisters did.

The people who had been run through the Milgram experiment, who had trembled and sweated and nervously laughed as they went all the way to pressing the switches marked 'XXX', many of them had written to thank Milgram, afterward, for what they had learned about themselves. That, too, was part of the story, the legend of that legendary experiment.

The Sun had almost sunk below the horizon now, a last golden tip peeking above the faraway tops of trees.

Harry looked at it, that tip of Sun, his glasses were supposed to be proof against UV so he ought to be able to look directly at it without damaging his eyes.

Harry stared directly at it, that tiny fraction of the Light that was not obscured and blocked and hidden, even if it was only 3 parts out of 40, the other 37 parts were there somewhere. The 7.5% of the glass that was full, which proved that people really did care about water, even if that force of caring within themselves was too often defeated. If people truly didn't care, the glass would have been truly empty. If everyone had been like You-Know-Who inside, secretly cleverly selfish, there would have been no resisters to the Holocaust at all.

Harry looked at the sunset, on the second day of the rest of his life, and knew that he had switched sides.

Because he couldn't believe in it any more, he couldn't really, not after going to Azkaban. He couldn't do what 37 out of 40 people would vote for him to do. Everyone might have inside them what it took to be Hermione, and someday they might learn; but someday wasn't now, not here, not today, not in the real world. If you were on the side of 3 out of 40 people then you weren't a political majority, and Professor Quirrell had been right, Harry would not bow his head in submission when that happened.

There was a sort of awful appropriateness to it. You shouldn't go to Azkaban and come back having not changed your mind about anything important.

So is Professor Quirrell right, then? asked Slytherin. Leaving out whether he's good or evil, is he right? Are you, to them, whether they know it or not, their next Lord? We'll just leave out the Dark part, that's him being cynical again. But is it your intention now to rule? I've got to say, that makes even me nervous.

Do you think you can be trusted with power? said Gryffindor. Isn't there some sort of rule that people who want power shouldn't have it? Maybe we should make Hermione the ruler instead.

Do you think you're fit to run a society and not have it collapse into total chaos inside of three weeks flat? said Hufflepuff. Imagine how loudly Mum would scream if she'd heard you'd been elected Prime Minister, now ask yourself, are you sure she's wrong about that?

Actually, said Ravenclaw, I have to point out that all this political stuff sounds overwhelmingly boring. How about if we leave all the electioneering to Draco and stick to science? It's what we're actually good at, and that's been known to improve the human condition too, y'know.

Slow down, thought Harry at his components, we don't have to decide everything right now. We're allowed to ponder the problem as fully as possible before coming to a solution.

The last part of the Sun sank below the horizon.

It was strange, this feeling of not quite knowing who you were, which side you were on, of having not already made up your mind about something as major as that, there was an unfamiliar sensation of freedom in it...

And that reminded him of what Professor Quirrell had said to his last question, which reminded him of Professor Quirrell, which made it hard once more to breathe, started that burning sensation in Harry's throat, sent his thoughts around that loop of the climbing spiral once again.

Why was he so sad, now, whenever he thought of Professor Quirrell? Harry was used to knowing himself, and he didn't know why he felt so sad...

It felt like he'd lost Professor Quirrell forever, lost him in Azkaban, that was how it felt. As surely as if the Defense Professor had been eaten by Dementors, consumed in the empty voids.

Lost him! Why did I lose him? Because he said Avada Kedavra and there was in fact a perfectly good reason even though I didn't see it for a couple of hours? Why can't things go back to the way they were?

But then it hadn't been the Avada Kedavra. That might have played a part in irreversibly collapsing a structure of rationalizations and flinches and carefully not thinking about certain things. But it hadn't been the Avada Kedavra, that hadn't been the disturbing thing that Harry had seen.

What did I see...?

Harry looked at the fading sky.

He'd seen Professor Quirrell turn into a hardened criminal while facing the Auror, and the apparent change of personalities had been effortless, and complete.

Another woman had known the Defense Professor as 'Jeremy Jaffe'.

How many different people are you, anyway?

I cannot say that I bothered keeping count.

You couldn't help but wonder...

...whether 'Professor Quirrell' was just one more name on the list, just one more person that had been turned into, made up in the service of some unguessable goal.

Harry would always be wondering now, every time he talked to Professor Quirrell, if it was a mask, and what motive was behind that mask. With every dry smile, Harry would be trying to see what was pulling the levers on the lips.

Is that how other people will start thinking of me, if I get too Slytherin? If I pull off too many plots, will I never be able to smile at anyone again, without them wondering what I really mean by it?

Maybe there was some way to restore a trust in surface appearances and make a normal human relationship possible again, but Harry couldn't think of what it might be.

That was how Harry had lost Professor Quirrell, not the person, but the... connection...

Why did that hurt so much?

Why did it feel so lonely, now?

Surely there were other people, maybe better people, to trust and befriend? Professor McGonagall, Professor Flitwick, Hermione, Draco, not to mention Mum and Dad, it wasn't like Harry was alone...

Only...

A choking sensation grew in Harry's throat as he understood.

Only Professor McGonagall, Professor Flitwick, Hermione, Draco, they all of them sometimes knew things that Harry didn't, but...

They did not excel above Harry within his own sphere of power; such genius as they possessed was not like his genius, and his genius was not like theirs; he might look upon them as peers, but not look up to them as his superiors.

None of them had been, none of them could ever be...

Harry's mentor...

That was who Professor Quirrell had been.

That was who Harry had lost.

And the manner in which he had lost his first mentor might or might not allow Harry to ever get him back. Maybe someday he would know all Professor Quirrell's hidden purposes and the doubts between them would go away; but even if that seemed possible, it didn't seem very probable.

There was a gust of wind, outside Hogwarts, it bent the empty trees, rippled the lake whose heart was still unfrozen, made a whispering sound as it slid past the window that looked upon the half-twilit world, and Harry's thoughts wandered outward for a time.

Then returned inward again, to the next step of the spiral.

Why am I different from the other children my age?

If Professor Quirrell's answer to that had been an evasion, then it was a very well-calculated one. Deep enough and complex enough, sufficiently full of suggestions of hidden meaning, to serve as a trap for a Ravenclaw who couldn't be diverted by less. Or maybe Professor Quirrell had meant his answer honestly. Who knew what motive might have pulled that lever on those lips?

I will say this much, Mr. Potter: You are already an Occlumens, and I think you will become a perfect Occlumens before long. Identity does not mean, to such as us, what it means to other people. Anyone we can imagine, we can be; and the true difference about you, Mr. Potter, is that you have an unusually good imagination. A playwright must contain his characters, he must be larger than them in order to enact them within his mind. To an actor or spy or politician, the limit of his own diameter is the limit of who he can pretend to be, the limit of which face he may wear as a mask. But for such as you and I, anyone we can imagine, we can be, in reality and not pretense. While you imagined yourself a child, Mr. Potter, you were a child. Yet there are other existences you could support, larger existences, if you wished. Why are you so free, and so great in your circumference, when other children your age are small and constrained? Why can you imagine and become selves more adult than a mere child of a playwright should be able to compose? That I do not know, and I must not say what I guess. But what you have, Mr. Potter, is freedom.

If that was a snow job it was one heck of a distracting one.

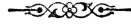
And the still more worrisome thought was that Professor Quirrell hadn't realized how disturbed Harry would be, how wrong that speech would sound

to him, how much damage it would do to his trust in Professor Quirrell.

There ought to always be one real person who you truly were, at the center of everything...

Harry stared out at the falling night, the gathering darkness.

...right?



It was almost bedtime when Hermione heard the scattered intakes of breath and looked up from her copy of *Beauxbatons: A History* to see the missing boy, the boy who had been misplaced at lunch that Sunday, whose dinner nonappearance had been accompanied by rumors – and she hadn’t believed them because they were completely ridiculous, but she’d felt a little queasiness inside – that he’d withdrawn from Hogwarts in order to hunt down Bellatrix Black.

“Harry!” she shrieked, she didn’t even realize that she was talking directly to him for the first time in a week, or notice how some other students started at the sound of her yelling all the way across the Ravenclaw common room.

Harry’s eyes had already lifted to her, he was already walking toward her, so she stopped halfway out of her chair –

A few moments later, Harry was seated across from her, and he was putting away his wand after casting a Quieting barrier around them.

(And an awful lot of Ravenclaws were trying not to look like they were watching.)

“Hey,” Harry said. His voice wavered. “I missed you. You’re... going to talk to me again, now?”

Hermione nodded, she just nodded, she couldn’t think of what to say. She’d missed Harry too, but she was realizing, with a guilty sort of feeling, that it might’ve been a lot worse for him. She had other friends, Harry... it didn’t feel fair, sometimes, that Harry talked to only her like that, so that she had to talk to him; but Harry had a look about him like unfair things had been happening to him, too.

“What’s been going on?” she said. “There’s all sorts of rumors. There were people saying you’d run off to fight Bellatrix Black, there were people saying you’d run off to join Bellatrix Black –” and those rumors had said that Hermione had just made up the thing about the phoenix, and she’d yelled that the whole Ravenclaw common room had seen it, so then the next rumor

had claimed she'd made up that part too, which was stupidity of such an inconceivable level that it left her completely flabbergasted.

"I can't talk about it," Harry said in a bare whisper. "Can't talk about a lot of it. I wish I could tell you everything," his voice wavered, "but I can't... I guess, if it helps or anything, I'm not going to lunch with Professor Quirrell any more..."

Harry put his hands over his face, then, covering his eyes.

Hermione felt the queasy feeling all through her stomach.

"Are you crying?" said Hermione.

"Yeah," said Harry, his voice sounding a little breathy. "I don't want anyone else to see."

There was a little silence. Hermione wanted to help but she didn't know what to do about a boy crying, and she didn't know what was happening; she felt like huge things were happening around her – no, around Harry – and if she knew what they were she would probably be scared, or alarmed, or something, but she didn't know anything.

"Did Professor Quirrell do something wrong?" she said at last.

"That's not why I can't go to lunch with him any more," Harry said, still in that bare whisper with his hands pressed over his eyes. "That was the Headmaster's decision. But yeah, Professor Quirrell said some things to me that made me trust him less, I guess..." Harry's voice sounded very shaky. "I'm feeling kind of alone right now."

Hermione put her hand on her cheek where Fawkes had touched her yesterday. She'd kept thinking about that touch, over and over, maybe because she wanted it to be important, to mean something to her...

"Is there any way I can help?" she said.

"I want to do something normal," Harry said from behind his hands. "Something very normal for first-year Hogwarts students. Something eleven-year-olds and twelve-year-olds like us are supposed to do. Like play a game of Exploding Snap or something... I don't suppose you have the cards or know the rules or anything like that?"

"Um... I don't know the rules, actually..." said Hermione. "I know they explode."

"I don't suppose Gobstones?" said Harry.

"Don't know the rules and they spit at you. Those are boy games, Harry!"

There was a pause. Harry ground his hands against his face to wipe it, and then took his hands away; and then he was looking at her, looking a little

helpless. "Well," Harry said, "what do wizards and witches our age do, when they play, you know, the kind of pointless silly games we're supposed to play at this age?"

"Hopscotch?" said Hermione. "Jump-rope? Unicorn attack? I don't know, I read books!"

Harry started laughing, and Hermione started giggling along with him even though she didn't know quite why, but it was funny.

"I guess that helped a little," said Harry. "Actually I think it helped more than playing Gobstones for an hour could've possibly helped, so thanks for being you. And no matter what, I'm not having anyone Obliviate everything I know about calculus. I'd sooner die."

"What?" said Hermione. "Why – why would you ever want to do that?"

Harry stood up from the table, and there was a rush of restored background noise as his rise broke the Quieting Charm. "I'm a tad sleepy so I'm going off to bed," Harry said, now his voice was ordinary and wry, "I've got some lost time to make up for, but I'll see you at breakfast, and then at Herbology, if that's all right. Not to mention it wouldn't be fair to dump all my depression on you. G'night, Hermione."

"Good night, Harry," she said, feeling very confused and alarmed. "Pleasant dreams."

Harry stumbled a little as she said that, and then he continued on toward the stairs that led to the first-year-boys' dorms.



Harry turned the Quieting Charm all the way up, on the head of his bedboard, so that he wouldn't wake anyone else up if he screamed.

Set his alarm to wake him up for breakfast (if he wasn't up already by that hour, if indeed he slept at all).

Got into bed, laid down –

– felt the lump beneath his pillow.

Harry stared up at the canopy above his bed.

Hissed under his breath, "Oh, you've got to be kidding me..."

It took a few seconds before Harry could muster the heart to sit up in bed, pull the blanket over himself and his pillow to obscure the deed from the other boys, cast a low-intensity Lumos and see what was under his pillow.

There was a parchment, and a deck of playing cards.

The parchment read,

A little bird told me that Dumbledore has shut the door of your cage.

I must admit, on this occasion, that Dumbledore may have a point. Bellatrix Black is loosed upon the world once more, and that is not good news for any good person. If I stood in Dumbledore's place, I might well do the same.

But just in case... The Salem Witches' Institute in America accepts boys as well, despite the name. They are good people and would protect you even from Dumbledore, if you needed it. Britain holds that you need Dumbledore's permission to emigrate to magical America, but magical America disagrees. So in the final extremity, get outside the wards of Hogwarts and tear in half the King of Hearts from this deck of cards.

That you should resort to it only in the final extremity goes without saying.

Be well, Harry Potter.

– Santa Claus

Harry stared down at the pack of cards.

It couldn't take him anywhere else, not right now, portkeys didn't work here.

But he still felt unnerved about the prospect of picking it up, even to hide it inside his trunk...

Well, he'd already picked up the parchment, which could just as easily have been enchanted with a trap, if a trap was involved.

But still.

"Wingardium Leviosa," Harry whispered, and Hovered the packet of cards to lie next to where his alarm clock rested in a pocket of the headboard. He'd deal with it tomorrow.

And then Harry lay back in bed, and closed his eyes, to dream without any phoenix to protect him, and pay his reckoning.



He came awake with a gasp of horror, not a scream, he'd yet to scream this night, but his blanket was all tangled around him from where his sleeping form had jerked as he dreamed of running, trying to get away from the gaps in

space that were pursuing him through a corridor of metal lit by dim gaslight, an endlessly long corridor of metal lit by dim gaslight, and he hadn't known, in the dream, that touching those voids meant he would die horribly and leave his still-breathing body empty behind him, all he'd known was that he had to run and run and run from the wounds in the world sliding after him –

Harry started to cry again, it wasn't for the horror of the chase, it was that he'd run away while someone behind him was screaming for help, screaming for him to come back and save her, help her, she was being eaten, she was going to die, and in the dream Harry had run away instead of helping her.

"DON'T GO!" The voice came in a scream from behind the metal door. "No, no, no, don't go, don't take it away, don't don't don't –"

Why had Fawkes ever rested on his shoulder? He'd walked away. Fawkes should hate him.

Fawkes should hate Dumbledore. He'd walked away.

Fawkes should hate everyone –

The boy wasn't awake, wasn't dreaming, his thoughts were jumbled and confused in the shadowlands that bordered sleep and waking, unprotected by the safety rails that his aware mind imposed on itself, the careful rules and censors. In that shadowland his brain had woken up enough to think, but something else was too sleepy to act; his thoughts ran free and wild, unconstrained by his self-concept, his waking self's ideals of what he shouldn't think. That was the freedom of his brain's dreams, as his self-concept slept. Free to repeat, over and over, Harry's new worst nightmare:

"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!"

A rage grew in him alongside the self-loathing, a terrible hot wrath / icy cold hatred, for the world which had done that to her / for himself, and in his half-awake state Harry fantasized escapes, fantasized ways out of the moral dilemma, he imagined himself hovering above the vast triangular horror of Azkaban, and whispering an incantation unlike any syllables that had ever been heard before on Earth, whispers that echoed all the way across the sky and were heard on the other side of the world, and there was a blast of silver Patronus fire like a nuclear explosion that tore apart all the Dementors in an instant and ripped apart the metal walls of Azkaban, shattered the long corridors and all the dim orange lights, and then a moment later his brain remembered that there were people in there, and rewrote the half-dream

fantasy to show all the prisoners laughing as they flew away in flocks from the burning wreck of Azkaban, the silver light restoring the flesh to their limbs as they flew, and Harry started crying harder into his pillow, because he couldn't do it, because he wasn't God –

He'd sworn upon his life and magic and his art as a rationalist, he'd sworn by all he held sacred and all his happy memories, he'd given his oath so now he had to do something, had to do something, had to DO SOMETHING –

Maybe it was pointless.

Maybe trying to follow rules was pointless.

Maybe you just burned down Azkaban however.

And in fact he'd sworn he'd do it, so now that was what he had to do.

He'd just do whatever it took to get rid of Azkaban, that was all. If that meant ruling Britain, fine, if that meant finding a spell to whisper that would echo all across the sky, whatever, the important thing was to destroy Azkaban.

That was the side he was on, that was who he was, so there, it was done.

His waking mind would have demanded a lot more details before accepting that as an answer, but in his half-dreaming state it felt like enough of a resolution to let his tired mind fall truly asleep again, and dream the next nightmare.



Final Aftermath:

She came awake with a gasp of horror, a disruption of her breathing that left her feeling deprived of air and yet her lungs didn't move, she woke up with an unvoiced scream on her lips and no words, no words came forth, for she could not understand what she had seen, she could not understand what she had seen, it was too large for her to encompass and still taking shape, she could not put words to that formless shape and so she could not discharge it, could not discharge it and become innocent and unknowing once more.

"What time is it?" she whispered.

Her golden jeweled alarm clock, the beautiful and magical and expensive alarm clock that the Headmaster had given her as a gift upon her employment at Hogwarts, whispered back, "Around two in the morning. Go back to sleep."

Her sheets were soaked in sweat, her nightclothes soaked in sweat, she took her wand from beside the pillow and cleaned herself up before she tried to go back to sleep, she tried to go back to sleep and eventually succeeded.

Sybill Trelawney went back to sleep.

OMAKE FILES 4, ALTERNATE PARALLELS

LORD OF THE RATIONALITY

Frodo glanced at all the faces, but they were not turned to him. All the Council sat with downcast eyes, as if in deep thought. A great dread fell on him, as if he was awaiting the pronouncement of some doom that he had long foreseen and vainly hoped might after all never be spoken. An overwhelming longing to rest and remain at peace by Bilbo's side in Rivendell filled all his heart. At last with an effort he spoke, and wondered to hear his own words, as if some other will was using his small voice.

"We cannot," said Frodo. "We must not. Do you not see? It is exactly what the Enemy desires. All of this he has foreseen."

The faces turned to him, puzzled the Dwarves and grave the Elves; sternness in the eyes of the Men; and so keen the gazes of Elrond and of Gandalf that Frodo almost could not withstand it. It was very hard, then, not to grasp the Ring in his hand, and harder still not to put it on, to face them as only Frodo.

"Do you not question it?" Frodo said, thin like the wind his voice, and wavering like a breeze. "You have chosen, of all things, to send the Ring into Mordor; should you not wonder? How did it come to this? That we might, of all our choices, do that single thing our Enemy most desires? Perhaps the Cracks of Doom are already guarded, strongly enough to hold off Gandalf and Elrond and Glorfindel all together; or perhaps the Master of that place has cooled the lava there, set it to trap the Ring so that he may simply bring it out after it is thrown in..." A memory of awful clarity came over Frodo then, and a flash of black laughter, and the thought came to him that it was just what the Enemy would do. Only the thought came to him so: thus it would amuse me to do, if I meant to rule...

There were doubtful glances exchanged within the council; Glóin and Gimli and Boromir were now looking at the Elves more skeptically than before, like they had awoken out of a dream of words.

"The Enemy is very wise," said Gandalf, "and weighs all things to a nicety in the scales of his malice. But the only measure that he knows is desire, desire for power; and so he judges all hearts. Into his heart the thought will not enter that any will refuse it, that having the Ring we may seek to destroy it –"

"He will think of it!" cried Frodo. He struggled for words, trying to convey things that had once seemed perfect in his comprehension, and then faded like melting snow. "If the Enemy thought that all his foes were moved by desire for power alone – he would guess wrongly, over and over, and the Maker of this Ring would see that, he would know that somewhere he had made a mistake!" Frodo's hands stretched forth pleadingly.

Boromir stirred, and his voice was doubtful. "You speak fair of the Enemy," said Boromir, "for one of his foes."

Frodo's mouth opened and shut in desperate bewilderment; for Frodo knew, he knew the Man was mad, but he could think of nothing to say.

Then Bilbo spoke, and his withered voice silenced the whole room, even Elrond who had been about to speak. "Frodo is right, I fear," whispered the old hobbit. "I remember, I remember what it was like. To see with the Black Sight. I remember. The Enemy will think that we might not trust one another, that the weaker among us will propose to destroy the Ring so that the stronger may not have it. He knows that even one not truly good might still cry to destroy the Ring, to make a show of pretended goodness. And the Enemy will not think it impossible that such a decision be made by this council, for you see, he does not trust us to be wise." A whispering chuckle rose from the ancient hobbit's throat. "And if he did – why, he would still guard the Cracks of Doom. It would cost him little."

Now foreboding was on the faces even of the Elves, and the Wise; Elrond had frowned, and the sharp eyebrows of Gandalf furrowed.

Frodo gazed at them all, feeling a wildness come over him, a despair; and as his heart weakened a shadow came over his vision, a darkness and a wavering. From within the shadow Frodo saw Gandalf, and the wizard's strength was revealed as weakness, and his wisdom folly. For Frodo knew, as the Ring seemed to drag and weigh on his breast, that Gandalf had not thought at all of history and lore, when the wizard spoke of how the Enemy would not understand any desire save power; that Gandalf had not remembered how Sauron had cast down and corrupted the Men of Númenor in the days of their glory. Just as it had not occurred to Gandalf that the Enemy might

learn to comprehend foes of goodwill by looking...

Frodo's gaze swung to Elrond, but there was no hope there, no answer and no rescue in the shadowy vision; for Elrond had let Isildur go, carrying the Ring from the Cracks of Doom where it should have been destroyed, to the cost of all this war. Not for Isildur's own sake, not for friendship had it been done, for the Ring had killed Isildur in the end, and far worse fates could have followed him. But the Doom that had stemmed from Isildur's deed would have seemed unsure to Elrond then, unsure and distant in time; and yet the cost to Elrond himself of taking his sword's pommel to the back of Isildur's head would have been surer, and nearer...

As though in desperation, Frodo turned to look at Aragorn, the weathered man who had donned his travel-worn clothes for this council, the heir of kings who spoke softly to hobbits. But Frodo's vision seemed to double, and in the shadowy second image Frodo saw a Man who had spent too much of his youth among Elves, who had learned to wear humble and stained clothes amid the gold and jewels, knowing he could not match them wisdom for wisdom, and hoping to outplay them in a fashion they would not emulate...

In the sight of the Ring, which was the sight of the Ring's own Maker, all noble things faded into stratagems and lies, a world of grey and darkness without any light. They had not made their choices knowingly, Gandalf or Elrond or Aragorn; the impulses had come from the dark hidden parts of themselves, the black secret depths which the Ring had rendered plain in Frodo's vision. Would they outthink the Shadow, when they could not comprehend even their own selves, or the forces that moved them?

"Frodo!" came the sharp whisper of Bilbo's voice, and Frodo came to himself, and halted his hand reaching up toward where the Ring lay on his breast, on its chain, dragging like a vast stone around his neck.

Reaching up to grasp the Ring wherein all answers lay.

"How did you bear this thing?" Frodo whispered to Bilbo, as if the two of them were the only souls in the room, though all the Council watched them. "For years? I cannot imagine it."

"I kept it locked in a room to which only Gandalf had the key," said his uncle, "and when I began to imagine ways to open it, I remembered Gollum."

A shudder went through Frodo, remembering the tales. The horror of the Misty Mountains, thinking, always thinking in the dark; ruling the goblins from the shadows and filling the tunnels with traps; but for Bilbo wearing the ring that first time not a single dwarf would have lived. And now, Legolas

the Elf had told them, Gollum had given up on sending his agents against the Shire, had at last found the courage to leave his mountains and seek the Ring himself. That was Gollum, the fate which Frodo would share himself, if the Ring were not destroyed.

Only they had no way to destroy the Ring.

The Shadow had foreseen every move they could make. Had almost – Frodo still could not imagine how it had been done, how the Shadow had arranged such a thing – had almost maneuvered the Council into sending the Ring straight into Mordor with only a tiny guard set on it, as they would have done if Frodo and Bilbo had not been there.

And having foregone that swiftest of all possible defeats, the only question remaining was how long it would take to lose. Gandalf had delayed too long, delayed far too long to set this march in motion. It could have been so easy, if only Bilbo had set out eighty years earlier, if only Bilbo had been told what Gandalf had already suspected, if only Gandalf's heart had not silently flinched away from the prospect of being embarrassingly wrong...

Frodo's hand spasmed on his breast; without thought, his fingers began to rise again toward the vast weight of the chain on which the Ring hung.

All he had to do was put on the Ring.

Just that, and all would become clear to him, once more the slowness and mud would leave his thoughts, all possibilities and futures transparent to him, he would see through the Shadow's plans and devise an irresistible counterstroke –

– and he would never be able to take off the Ring, not again, not by any will that would be left to him. All Frodo had of those moments were fading memories, but he knew that it had felt like dying, to let all his towers of thought collapse and become only Frodo once more. It had felt like dying, he remembered that much of Weathertop even if he remembered little else. And if he did wear the Ring again, it would be better to die with it on his finger, to end his life while he was still himself; for Frodo knew that he could not withstand the effects of wearing the Ring a second time, not afterward when the limitless clarity was lost to him...

Frodo looked around the Council, at the poor lost leaderless Wise, and he knew they could not defeat the Shadow by their own strength.

"I will wear it one last time," Frodo said, his voice broken and failing, as he had known from the beginning that he would say in the end, "one last time to find the answer for this Council, and then there will be other hobbits."

“No!” screamed the voice of Sam, as the other hobbit began to rush forward from where he had hidden; even as Frodo, with movement as swift and precise as a Nazgûl, took out the Ring from beneath his shirt; and somehow Bilbo was already standing there and had already thrust his finger through.

It all happened before even Gandalf’s staff could point, before Aragorn could level the hilt-shard of his sword; the Dwarves shouted in shock, and the Elves were dismayed.

“Of course,” said Bilbo’s voice, as Frodo began to weep, “I see it now, I understand everything at last. Listen, listen and swiftly, here is what you must do –”



THE WITCH AND THE WARDROBE

With a critical eye, Peter looked over the encamped Centaurs with their bows, Beavers with their long daggers, and talking Bears with their chain-mail draped over them. He was in charge, because he was one of the mythical Sons of Adam and had declared himself High King of Narnia; but the truth was he didn’t really know much about encampments, weapons, and guard patrols. In the end all he could see was that they all looked proud and confident, and Peter had to hope they were right about that; because if you couldn’t believe in your own people, you couldn’t believe in anyone.

“They’d scare me, if I had to fight ‘em,” Peter said finally, “but I don’t know if it’s enough to beat... her.”

“You don’t suppose this mysterious lion will actually show up and help us, d’you?” said Lucy. Her voice was very quiet, so that none of the creatures around them would hear. “Only it’d be nice to really have him, don’t you think, instead of just letting people think that he put us in charge?”

Susan shook her head, shaking the magical arrows in the quiver on her back. “If there was really someone like that,” Susan said, “he wouldn’t have let the White Witch cover the land in winter for a hundred years, would he?”

“I had the strangest dream,” Lucy said, her voice even quieter, “where we didn’t have to organize any creatures or convince them to fight, we just walked into this place and the lion was already here, with all the armies already mustered, and he went and rescued Edmund, and then we rode alongside him into this tremendous battle where he killed the White Witch...”

“Did the dream have a moral?” said Peter.

“I don’t know,” said Lucy, blinking and looking a little puzzled. “In the dream it all seemed pointless somehow.”

“I think maybe the land of Narnia was trying to tell you,” said Susan, “or maybe it was just your own dreams trying to tell you, that if there was really such a person as that lion, there’d be no use for us.”



MY LITTLE PONY: FRIENDSHIP IS SCIENCE

“Applejack, who told me outright that I was mistaken, represents the spirit of... honesty!” Twilight Sparkle raised her head even higher, mane blowing like a wind about the dusky sky of her neck. “Fluttershy, who approached the manticore to find out about the thorn in its paw, represents the spirit of... investigation! Pinkie Pie, who realized that the awful faces were just trees, represents the spirit of... formulating alternative hypotheses! Rarity, who solved the serpent’s problem represents the spirit of... creativity! Rainbow Dash, who saw through the false offer of her heart’s desire, represents the spirit of... analysis! Marie-Susan, who made us convince her that we were right before she agreed to come on our expedition, represents the spirit of... peer review! And when those Elements are ignited by the spark of curiosity that resides in the heart of all of us, it creates the seventh element – the Element of Sci-”

The blast of power that came forth was like a wind of moonless night, it caught Marie-Susan before the pony could even flinch, and she was gone without a trace before any of them had the chance to rear in shock.

From the dark thing that stood in the center of the dais where the Elements had shattered, from the scarce-recognizable void-black outline of a horse, came a voice that seemed to bypass all ears and burn like cold fire, sounding directly in the brain of every pony who heard:

Did you expect me to just stand there and let you finish?

Twilight Sparkle stared at the space where Marie-Susan had been, where not a trace of the unicorn remained. She – she just – she – In the back of her mind, unheard, she was aware that Rarity was screaming.

That wasn’t a disintegration, said the voice of Nightmare. I sent her somewhere else.

Rarity's scream stopped abruptly.

Twilight Sparkle felt like her own scream was only beginning. Seven. It took seven ponies to use the Elements of Inquiry. Everyone knew that no matter how honest, investigating, skeptical, creative, analytic, or curious you were, what really made your work Science was when you published your results in a prestigious journal. Everyone knew that. Could there be more than one Element of Peer Review at a time – how long would it take to find another one – and the Nightmare wouldn't just stand there and let them do it –

"Where?" yelled Rainbow Dash. "Where'd you put her?"

I put the little pony in the same place I bound my pathetic sister, in the heart of her pathetic Sun.

"She'll die!" cried Fluttershy, staring at the Nightmare in horror. "It's too hot, she'll burn!"

Oh, don't worry. The power of the Nightmare surrounds your little friend, keeping her safe and cool, sustaining her without food or drink. She will suffer nothing more than boredom...

The void-black outline stepped off the dais, walking slowly, deliberately, past the remaining six ponies.

... so long as the Nightmare's power is not broken. By any backup plans my sister may have set in motion, for example, and which may be known to you. In that case she will vaporize instantly. Such a lovely thing, friendship. It makes such a wonderful instrument of blackmail. Be sure to keep safe the Elements of Inquiry. You wouldn't want anyone else using them on me, now would you?

"No," whispered Twilight Sparkle, as the horror began to dawn on her.

Then a crawling sensation all over her skin, as the Nightmare walked past her, and the deadly power brushed her with its cold caress.

Now if you'll pardon me, my little ponies, I have an eternal night to rule over.



THE VILLAGE HIDDEN IN THE CLARITY¹

“Consider the computational power required to manifest over a hundred shadow clones,” the Uchiha genius said in his dispassionate tones. “It is an error of rationality, Sakura, to say ‘fluke’ and think you have explained anything. ‘Fluke’ is simply the name one gives to data that one is ignoring.”

“But it has to be a fluke!” Sakura yelled. With effort, she calmed her voice into the careful precision expected of a rationality ninja; it wouldn’t do to have her crush think she was stupid. “Like you said, the computational power required to use over a hundred Kage Bunshin is simply absurd. We’re talking the level of a major superintelligence. Naruto’s the dead last of our class. He’s not even jounin-level smart, let alone a superintelligence!”

The Uchiha’s eyes gleamed, almost as though he had activated his Smartingan. “Naruto can manifest a hundred independently acting clones. He must have the raw brainpower. But, under ordinary circumstances, something prevents him from using this computational power efficiently... like a mind at war within itself, perhaps? We now have cause to believe that Naruto is in some way connected to a superintelligence, and as a recently graduated genin, he, like us, is fifteen years old. What happened fifteen years ago, Sakura?”

It took a moment for Sakura to comprehend, to remember, and then she understood.

The attack of the Nine-Brains Demon Fox.

Just a small bone-white creature with big ears and bigger tail and beady red eyes. It was no stronger than an ordinary fox, it didn’t breathe fire or flash laser eyes, it possessed no chakra and no magic of any kind, but its intelligence was over nine thousand times that of a human being.

Hundreds had been killed, half the buildings wrecked, almost the whole village of Beisugakure had been destroyed.

“You think the Kyubey is hiding inside Naruto?” Sakura said. A moment later, her brain automatically went on to fill in the obvious implications of the theory. “And the software conflict between their existences is why he acts like a gibbering idiot half the time, but can control a hundred Kage Bunshin. Huh. That makes... a lot of sense... actually...”

Sasuke gave her the brief, contemptuous nod of someone who had figured all this out on his own, without anyone else needing to prompt him.

¹(This has now inspired an extended fanfiction, *Lighting Up the Dark* by Velorien.)

“Ano...” said Sakura. Only years of sanity exercises channeled her complete screaming panic into pragmatically useful policy options. “Shouldn’t we... tell someone about this? Like, sometime in the next five seconds?”

“The adults already know,” Sasuke said emotionlessly. “It is the obvious explanation for their treatment of Naruto. No, the real question is how this fits into the outwitting of the Uchiha...”

“I don’t see how it fits at all –” began Sakura.

“It must fit!” A tinge of frantic emotion flickered in Sasuke’s voice. “I asked that man why he did it, and he told me that when I knew the answer to that, it would explain everything! Surely this must also be part of what is to be explained!”

Sakura sighed to herself. Her personal hypothesis was that Itachi had just been trying to drive his brother into clinical paranoia.

“Yo, kids,” said the voice of their rationality sensei from their radio earpieces. “There’s a village in Wave trying to build a bridge, and it keeps falling down for no reason anyone can figure out. Meet up at the gates at noon. It’s time for your first C-ranked analysis mission.”



ERDŐS IN CHAINS

“How could you do it, Anita?” said Richard, his voice very tight. “How could you coauthor a paper with Jean-Claude? You study the undead, you don’t collaborate with them on papers!”

“And what about you?” I spat. “You coauthored a paper with Sylvie! It’s all right for you to be prolific but not me?”

“I’m the head of her institute,” Richard growled. I could feel the waves of science radiating off him; he was angry. “I have to work with Sylvie, it doesn’t mean anything! I thought our own research was special, Anita!”

“It is,” I said, feeling helpless about my inability to explain things to Richard. He didn’t understand the thrill of being a polymath, the new worlds that were opening up to me. “I didn’t share our research with anyone –”

“But you wanted to,” said Richard.

I didn’t say anything, but I knew that the look on my face said it all.

“God, Anita, you’ve changed,” said Richard. He seemed to slump in on himself. “Do you realize that the monsters are joking about Blake numbers,

now? I used to be your partner in everything, and now – I’m just another werewolf with a Blake number of 1.”



THUNDERSMARTS

“I am sick of this!” shouted Liono. “Sick of doing this every single week! Our species was capable of interstellar travel, Panthro, I know the quantities of energy involved! There is no way you can’t build a nuke or steer an asteroid or somehow blow up that ever-living idiot’s pyramid!”



HE-MAN AND THE MASTERS OF RATIONALITY

“Fabulous secret knowledge was revealed to me on the day I held aloft my magic book and said: By the power of Bayes’s Theorem!”



FATE/SANE NIGHT

I am the core of my thoughts
Belief is my body
And choice is my blood
I have revised over a thousand judgments
Unafraid of loss
Nor aware of gain
Have withstood pain to update many times
Waiting for truth’s arrival.
This is the one uncertain path.
My whole life has been...
Unlimited Bayes Works!



THE NAME OF THE RATIONALITY

The eleven-year-old boy who would someday become legend – slayer of dragons, killer of kings – had but one thought upon his mind, as he approached the Sorting Hat to enter into the study of mysteries.

Anywhere but Ravenclaw anywhere but Ravenclaw oh please anywhere but Ravenclaw...

But no sooner the brim of the ancient felted device slipped over his forehead –

“RAVENCLAW!”

As the table decked in blue began to applaud him, as he approached the dread table where he would spend the next seven years, Kvothe was already wincing inside, waiting for the inevitable; and the inevitable happened almost at once, exactly as he had feared it, before he’d even had a chance to sit down properly.

“So!” an older boy said with the happy expression of someone who’s thought of something terribly clever. “Kvothe the Raven, huh?”



TENGEN TOPPA GURREN RATIONALITY 40K

I have a truly marvelous story for this crossover which this margin is too narrow to contain.



UTILITARIAN TWILIGHT²

“Edward,” said Isabella tenderly. She reached up a hand and stroked his cold, sparkling cheek. “You don’t have to protect me from anything. I’ve listed out all the upsides and all the downsides, assigned them consistent relative weights, and it’s just really obvious that the benefits of becoming a vampire outweigh the drawbacks.”

“Bella,” Edward said, and swallowed desperately. “Bella –”

²Written after I heard Alicorn was writing a Twilight fanfic, but before I read Luminosity. It’s obvious if you’re one of us.

“Immortality. Perfect health. Awakening psychic powers. Easy enough to survive on animal blood once you do it. Even the beauty, Edward, there are people who would give their lives to be pretty, and don’t you dare call them shallow until you’ve tried being ugly. Do you think I’m scared of the word ‘vampire’? I’m tired of your arbitrary deontological constraints, Edward. The whole human species ought to be in on your fun, and people are dying by the thousands even as you hesitate.”

The gun in his lover’s hand was cold against his forehead. It wouldn’t kill him, but it would disable him for long enough –



JASMINE AND THE LAMP

Aladdin’s face was wistful, but determined, as the newly minted street urchin addressed the blue being of cosmic power for one last time, prepared to leave behind the wealth and hope he had so briefly tasted for the sake of his friend. “Genie, I make my third wish. I wish for you to be –”

Princess Jasmine, who had been staring at this with her mouth open, not quite believing what she was seeing, just barely managed to overcome her paralysis and yank the lamp out of the boy’s hand before he could finish the fatal sentence.

“Excuse me,” said Jasmine. “Aladdin, my darling, you’re cute but you’re an idiot, do you know that? Did you not notice how once Jafar got his hands on this lamp, he got his own three wishes – oh, never mind. Genie, I wish for everyone to always be young and healthy, I wish nobody ever had to die if they didn’t want to, and I wish for everyone’s intelligence to gradually increase at a rate of 1 IQ point per year.” She tossed the lamp back to Aladdin. “Go back to what you were doing.”



RATIONALIST HAMLET³

HAMLET

Interloper, abandon this strange prank,
which makes cruel use of the blindness of my grief,
and the good heart of my good friend Horatio.
Or else, if thou hast true title to this belov'd form,
tell me:

What drawing did I present to Hamlet King,
when six years old and scarce out of my sling?

Ghost

'twas a unicorn clad all in mail.

HAMLET

What.

Ghost

Mark me.

HAMLET

Father, I will.

Ghost

My hour is almost come,
When I to sulphurous and tormenting flames
Must render up myself.

HAMLET

Thou art in torment?

Ghost

Ay, as are all who die unshriven.

HAMLET

Like every Dane this is what I've been taught.
Yet I did figure such caprice ill-suited to almighty God.
For all who suffer unlook'd for deaths, unattended by God's chosen priests,
to be then punish'd for the ill-ordering of the world...

Ghost

'twas not the world that killed me, nor accident of any kind.

³Contributed by Histocrat on LiveJournal, post 13389, aka HonoreDB on LessWrong, reposted with permission. HonoreDB has now extended this to a complete ebook entitled "A Will Most Incorrect to Heaven: The Tragedy of Prince Hamlet and the Philosopher's Stone" available for \$3 at makefoi1.com. yes, really.

HAMLET

What?

Ghost

If thou didst ever thy dear father love,
Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.

HAMLET

Oh God.

Ghost

My time grows ever shorter. Wilt thou hear the tale?

HAMLET

No.

Ghost

What?

HAMLET

My love for you does call me to avenge your death,
but greater crimes have I heard told this night.
If all those murdered go to Hell, and others as well,
who would have confess'd had they the time,
If people who are, in balance, good, suffer grisly
at the hands of God, then I defy God's plan.

Good Ghost, as one who dwells beyond the veil,
you know things that we mortals scarce conceive.
Tell me: is there some philter or device,
outside nature's ken but not outside her means,
by which death itself may be escap'd?

Ghost

You seek to evade Hell?

HAMLET

I seek to deny Hell to everyone!
and Heaven too, for I suspect the Heaven of our mad God
might be a paltry thing, next to the Heaven I will make of Earth,
when I am its immortal king.

Ghost

I care not for these things.
Death and hell have stripp'd away all of my desires,
save for revenge upon my murderer.

HAMLET

Thou shalt not be avenged, save that thou swear:
an I slay thine killer, so wilt thou vouchsafe to me the means
by which I might slay death.

He who killed you will join you in the Pit,
and then that's it. No further swelling of Hell's ranks will I permit.

Ghost

Done. When my brother is slain, he who poured the poison in my ear,
then will I pour in yours the precious truth:
the making of the Philosopher's Stone. With this Stone, thou may'st procure
a philter to render any man immune to death, and more transmute
base metal to gold, to fund the provision of this philter to all mankind.

HAMLET

Truly there is nothing beyond the dreaming of philosophy.
Wait.

The man whom I must kill-my uncle the king?

Ghost

Ay, that incestuous, that adulterate beast,
With witchcraft of his wit, with traitorous gifts-

HAMLET

Indeed, he has such gifts I near despair,
of killing him and yet succeeding to his throne.
'twill be an awesome fight for awesome stakes.
Hast thou advice?

A cock crows. Exit Ghost.⁴

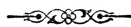


MOBY DICK AND THE METHODS OF RATIONALITY⁵

"Revenge?" said the peg-legged man. "On a whale? No, I decided I'd just get on with my life."

⁴HonoreDB has now extended this to a complete ebook entitled "A Will Most Incorrect to Heaven: The Tragedy of Prince Hamlet and the Philosopher's Stone" available for \$3 at makefoi dot com. Yes, really.

⁵As related by Eneasz on LessWrong.



ALICE IN THE LAND WHERE THINGS ARE EVEN CRAZIER THAN HERE⁶

Alice was sitting by her sister on the bank, reading a book. She had several friends who were older, and if she just asked nicely, they were often happy to lend her books without quite so many pictures and conversations as was thought appropriate for a girl her age.

Hot days often made her feel sleepy and stupid, so Alice had thoughtfully wet a handkerchief and placed it at the back of her neck. Still her mind had gone off wandering (just as if it was some little kitten whose owner had taken off her eyes for just a moment), and she had just decided that the pleasure of making a daisy-chain would be worth around $4/3$ of the trouble of getting up and picking the daisies, which was nonetheless not equal to the opportunity cost of putting down her book, when suddenly a White Rabbit with pink eyes ran close by her.

There was nothing so very remarkable in that; nor, in fact, did Alice think it so very much out of the way to hear the Rabbit say to itself, "Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be late!" But when the Rabbit actually took a watch out of its waistcoat-pocket, and looked at it, and then hurried on, Alice froze in sudden clarity and fear, for she had never before seen a rabbit with either a waistcoat-pocket, or a watch to take out of it. "Oh bother," she said to herself (though not aloud; she had long since cured herself of that habit, as it made people take her even less seriously than they already did). "If I did not immediately recognize how much curiouiser that was than the average rabbit, then something is interfering with my curiosity, and that is most curious of all." So, burning with questions, she ran across the field after it, and was just in time to see it pop down a large rabbit-hole under the hedge.



⁶As first written by braindoll in a review of this chapter, with some further edits.

WELCOME TO THE REAL WORLD⁷

MORPHEUS: For the longest time, I wouldn't believe it. But then I saw the fields with my own eyes, watched them liquefy the dead so they could be fed intravenously to the living –

NEO (politely): Excuse me, please.

MORPHEUS: Yes, Neo?

NEO: I've kept quiet for as long as I could, but I feel a certain need to speak up at this point. The human body is the most inefficient source of energy you could possibly imagine. The efficiency of a power plant at converting thermal energy into electricity decreases as you run the turbines at lower temperatures. If you had any sort of food humans could eat, it would be more efficient to burn it in a furnace than feed it to humans. And now you're telling me that their food is the bodies of the dead, fed to the living? Haven't you ever heard of the laws of thermodynamics?

MORPHEUS: Where did you hear about the laws of thermodynamics, Neo?

NEO: Anyone who's made it past one science class in high school ought to know about the laws of thermodynamics!

MORPHEUS: Where did you go to high school, Neo?

(Pause.)

NEO: ...in the Matrix.

MORPHEUS: The machines tell elegant lies.

(Pause.)

NEO (in a small voice): Could I please have a real physics textbook?

MORPHEUS: There is no such thing, Neo. The universe doesn't run on math.



⁷Thanks to dsummerstay for reminding me to post this one.

Arc Set Four

CONTAGIOUS LIES

HERMIONE Granger had read somewhere once, that one of the keys to staying thin was to pay attention to the food you ate, to notice yourself eating it, so that you were satisfied with the meal. This morning she'd made herself toast, and put butter on the toast, and cinnamon on the butter, and it really should've been enough to get her to notice, this time, the goodness that was in front of her...

Without noticing the cinnamon or the butter, without noticing the food or that she was eating, Hermione swallowed another bite of toast, and said, "Can you try explaining that again? I'm still completely flabbergasted."

"It's pretty straightforward, if you think like a Light-Side Slytherin," said the boy that everyone else in school, excepting only the two of them, now believed to be her true love. Harry Potter's spoon absentmindedly stirred his breakfast cereal; he hadn't taken many bites of it this morning, not that Hermione had seen. "Every good thing in the world brings its own opposition into existence. Phoenixes are no exception."

Hermione took another unnoticed bite out of her buttered and cinnamon toast, and said, "How can anyone not understand that Fawkes thinks you're a good enough person to ride around on your shoulder? He wouldn't do that with a Dark Wizard! He just wouldn't!"

And she hadn't yelled at anyone about Fawkes's touch on her own cheek, because she knew it wouldn't be right – that if a phoenix touched you, you weren't supposed to brag about it, that wasn't what a phoenix was for.

But she'd really hoped that it would squash the rumors about Harry Potter going evil and Hermione Granger following him down.

And it hadn't.

And she truly couldn't understand why not.

Harry ate another bite of his cereal, his eyes going distant now, no longer meeting her own. "Think of it this way: You skip school one day, and you lie and tell your teacher you were sick. The teacher tells you to bring a doctor's note, so you forge one. The teacher says she's going to call the doctor to

check, so you have to give her a fake number for the doctor, and get a friend to pretend to be the doctor when she calls –”

“You did what?”

Harry looked up from his cereal then, and now he was smiling. “I’m not saying I really did that, Hermione...” Then his eyes abruptly dropped back down to his cereal. “No. Just an example. Lies propagate, that’s what I’m saying. You’ve got to tell more lies to cover them up, lie about every fact that’s connected to the first lie. And if you kept on lying, and you kept on trying to cover it up, sooner or later you’d even have to start lying about the general laws of thought. Like, someone is selling you some kind of alternative medicine that doesn’t work, and any double-blind experimental study will confirm that it doesn’t work. So if someone wants to go on defending the lie, they’ve got to get you to disbelieve in the experimental method. Like, the experimental method is just for merely scientific kinds of medicine, not amazing alternative medicine like theirs. Or a good and virtuous person should believe as strongly as they can, no matter what the evidence says. Or truth doesn’t exist and there’s no such thing as objective reality. A lot of common wisdom like that isn’t just mistaken, it’s anti-epistemology, it’s systematically wrong. Every rule of rationality that tells you how to find the truth, there’s someone out there who needs you to believe the opposite. If you once tell a lie, the truth is ever after your enemy; and there’s a lot of people out there telling lies –” Harry’s voice stopped.

“What does that have to do with Fawkes?” she said.

Harry withdrew his spoon from his cereal, and pointed in the direction of the Head Table. “The Headmaster has a phoenix, right? And he’s Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot? So he’s got political opponents, like Lucius. Now, d’you think that opposition is going to just roll over and surrender, because Dumbledore has a phoenix and they don’t? Do you think they’ll admit that Fawkes is even evidence that Dumbledore’s a good person? Of course not. They’ve got to invent something to say that makes Fawkes... not important. Like, phoenixes only follow people who charge straight at anyone they think is evil, so having a phoenix just means you’re an idiot or a dangerous fanatic. Or, phoenixes just follow people who are pure Gryffindor, so Gryffindor they don’t have the virtues of other Houses. Or it just shows how much courage a magical animal thinks you have, nothing else, and it wouldn’t be fair to judge politicians based on that. They have to say something to deny the phoenix. I bet Lucius didn’t even have to make up anything new.

I bet it had all been said before, centuries ago, since the first time someone had a phoenix riding on his shoulder, and someone else wanted people not to take that into account as evidence. I bet by the time Fawkes came along it was already common wisdom, it would have just seemed strange to take into account who a phoenix liked or disliked. It would be like a Muggle newspaper testing political candidates to rate their level of scientific literacy. Every force for Good that exists in this universe, there's someone else who benefits from people discounting it, or fencing it into a narrow box where it can't get to them."

"But –" Hermione said. "Okay, I see why Lucius Malfoy doesn't want anyone to think that Fawkes matters, but why does anyone who isn't a bad guy believe it?"

Harry Potter gave a little shrug. His spoon dropped back into his cereal, and went on stirring without a pause. "Why does any kind of cynicism appeal to people? Because it seems like a mark of maturity, of sophistication, like you've seen everything and know better. Or because putting something down feels like pushing yourself up. Or they don't have a phoenix themselves, so their political instinct tells them there's no advantage to be gained from saying nice things about phoenixes. Or because being cynical feels like knowing a secret truth that common people don't know..." Harry Potter looked in the direction of the Head Table, and his voice dropped until it was almost a whisper. "I think maybe that's what he's getting wrong – that he's cynical about everything else, but not about cynicism itself."

Without thinking, Hermione looked in the direction of the Head Table herself, but the Defense Professor's seat was still empty, as it had been on Monday and Tuesday; the Deputy Headmistress had pronounced, earlier, that Professor Quirrell's classes for today would be canceled.

Afterward, when Harry had eaten a few bites of treacle tart and then left the table, Hermione looked at Anthony and Padma, who had been coincidentally eating nearby but certainly not eavesdropping or anything.

Anthony and Padma looked back at her.

Padma said hesitantly, "Is it just me, or has Harry Potter started talking like a more complicated sort of book in the last few days? I mean, I haven't been listening to him very long –"

"It's not just you," said Anthony.

Hermione didn't say anything, but she was becoming increasingly worried. Whatever had happened to Harry Potter on the day of the phoenix, it

had changed him; there was something new in him now. Not cold, but hard. Sometimes she caught him staring out a window at nothing visible, a look of grim determination on his face. In Herbology class on Monday, a Venus Fire Trap had gone out of control; and Harry had tackled Terry out of the way of a fireball even as Professor Sprout had shouted a Flame-Freezing Charm; and when Harry had risen from the floor he'd just gone back to his place like nothing interesting had happened. And when for once she'd gotten a better test score than Harry in their Transfiguration exam, later that same Monday, Harry had smiled at her as though to congratulate her, instead of gritting his teeth; and... that had bothered her a lot.

She was getting the sense that Harry...

...was pulling away from her...

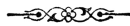
"He seems a lot older all of a sudden," said Anthony. "Not like a real grownup, I can't imagine Harry as a grownup, but it's like he suddenly turned into a fourth-year version of... of whatever he is."

"Well," Padma said. She daintily dabbed a chocolate-flavored scone with some scone-flavored frosting. "I think Dragon and Sunshine had better ally during the next battle or Mr. Harry Potter is going to smash us. We were allied last time, and even then Chaos almost won –"

"Yeah," said Anthony. "You're right, Miss Patil. Tell the Dragon General that we want to meet with you –"

"No!" said Hermione. "We shouldn't have to gang up on General Potter just to stand a chance. That doesn't make sense, especially now that nobody can use Muggle things anymore. It's still twenty-four soldiers in every army."

Neither Padma or Anthony said anything to that.



Knock-knock, knock-knock.

"Come in, Mr. Potter," she said.

The door creaked open, and Harry Potter slipped through the opening into her office; he pushed the door shut behind him with one hand, and wordlessly seated himself in the cushioned chair that now stood in front of her desk. She'd Transfigured that chair so often that it sometimes changed form to reflect her mood, without any wand movement or incantation or even conscious intent. Right now, that chair had become deeply cushioned, so that as Harry sat down he sank into it, as though the chair were hugging him.

Harry didn't seem to notice. There was an air of quiet determination about the boy; his eyes had locked steadily with hers, and not let up for a moment. "You called me?" said the boy.

"I did," said Professor McGonagall. "I have two pieces of good news for you, Mr. Potter. First – have you met Mr. Rubeus Hagrid, at all? The groundskeeper? He was an old friend of your parents."

Harry hesitated. Then, "Mr. Hagrid spoke to me a bit after I got here," Harry said. "I think it was on Tuesday of my first week of school. He didn't say he knew my parents, though. At the time I thought he just wanted to introduce himself to the Boy-Who-Lived... did he have some kind of hidden agenda? He didn't seem like the type..."

"Ah..." she said. It took her a moment to pull her thoughts together. "It's a long story, Mr. Potter, but Mr. Hagrid was falsely accused of murdering a student, five decades ago. Mr. Hagrid's wand was snapped, and he was expelled. Later, when Professor Dumbledore became Headmaster, he gave Mr. Hagrid a place here as Keeper of Grounds and Keys."

Harry's eyes watched her intently. "You said that five decades ago was the last time a student died in Hogwarts, and you were certain that five decades ago was the last time someone heard the Sorting Hat's secret message."

She felt a slight chill – even the Headmaster or Severus might not have made that connection that quickly – and said, "Yes, Mr. Potter. Someone opened the Chamber of Secrets, but this was not believed, and Mr. Hagrid was blamed for the resulting death. However, the Headmaster has located the additional enchantment on the Sorting Hat, and he has shown it to a special panel of the Wizengamot. As a result, Mr. Hagrid's sentence has been revoked – just this morning, in fact – and he will be allowed to acquire a new wand." She hesitated. "We... have not yet told Mr. Hagrid of this, Mr. Potter. We were waiting until the deed was done, so as not to give him false hope after so long. Mr. Potter... we were wondering if we could tell Mr. Hagrid that it was you who helped him..."

She saw the weighing look in his eyes –

"I remember Mr. Hagrid holding you when you were a baby," she said. "I think he would be very happy to know."

She could see it, though, on Harry's face, the moment when he decided that Rubeus wouldn't be any use to him.

Harry shook his head. "Bad enough that someone might deduce there was a Parselmouth in this year's crop of students," Harry said. "I think it'd be

more prudent to just keep it all as secret as possible.”

She remembered James and Lily, who’d never hesitated to return the friendship the huge, bluff man had offered them, for all that James was the scion of a wealthy House or Lily a budding Charms Mistress, and Rubeus a mere half-giant whose wand had been snapped...

“Because you don’t expect him to prove useful, Mr. Potter?”

There was silence. She hadn’t intended to say that out loud.

Sadness crossed Harry’s face. “Probably,” Harry said quietly. “But I don’t think he and I would get along, do you?”

Something seemed to be stuck in her throat.

“Speaking of making use of people,” Harry said. “It seems I’m going to be thrown into a war with a Dark Lord sometime soon. So while I’m in your office, I’d like to ask that my sleep cycle be extended to thirty hours per day. Neville Longbottom wants to start practicing dueling, there’s an older Hufflepuff who offered to teach him, and they invited me to join. Plus there’s other things I want to learn too – and if you or the Headmaster think I should study anything in particular, in order to become a powerful wizard when I grow up, let me know. Please direct Madam Pomfrey to administer the appropriate potion, or whatever it is that she needs to do –”

“Mr. Potter!”

Harry’s eyes gazed directly into her own. “Yes, Minerva? I know it wasn’t your idea, but I’d like to survive the use the Headmaster’s making of me. Please don’t be an obstacle to that.”

It almost broke her. “Harry,” she whispered in a bare voice, “children shouldn’t have to think like that!”

“You’re right, they shouldn’t,” Harry said. “A lot of children have to grow up too early, though, not just me; and most children like that would probably trade places with me in five seconds. I’m not going to pity myself, Professor McGonagall, not when there are people out there in real trouble and I’m not one of them.”

She swallowed, hard, and said, “Mr. Potter, at thirty hours per day, you’ll – get older, you’ll age faster –” Like Albus.

“And in my fifth year I’ll be around the same physiological age as Hermione,” said Harry. “Doesn’t seem that terrible.” There was a wry smile now on Harry’s face. “Honestly, I’d probably want this even if there weren’t a Dark Lord. Wizards live for a while, and either wizards or Muggles will probably push that out even further over the next century. There’s no reason

not to pack as many hours into a day as I can. I've got things I plan to do, and 'twere well they were done quickly."

There was a long pause.

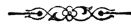
"All right," Minerva said. It came out as almost a whisper. She raised her voice. "All right, Mr. Potter, I shall ask the Headmaster, and if he agrees, it shall be done."

Harry's eyes narrowed for a moment. "I see. Then please remind the Headmaster that Godric Gryffindor, in his last words, said that if it had been the right thing for him to do, then he wouldn't tell anyone else to choose wrongly, not even the youngest student in Hogwarts."

And she knew with a hollow feeling that any chance of Albus stopping this, stopping any of this, had just Vanished into nothingness. That was what Albus had told her when she'd objected that Cameron Edward was too young, and then when she'd objected that Peter Pevensie was too young, and finally she'd given up objecting. "Who told you that, Mr. Potter?" Not Albus – surely Albus would never say that to any student –

"I've been doing a lot of reading lately," Harry said. His body started to rise from the enveloping chair, then halted. "Dare I ask about the second piece of good news?"

"Oh," she said. "Ah – Professor Quirrell has woken up and says that you may –"



The Hogwarts infirmary was a brilliantly open space, skylit on all four sides despite seeming to be located squarely in the middle of the castle. White beds in long rows stretched out, only three of them occupied at the moment. One older boy and one older girl on opposite sides, both lying motionless with their eyes closed, probably unconscious and spell-bound while some healing Charm or Potion reconfigured their bodies in uncomfortable ways; and the third occupant had the curtain drawn around their bed, which was presumably a good thing. Madam Pomfrey had pushed him along with a hard shove and told him not to gawk, and Harry had needed to remind himself sharply that some people still didn't know who the Boy-Who-Lived was – either that, or Madam Pomfrey's identity was bound up with her absolute dominance of her own hospital, etcetera, whatever.

Behind the rows of beds were five doors, leading into the private rooms where they stored the patients who would be staying for days instead of hours, but whose condition didn't warrant a transfer to St. Mungos.

Windowless, skylless, unlit but for a single smokeless torch on one of the solid stone walls; that was the room behind the middle door. Harry had wondered whether professors could ask Hogwarts to change itself; or if the infirmary always had a room like that available, for people who didn't enjoy the light.

In the center of the room, between two equal bedstands that looked to have been carved from the same grey marble as the walls, rested a white hospital bed, looking vaguely orangish in the unsmoking torchlight; and within that bed, a white sheet pulled up about his thighs and wearing a hospital gown, sat Professor Quirrell with his back slightly propped up against the headboard of the bed.

There was something frightening about seeing Professor Quirrell in one of Madam Pomfrey's beds, even if the Defense Professor appeared uninjured. Even knowing that Professor Quirrell had deliberately arranged his own apparent defeat at Severus's hands, to give himself an excuse to recover his strength from Azkaban. Harry had never actually watched anyone dying in a hospital bed, but he'd seen too many movies. It was an intimation of mortality, and the Defense Professor was not supposed to be mortal.

Madam Pomfrey had told Harry that he was absolutely forbidden to pester her patient.

Harry had said, "I understand", which technically did not say anything about obedience.

The stern old healer had then turned, and started to say to Professor Quirrell that he was absolutely not to overexert himself or... upset himself...

Madam Pomfrey had trailed off, hurriedly turned around, and fled the room.

"Not bad," Harry observed, after the door had shut behind the escaping medical matron. "I've got to learn how to do that, sometime."

Professor Quirrell smiled a smile with absolutely no humor content, and said, his voice sounding a good deal dryer than its usual dryness, "Thank you for your artistic critique, Mr. Potter."

Harry stared into the pale blue eyes, and thought that Professor Quirrell looked...

...older.

It was subtle, it might have just been Harry's imagination, it might have been the poor lighting. But the hair above Quirinus Quirrell's forehead might have receded a bit, what remained might have thinned and greyed, an advancing of the baldness that had already been visible on the back of his head. The face might have grown a little sunken.

The pale blue eyes had stayed sharp and intense.

"I am glad," Harry said quietly, "to see you in what appears to be good health."

"Appearances can be deceiving, of course," said Professor Quirrell. He gave a flick of his fingers, and when his hand finished the gesture he was holding his wand. "Would you believe that woman thinks she has confiscated this from me?"

Six incantations the Defense Professor spoke then; six of the thirty that he had used to safeguard their important conversations in Mary's Room.

Harry raised his eyebrows, silently quizzical.

"That is all I can manage for now," said the Defense Professor. "I expect it shall prove sufficient. Still, there is a proverb: If you do not wish a thing heard, do not say it. Consider it to apply in full measure. I am told that you were trying to see me?"

"Yes," Harry said. He paused, gathered his thoughts. "Did the Headmaster, or anyone, tell you that we can't go to lunch any more?"

"Something along those lines," said the Defense Professor. And without changing expression, "Of course I was terribly sorry to hear it."

"It's more extreme than that, actually," said Harry. "I'm confined to Hogwarts and its grounds indefinitely. I can't leave without a guard and a good reason. I'm not going home for summer, and maybe not ever again. I was hoping... to speak with you, about that."

There was a pause.

The Defense Professor exhaled a breath like a brief sigh, and said, "We shall just have to rely on the known fact that the Deputy Headmistress will personally murder anyone who tries to report me. Mr. Potter, I intend to keep this conversation on track so that we may conclude it quickly, is that understood?"

Harry nodded, and –

In the light of the single torch, shaded toward the reddish end of the optical spectrum, the snake's green scales were not very reflective, and the blue-and-white banding hardly more so. Dark seemed the snake, in that

light. The eyes, which had seemed like gray pits before, now reflected the torchlight, and seemed brighter than the rest of the snake.

"Sso," hissed the venomous creature. "What did you wissh to ssay?"

And Harry hissed, "Sschoolmasster thinkss that woman'ss former Lord iss the one who sstole her from prisson."

Harry had thought about it this time, and carefully, before he had decided that he would reveal to Professor Quirrell only that the Headmaster believed that; and not say anything about the prophecy which had set Voldemort on Harry's parents, nor that the Headmaster was reconstituting the Order of the Phoenix... it was a risk, a significant risk, but Harry needed an ally in this.

"He believess that one iss alive?" the snake finally said. The divided, two-pronged tongue flickered rapidly from side to side, sardonic snakish laughter. "Ssomehow I am not ssurprised."

"Yess," Harry hissed dryly, "very amussing, I am ssure. Except now amsstuck in Hogwartss for next ssix years, for ssafety! I have decided that I will, indeed, sseek power; and confinement iss not helpful for that. Musst convince sschoolmasster that Dark Lord iss not yet awakened, that esscape was work of ssome other power –"

Again the rapid flickering of the snake's tongue; the snakish laughter was stronger, dryer, this time. "Amateur foolisshnesss."

"Pardon?" hissed Harry.

"You ssee misstake, think of undoing, ssetting time back to sstart. Yet not even with hourglassss can time be undone. Musst move forward insstead. You think of convincing otherss they are misstaken. Far eassier to convince them they are right. Sso conssider, boy: what new happensstance would make schoolmasster decide you were ssafe once more, ssimultaneoussly advance your other agendass?"

Harry stared at the snake, puzzled. His mind tried to comprehend and unravel the riddle –

"Iss it not obviouss?" hissed the snake. Again the tongue flickered sardonic laughter. "To free yoursself, to gain power in Britain, you musst again be sseen to defeat the Dark Lord."



In reddish-orange flickering torchlight, a green snake swayed above a white hospital bed, as the boy stared into the embers of its eyes.

"Sso," Harry said finally. "Let uss be clear on what iss propossed. You ssuggests that we sset up imposstor to imperssonate Dark Lord."

"Ssomething like that. Woman we resscued will cooperate, sshould be mosst convincing when sshe iss sseen at hiss sside." More sardonic tongue-flickering. "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 –"

"Casst Killing Cursse?" Harry hissed in incredulity. "At me? Again? Ssecond time? Nobody will believe Dark Lord could possibibly be that ssupid –"

"You and I are only two people in country who would notice that," hissed the snake. "Trusst me on thiss, boy."

"What if there iss third, ssomeday?"

The snake swayed thoughtfully. "Could write different sscrip for play, if you wissh. Whatever sscenario, sshould leave open possibility Dark Lord might return yet again – nation musst think they are sstill dependent on you to protect them."

Harry stared into the red-flickering pits of the snake's eyes.

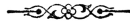
"Well?" hissed the swaying form.

The obvious thought was that going along with the Defense Professor's plots and deceptions a second time, spinning an even more complicated lie to cover up the first mistake, and creating another fatal vulnerability if anyone ever discovered the truth, would be exactly the same sort of stupidity as the putative Dark Lord using the Killing Curse again. It didn't even take his Hufflepuff side to point that out, Harry thought it in his very own mental voice.

But there was also a certain question as to whether the appropriate moral to learn from the last experience was to always say no immediately to the Defense Professor, or...

"Will think about it," hissed Harry. "Will not ansswer right away, thiss time, will enumerate risskss and benefitss firsst –"

"Undersstood," hissed the snake. "But remember thiss, boy, other eventss proceed without you. Hessitation iss always eassy, rarely usseful."



The boy emerged from the private room into the main infirmary, running nervous fingers through his messy black hair as he walked past the white beds, occupied and unoccupied.

Shortly afterward, the boy emerged from the Hogwarts infirmary entirely, passing Madam Pomfrey on the way out with a distracted nod.

The boy walked out into a hallway, then into a larger corridor, and then stopped and leaned against the wall.

The thing was...

...he really didn't want to be stuck in Hogwarts for the next six years; and when you thought about it...

... the Incident with Rescuing Bellatrix From Azkaban wasn't just imposing costs on Harry. Other people would be worrying, living in fear of the Dark Lord's return, expending unknown resources to take unknown precautions. Harry could demand that they write the script in such fashion as to make it seem not plausible that the Dark Lord would return a third time. And then people would relax, it would all be over.

Unless of course there actually was a Dark Lord out there to be feared. There had been a prophecy.

The boy leaning against the wall vented a soft sigh, and started walking again.

Harry had almost forgotten, but he had gotten around to showing Professor Quirrell the deck of cards he'd been given on Sunday night by 'Santa Claus', within which the King of Hearts was allegedly a portkey that would take him to the Salem Witches' Institute in America. Although of course Harry hadn't told Professor Quirrell who'd sent him the card, nor what it was supposed to do, before he'd asked Professor Quirrell if it was possible to tell where the portkey would send him.

The Defense Professor had transformed back to human form, and examined the King of Hearts, tapping it a few times with his wand.

And according to Professor Quirrell...

...the portkey would send the user somewhere in London, but he couldn't pinpoint it any nearer than that.

Harry had shown Professor Quirrell the note that had accompanied the deck of cards, saying nothing of the earlier notes.

Professor Quirrell had taken it in at a glance, given a dry chuckle, and observed that if you read the note carefully, it did not explicitly say that the portkey would take him to the Salem Witches' Institute.

You needed to learn to pay attention to that kind of subtlety, Professor Quirrell said, if you wanted to be a powerful wizard when you grew up; or, indeed, if you wanted to grow up at all.

The boy sighed again as he trudged off to class.

He was starting to wonder if all the other wizarding schools were also like this, or if it was only Hogwarts that had a problem.

SELF ACTUALIZATION, PART I

Hesitation is always easy, rarely useful. So the Defense Professor had told him; and while you could quibble about the details of the proverb, Harry understood the weaknesses of Ravenclaws well enough to know that you had to try answering your own quibbles. Did some plans call for waiting? Yes, many plans called for delayed action; but that was not the same as hesitating to choose. Not delaying because you knew the right moment to do what was necessary, but delaying because you couldn't make up your mind – there was no cunning plan which called for that.

Did you sometimes need more information to choose? Yes, but that could also turn into an excuse for delaying; and it would be tempting to delay, when you were faced with a choice between two painful alternatives, and not choosing would avoid the mental pain for a time. So you would pick a piece of information you couldn't easily obtain, and claim that you couldn't possibly decide without it; that would be your excuse. Although if you knew what information you needed, knew when and how you would obtain that information, and knew what you would do depending on each possible observation, then that was less suspicious as an excuse for hesitating.

If you weren't just hesitating, you ought to be able to choose in advance what you would do, once you had the extra information you claimed you needed.

If the Dark Lord were really out there, would it be smart to go along with Professor Quirrell's plan to have someone impersonate the Dark Lord?

No. Definitely no. Absolutely not.

And if Harry knew for a fact that the Dark Lord wasn't really out there... in that case...

The Defense Professor's office was a small room, at least today; it had changed since the last time Harry had seen it, the stone of the room becoming darker, more polished. Behind the Defense Professor's desk stood the single empty bookcase that always decorated the room, a tall bookcase stretching almost from the floor to the ceiling, with seven empty wooden shelves. Harry

had only once seen Professor Quirrell take a book from those empty shelves, and never seen him put a book back.

The green snake swayed above the seat of the chair behind the Defense Professor's desk, the lidless eyes staring unblinking at Harry from close to his own eye level.

They were warded now by twenty-two spells, all that could be cast within Hogwarts without attracting the Headmaster's attention.

"No," hissed Harry.

The green snake cocked its head, tilting it slightly; no emotion was conveyed by the gesture, not that Harry's Parselmouth talent conveyed to him. "Reason not?" said the green snake.

"Too risky," Harry said simply. That was true whether or not the Dark Lord was out there. Forcing himself to decide in advance had made him realize that he'd just been using the unanswered question as an excuse to hesitate; the sane decision was the same, either way.

For a moment the dark pitted eyes seemed to gleam blackly, for a moment the scaled mouth gaped to expose the fangs. "Think you have learned wrong lesson, boy, from previous failure. My plans are not in habit of failing, and last one would have gone flawlessly, but for your own foolishness. Correct lesson is to follow steps laid down for you by older and wiser Slytherin, tame your wild impulses."

"Lesson I learned is not to try plots that would make girl-child friend think I am evil or boy-child friend think I am stupid," Harry snapped back. He'd been planning a more temporizing response than that, but somehow the words had just slipped out.

The sssss-ing sound that came from the snake was not heard by Harry as words, only as pure fury. A moment later, "You told them –"

"Of course not! But know what they would say."

There was a long pause as the snake-head swayed, staring at Harry; again no detectable emotion came through, and Harry wondered what Professor Quirrell could be thinking that would take Professor Quirrell that long to think.

"You seriously care what those two think?" came the snake's final hiss. "True younglings those two are, not like you. Could not weigh adult matters."

"Might have done better than me," Harry hissed. "Boy-child friend would have asked after secret motives before assenting to rescue woman –"

"Glad you undersstand that now," the snake hissed coldly. "Always ask after other's advantage. Next learn to always ask after your own. If my plan is not to your taste, what is yours?"

"If necessary – stay at school six years and study. Hogwarts seems fine place to dwell. Books, friends, strange but tasty food." Harry wanted to chuckle, but there wasn't any gesture in Parseltongue for the kind of laughter he wanted to express.

The pits of the snake's eyes seemed almost black. "Easy to say that now. Such as you and I, we do not tolerate imprisonment. You will lose patience long before seventh year, perhaps before end of this one. I shall plan accordingly."

And before Harry could hiss another word of Parseltongue, the human-shape of Professor Quirrell was sitting in his chair once more. "So, Mr. Potter," said the Defense Professor, his voice as calm as if they had been discussing nothing important, as if the whole conversation had not occurred at all, "I hear that you have begun to practice dueling. Not the worthless sort with rules, I hope?"



Hannah Abbott looked as unnerved as Hermione had ever seen her (except on the day of the phoenix, the day Bellatrix Black had escaped, which shouldn't ought to count for anyone). The Hufflepuff girl had come over to the Ravenclaw table during dinner, and tapped Hermione on her shoulder, and very nearly dragged her away –

"Neville and Harry Potter are learning dueling from Mr. Diggory!" Hannah blurted as soon as they were a few steps away from the table.

"Who?" said Hermione.

"Cedric Diggory!" said Hannah. "He's the Captain of our Quidditch Team, and general of an army, and he's taking all the electives and getting better grades than anyone, and I hear he learns dueling from professional tutors during the summers, and he once beat two seventh-year students, and even some teachers call him the Super Hufflepuff, and Professor Sprout says we should all emulate him or something like that, and –"

After Hannah finally stopped for air (the list had gone on for a while), Hermione managed to insert a word in edgewise.

“Sunshine Soldier Abbott!” said Hermione. “Calm down. We’re not going to be fighting General Diggory, right? Sure, Neville’s studying to beat us, but we can study too –”

“Don’t you see?” Hannah shrieked, raising her voice a lot louder than it should’ve been, if they were trying to keep the conversation private from all the Ravenclaws looking at them. “Neville isn’t studying to beat us! He’s practicing so he can fight Bellatrix Black! They’re going to go through us like a Bludger through a stack of pancakes!”

The Sunshine General gave her soldier a look. “Listen,” said Hermione, “I don’t think a few weeks of practice is going to make anyone an invincible fighter. Plus we already know how to handle invincible fighters. We’ll concentrate fire on them and they’ll go down just like Draco.”

The Hufflepuff girl was looking at her with mixed admiration and skepticism. “Aren’t you even, you know, worried?”

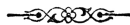
“Oh, honestly!” said Hermione. Sometimes it was hard being the only sensible person in your whole school year. “Haven’t you ever heard the saying, the only thing we have to fear is fear itself?”

“What?” said Hannah. “That’s crazy, what about Lethifolds lurking in the darkness, and being put under the Imperius Curse, and horrible Transfiguration accidents and –”

“I mean,” said Hermione, exasperation leaking out into her now-raised voice, she’d been hearing this sort of thing all week now, “how about if we wait until after the Chaos Legion actually crushes us to get so scared of them and did you just mutter ‘Gryffindors’ under your voice?”

A few moments later, Hermione was walking back to her place at the table with a sweet smile plastered onto her young face, it wasn’t the terrible cold glare of Harry’s dark side but it was the scariest face she knew how to make.

Harry Potter was going down.



“This is loony,” gasped Neville, with what tiny amount of breath he could spare from being completely out of breath.

“This is brilliant!” said Cedric Diggory. The eyes of the Super Hufflepuff gleamed with manic enthusiasm, shining like the sweat on his forehead as he stamped his feet through the dance of one of his dueling postures. His usually-light steps had changed to heavier stomps, which might have had

something to do with the Transfigured metal weights they'd all attached to their arms and legs and strapped over their chests. "Where do you get these ideas, Mr. Potter?"

"A strange old shop... in Oxford... and I'm never... shopping there... again." Thud.

SELF ACTUALIZATION, PART II

IN the high reaches of Hogwarts where rooms and corridors changed on a daily basis, where the territory itself was uncertain and not just the map, where the stability of the castle began to fray into dreams and chaos without changing its architectural style or apparent solidity – in the high reaches of Hogwarts, a battle would soon be fought.

The presence of so many students would stabilize the corridors for a time, by dint of constant observation. The rooms and corridors of Hogwarts sometimes moved even while people looked directly at them, but they wouldn't change. Even after eight centuries, Hogwarts was still a little shy about changing in front of people.

But despite that transient permanence (the Defense Professor had said) the upper reaches of Hogwarts still had a military realism: you had to learn the ground anew each time, and check every closet for secret corridors all over again.

Sunday it was, Sunday the first of March. Professor Quirrell had recovered enough to supervise battles once more, and they were all catching up on the backlog.

The Dragon General, Draco Malfoy, watched two compasses he held in either hand. One compass was the color of the Sun, the other had a multicolored, iridescent sheen to indicate Chaos. The other two generals, Draco knew, had been given their own compasses; only Hermione Granger's hand, and Harry Potter's hand, would hold a compass that was orange-red and flickered in its reflections like fire, pointing always to the direction of the largest active contingent of Dragon Army.

Without those compasses they might have searched for days and never found each other, which was a territorial hazard of fighting in the upper levels of Hogwarts.

Draco had a bad feeling about what would happen when Dragon Army found the Chaos Legion. Harry Potter had changed since Bellatrix Black had escaped; the Heir of Slytherin had begun to seem truly Lordly now (and how had Professor Quirrell known that would happen?) Draco would have

felt a lot better with Hermione Granger standing alongside him with her twenty-three Sunshine Soldiers in tow, but no, the Sunshine General was being stupidly proud and refusing to accept aid against General Potter. She wanted to take down Potter herself, she'd told him.

The Noble and Most Ancient House of Malfoy had maintained their influence over Britain for centuries by understanding that you couldn't always be the most powerful. Sometimes another Lord was just stronger, and you had to settle for merely being his foremost lieutenant. You could build up quite a position of wealth and power over a dozen generations of being second in command. You just had to be careful, each time, not to let your House be dragged down with the fall of the Lord you served. That was the Malfoy tradition which centuries of experience had honed...

And so Father had thoroughly explained to Draco that if he ran into someone who was obviously stronger than him, Draco was not to resent this and not to deny it and not to throw a tantrum that could sabotage his potential position, but Draco was to make sure that his place in the next generation's power structure wasn't any lower than second.

Granger, apparently, had never gotten this lecture from her own parents, and was still in denial about the obvious fact that Harry Potter was becoming stronger than her.

So Draco had secretly met with Captain Goldstein and Captain Bones and Captain Macmillan and they'd agreed to all do their best to make sure that Dragon and Sunshine didn't engage each other before they engaged the larger threat of Chaos.

It wasn't really violating the agreement against traitors, you weren't soliciting traitors if you honestly meant to help the other army.

A high ringing tone belled through the corridors to signal the start of the battle, and a moment later Draco shouted "Go!" and the Dragons started running. It would tire his soldiers, it would cost them something even after they stopped and caught their breath, but they had to put Chaos directly between themselves and the Sunshine Regiment.



Harry and Neville walked at a leisurely pace through the corridors, Harry watching the yellow-golden compass that pointed toward the location of the Sunshine Regiment, and Neville keeping a lookout just in case they ran into someone else.

Their footsteps sounded a bit thumpy, if you listened closely.

“So,” the Chaotic Lieutenant said after a while. “That’s why you had us practice dueling with all that weight strapped on?”

Harry nodded, keeping his eyes on the compass that led to Sunshine; if the apparent direction started to change quickly then they were getting close.

“I didn’t want to say anything in front of the others, but a couple of weeks isn’t a lot of time to put on extra muscle,” said Neville. “And the balance is different, and I think this weighs more actually, and doesn’t this count as Transfiguring a Muggle artifact?”

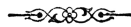
“Nope,” Harry said. “I checked that in advance. You can see it in Hogwarts statues, so some wizards used to wear it, even if they were just being fashionable for the Dark Ages.” And since nobody would ever try this if they weren’t fighting first-year students using weak spells like the Sleep Hex, it didn’t count as giving away good ideas, either.

They came to a Y-intersection, an annoying one; neither corridor bent in quite the right way to take them on a direct intercept course toward where Sunshine would go as they followed the Chaos Legion following Dragon Army. So Harry chose what seemed like the better of the two options, and Neville followed.

“We’d better try a quick Silencing Charm on this stuff when we get close,” Neville said. “It’s kind of noisy, they might figure it out.”

Harry nodded, and then said “Good idea” in case Neville hadn’t been looking at him.

They trudged on through the stone-floored corridor of the upper reach of Hogwarts, lit by windows of plain glass or stained glass, now and then passing statues of witches and dragons and even the occasional wizard-knight in plate armor or chainmail.



The Sunshine Soldiers were striding through a long, wide corridor with their wands out and pointed. They couldn’t use the Prismatic Shield while they were maneuvering, but Parvati Patil and Jenny Rustad were currently maintaining Contegos around the officer group, who would be the first targets of any ambush.

Their tactic for the next battle, she and her officers had decided, would be to mix directly in with the enemy soldiers as fast as possible – after having practiced among themselves how to support one another, avoid hitting each

other, and get into positions where enemy soldiers would hesitate to fire. They'd only gotten in four hours practice, but she thought her troops would already be better at that kind of mixed-in fighting than soldiers who hadn't practiced at all. It seemed like the sort of tactic Chaos would use, but they hadn't actually used it yet.

It was a good strategy, she believed. And yet still, no matter how much she'd lectured her soldiers, they'd persisted in whispering fearful rumors about what Harry and Neville were learning to do. Finally she'd gone off and talked with Captain Goldstein, who understood things like Troop Morale, and Anthony had suggested –

"That's weird," Captain Macmillan spoke up suddenly, frowning at the fiery and iridescent compasses he held in either hand. (Ernie was, as Harry would have termed it, "good at spatial visualization", and so had been designated to hold both compasses and try to figure out what their enemies were doing.) "I think... Dragon's not moving fast anymore... I think they got on the other side of Chaos from us first... and it looks like Chaos is moving to attack them instead of trying to maneuver out from in between?"

Hermione frowned, trying to understand, and she saw similar frowns on the faces of Anthony and Ron. If Chaos and Dragon attacked each other straight out, and spent all their forces fighting each other, that was practically conceding the battle to Sunshine...

"Potter thinks we're allied so he's attacking Malfoy now, before Dragon can link up with us," said Blaise Zabini from the common ranks of soldiers. "Or Potter just thinks he can beat both armies in a row, if he attacks them separately." The Slytherin boy gave a condescending sigh. "Are you going to promote me back to officer now? You lot are hopeless without me, you know."

They all ignored the talking noises coming from Zabini's mouth.

"We still moving in the right direction?" said Anthony.

"Yeah," said Ernie.

"We getting close to them?" said Ron.

"Not yet –"

That was when the huge black-wooden doors at the end of the corridor flew open and crashed into the wall, revealing two figures almost completely enveloped in grey cloaks, grey cloth stretched over the faces beneath the grey hoods, one of those figures already raising a wand and pointing it directly at her.

And then the face of the game changed drastically, as Harry's voice, high and strained with the effort, screamed the word:

"Stupefy!"

The dueling-grade stunner blasted toward her, she was so shocked that she didn't start to move until almost too late, as the red jet of light smashed right through the Contego shield to their front and she just barely dodged, there was a tingle on her arm as the red light went past her, and she saw out of the corner of her eye Susan getting hit and blown off her feet into Ron –

"Somnium!" bellowed Anthony's voice, followed a moment later by a dozen voices crying "Somnium!"

Hermione frantically pushed herself to her feet, and as she rose, she saw the two figures in the grey cloaks just standing there.

You couldn't see Sleep Hexes, the spell was too weak –

But there was no way they all could've missed.

"Stupefy!" shrieked the voice of Neville Longbottom, and another red jet shot at her, she fell in an undignified heap as she desperately twisted out of the way, and when she scrambled up, panting, she saw that this time the stunbolt had gotten Ron where he'd been rising from the ground.

"Hello there, Sunshine," said Harry's voice from beneath his hood.

"We're the Grey Knights of Chaos," said Neville's voice.

"We'll be your opponents for this battle," said Harry's voice, "while Chaos's other army slaughters the Dragons."

"And by the way," said Neville's voice, "we're invincible."



The two boys in their grey cloaks and robes, grey cloth over their faces, stood facing Sunshine's entire army, seemingly unfazed by a dozen Sleep Hexes.

Daphne heard a soft sigh from beside her, and when her head turned she saw that Hannah's lips were parted, and the Hufflepuff girl's eyes were huge, and she was staring at –

It would have been hard to describe the jumble of thoughts that flashed through Daphne's mind as she realized that Hannah was staring at Neville rather than Harry, which in turn seemed to trigger some part of her into noticing that in point of fact Neville had been getting pretty interesting lately as boys went, in fact right now the Last Scion of Longbottom was seeming downright cool, and something woke up inside her and her own lips parted and everything the Lady her Mother had ever instructed her about demure

demeanors and flattery and scented shampoo blew straight out of her mind so hard it should have fluffed her hair about her ears, because she'd watched Hermione and Harry and she knew how she wanted her own courtship to go –

Her Lady Mother had also recently instructed her on a few spells it might be embarrassing not to know if you belonged to the Noble and Most Ancient House of Greengrass.

Daphne's wand swung to point to her left, and she shouted "Tonare!"

The wand went over her head, and she spoke the incantation "Ravum Calvaria!"

And finally she grasped her wand in both hands and shrieked, "Lucis Gladius!"

The huge magical drain almost sent her to her knees, but she bore it, and when the blazing shape had fully formed and stabilized the drain was a little less.

Still, she had a feeling she'd better not try to fight with this for long.

That everyone was staring at her went quite without saying, and she should have leaped forward to confront Neville with her hair billowing around her, but it was all she could do to walk forward steadily to level her Most Ancient Blade at Neville Longbottom. That everyone moved aside and made way for her also went without saying.

"I hight Daphne, of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Greengrass!" she cried. "Greengrass of Sunshine!" The dueling forms had gone completely out of her mind, she'd seen enough plays to remember death challenges and blood challenges but she couldn't remember at all what was appropriate for this, so she just pointed the incandescent sword toward the object of her crush and yelled, "Let's see what you got, Nevvy!"

Once again Harry's voice shrieked "Stupefy!", and later on, when she was remembering this, she could never quite believe she'd managed to do it, but she slashed out with her blade of light like it was a Beater's bat, and hit the stunbolt back at Harry who just barely managed to twist out of the way.

"Tonare!" shouted Neville, of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Longbottom. "Ravum Calvaria, Lucis Gladius!"



For a few seconds, no one did anything but stare at Neville and Daphne as they started whacking at each other. They were both moving slowly, and

Hermione guessed that the spell was taking a lot of strength out of them. It wasn't very impressive by comparison, if you were a Muggleborn and you'd watched certain movies.

But you still had to give them extra credit for using lightsabers at all.

"Point of order," said Harry's voice. "I know the Defense Professor is watching, but I still have to ask, does anyone know whether they'll slice each other in half if they actually hit –"

"No," Hermione said absently. This had been in one of her history books, though she'd had no idea the magical dueling sword looked like that. "They cast it so it'll only stun if it touches."

"You know that spell?"

"Oh, no, it's the Charm of the Most Ancient Blade, it's only legal for Noble and Most Ancient Houses to use –"

Hermione stopped talking and looked at Harry, or Harry's grey hood rather.

"Well," said Harry's voice, "I guess I could take down the rest of the Sunshine Regiment by myself, then." She couldn't see his face, but his voice sounded like he was smiling.

"You dodged when Daphne hit your own spell back at you," Hermione said. "So whatever you did, you're not invincible. A Stupefy can still get you."

"Interesting theory," said Harry's voice from beneath the hood. "Got anyone in your army who can test it?"

"I read about the Stunning Hex once," said Hermione. "A few months ago. I wonder if I can remember the instructions right?" Her wand came up to point at Harry.

There was a slight pause, as nearby a boy and a girl breathing in audible gasps slowly whacked at each other with lightsabers.

"Of course," Harry said, leveling his own wand on her, "I can just use Somnium on you. That'll take a lot less effort."

New Contego shields sprung into existence in front of her, cast by Jenny and Parvati, even as Harry spoke.

The tip of Hermione's own wand began making small motions in the air, a diamond within a circle, a diamond within a circle, rehearsing the gesture to match exactly what she remembered seeing in the book. It would be a difficult feat even for her, but she had to cast the spell right on the first try, she couldn't afford any failed castings that would sap her energy.

"You know," said Hermione Granger, "I understand that it's not really your fault, but I'm getting tired of hearing people talk about the Boy-Who-Lived like you're – like you're some kind of god or something."

"Same here, I must say," said Harry Potter. "It's sad how people keep underestimating me."

Her wand kept rehearsing the diamond within the circle, over and over. Harry would be recharging his own strength, she knew, even as she practiced as much as she could before her attack. "I'm starting to think you need taking down a peg, General Chaos."

"You could be right," Harry said equably. His feet began to shuffle through what she recognized as a duelist's dance. "Unfortunately there's nothing left that can defeat me now except another Harry Potter."

"Let me be specific, Mr. Potter. I'm taking you down a peg."

"You and what other army?"

"You think you're pretty cool, don't you," said Hermione.

"Why, yes," said Harry. "Yes, I do. Some might call that arrogant, but am I supposed to be the last person in Hogwarts to notice how awesome I am?"

Hermione raised her left hand into the air, and made a fist.

It was a signal. Eight designated soldiers in her army would be pointing their wands at her, and quietly casting Wingardium Leviosa.

They'd practiced this, too, once Hermione had given up on lecturing her soldiers, and at Anthony's suggestion, tried giving them a Sunshine General who looked like she could defeat invincible enemies.

"You pretend you're Superman," said Hermione. She raised her left fist higher in the air, and the eight soldiers supporting her Hovered her off the ground. "Well here's Super Hermione!" Her hand pushed forward, and as she shot rapidly through the air toward Harry, regretting only that she couldn't see the look on his face, her wand made a diamond within a circle and she summoned up all the magic she could, it felt like she imagined touching a live wire would feel as the too-powerful spell poured through her when her voice screamed "Stupefy!"

The red bolt burst from her wand, perfectly formed.

Harry dodged it.

And then, because they hadn't practiced doing this part inside of hallways, she crashed into a wall.



“Somnium!” shrieked Draco, and then after only a few seconds to recharge, “SOMNIUM, CURSE YOU!”

He knew he was hitting Theodore, the other boy wasn’t even trying to dodge, but the scion of Nott only grinned as evilly as his father and leveled his wand –

Draco managed to leap aside just as Theodore said “Somnium!” but Draco was getting winded, he couldn’t keep this up, Theodore wasn’t bothering to dodge at all while Draco had to keep moving, this was crazy.

He had enough strength now to fire again, but –

Stupidity is doing the same thing and expecting a different result, Harry had said, this was Harry’s work somehow, it couldn’t be a Muggle artifact anymore but Draco couldn’t figure out what it could be, and he should be thinking of hypotheses and ways to test them but he was too busy frantically dodging as Theodore laughed and shot another Sleep Hex at him, Draco felt a little numbness in his side that time as he twisted, that had been a very very near miss and finally Draco couldn’t take it anymore, he didn’t bother working out what theory he was testing or why as he just –

“Luminos!” shouted Draco, and Theodore was haloed in red light, “Dulak!” and it went out again (so Theodore was still being affected by magic), “Expelliarmus!” and Theodore’s wand went flying (that had been a good spell to cast anyway now that Draco realized it) but Theodore was rushing toward Draco with his arms outstretched to grapple so Draco yelled “Flipendo!” and the other boy’s feet were abruptly yanked up –

– and Theodore’s back hit the ground with a surprisingly loud and metallic-sounding crash.

Draco’s vision was swimming now from casting four spells in such fast succession, and Theodore was already scrambling to his feet, so there wasn’t even time to think in words, but Draco still managed to say “Somnium!” and this time he aimed for Theodore’s face instead of the chest.

Theodore dodged (he dodged!) and the boy shouted “Code seven on Malfoy!”

“Prismatis!” cried Padma’s voice and there was suddenly a shimmering rainbow wall in front of Draco, just as four Chaotic voices cried “Somnium!”

And there was a pause, as everyone looked at the huge Prismatic Sphere protecting the remnants of Dragon Army.

Casting that fifth spell had sent Draco to his hands and knees, but he looked up and managed to say, as clearly as he could, “If the Sleep Hex –

doesn't work – aim for the face – I think the Lieutenants are wearing metal shirts.”

“You’ve already lost too many soldiers,” Finnigan said loudly from across the barrier, “we’ll beat you anyway,” and then the Gryffindor boy laughed evilly. He did the evil laughter almost as well as Harry Potter by now, and the other Chaotic Legionnaires started laughing with him soon afterward.

Draco could see from the corner of his eye where Gregory and Vincent lay unconscious. Padma was still sustaining the Prismatic Sphere, the largest one he’d ever seen her cast; but she was breathing hard, still visibly sweaty from when they’d all jogged to get into position, the Ravenclaw girl was a strong witch but not an athletic one.

He really hoped General Granger got here soon and hit Chaos from behind. General Potter and Neville of Chaos were missing, and Draco could guess where they’d gone, but two soldiers couldn’t delay the whole Sunshine Regiment for too long all by themselves, could they?



She knew it wasn’t fair, that the other girl had given all she could, but Hermione still wished that Daphne had lasted longer.

“Lagann!” said Neville’s voice from behind her as she flew, and there was the sound of a Prismatic Wall shattering, Hannah’s voice desperately cried “Somnium!” and then a few moments later Neville’s voice calmly said “Somnium” and there was the thud of another of her soldiers falling over.

And the force keeping her in the air diminished again, Hermione could feel the grab of the Hover Charms straining at her, but now it just wasn’t enough.

Her flight stopped and she began falling in slow motion toward the ground, and she should’ve signaled her soldiers to just drop her, but she was too angry and confused and not thinking fast enough and still trying to muster the strength for one last Stunning Hex, and so there was nowhere to go when Harry pointed his wand at her and said “Somnium” and that was the last word that Hermione Granger heard of her battle.

SELF ACTUALIZATION, PART III

HERMIONE wasn't feeling very nice right now, or Good either, there was a hot ball of anger burning inside her and she wondered if this was something like Harry's darkness (though it probably wasn't even close) and she shouldn't have felt that way over some silly little game but –

Her whole army. Two soldiers had beaten her whole army. That was what she'd been told after she woke up.

It was a little too much.

"Well," Professor Quirrell said. From up close the Defense Professor didn't look quite as healthy as he had the last time she'd been in his office; his skin looked paler, and he moved a little slower. His expression was as stern as ever, and his gaze as penetrating; his fingers tapped sharply on his desk, rap-rap. "I would guess that of the three of you, only Mr. Malfoy has guessed why I've asked you here."

"Something to do with Noble and Most Ancient Houses?" said Harry from beside her, sounding puzzled. "I didn't violate some kind of crazy law by firing on Daphne, did I?"

"Not quite," the man said with heavy irony. "Since Miss Greengrass did not invoke the correct dueling forms, she is not entitled to demand that you be stripped of your House name. Although of course I would not have permitted a formal duel. Wars do not respect such rules." The Defense Professor leaned forward and rested his chin on steepled hands, as though sitting upright had already tired him. His eyes gazed at them, sharp and dangerous. "General Malfoy. Why did I call you here?"

"General Potter against the two of us isn't a fair fight anymore," Draco Malfoy said in a quiet voice.

"What?" blurted Hermione. "We almost had them, if Daphne hadn't fainted –"

"Miss Greengrass did not faint from magical exhaustion," Professor Quirrell said dryly. "Mr. Potter shot her in the back with a Sleep Hex while your soldiers were distracted by the sight of their general flying into a wall. But

congratulations nonetheless, Miss Granger, on almost defeating two Chaotic Legionnaires with a mere twenty-four Sunshine Soldiers.”

The blood flaming in her cheeks grew a little hotter. “That – that was just – if I’d only figured out he was wearing armor –”

Professor Quirrell gazed at her from over touched fingers. “Of course there are ways you could have won, Miss Granger. There always are, in every lost battle. The world around us redunds with opportunities, explodes with opportunities, which nearly all folk ignore because it would require them to violate a habit of thought; in every battle a thousand Hufflepuff bones waiting to be sharpened into spears. If you had thought to try a massed Finite Incantatem on general principles, you would have dispelled Mr. Potter’s suit of chainmail and everything else he was wearing except his underwear, which leads me to suspect that Mr. Potter did not quite realize his own vulnerability. Or you could have had your soldiers swarm Mr. Potter and Mr. Longbottom and physically wrest the wands from their hands. Mr. Malfoy’s own response was not what I would term well-reasoned, but at least he did not wholly ignore his thousand alternatives.” A sardonic smile. “But you, Miss Granger, had the misfortune to remember how to cast the Stunning Hex, and so you did not search your excellent memory for a dozen easier spells that might have proved efficacious. And you pinned all your army’s hopes on your own person, so they lost spirit when you fell. Afterward they continued to cast their futile Sleep Hexes, governed by the habits of fighting that had been trained into them, unable to break the pattern as Mr. Malfoy did. I cannot quite comprehend what goes through people’s minds when they repeat the same failed strategy over and over, but apparently it is an astonishingly rare realization that you can try something else. And so the Sunshine Regiment was wiped out by two soldiers.” The Defense Professor grinned mirthlessly. “One perceives certain similarities to how fifty Death Eaters dominated all of magical Britain, and how our much-loved Ministry continues in its rule.”

The Defense Professor sighed. “Nonetheless, Miss Granger, the fact remains that this is not the first such defeat for you. In the previous battle, you and Mr. Malfoy united your forces, and yet you were fought to a standstill, so that you and Mr. Malfoy had to pursue Mr. Potter onto the roof. The Chaos Legion has now demonstrated, twice in succession, military strength equal to both other armies combined. This leaves me no choice. General Potter, you will select eight soldiers from your army, including at least one Chaotic Lieutenant, to be divided among Dragon Army and the Sunshine

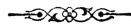
Regiment –”

“What?” Hermione burst out again, she glanced over at the other generals and saw that Harry looked as shocked as her, while Draco Malfoy only looked resigned.

“General Potter is stronger than both of you together,” Professor Quirrell said with calm precision. “Your contest is over, he has won, and it is time to rebalance the three armies to present him with a renewed challenge.”

“Professor Quirrell!” said Harry. “I didn’t –”

“This is my decision as the Professor of Battle Magic at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry and it is not subject to negotiation.” The words were still precise, but the look in Professor Quirrell’s eyes chilled Hermione’s blood, even though he was glaring at Harry and not at her. “And I find it suspicious, Mr. Potter, that the moment you wished to isolate Miss Granger and Mr. Malfoy and force them to chase you onto the roof, you were able to annihilate just exactly as much of their united force as you pleased. Indeed, that is the level of performance I expected of you since the start of this year, and I am annoyed to discover that you have been holding back in my classes this entire time! I have seen what you can truly do, Mr. Potter. You are far beyond the point where Mr. Malfoy or Miss Granger can fight you on an equal level, and you will not be permitted to pretend otherwise. This, Mr. Potter, I tell you in my capacity as your professor: For you to learn to your full potential, you must exercise your full abilities and not hold back for any reason – particularly not childish frets over what your friends might think!”



She left the Defense Professor’s office with a larger army, and less dignity, and feeling a lot like a sad little bug that had just been squished, and trying very very hard not to cry.

“I wasn’t holding back!” Harry said as soon as they turned the first corner away from Professor Quirrell’s office, the moment the wooden door faded out of sight behind the stone walls. “I wasn’t pretending, I never let either of you win!”

She didn’t answer, couldn’t answer, it would all break loose if she tried to say a word.

“Really?” said Draco Malfoy. The Dragon General still had that air of resignation. “Because Quirrell’s right, you know, it’s suspicious that you

could beat nearly everyone in both our armies as soon as you wanted to make us chase you onto the roof. And didn't you say something then, Potter, about us needing to beat you when you were fighting for real?"

The burning sensation was creeping up her throat, and when it reached her eyes she would burst into tears, and from then on she would be just a crying little girl to both of them.

"That –" Harry's voice said urgently, she wasn't looking at him but his voice sounded like he had his head turned toward her. "That was – I tried a lot harder that time, there was an important reason, I had to, so I used a whole bunch of tricks I'd been saving up – and –"

She'd always been trying her hardest, every time.

"– and I, I let out a side of myself I wouldn't usually use for something like Defense class –"

So if she ever got close to winning against Harry when it really mattered, he could just go into his dark side and crush her, was that it?

...of course it was. She couldn't even look Harry in the eyes when he was being scary, how had she ever thought she could beat him for real?

The corridor forked, and Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy went left toward a staircase that climbed to the second floor, and she went right instead, she didn't even know where that passage went but right now she'd rather be lost in the castle.

"Excuse me, Draco," said Harry's voice, and then there was a pattering of footsteps behind her.

"Leave me alone," she said, it came out sounding stern but then she had to shut her mouth and press her lips together tightly and hold her breath to stop it all from coming out.

That boy just kept on coming, and ran around her and put himself in front of her, because he was stupid that was why, and Harry said, his voice now a high and desperate whisper, "I didn't run away when you were beating me in all my classes except broomstick riding!"

He didn't understand, and he would never understand, Harry Potter would never understand, because no matter what contest he lost he would still be the Boy-Who-Lived, if you were Harry Potter and Hermione Granger was beating you then it meant everyone was expecting you to rise to the challenge, if you were Hermione Granger and Harry Potter was beating you that meant you were just no one.

"It's not fair," she said, her voice was shaking but she wasn't crying yet, not yet, "I shouldn't have to fight your dark side, I'm just – I'm only –" I'm only twelve, that was what she thought then.

"I only used my dark side once and that was – when I had to!"

"So today you beat my whole army being just Harry?" She still wasn't crying yet, and she wondered what her face looked like right now, if she looked like an angry Hermione or a sad one.

"I –" Harry said. His voice got a little lower, "I wasn't... really expecting to win, that time, I know I said I was invincible but that was just to try to scare you, I really just thought we'd slow you down for a bit –"

She started walking again, walked right past him, and as she passed Harry's face tightened up like he was going to cry.

"Is Professor Quirrell right?" came a high desperate whisper from behind her. "If I have you for a friend, will I always be afraid to do better because I know it will hurt your feelings? That's not fair, Hermione!"

She took a breath and held it and ran, her feet pattering across the stone as fast as they could, running as fast as she dared with her vision all blurry, ran so that no one would hear her, and this time Harry didn't follow.



Minerva was going over the Transfiguration parchment due Monday, and had just marked down to negative two hundred points a fifth-year parchment with an error that could have potentially killed someone. During her first year as a professor she'd been indignant at the folly of older students, now she was just resigned. Some people not only never learned, they never noticed that they were hopeless, they stayed bright and eager and kept on trying. Sometimes they believed you when you told them, before they left Hogwarts, that they must never try anything unusual, give up free Transfiguration and use the art only through established Charms; and sometimes... they didn't.

She was in the middle of trying to unravel a particularly convoluted answer when a knock at the door disrupted her thoughts; and it wasn't her office hours, but it had only taken a very short time as Head of Gryffindor House for her to learn to suspend judgment. You could always deduct House points afterward.

"Come in," she said in a crisp voice.

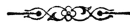
The young girl who entered her office had clearly been crying, and then afterward had washed her face in hopes it wouldn't show –

“Miss Granger!” said Professor McGonagall. It had taken her a moment to recognize that face with its eyes reddened and cheeks puffed. “What happened?”

“Professor,” said the young girl in a wavering voice, “you said that if I was ever worried or uncomfortable about anything, I should come to you at once –”

“Yes,” said Professor McGonagall, “now what happened?”

The girl started to explain –



Hermione stood still and the stairs turned around her, a revolving helix that shouldn't have taken her anywhere at all, and instead bore her continuously upward. Hermione thought it seemed like the Enchantment of the Endless Stair, which had been invented in 1733 by the wizard Arram Sabeti who'd lived on top of Mount Everest in the days when no Muggles could climb it. Only that couldn't be right because Hogwarts was much older – maybe the enchantment had been reinvented?

She should've been frightened, should've been nervous about her second meeting with the Headmaster.

She was, in fact, frightened and nervous about her second meeting with the Headmaster.

Only Hermione Granger had been thinking; she'd been thinking a lot, after she hadn't been able to run any further and had slid down against the wall with her lungs on fire, thinking while she curled up in a ball with her back against the chilly stone wall and her legs drawn up and crying.

Even if she lost to Harry Potter she was never, ever going to lose to Draco Malfoy, that was just totally absolutely unacceptable, and Professor Quirrell had praised General Malfoy for not ignoring his thousand alternatives; and so after Hermione had cried herself out she'd thought of fourteen other spells she should've tried against Harry and Neville, and then she'd started wondering if she might be making the same sort of mistake about other things; and that was how she'd ended up knocking on Professor McGonagall's door. Not asking for help, right now Hermione didn't have any plans she could ask for help with, just telling Professor McGonagall everything, because when she'd thought of it that had seemed like one of the thousand alternatives that Professor Quirrell had been talking about.

And she'd told Professor McGonagall about how Harry Potter had changed since the day the phoenix had been on his shoulder, and about how people more and more seemed to see her as just something of Harry's, and how it seemed like Harry was pulling farther and farther away from everyone else in their school year and went around with a sad air sometimes like he was losing something, and she didn't know what to do anymore.

And Professor McGonagall had told her that they needed to talk to the Headmaster.

And Hermione had felt worried, but then the thought had come to her that Harry Potter wouldn't have been scared of the Headmaster. Harry Potter would have just barged ahead doing whatever he was trying to do. Maybe (the thought had come to her) it was worth trying to be like that, not being scared, just doing whatever, and seeing what happened to her, it couldn't really be worse.

The Endless Stair stopped turning.

The great oaken door in front of them with the brass griffin knocker opened without being touched.

Behind a black oaken desk with dozens of drawers facing in every direction, looking like it had drawers set inside other drawers, was the silver-bearded Headmaster of Hogwarts upon his throne, Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, into whose gently twinkling eyes Hermione looked for around three seconds before she was distracted by all the other things in the room.

Some time later – she wasn't sure how long but it was while she was trying to count the number of things in the room for the third time and still not getting the same answer, even though her memory insisted that nothing had been added or removed – the Headmaster cleared his throat and said, "Miss Granger?"

Hermione's head snapped around, and she felt a little heat in her cheeks; but Dumbledore didn't appear annoyed with her at all, only serene, and with an inquiring look in those mild, half-glassed eyes.

"Hermione," said Professor McGonagall, the older witch's voice was gentle and her hand rested reassuringly on Hermione's shoulder, "please tell the Headmaster what you said to me about Harry."

Hermione began speaking, despite her newfound resolution her voice still stumbled a little with nervousness, as she described how Harry had changed in the last few weeks since Fawkes had been on his shoulder.

When she was done there was a pause, and then the Headmaster sighed. "I am sorry, Hermione Granger," said Dumbledore. Those blue eyes had grown sadder as she spoke. "That is... unfortunate, but I cannot say it is unexpected. That is a hero's burden, which you see."

"A hero?" said Hermione. She looked up nervously at Professor McGonagall and saw that the Transfiguration Professor's face had grown tight, though her hand still squeezed Hermione's shoulder reassuringly.

"Yes," said Dumbledore. "I was a hero myself once, before I was a mysterious old wizard, in the days when I opposed Grindelwald. You have read history books, Miss Granger?"

Hermione nodded.

"Well," said Dumbledore, "that is what heroes have to do, Miss Granger, they have their tasks and they must grow strong to accomplish them, and that is what you see happening to Harry. If there is anything that can be done to gentle his pathway, then you will be the one to do it, and not I. For I am not Harry's friend, alas, but only his mysterious old wizard."

"I –" said Hermione. "I'm not sure – I still want to be –" Her voice stopped, it seemed too awful to say aloud.

Dumbledore closed his eyes, and when he opened them, he looked a little older than before. "No one can stop you, Miss Granger, if you choose to stop being Harry's friend. As for what it would do to him, you may know that better than I."

"That – doesn't seem fair," Hermione said, her voice trembling. "That I've got to be Harry's friend because he's got no one else? That doesn't seem fair."

"Being a friend is not something you can be forced to, Miss Granger." The blue eyes seemed to look right through her. "The feelings are there, or they are not. If they are there, you can accept them or deny them. You are Harry's friend – and choosing to deny it would wound him terribly, perhaps beyond healing. But Miss Granger, what would drive you to such extremes?"

She couldn't find words. She'd never been able to find words. "If you get too near Harry – you get swallowed up, and no one sees you any more, you're just something of his, everyone thinks the whole world revolves around him and..." She didn't have the words.

The old wizard nodded slowly. "It is indeed an unjust world we live in, Miss Granger. All the world now knows that it is I who defeated Grindelwald, and fewer remember Elizabeth Beckett who died opening the way so I could

pass through. And yet she is remembered. Harry Potter is the hero of this play, Miss Granger; the world does revolve around him. He is destined for great things; and I ween that in time the name of Albus Dumbledore will be remembered as Harry Potter's mysterious old wizard, more than for anything else I have done. And perhaps the name of Hermione Granger will be remembered as his companion, if you prove worthy of it in your day. For this I tell you true: never will you find more glory on your own, than in Harry Potter's company."

Hermione shook her head rapidly. "But that's not –" She'd known she wouldn't be able to explain. "It's not about glory, it's about being – something that belongs to someone else!"

"So you think you would rather be the hero?" The old wizard sighed. "Miss Granger, I have been a hero, and a leader; and I would have been a thousand times happier if I could have belonged to someone like Harry Potter. Someone made of sterner stuff than I, to make the hard decisions, and yet worthy to lead me. I thought, once, that I knew such a man, but I was mistaken... Miss Granger, you have no idea at all how fortunate are those like you, compared to heroes."

The hot burning feeling was creeping up her throat again, along with helplessness, she didn't understand why Professor McGonagall had brought her here if the Headmaster wasn't going to help, and from a glance at Professor McGonagall's face, it looked like Professor McGonagall also wasn't sure now that it had been a good idea.

"I don't want to be a hero," said Hermione Granger, "I don't want to be a hero's companion, I just want to be me."

(The thought came to her a few seconds later that maybe she did in fact want to be a hero, but she decided not to change what she'd said.)

"Ah," said the old wizard. "That is a tall order, Miss Granger." Dumbledore rose from his throne, stepped out behind his desk, and pointed to a symbol on the wall, so ubiquitous that Hermione's eyes had glossed right over it; a faded shield on which was inscribed the heraldry of Hogwarts, the lion and snake, and badger and raven, and in Latin engraved words whose point she'd never understood. Then, as she realized where that shield was, and how old it looked, it suddenly occurred to Hermione that this might be the original –

"A Hufflepuff would say," said Dumbledore, tapping his finger on the faded badger and making Hermione wince for the sacrilege (if it was the original), "that people fail to become who they are meant to be, because they

are too lazy to put in all the work involved. A Ravenclaw,” tapping the raven, “would repeat those words that the wise know to be far older than Socrates, know thyself, and say that people fail to become who they are meant to be, through ignorance and lack of thought. And Salazar Slytherin,” Dumbledore frowned as his finger tapped the faded snake, “why, he said that we become who we are meant to be by following our desires wherever they lead. Perhaps he would say that people fail to become themselves because they refuse to do what is necessary to achieve their ambitions. But then one notes that nearly all of the Dark Wizards to come out of Hogwarts have been Slytherins. Did they become what they were meant to be? I think not.” Dumbledore’s finger tapped the lion, and then he turned toward her. “Tell me, Miss Granger, what would a Gryffindor say? I do not need to ask whether the Sorting Hat offered you that House.”

It didn’t seem like a hard question. “A Gryffindor would say that people don’t become who they should be, because they’re afraid.”

“Most people are afraid, Miss Granger,” said the old wizard. “They live their whole lives circumscribed by crippling fear that cuts off everything they might accomplish, everything they might become. Fear of saying or doing the wrong thing, fear of losing their mere possessions, fear of death, and above all the fear of what other people will think of them. Such fear is a most terrible thing, Miss Granger, and it is terribly important to know that. But it is not what Godric Gryffindor would have said. People become who they are meant to be, Miss Granger, by doing what is right.” The old wizard’s voice was gentle. “So tell me, Miss Granger, what seems to you like the right choice? For that is who you truly are, and wherever that path leads, that is who you are meant to become.”

There was a long space filled with the sounds of things that could not be counted.

She thought about it, because she was a Ravenclaw.

“I don’t think it’s right,” Hermione said slowly, “for someone to have to live inside someone else’s shadow like that...”

“Many things in the world are not right,” said the old wizard, “the question is what is right for you to do about them. Hermione Granger, I shall be less subtle than is usual for a mysterious old wizard, and tell you outright that you cannot imagine how badly things could go if the events surrounding Harry Potter turn to ill. His quest is a matter you would not even dream of walking away from, if you knew.”

“What quest?” said Hermione. Her voice was trembling, because it was very clear what answer the Headmaster was looking for and she didn’t want to give it. “What happened to Harry back then, why was Fawkes on his shoulder?”

“He grew up,” said the old wizard. His eyes blinked several times, beneath the half-moon glasses, and his face suddenly looked very lined. “You see, Miss Granger, people do not grow up because of time, people grow up when they are placed in grownup situations. That is what happened to Harry Potter that Saturday. He was told – you are not to share this information with anyone, you understand – he was told that he would have to fight someone. I cannot tell you who. I cannot tell you why. But that is what happened to him, and why he needs his friends.”

There was a pause.

“Bellatrix Black?” Hermione said. She couldn’t have been more shocked if someone had plugged an electrical cord into her ear. “You’re going to make Harry fight Bellatrix Black?”

“No,” said the old wizard. “Not her. I cannot tell you who, or why.”

She thought about it some more.

“Is there any way I can keep up with Harry?” said Hermione. “I mean, I’m not saying it’s what I’ll do, but – if he needs friends then can we be equal friends? Can I be a hero too?”

“Ah,” said the old wizard, and smiled. “Only you can decide that, Miss Granger.”

“But you’re not going to help me like you’re helping Harry.”

The old wizard shook his head. “I have helped him little enough, Miss Granger. And if you are asking me for a quest –” The old wizard smiled again, rather wryly. “Miss Granger, you are in your first year of Hogwarts. Do not be too eager to grow up; there will be time enough for that later.”

“I’m twelve. Harry’s eleven.”

“Harry Potter is special,” said the old wizard. “As you know, Miss Granger.” The blue eyes were suddenly piercing beneath the half-moon glasses, and she was reminded of the day of the Dementor when Dumbledore’s voice had said, inside her mind, that he knew about Harry’s dark side.

Hermione put up her hand and touched Professor McGonagall’s hand, which had stayed strong on her shoulder this whole time, and Hermione said, she was surprised that her voice didn’t break, “I’d like to go, now, please.”

"Of course," said Professor McGonagall, and Hermione felt the hand on her shoulder gently turning her around to face the oaken door.

"Have you chosen your path yet, Hermione Granger?" said Albus Dumbledore's voice from behind her, even as the door slowly creaked open to reveal the Enchantment of the Endless Stair.

She nodded.

"And?"

"I'll," she said, her voice stuck, "I'll, I'll –"

She swallowed.

"I'll do – what's right –"

She didn't say anything else, she couldn't, and then the Endless Stair began revolving around her once again.

Neither she nor Professor McGonagall spoke on the way down.

When the Flowing Stone gargoyles stepped out of their way, and the two of them stepped out into the corridors of Hogwarts, Professor McGonagall finally spoke, and she said in a whisper, "I'm so terribly sorry, Miss Granger. I did not think the Headmaster would say such things to you. I think he truly has forgotten what it is like to be a child."

Hermione glanced back up to her and saw that Professor McGonagall looked like she was about to burst into tears... only not really, but there was a tightness in her face that was like that.

"If I want to be a hero too," said Hermione, "if I've decided to be a hero too, is there anything you can do to help?"

Professor McGonagall rapidly shook her head, and said, "Miss Granger, I'm not sure the Headmaster is wrong about that. You are twelve."

"Okay," said Hermione.

They walked forward a bit.

"Excuse me," said Hermione, "is it okay if I walk back to the Ravenclaw tower by myself? I'm sorry, it's not your fault or anything, I just want to be by myself right now."

"Of course, Miss Granger," said Professor McGonagall, her voice sounding a little hoarse, and Hermione heard her footsteps stop, and then turn around behind her.

Hermione Granger walked away.

She climbed a flight of stairs, and then another, wondering if there was anyone else in Hogwarts who would give her a chance to be a hero. Professor Flitwick would say the same thing as Professor McGonagall, and even if he

didn't, he probably couldn't help, Hermione didn't know who could help. Well, Professor Quirrell would come up with something clever if she used up enough Quirrell points, but she had a feeling that asking him would be a bad idea – that the Defense Professor couldn't help anyone become the sort of hero that was worth becoming, and that he wouldn't even understand the difference.

She had almost gotten to the Ravenclaw tower when she saw the flash of gold.

SELF ACTUALIZATION, PART IV

IT was out of the corner of her eye that Hermione Granger saw it, a reflection on the polished metal of a statue at the junction of two corridors, a flash of gold, a flash of red, something like an image of fire; just for a moment she saw it, and then it was gone.

She paused, puzzled, and she almost walked away, but there had been something familiar about that brief glow –

Hermione walked forward to where the statue had stood, looked at the corridor from which she thought the fiery reflection might have come.

Faintly, as though from a faraway place, she heard the cry, the call.

Hermione started to run.

She ran for a while; whenever she got to a junction she would pause, catch as much breath as she could, and then she would see a flash of fire reflected from one direction or another, or hear that distant call. If it hadn't been for her army training she would've fallen over in exhaustion, running like that.

She never saw the phoenix.

And then she came to a four-way branch and there was nothing, no sign, she waited for long seconds and she heard no cry and saw no fire, and she was only just starting to wonder with a sick sad feeling if she'd imagined the whole thing, when she heard a person cry out.

When her rapidly racing feet turned the corner her mind took in the whole scene at a glance, three huge boys in green-trimmed robes already turning to look at her, and one shorter and smaller boy in yellow, who was dangling in the air from one foot held up high by an invisible hand.

The Sunshine General didn't even think about it, people who stopped to think didn't spring very good ambushes.

Her wand was in her hand, her fingers did the twist and her lips said "Somnium!" and the largest bully fell over, the Hufflepuff boy dropped out of the air with a thump and the other two bullies were trying to aim their wands at her and she said "Somnium!" again and another huge boy keeled

over – the one who'd been aiming his wand faster, that was who she'd fired at.

Unfortunately casting two Sleep Hexes in a row like that was hard even for her, and she couldn't get off a third before –

The last bully shouted "Protego!" and was surrounded by a shimmering blue glow.

Twenty-four hours ago, Hermione would have panicked at that, a real Shielding Charm would let the bully-boy cast spells on her even while he was protected.

Now she –

"Stupefy!" shouted the bully-boy.

The crimson bolt blasted toward her with a terrible brilliance, blazing far brighter than any hex that had sprung from Harry's wand.

Hermione swayed slightly to the left, and the bolt missed, because the bully's aim hadn't been nearly as good as Harry's; and the thought came to her that maybe bullies and Professor Quirrell's armies didn't mix.

"Stupefy!" shouted the bully-boy again. "Expelliarmus! Stupefy!"

Anyway, now she'd just spent a whole hour thinking of all the other spells she could've cast on Harry and Neville –

"Jellyfy!" yelled the bully-boy, a wide-beam jinx with no visible bolt to dodge, and her knees suddenly felt almost too weak to support her. And then, with an angry roar producing an even brighter blaze of crimson, "Stupefy!"

She dodged that one by deliberately falling, and by then she'd recovered enough for her next spell, which was –

"Glisseo," said Hermione, directing her remark to the floor.

"Oof," said the bully-boy as his feet went out from under him and he actually dropped his wand.

The Protego winked out.

"Somnium," said Hermione.

She was still breathing in gasps as she crawled over to where the Hufflepuff boy was sitting up, and groaning and rubbing his skull where he'd been dropped head-first into the floor; it was a good thing he hadn't been a Muggle, Hermione realized, or he might have snapped his neck. She hadn't actually thought of that.

"Uh," said the boy, his hair was of a color that would've been called 'brunette' if he was a girl, his eyes an undistinguished brown that somehow

seemed just right for Hufflepuff, there weren't any tears on his face but he looked sort of pale. She pegged him at about fourth year, or third.

Then the brown eyes widened as he focused on her. "General Sunshine?"

"Yeah," she said. "That's (gasp) me." If the Hufflepuff boy said anything about her being Harry Potter's love interest, she decided, he was going to die.

"Wow," said the Hufflepuff boy. "That was – you just – I mean I saw you on the screens before Christmas but – wow! I can't believe you just did that!"

There was a pause.

I can't believe I just did that, thought Hermione Granger, who was feeling a little faint all of a sudden, it must have been all that running. "Excuse (gasp) me," she said, "can you (gasp) Unjellyfy my legs?"

The boy nodded, pushed himself to his feet, and reached inside his robes for his wand; but Hermione had to correct his gesture before the counter-Jinx worked right.

"I'm Michael Hopkins," said the boy once Hermione had rolled back to her own feet. He stuck out his hand. "Or just Mike inside Hufflepuff, there aren't any other Mikes in all of Hufflepuff this year, would you believe it?"

They shook hands, and Mike said, "Anyway, thank you."

Hermione wasn't prepared for the rush of euphoria that hit her then, saving someone like that literally felt better than anything she'd ever felt in her whole life.

She turned to look at the bullies.

They were very big and they looked, she thought, around fifteen years old, and she was suddenly realizing just how large a difference had sprung up between Hogwarts students who'd signed up for all of Professor Quirrell's extra-curricular activities, and students who'd had years of being taught by the worst Professors ever to go Professing. Being able to hit things that you aimed at, for example; or being able to think well enough in the middle of a fight to realize that you ought to Innervate your fallen allies. And other things Professor Quirrell had said, like that in the real world almost any fight would be settled by a surprise attack, suddenly made a lot more sense to her.

Still trying to catch her breath, she looked back at Mike.

"Would you (gasp) believe," said Hermione Granger, "that five minutes ago I was (gasp) having trouble figuring out how to become a (gasp) hero?"

Had she really thought she needed permission from someone, or that heroes sat around waiting for someone else to give them quests? It was very simple actually, you just went where the evil was, that was all it ever took to

be a hero. She should've remembered, she shouldn't have needed a phoenix to tell her, that bad things sometimes happened right here in Hogwarts.

Then Hermione glanced nervously back at where the three older boys were lying unconscious as the realization hit that they'd seen her, they might know who she was, they might sneak up on her and take her by surprise and – and they could really hurt her –

Hermione stopped.

She remembered that Harry Potter had put himself in the middle of five Slytherin bullies on the first day of class when he hadn't even known how to use his wand.

She remembered the Headmaster saying that you grew up by being put in grownup situations, and that most people lived their lives inside a constraining circle of fear.

And she remembered Professor McGonagall's voice saying, 'You are twelve.'

Hermione took a deep breath, once, twice, and three times.

She asked Mike if he needed to go to Madam Pomfrey's office, which he didn't; and got him to tell her the names of the Slytherin boys, just in case.

And then Hermione Granger strolled away from the heap of unconscious bullies, making sure to put a smile on her face as she walked.

She knew that she was probably going to get hurt sooner or later. But if you were too scared of getting hurt to do what was right, then you couldn't be a hero, it was as simple as that; and if you'd put the Sorting Hat on her head at that moment it wouldn't have waited even one second before calling out 'GRYFFINDOR!'



She was still thinking about it when she came down to dinner; the euphoria of saving someone still hadn't worn off, and she was beginning to worry that it had broken something in her brain.

As she approached the Ravenclaw table a sudden epidemic of whispers broke out, and Hermione wondered if the Hufflepuff boy had said anything yet before she realized that the whispers probably weren't about that.

She sat down across from Harry Potter who looked extremely nervous, probably because she was still smiling.

“Uh –” said Harry, as she served herself freshly toasted bread, butter, cinnamon, no fruits or vegetables whatsoever, and three helpings of chocolate brownies. “Uh –”

She let him go on like that until she’d finished pouring herself a glass of grapefruit juice, and then she said, “I’ve got a question for you, Mr. Potter. How do you think people fail to become themselves?”

“What?” said Harry.

She looked at him. “Pretend there isn’t all this stuff going on,” she said, “and just say whatever you’d have said yesterday.”

“Um...” Harry said, looking very confused and worried. “I think we already are ourselves... it’s not like I’m an imperfect copy of someone else. But I guess if I try to run with the sense of the question, then I’d say that people don’t become themselves because we absorb all this crazy stuff from the environment and then regurgitate it. I mean, how many people playing Quidditch would be playing a game like that if they’d invented the game themselves? Or back in Muggle Britain, how many people who think of themselves as Labour or Conservative or Liberal Democrat would invent that exact bundle of political beliefs if they had to come up with everything themselves?”

Hermione considered this. She’d been wondering if Harry would say something Slytherin or maybe even Gryffindor, but this didn’t seem to fit into the Headmaster’s list; and it occurred to Hermione that there might be a lot more viewpoints on the subject than just four.

“Okay,” said Hermione, “different question. What makes someone a hero?”

“A hero?” said Harry.

“Yeah,” said Hermione.

“Ah...” Harry said. His fork and knife nervously sawed at a piece of steak, cutting it into tinier and tinier pieces. “I think a lot of people can do things when the world channels them into it... like people are expecting you to do it, or it only uses skills you already know, or there’s an authority watching to catch your mistakes and make sure you do your part. But problems like that are probably already being solved, you know, and then there’s no need for heroes. So I think the people we call ‘heroes’ are rare because they’ve got to make everything up as they go along, and most people aren’t comfortable with that. Why do you ask?” Harry’s fork stabbed three pieces of thoroughly shredded steak and lifted them up to his mouth.

“Oh, I just stunned three older Slytherin bullies and rescued a Hufflepuff,” said Hermione. “I’m going to be a hero.”

When Harry had finished choking on his food (some of the other Ravensclaws in hearing distance were still coughing) he said, “What?”

Hermione told the story, it began rippling out in further whispers even as she spoke. (Though she left out the part about the phoenix, because that seemed like a private thing between the two of them. Hermione had felt surprised, thinking about it afterward, that a phoenix would appear for someone who wanted to be a hero; it seemed a bit selfish when she thought about it that way; but maybe it didn’t matter to phoenixes so long as they saw that you were willing to help people.)

When she was done talking, Harry stared at her across the table and didn’t say a word.

“I’m sorry for how I acted earlier,” Hermione said. She sipped from her glass of grapefruit juice. “I should’ve remembered that if I’m still beating the pants off you in Charms class then it’s okay for you to do better in Defense.”

“Please don’t take this the wrong way,” said Harry. He looked too-adult now, and grim. “But are you sure this is who you are, and not, to put it bluntly, me?”

“I’m quite certain,” said Hermione. “Why, my name practically spells out ‘heroine’ except for the extra ‘m’, I never noticed that until today.”

“Being a hero isn’t all fun and games,” said Harry. “Not real heroing, the sort grownups have to do, it isn’t like this, it isn’t going to be this easy.”

“I know,” said Hermione.

“It’s hard and it’s painful and you’ve got to make decisions where there isn’t any good answer –”

“Yes, Harry, I read those books too.”

“No,” said Harry, “you don’t understand, even if the books warn you there’s no way you can understand until –”

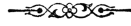
“That doesn’t stop you,” said Hermione. “It doesn’t stop you even a little. I bet you never even considered not being a hero because of that. So why d’you think it’ll stop me?”

There was a pause.

A sudden huge smile lit Harry’s face, a smile that was as bright and as boyish as the frown had been grim and adult, and everything was all right again between them.

"This is going to go horribly mind-bogglingly wrong somehow," said Harry, still smiling hugely. "You know that, right?"

"Oh, I know," said Hermione. She ate another bite of toast. "That reminds me, Dumbledore refused to be my mysterious old wizard, is there someplace I can write to get another one?"



Aftermath:

"...and Professor Flitwick says her determination seems unshakeable," Minerva said tightly, staring at the silver-bearded old wizard who was responsible for this. Albus Dumbledore was just sitting silently and listening to her with a distant sad look in his eyes. "Miss Granger didn't even blink when Professor Flitwick threatened to have her transferred to Gryffindor, just said that if she left she would take all the books with her. Hermione Granger has decided she's going to be a hero and she's not taking no for an answer. I doubt you could have pushed her into this any harder if you had tried to –"

It took all of five full seconds for Minerva's brain to process the realization.

"ALBUS!" she shrieked.

"My dear," said the old wizard, "after you have dealt with your thirtieth hero or so, you will realize that they react quite predictably to certain things; such as being told that they are too young, or that they are not destined to be heroes, or that being a hero is unpleasant; and if you truly wish to be sure you should tell them all three. Although," with a brief sigh, "it does not do to be too blatant, or your Deputy Headmistress might catch you."

"Albus," Minerva said, her voice even tighter, "if she is hurt, I swear this time I'll –"

"She would have come to that same place in due time," Albus said, the distant sad look still in his eyes. "If someone is meant to become a hero then they will not listen to our warnings, Minerva, no matter how hard we try. And given that, it is better for Harry if Miss Granger does not fall too far behind him." Albus produced, as though from nowhere, a tin which flipped open to reveal small yellow lumps, she'd never been able to figure out where he kept it and she'd never been able to detect the magic involved. "Lemon drop?"

"She is a twelve-year-old girl, Albus!"



Afteraftermath:

Within the windows, barely visible in the evening gloom, fishes swam in the black waters; illuminated by the bright shine of the Slytherin common room as they came closer, fading into darkness as they swam away.

Daphne Greengrass was sitting in a comfortable black leather couch, her head collapsed into her hands, glowing golden-yellowish as bright sparks of white light winked in and out of existence around her.

She'd been ready to be teased about liking Neville Longbottom. She'd been expecting to hear a lot of snide remarks about Hufflepuffs. She'd thought of whole reams of snappy comebacks for it while she was on the way back to the Slytherin dungeons.

She'd been looking forward to being teased about liking Neville. Being teased about that sort of thing meant you'd grown up into a real girl.

As it turned out, nobody had worked out that her challenging Neville to a Most Ancient Duel meant that she liked him. She'd thought it would be obvious but no, nobody else had even thought of that apparently.

It was always the hex you didn't see that hit you.

She should've just called herself Daphne of Sunshine, like Neville of Chaos. Or Sunny Daphne like Sunny Ron. Or anything except Greengrass of Sunshine.

Greengrass of Sunshine.

It had gone from there to Greengrass of Sunshine and Blue Skies.

Then someone had added Snow-Topped Mountains and Frolicking Woodland Creatures.

Currently she was being referred to as the Sparkly Unicorn Princess of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Sparklypoo.

And some cursed sixth-year girl had hit her with a Sparkling Jinx, she hadn't even known there was such a thing as a Sparkling Jinx, and Finite Incantatem hadn't worked, and she'd asked older girls who she'd thought were her friends (she had apparently been wrong about this) and then she'd threatened the caster with grievous political mayhem wreaked by her father and nonetheless Daphne Greengrass was still sitting in the Slytherin common room with her head in her hands, sparkling brightly and wondering how she'd ended up as the only sane person in Hogwarts.

It was after dinnertime and they were still at it and if they didn't stop by tomorrow morning she was going to transfer to Durmstrang and become the next Dark Lady.

"Hey, everyone!" said the Carrow twins dramatically, waving an issue of the Daily Prophet. "Did you hear the news? The Wizengamot just ruled that 'let's see what you got' constitutes a lawful challenge to be fought until the challenger lies down and has a nap!"

"How dare you insult the honor of the Sparkly Unicorn Princess!" shouted Tracey. "Let's see what you got!" Then Tracey lay down flat on her sofa and started snoring loudly.

Daphne's sparkling head sank further into her glowing hands. "After my family takes over I'm going to have you all put under anti-Apparition jinxes and Flooed into the sea," she said to no one in particular. "You're all okay with that, right?"

Thunk-thunk, thunk-thunk-thunk, thunk.

Daphne looked up, surprised; that was a Sunshine code-signal –

"I hight someone knocking!" bellowed Mr. Goyle. "Knocking of the door!"

"Let's see what you've got, door!" shouted an older boy near the door, and yanked the door open.

There was a moment of complete surprise.

"I've come to have a word with Miss Greengrass," said the Sunshine General, sounding like she was trying to sound confident. "Could someone please –"

From the look on Hermione's face she had just noticed Daphne sparkling.

And that was when Millicent Bulstrode raced up from the lower dorms and shouted, "Hey, everyone, guess what, now Granger went and beat up Derrick and what's left of his crew, and his father owled him and said that if he didn't –"

Millicent caught sight of Hermione standing in the doorway.

There was a very loud silence.

"Uh," said Daphne. What? said her brain. "Uh, what're you doing here, General?"

"Well," said Hermione Granger with a strange smile on her face, "I've decided it's not fair if mysterious old wizards give some people a chance to be heroes and not others, and also I've read history books and there aren't nearly enough girl heroes in them. So I thought I'd just drop by and see if you wanted to be a hero and why are you glowing like that?"

There was another silence.

“This,” said Daphne, “was probably not the best time to ask me that question –”

“I’ll take it!” shouted Tracey Davis, leaping off her sofa.



And thus was born the Society for the Promotion of Heroic Equality for Witches.

SELF ACTUALIZATION, PART V

EVEN if you had been the Deputy Headmistress for three decades, and a Transfiguration Professor before that, it was rare that you saw Albus Dumbledore caught completely flatfooted.

“...Susan Bones, Lavender Brown, and Daphne Greengrass,” Minerva finished. “I should also note, Albus, that Miss Granger’s account of your seemingly unsupportive attitude – I believe her phrase was ‘he said I should be happy to be just a sidekick’ – has generated a good deal of interest among the older girls. Several of whom came to me to ask if Miss Granger’s accusations were true, since Miss Granger had said that I was there.”

The old wizard leaned back in his huge chair, still gazing at her, his eyes looking rather abstracted beneath the half-moon glasses.

“It placed me in something of a dilemma, Albus,” said Professor McGonagall. Her face stayed quite neutral, she made sure of that. “I now know that you did not truly mean to discourage the girl. Quite the opposite, in fact. But you and Severus have often told me that to keep a secret I must give no sign that differs from the reaction of someone truly ignorant. Thus I had no choice but to confirm that Miss Granger’s account was accurate, and feign the appropriate degree of worry, with a slight overtone of offense. After all, had I not known you were deliberately manipulating Miss Granger, I might have been rather put out.”

“I... see,” the old wizard said slowly. His hands toyed absently with his silver beard, small quick gestures.

“Thankfully,” Professor McGonagall continued, “so far Professors Sinistra and Vector are the only two faculty members to don Miss Granger’s buttons.”

“Buttons?” repeated the old wizard.

Minerva drew forth a small silver disc bearing the initials S.P.H.E.W., laid it on Albus’s desk, and gave it a brief tap with her finger.

And the voices of Hermione Granger, Padma Patil, Parvati Patil, Lavender Brown, Susan Bones, Hannah Abbott, Daphne Greengrass, and Tracey Davis cried out in unison, “We won’t settle for second best, it’s time to give a witch a quest!”

“Miss Granger is selling them for two Sickles, and tells me that she has so far sold fifty of them. I believe that Nymphadora Tonks, in seventh-year Hufflepuff, is enchanting them for her. To conclude my report,” Professor McGonagall said briskly, “our eight newly minted heroines have asked permission to conduct a protest outside the entrance to your office.”

“I hope,” Albus said, frowning, “you explained to them that –”

“I explained to them that Wednesday at 7pm would be fine,” said Minerva. She took back the button from the Headmaster’s desk, favored Albus with a honeyed smile, and turned to the door.

“Minerva?” said the old wizard from behind her. “Minerva!”

The oaken door shut solidly behind her.



There wasn’t a lot of room between the brief stone walls that demarcated the vestibule to the Headmaster’s office, so although a lot of people had wanted to watch the protest, not many had been allowed to come. Just Professor Sinistra and Professor Vector, who were wearing the buttons, and the prefects Penelope Clearwater and Rose Brown and Jacqueline Preece, who were wearing the buttons. Behind them, Professor McGonagall and Professor Sprout and Professor Flitwick, who weren’t wearing the buttons, scrutinizing the whole affair. Harry Potter and the Head Boy of Hogwarts were there, and the boy prefects Percy Weasley and Oliver Beatson, all wearing the buttons to show Solidarity. And of course the eight founding members of S.P.H.E.W., forming a picket line next to the gargoyles with their signs. Hermione’s own sign, attached to a solid wooden handle which seemed to weigh heavier and heavier in her hands as the seconds passed, said NOBODY’S SIDEKICK.

And Professor Quirrell, who was leaning with his back against the far stone wall and watching with unreadable eyes. The Defense Professor had gotten one of her buttons, though she’d never sold one to him; and he wasn’t wearing it, but idly tossing it with one hand.

This whole idea had seemed like a much better idea four days ago, when the fires of her indignation had been burning fresh and hot, and she’d been facing the prospect of doing it all four days later instead of right now.

But she had to carry on, because that was what heroes did, they carried on, and also because it had seemed infinitely too awful to tell everyone she was calling it off. Hermione wondered how much heroism had gone on for reasons like that. Most books didn’t say “And then they refused to give up,

no matter how sensible it would have been, because that would've been too embarrassing"; but a great deal of history made a lot more sense that way.

At 7:15pm, Professor McGonagall had told her, Headmaster Dumbledore would come down and talk to them for a couple of minutes. Professor McGonagall had said not to be frightened – the Headmaster was a good person deep down, and they'd properly gotten the school's authorization for the protest.

But Hermione was very very aware that even if she was doing it with signed permission, she was still Defying Authority.

After she'd decided to be a hero, Hermione had done the obvious thing, and gone to the Hogwarts library and taken out books on how to be a hero. Then she'd returned those books back to their shelves, because it'd been patently obvious that none of the authors had been actual heroes themselves. Instead she'd just read five times over, until she'd memorized every word, the thirty inches by Godric Gryffindor that was all his autobiography and his life's advice. (Or the English translation, anyway; she couldn't read Latin yet.) Godric Gryffindor's autobiography had been a lot more compressed than the books Hermione was used to reading, he used one sentence to say things that should've taken thirty inches just by themselves, and then there was another sentence after that...

But it was clear from what she'd read that, while Defying Authority wasn't the point of being a hero, you couldn't be a hero if you were too scared to do it. And Hermione Granger knew by now how others saw her, and she knew what other people thought she couldn't do.

Hermione hefted her picket sign a little higher and concentrated on breathing slowly and rhythmically instead of hyperventilating until she fell over.

"Really?" said Miss Preece in a tone of undisguised fascination. "They couldn't vote?"

"Indeed," said Professor Sinistra. (The Astronomy Professor's hair was still dark, and her dark face only slightly lined; Hermione would have guessed her age at around seventy, except –) "I quite remember my mother's rejoicing when they announced the Qualification of Women Act, although she did not actually qualify." (Which meant that Professor Sinistra had been around her Muggle family in 1918.) "And that wasn't the worst of it. Why, just a few centuries earlier –"

Thirty seconds later all the non-Muggleborns, male and female both,

were staring at Professor Sinistra with utterly shocked expressions. Hannah had dropped her sign.

“And that wasn’t the worst of it either, not by half,” finished Professor Sinistra. “But you see where this sort of thing could potentially lead.”

“Merlin preserve us,” said Penelope Clearwater in a strangled voice. “You mean that’s how men would treat us if we didn’t have wands to defend ourselves?”

“Hey!” said one of the boy prefects. “That’s not –”

There was a short, sardonic laugh from the direction of Professor Quirrell. When Hermione turned her head to look she saw that the Defense Professor was still idly toying with the button, not bothering to glance up at the rest of them, as he said, “Such is human nature, Miss Clearwater. Rest assured that you would be no kinder, if witches had wands and men lacked them.”

“I hardly think so!” snapped Professor Sinistra.

A cold chuckle. “I suspect it happens more often than any dare suggest, in the proudest pureblood families. Some lonely witch spies a handsome Muggle; and thinks how very easy it would be, to slip the man a love potion, and by him be adored alone and utterly. And since she knows he can offer her no resistance, why, it is only natural for her to take from him whatever she pleases –”

“Professor Quirrell!” said Professor McGonagall sharply.

“I’m sorry,” Professor Quirrell said mildly, his eyes still looking down on the button in his hand, “are we all still pretending it doesn’t happen? My apologies, then.”

Professor Sinistra snapped, “And I suppose that wizards don’t –”

“There are children present, Professors!” Again Professor McGonagall.

“Some do,” Professor Quirrell said equably, as though discussing the weather. “Although personally, I don’t.”

There was a bit of silence, for a time. Hermione put up her sign again – it had slipped down to her shoulder while she was listening. She’d never thought of that, not even a little, and now she was trying not to think of it, and her stomach was feeling a bit queasy. She looked in Harry Potter’s direction, not quite knowing why she did; and she saw that Harry’s face was perfectly still. A chill ran down her spine before she looked away, not quite fast enough to miss the small nod that Harry gave her, as though they were agreeing on something.

"To be fair," Professor Sinistra said after a while, "since I received my Hogwarts letter I can't recall encountering any prejudice on account of being a woman, or colored. No, now it is all for being a Muggleborn. I believe Miss Granger said that it was just with heroes that she found a problem, so far?"

It took Hermione a moment to recognize that she'd been asked the question, and then she said "Yes," in a tone that squeaked a little. This whole thing had blown up a bit larger than she'd imagined when she'd started it.

"What exactly did you check, Miss Granger?" said Professor Vector. She looked older than Professor Sinistra, her hair starting to gray a little; Hermione hadn't ever come close to Professor Vector in person until the Arithmancy Professor had asked her for a button.

"Um," Hermione said, her voice a little high, "I checked the history books and there's been as many woman Ministers of Magic as men. Then I looked at Supreme Mugwumps and there were a few more wizards than witches but not many. But if you look at people like famous Dark Wizard hunters, or people who've stopped invasions of Dark creatures, or people who've overthrown Dark Lords –"

"And the Dark Wizards themselves, of course," said Professor Quirrell. Now the Defense Professor had looked up. "You may add that to your list, Miss Granger. Among all the suspected Death Eaters we know of only two sorceresses, Bellatrix Black and Alecto Carrow. And I daresay that most wizards would be hard-pressed to name a single Dark Lady besides Baba Yaga."

Hermione just stared at him.

He couldn't possibly be –

"Professor Quirrell," said Professor Vector, "what exactly are you implying?"

The Defense Professor raised the button so that the golden-lettered S.P.H.E.W. faced them, and said, "Heroes," then turned the button to show its silver backside and said, "Dark Wizards. They are similar career paths followed by similar people, and one can hardly ask why young witches are turning away from one course without considering its reflection."

"Oh, now I see!" said Tracey Davis, speaking up so suddenly that Hermione gave a small startle. "You're joining our protest because you're worried that not enough girls are becoming Dark Witches!" Then Tracey giggled, which Hermione couldn't have managed at this point if you paid her a million pounds sterling.

There was a half-smile on Professor Quirrell's face as he replied, "Not really, Miss Davis. In truth I do not care about that sort of thing in the slightest. But it is futile to count the witches among Ministers of Magic and other such ordinary folk leading ordinary existences, when Grindelwald and Dumbledore and He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named were all men." The Defense Professor's fingers idly spun the button, turning it over and over. "Then again, only a very few folk ever do anything interesting with their lives. What does it matter to you if they are mostly witches or mostly wizards, so long as you are not among them? And I suspect you will not be among them, Miss Davis; for although you are ambitious, you have no ambition."

"That's not true!" said Tracey indignantly. "And what's it mean?"

Professor Quirrell straightened from where he had been leaning against the wall. "You were Sorted into Slytherin, Miss Davis, and I expect that you will grasp at any opportunity for advancement which falls into your hands. But there is no great ambition that you are driven to accomplish, and you will not make your opportunities. At best you will grasp your way upward into Minister of Magic, or some other high position of unimportance, never breaking the bounds of your existence."

Then Professor Quirrell's gaze shifted away from Tracey, he was looking at her, the pale blue eyes staring at her with an awful intensity – "Tell me, Miss Granger. Do you have an ambition?"

"Professor –" squeaked the high stern voice of Professor Flitwick, and then her Head of House's voice cut off, and from the side of her vision Hermione saw that Harry had laid his hand on Professor Flitwick's shoulder and was shaking his head, face looking very adult.

Hermione felt like a deer caught in headlights.

"What drove you to break your bounds, Miss Granger?" said the Defense Professor, still gazing directly at her. "Why is getting good marks in class no longer enough? Is it true greatness that you seek? Does some aspect of the world dissatisfy you, that you must remake according to your will? Or is this all merely a child's game to you? I will be quite disappointed if this is only about rivaling Harry Potter."

"I –" said Hermione, her voice so high-pitched it made a sort of peeping sound, but then she couldn't think of what else to say.

"You may take a moment to think, if you like," said Professor Quirrell. "Pretend it is a homework essay, six inches due Thursday. I hear you are quite eloquent in them."

Everyone was looking at her.

"I –" said Hermione. "I don't agree with one single thing you just said, anywhere."

"Well spoken," came Professor McGonagall's crisp voice.

Professor Quirrell's gaze did not waver. "That is not six inches, Miss Granger. Something drives you to defy the Headmaster's verdict and gather followers about yourself. Perhaps it is something you prefer not to speak aloud?"

Hermione knew the correct answer wouldn't impress Professor Quirrell, but it was the correct answer, so she said it. "I don't think you need ambition to be a hero," Hermione said. Her voice wavered but it didn't crack. "I think you just have to do what's right. And they're not my followers, we're friends."

Professor Quirrell leaned back against the wall again. The half-smile had faded from his face. "Most folk tell themselves they are doing right, Miss Granger. They do not thereby rise above the ordinary."

Hermione took a couple of deep breaths, trying to be brave. "It's not about being not ordinary," she said as stoutly as she could. "But I think if someone just tries to do what's right, over and over again, and they're not too lazy to do all the work it takes, and they think about what they're doing, and they're brave enough to do it even when they're scared –" Hermione paused for an instant, her eyes darting to Tracey and Daphne, "– and they cleverly plan how to do it – and they don't just do what other people do – then I think someone like that would already get into enough trouble."

Some of the girls and boys chuckled, as did Professor McGonagall, who looked wry and proud at the same time.

"You may be right about that," said the Defense Professor, his eyes half-lidded. He tossed Hermione the button, and she caught it without thinking. "My donation to your cause, Miss Granger. I understand that they are worth two Sickles."

The Defense Professor turned and walked away without another word.

"I thought I was going to faint!" gasped Hannah after his footsteps had faded, and she heard some of the other girls letting out their breath or putting down their signs for a moment.

"I do too have an ambition!" said Tracey, who seemed to be almost on the verge of tears. "I'm – I'm – I'll figure out what it is by tomorrow, but I have one, I'm sure!"

"If you really can't think of anything," Daphne said, giving Tracey a comforting pat on the shoulder, "just go with the oldie but goodie and try to take over the world."

"Hey!" said Susan sharply. "You're supposed to be heroes now! That means you have to be good!"

"No, it's all right," said Lavender, "I'm pretty sure General Chaos wants to take over the world and he's sort of a good guy."

More conversation was going on behind the picket line. "My goodness," said Penelope Clearwater. "I think that's the most overtly evil Defense Professor we've ever had."

Professor McGonagall coughed warningly, and the Head Boy said, "You weren't around for Professor Barney," which made several people twitch.

"Professor Quirrell just talks like that," said Harry Potter, though he sounded less certain than before. "I mean, think about it, he doesn't do anything like what Professor Snape does –"

"Mr. Potter," squeaked Professor Flitwick, voice polite and face stern, "why did you ask me to stay silent?"

"Professor Quirrell was testing Hermione to see if he wanted to be her mysterious old wizard," Harry said. "Which totally would not have worked out in any way, shape, or form, but she had to answer for herself."

Hermione blinked.

Then Hermione blinked again, as she realized that it was Professor Quirrell who was Harry Potter's mysterious old wizard, and not Dumbledore at all, and that really wasn't a good sign –

A rumbling noise filled the small stone vestibule, and Hermione, her nerves already on edge, spun rapidly around, almost dropping her protest sign as her other hand darted toward her wand.

The gargoyles were stepping aside, the Flowing Stone rumbling like rock as it moved like flesh. The huge ugly figures waited only briefly, dead gray eyes staring out in silent vigil. Then the great gargoyles folded their wings back into place and stepped back into their former positions, the Flowing Stone not changing its outward appearance at all as it returned from flexibility to motionlessness, and the brief gap in the stone of Hogwarts was solid once more.

And before them all, wearing robes of bright purple that probably only looked hideous if you were Muggleborn, stood the towering form of Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, the Headmaster of Hogwarts, the Chief

Warlock of the Wizengamot, the Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards, the vanquisher of the Dark Lord Grindelwald and protector of Britain, the rediscoverer of the fabled Twelve Uses of Dragon's Blood, the most powerful wizard alive; and he was looking at her, Hermione Jean Granger, General of the recently expanded Sunshine Regiment, who was getting the best grades in the first year of Hogwarts classes, and who had declared herself a heroine.

Even her name was shorter than his.

The Headmaster smiled benevolently at her, his wrinkle-lined eyes twinkling cheerfully beneath their half-circles of glass, and said, "Hello, Miss Granger."

The odd thing was that it wasn't nearly as scary as talking to Professor Quirrell. "Hello, Headmaster Dumbledore," Hermione said with only a slight quaver in her voice.

"Miss Granger," said Dumbledore, now looking more serious, "I think you and I may have had a bit of a misunderstanding. I did not mean to imply that you could not, or should not be a hero. I certainly did not mean to imply that witches in general should not be heroes. Only that you were... a bit young, to be thinking of such things."

Hermione, unable to help herself, glanced at Professor McGonagall and saw that Professor McGonagall was giving her an encouraging smile – or she was giving the two of them some kind of smile, anyway – so Hermione looked back at the Headmaster and said, the small quaver in her voice a little larger now, "Since you became Headmaster forty years ago, there've been eleven students to graduate Hogwarts who became heroes, I mean people like Lupe Cazaril and so on, and ten of those were boys. Cimorene Linderwall was the only witch."

"Hm," said the Headmaster. There was a thoughtful expression on his face; he at least seemed to be thinking about it. "Miss Granger, I have never been one for tallying such numbers. Often it is too much easier to count than to understand. Many good people have come out of Hogwarts, witches and wizards both; those famed as heroes are only one kind of good person, and perhaps not the highest. You did not include Alice Longbottom or Lily Potter in your reckoning... But leave that aside. Tell me, Miss Granger, did you tally how many heroes came out of Hogwarts in the forty years before me? For in that time I can recall only three now called heroes; and among those three, no witches at all."

"I'm not trying to say it's just you!" Hermione said. "Only I think maybe a lot of people, like the Headmasters before you too, maybe even your whole society and everything, might be discouraging girls."

The old wizard sighed. His half-glasses eyes looked only at her, as though they were the only two people present. "Miss Granger, it might be possible to discourage witches from becoming Charms Mistresses, or Quidditch players, or even Aurors. But not heroes. If someone is meant to be a hero then a hero they will be. They will walk through fire and swim through ice. Dementors will not stop them, nor the deaths of friends, and not discouragement either."

"Well," Hermione said, and paused, struggling with the words. "Well, I mean... what if that's not actually true? I mean, to me it seems that if you want more witches to be heroes, you ought to teach them heroing."

"Many boys and girls are heroes in their dreams," Dumbledore said quietly. He did not look at any of the other girls, only at her. "Fewer in the waking world. Many have stood their ground and faced the darkness when it comes for them. Fewer come for the darkness and force it to face them. It is a hard life, sometimes lonely, often short. I have told none to refuse that calling, but neither would I wish to increase their number."

Hermione hesitated; there was something in the lined face that stopped her, like a hint to all the emotion that wasn't being displayed, years and years of it...

Maybe if there were more heroes, their lives wouldn't be so lonely, or so short.

She couldn't bring herself to say that, though, not to him.

"But the point is moot," said the old wizard. He smiled, a bit ruefully she thought. "Miss Granger, you cannot teach heroism like you would teach Charms. You cannot assign twelve inches on how to carry on when all hope seems lost. You cannot rehearse students on when to stand up and tell the Headmaster he has done wrong. Heroes are born, not taught. And for whatever reason, more of them are born boys than girls." The Headmaster shrugged, as if to say that he was helpless to do anything about that.

"Um," Hermione said. She couldn't help it, she glanced behind her.

Professor Sinistra was looking a bit indignant. And it wasn't true that everyone was staring at her like she'd just been silly, the way she'd started to imagine while she was listening to Dumbledore.

Hermione turned back to face Dumbledore again, took a deep breath, and said, "Well, maybe people who are going to be heroes, will be heroes no

matter what. But I don't see how anyone could really know that, aside from just saying it afterward. And when I told you that I wanted to be a hero, you weren't very encouraging."

"Mr. Potter," the Headmaster said mildly. His eyes didn't leave hers. "Please tell Miss Granger your impression of our own first meeting. Would you say that I was encouraging? Speak the truth."

There was a pause.

"Mr. Potter?" said Professor Vector's voice from behind her, sounding puzzled.

"Um," Harry's voice said from further back, sounding extremely reluctant. "Um... well, actually in my case the Headmaster set fire to a chicken."

"He what?" Hermione blurted, only there were several other people exclaiming things at around the same time so she wasn't sure anyone heard her.

Dumbledore went on gazing at her, looking perfectly serious.

"I didn't know about Fawkes," Harry's voice said rapidly, "so he told me that Fawkes was a phoenix, while he was pointing to a chicken on Fawkes's stand so I'd think that was Fawkes, and then he set the chicken on fire – and also he gave me this big rock and told me it had belonged to my father and I ought to carry it everywhere –"

"But that's crazy!" Susan blurted out.

There was a sudden hush.

The Headmaster slowly turned his head to stare at Susan.

"I –" said Susan. "I mean – I –"

The Headmaster leaned down until he was face-to-face with the young girl.

"I didn't –" said Susan.

Dumbledore put a finger to his lips and twiddled them, making a bweeble-bweeble sound.

The Headmaster straightened up again and said, "Well, my good heroines, it has been pleasant speaking to you, but alas, much else remains to do this day. Still, rest assured that I am inscrutable at everyone, not just witches."

The gargoyles stepped aside, the Flowing Stone rumbling like rock as it moved like flesh.

The huge ugly figures waited briefly with dead gray eyes staring out in silent vigil, as Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, smiling as benev-

olently as when he'd first emerged from his office, stepped back into the Enchantment of the Endless Stair.

Then the great gargoyles folded their wings back into place and stepped back into their former positions, only one last brief "Bwa-ha-ha!" echoing out before the gap closed.

There was a long silence.

"He really set a chicken on fire?" said Hannah.



The eight of them had continued protesting even after that, but to be honest their heart had gone out of it.

It had been established, after some careful questions from Professor Flitwick, that Harry Potter hadn't smelled the chicken burning. Which meant that it had probably been a pebble or something, Transfigured into a chicken and then enclosed in a Boundary Charm to make sure that no smoke escaped into the air – both Professor Flitwick and Professor McGonagall had been very emphatic about nobody trying that without their supervision.

But still...

But still... what?

Hermione didn't even know but still what.

But still.

After a lot of glances exchanged between girls none of whom had wanted to be first to say it, Hermione had declared the protest over, and the adults and boys had drifted off.

"You don't think we were being unfair to Dumbledore, do you?" said Susan as the heroines walked away to the sound of eight pairs of feet trodding on the stone paving of Hogwarts's corridors. "I mean, if he is crazy at everyone and not just at witches then it's not discrimination, right?"

"I don't want to protest against the Headmaster any more," Hannah said weakly. The Hufflepuff girl seemed a bit unsteady on her feet. "I don't care what Professor McGonagall says about him not holding it against us, it's just too much for my nerves."

Lavender snorted. "I guess you won't be slaying armies of Inferi anytime soon –"

"Stop that!" Hermione said sharply. "Look, all of us have got to learn to be heroines, right? It's okay if someone doesn't know right away."

"The Headmaster doesn't think it can be learned," Padma said. The Ravenclaw girl's face was thoughtful, her steps measured as she strode through the corridor. "The Headmaster doesn't even think that's a good idea."

Daphne was striding with her back straight and her head held bolt upright, looking more like a Proper Young Lady in her Hogwarts robes than Hermione could have done with her best formal dress. "The Headmaster," Daphne said in a precise voice, her shoes making hard, sharp tacking sounds on the stone, "thinks the lot of us are a bunch of silly girls playing games, and that someday Hermione might make a good sidekick but the rest of us are hopeless."

"Is he right?" said Parvati. The Gryffindor girl's face was very serious, making her look much more like her twin than she usually did. "I mean it has to be asked –"

"No!" spat Tracey. The Slytherin girl was stalking through the hallway looking ready to kill someone, like a miniature female Snape. Of all the girls, Tracey was the one who Hermione knew least. Hermione had talked to Lavender once before, but she'd never really seen Tracey except at wandpoint during a battle, until the Slytherin had jumped up from her sofa to volunteer. "We'll show him! We'll show them all!"

"Okay," said Susan, "that was definitely evil –"

"No," said Lavender, "that's a Chaos Legion motto, actually. Only she didn't do the insane laughter."

"That's right," Tracey said, her voice low and grim. "This time I'm not laughing." The girl went on stalking through the corridor, like she had dramatic music accompanying her that only she could hear.

(Hermione was starting to worry about what exactly the impressionable youths of the Chaos Legion were learning from Harry Potter.)

"But – I mean –" Parvati said. She still had a contemplative look on her face. "I mean, you can see why the Headmaster would think we were just silly girls, right? What does protesting outside the Headmaster's office have to do with becoming heroines?"

"Huh," Lavender said, now looking thoughtful herself. "That's true. We should do something heroic. I mean heroinic."

"Um –" said Hannah, which very much expressed Hermione's own feelings on the subject.

"Well," said Parvati, "has everyone already been through Dumbledore's third-floor forbidden corridor? I mean everyone in Gryffindor's been through it by now –"

“Hold on!” Hermione said desperately. “I don’t want you doing anything dangerous!”

There was a pause while everyone looked at Hermione, who was realizing, much too late, why Dumbledore hadn’t wanted anyone else to be a hero.

“I don’t think you can become a heroine if you never do anything dangerous,” Lavender observed reasonably.

“Besides,” said Padma, a considering look on her face. “Everyone knows that nothing really bad ever happens in Hogwarts, right? To students, I mean, not to the Defense Professors. We’ve got all these ancient wards and so on.”

“Um –” Hannah said again.

“Yeah,” said Parvati, “the worst that can happen is that we’ll lose a few dozen House points or something, and there’s two of us from each House so that’ll all come out even.”

“Why, that’s brilliant, Hermione!” said Daphne in a tone of great amazement. “The way you set it up means we can get away with anything! And I didn’t even notice your cunning plan until now!”

“UM –” said Hermione, Hannah, and Susan.

“Right!” said Parvati. “So now it’s time for us to become real heroines. We’ll come for the darkness –”

“And make it face us –” said Lavender.

“And teach it to be afraid,” Tracey Davis said grimly.

SELF ACTUALIZATION, PART VI

“WELL,” Daphne whispered, keeping her voice as low as she could, “at least now I don’t feel like the only sane person in Hogwarts any more.”

“Because now you’ve got the rest of us as friends?” whispered Lavender Brown, who was tiptoeing along at her left side.

“I don’t think that’s what she means,” General Granger murmured from Lavender’s own left.

They crept slowly and carefully through the corridors of Hogwarts, all eight of them keeping both ears peeled for the slightest sound of Trouble, just like it was a battle and they were looking for enemy soldiers to ambush; only in this case they were looking for bullies to Vanquish and victims to Rescue in the span between the end of breakfast-time and when Lavender and Parvati had to get to their Herbology class.

Lavender had argued that if one first-year girl could take down three older bullies, then eight first-year girls ought to be able to outfight twenty-four older bullies because of Multiplication.

Judging by her frantic spluttering and waving of hands, General Granger hadn’t found this convincing.

Padma had stayed silent for a bit during the ensuing argument, and then observed thoughtfully that even in Hogwarts, beating up first-year girls probably wouldn’t be good for your reputation as a bully.

Parvati had straightened up at this, exclaiming that this meant they were the only ones who could do something about Hogwarts’s bully problem, which made it really truly heroic. Plus the whole reason their parents had moved to Britain was so that the two of them could attend the world’s only magical school with a 0% fatality rate, and what was the point if they didn’t take advantage and try a few things?

To which General Granger had responded that Parvati didn’t understand the point of a perfect safety record at all –

Lavender had said that if they were really all friends together and not Hermione’s followers like Professor Quirrell thought, then they should vote

on things like this.

Daphne had expected that hers would be the deciding vote after Hermione and Susan and Hannah voted no. And so Daphne had considered it carefully after her first flush of enthusiasm wore off. She was a Slytherin, after all, and that meant it was her responsibility to keep a watchful eye on their own interests while they were all running around trying to help people – her job to figure out how risky it really was, and whether it would be worth it for them, just like Mother would have done in her place. Always looking out for yourself and your friends like that, was what real Slytherining was all about...

Hannah Abbott, the nervous little Hufflepuff girl, had in a small trembling voice said “Yes.”

And now Daphne and Susan and Hermione had to stay with the other five, they couldn’t possibly let the others go off on their own. Because no Gryffindor would ever live down hurting the last surviving child of the Bones family, and no Slytherin would dare assault a daughter of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Greengrass. (Daphne hoped so, anyway.) And General Granger who’d started the whole thing... you didn’t even have to ask.

The corridors of Hogwarts passed them by one after another, their tense hands never straying far from their wands, as stone and wood and Everburning Torches came into vision and then moved past. At one point they heard footsteps and drew in their breath, hands almost dropping to their wands, but it was just a lone older Ravenclaw who looked at them curiously before sniffing and dropping his head back to his book as he walked on.

The heroines crept past solemn oaken panels carved with gilded frescos, and came to a dead end leading into a boys’ bathroom, and turned around, and wandered back through the solemn oaken panels carved with gilded frescos, and then turned through dusty old brick corridors grouted with worn cement, which sort of led them in a circle actually, so they consulted a portrait and then went down a different dusty old brick corridor instead, that took them to a brief rise of marble stairs that should’ve put them on the third-and-a-halfth floor if it’d been anywhere but Hogwarts, and then it was back to tiled stone pavement again, and skylights that let shafts of sunlight pour down even though they were nowhere near the roof, and after they’d followed that passageway around a few corners it took them to another boys’ bathroom, clearly marked with a plaque showing the silhouette of a robed figure whizzing into a toilet.

The eight of them stood before the closed door and stared with a certain amount of weariness.

"I'm bored," said Lavender.

Padma made a show of taking a pocketwatch out of her robes and looking at it. "Sixteen minutes and thirty seconds," she said. "A new record for the longest attention span in Gryffindor."

"I don't think this is going to work either," said Susan. "And I'm a Hufflepuff."

"Y'know," Lavender said thoughtfully, "I wonder if maybe what really makes someone a hero, is that when they try something like this, something interesting actually happens."

"I bet you're right," said Tracey. "I bet if we had Harry Potter with us, we'd run into three bullies and a hidden room full of treasure in the first five minutes. I bet that all General Chaos has to do is go to the bathroom and he, like, finds Slytherin's Chamber of Secrets or something –"

Daphne couldn't quite let that one go past. "You think Lord Slytherin would've put the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets in a bathroom –"

"What I'm saying," said Susan, as Tracey was opening her mouth to reply, "is that we've got no way of actually finding any bullies. I mean, all they've got to do is find a Hufflepuff somewhere, but we've got to run across them at exactly the right time, d'you see? Which is a very good problem because if we did find them we'd all get squished like bugs. Can't we just do the forbidden third-floor corridor like we're supposed to?"

Lavender snorted scornfully. "You don't become a real heroine just by doing the forbidden things the Headmaster tells you not to do!"

(Daphne's mind tried to wrap around this statement as she silently thanked the Sorting Hat for not putting her anywhere near Gryffindor.)

"Come to think..." Parvati said slowly, "I mean, what're the odds that Harry Potter would run across those five bullies on his first morning of school? He must've had some way of finding them."

Daphne happened to be standing where looking at Parvati let her see Hermione, so she noticed the Ravenclaw girl's expression change – and then she realized that the Sunshine General had also found some bullies just recently –

"Oh!" said Padma in a tone of sudden realization. "Of course! He got told by the ghost of Salazar Slytherin!"

"What?" said Daphne at the same time as several other people.

"That's who the ghost was that scared me, I'm pretty sure," Padma explained. "I mean I only figured it out afterward, but... yeah. Salazar Slytherin's ghost doesn't like it when Slytherins bully people, he thinks it shames his name, and the ghost is still keyed into the Hogwarts wards so he knows everything that happens, I bet."

Daphne's mouth was hanging open; and she saw that Hannah had put a hand to her forehead and was leaning against the stone walls, while Tracey's eyes were blazing like little brown stars.

Salazar Slytherin's ghost?

Had leagued himself with Harry Potter?

And had sent Hermione Granger to stop Derrick's crew?

She would have paid a hundred Galleons to be there when Draco Malfoy got told about this.

Although considering how fast rumors spread through Hogwarts, now that Padma had spilled the beans, Millicent had probably told him thirty minutes ago...

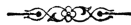
In fact... now that Daphne thought about it...

"So," said Parvati. "We've got to ask the Boy-Who-Lived where to find Salazar Slytherin's ghost? Wow, I guess if I'm saying stuff like that out loud, I might actually be turning into a heroine –"

"Yes!" said Lavender. "We've got to ask the Boy-Who-Lived where to find Salazar Slytherin's ghost!"

"We've got to ask... the Boy-Who-Lived... where to find Salazar Slytherin's ghost..." repeated Hannah in a nervous voice, like she was forcing herself to say it.

"And if that doesn't work," shouted Tracey, "we'll stun Harry Potter, tie him up and bring him with us!"



It said something, Hermione Granger thought, and it was something rather sad – as the eight of them strolled back through the maze of twisty little passages that was Hogwarts, their time before the next class having run out without finding any bullies – that she genuinely didn't know whether Harry Potter had been led around by the ghost of Salazar Slytherin or a phoenix or what. And whatever Harry had done, she hoped it didn't work for them. And most of all she hoped that the others didn't vote for Tracey's idea of stunning Harry Potter and carting his unconscious body around with them

to attract Adventures. That couldn't possibly work in real life, or, if it did, she was giving up.

Hermione looked from witch to witch, Tracey chatting with Lavender, and the others making occasional remarks; and her gaze caught on a girl who was subdued and quiet, the one person whose thoughts right now she couldn't guess at all.

"Hannah?" she said to the girl walking alongside her. Hermione tried to make her voice as gentle as she could. "You don't have to answer, but is it okay if I ask why you voted yes on fighting bullies?"

Hermione had thought she'd made her voice soft, but everyone stopped walking, and Lavender and Tracey halted their conversation and looked at them.

Hannah's cheeks were already reddening, and just as Hannah opened her mouth –

"It's 'cause she's got more courage than you think, obviously," said Lavender.

Hannah paused with her mouth open.

She closed her mouth.

She swallowed, hard and visibly, while her cheeks reddened even further.

Then Hannah took a deep breath, and said, in a small voice, "There's a boy I like."

The Hufflepuff girl flinched as she said it, and her head darted around nervously to look at everyone looking at her, while the pause and silence stretched.

"Um, okay?" Susan said eventually.

"I've got five boys I like," said Lavender.

"Padma and I knew we'd both like the same boys," said Parvati, "so we made a list and flipped a Knut to see who got to pick first."

"I know who I'm destined to marry," said Tracey. "I don't care what the world says, he's meant to be mine!"

This made all the other girls look expectantly at Hermione, whose brain had gone ahead and flushed Tracey's last statement entirely so it could focus on just on the first thing Hannah had said.

"Um," said Hermione. She carefully continued keeping her voice gentle. "Hannah, the reason why you joined the Society for Promotion of Heroic Equality for Witches was that there's a boy who might like you more if you become a hero?"

The Hufflepuff girl nodded again, her cheeks reddening even further while she stared down at her own reflection in her black-polished shoes.

"She likes Neville Longbottom, actually," Daphne said. The Slytherin gave a woeful sigh. "And unfortunately for her, he's going to marry someone else. It's very tragic."

This produced a high-pitched eeping sound from Hannah as she went on staring at her feet.

"Wait what?" said Lavender. "Neville's going to marry someone else? How do you know about this? Who?"

Daphne just shook her head sadly with a downcast expression.

"Excuse me," said Hermione, and then when the others looked at her again, "Ah..." while she tried to organize her thoughts. "I mean, um... Hannah... trying to become a hero so that a boy will like you isn't very feminist."

"It's pronounced feminine actually," said Padma.

"And why're you calling Hannah unfeminine?" said Susan. "There's nothing unfeminine about wanting to impress a boy."

"Besides," said Parvati, sounding puzzled, "isn't the whole point that we're trying to be heroes even though that isn't feminine?"

The ensuing discussion would not be remembered by Hermione Granger as one of her most successful forays into the realms of political education. She tried to explain, and then after the resulting argument tried to explain again, while the other seven girls looked at her more and more skeptically. Afterward Daphne declared in the imperious tones of the future Lady Greengrass that if this feminism business meant girls weren't allowed to pursue boys in whichever way they pleased, then feminism could stay in the Muggle lands where it belonged. Lavender suggested that maybe witchism could say that witches got to do anything they wanted, which sounded like more fun than feminism. And finally Padma closed off further discussion by observing wearily that she didn't see much point to going on arguing, since S.P.H.E.W. wasn't about anything to do with feminism in the first place, it was just about more girls becoming heroes.

Hermione had given up at that point.



As their Charms session that day ended and the first-year Ravenclaws began shuffling out of the class, Hermione was already wincing to herself. They'd made it to class just barely before the opening gong, they'd had to run right

over to their desks and sit down, so there hadn't been time for the awful thing to happen yet; but that just meant that Hermione got to look forward to the coming disaster for the whole class.

Sure enough, after Professor Flitwick squeaked his dismissal and everyone rose from their chairs, Harry began walking toward her; and for her own part Hermione shoved her book into her mokeskin pouch and very quickly walked over to the door and threw it open and headed into the corridors, and of course Harry followed her with a surprised look because they had a library session scheduled –

“Hermione?” Harry said as he closed the door behind him. “What’s wrong?”

The door flew open behind Harry not a moment after he closed it, almost hitting Harry as he stepped out of the way, and Padma Patil stepped out of the classroom with a dreadful look of determination upon her face.

“Excuse me, Mr. Potter,” came the awful words, the young girl’s high voice resounding through the corridor like the gloomy bells of doom, “can I ask you for help with something?”

Harry’s eyebrows drew up, and he said, “You can ask, of course.”

“Can you tell us how to talk to Salazar Slytherin’s ghost? We want him to tell us where to find bullies, like he tells you.”

There was a little bit of silence in the corridor outside the classroom.

The door opened again, and Su peered out with an inquiring look –

“Well, we’ve got to get to the library,” Harry said quite casually, his face looking relaxed, “would you mind following us?” and began to walk off in the direction that led to the library on odd-numbered days of the month, and Su made like she was going to follow but Harry’s face turned toward her for a moment.

It wasn’t until Harry had rounded a corner that he drew his wand, said in a low precise voice “Quietus” and then turned to Padma and said, “An interesting guess, Miss Patil.”

Padma looked rather smug, then; and said, “I should’ve figured it out earlier, really. There was that hiss in the ghost’s voice, I should’ve thought Parselmouth right away, even before he started talking about Godric Gryffindor.”

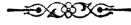
Harry’s face didn’t change. “May I ask, Miss Patil, whether you’ve shared this thought with –”

“She said it in front of everyone in S.P.H.E.W.,” Hermione said.

Harry's eyes had that look they had when he was very rapidly calculating something, and then he said, "Hermione, what's the chance that –"

"She said it in front of Lavender and Tracey."

"Um," said Padma. "Should I not've done that?"



"Wait here," growled Mr. Goyle, and went around the corner; and there was the sound of him knocking on Draco Malfoy's private room.

There was a bit of a queasy feeling in Tracey's stomach, and she reminded herself again that since Padma had spilled the beans someone was bound to tell Draco Malfoy, and it might as well be her, and it wasn't as if she owed Harry Potter anything, and a Slytherin had to do what was necessary to achieve her Ambitions.

She'd been collecting Ambitions ever since Professor Quirrell told her off, and so far she'd decided that she wanted to own her own Nimbus 2000 broomstick, become super famous, marry Harry Potter, eat Chocolate Frogs for breakfast every day, and defeat at least three Dark Lords just to show Professor Quirrell who was ordinary.

"Mr. Malfoy will see you," said the low, menacing voice of Mr. Goyle as he returned. "And you'd better hope he doesn't think you're wasting his time." The boy loomed at her briefly, and then stepped aside.

Tracey added having her own servants to her list of Ambitions, and entered.

The Malfoy private bedroom looked just like Daphne's. She'd been privately hoping for diamond chandeliers or golden frescos on the walls – she'd never have said it in front of Daphne, but the House of Malfoy was a step up from Greengrass. But it was just a small bedroom like Daphne's, and the only difference was that Malfoy's stuff was decorated in silver snakes instead of emerald plants.

As she stepped through the doorway, Draco Malfoy – who was perfectly groomed even inside his own bedroom – rose up from his desk chair to greet her with a small friendly bow, wearing a charming smile just like she was someone who mattered, which made Tracey so flustered that she forgot everything she'd rehearsed inside her head and just blurted out, "I've got something to tell you!"

"Yes, Gregory said so," Draco Malfoy said smoothly. "Please, Miss Davis, sit down." He gestured to his own desk chair, even as he sat down on his bed.

She felt somewhat lightheaded as she carefully sat herself down in Malfoy's own chair, her fingers unthinkingly fiddling with how her dress robes fell across her knees, trying to make them look as elegant and uncreased as Draco Malfoy's –

"So, Miss Davis," said Draco Malfoy. "What did you want to tell me?"

Tracey hesitated, and then when Malfoy's face started to look a bit impatient, just stammered it all out, everything Padma had said about Salazar Slytherin's ghost sending Harry Potter to stop bullies and also what Daphne had told her about Hermione Granger being in on it –

Draco Malfoy's expression didn't change at all as she spoke, not even in the slightest, and it dawned on Tracey with a sickening lurch in her stomach.

"You don't believe me!" she said.

There was a slight pause.

"Well," said Draco Malfoy, with a smile that wasn't quite as charming as his last one, "I do believe that's what Padma said and what Daphne said, so thank you anyway, Miss Davis." The boy rose from where he'd been sitting on his bed, and Tracey, not even thinking, rose from the chair.

As he was escorting her to the door, just as he was about to turn the knob, it occurred to Tracey that – "You didn't ask what I wanted for the information," she said.

Draco Malfoy gave her some kind of look, she didn't quite know what it was supposed to mean, and he didn't say anything.

"Well, anyway," Tracey said, making an on-the-spot change to her previous Plans, "I don't want anything for the information, I was just being friendly."

A brief look of surprise crossed Draco Malfoy's face for just an instant before his expression flattened again and he said, "It's not that easy to become friends with a Malfoy, Miss Davis."

Tracey smiled, and meant it. "Well, I'll just go on being friendly, then," she said, and left the room with a skip in her step, feeling like a real Slytherin for maybe the first time in her life, and having just decided that Draco Malfoy would be one of her husbands too.



After the girl was gone, Gregory came in, shut the door again and said, "Are you alright, Mr. Malfoy?"

Draco said nothing to his servant and friend. His eyes gazed off into nowhere, like he was trying to stare through the wall of his bedroom, through the Hogwarts lake that surrounded the Slytherin dungeons, through Earth's crust and atmosphere and the interstellar dust of the Milky Way, into the utterly empty and lightless void between galaxies which no wizard and no scientist had ever seen.

"Mr. Malfoy?" Gregory said, starting to sound a little worried.

"I can't believe I believed every word of that," said Draco.



Daphne finished her final inch of Transfiguration and looked up across the Slytherin common room, at where Millicent Bulstrode was still working on her own homework. It was time to come to a Decision.

If S.P.H.E.W. did go around trying to stun bullies, the bullies wouldn't like it, that was certain. And they'd try to do something unpleasant about it, which was also certain. On the other hand, if the bullies got really nasty then Hermione could ask Harry Potter for help, or they could pool their combined Quirrell points and ask the Defense Professor for a favor... No, the thing that Daphne was really worried about was if this business got them in bad with Professor Snape. You didn't want to ever end up on the wrong side of Professor Snape.

But since the day she'd challenged Neville to a Most Ancient Duel, she'd noticed people looking at her differently. Even the Slytherins who'd made fun of her were looking at her differently. It was dawning on Daphne that being the daughter of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Greengrass brought in a lot more respect if you were a beautiful heroine born to a Most Ancient House, and not just a pretty noble girl. It was the difference between having your role played by the lead actress and having your role played by a two-Galleon extra with a screechy laugh.

Fighting bullies might not be the best way to become a heroine. But Father had once told her that the trouble with passing up opportunities was that it was habit-forming. If you told yourself you were waiting for a better opportunity next time, why, next time you'd probably tell yourself the same thing. Father had said that most people spent their whole lives waiting for an opportunity that was good enough, and then they died. Father had said that while seizing opportunities would mean that all sorts of things went wrong, it wasn't nearly as bad as being a hopeless lump. Father had said that after

she got into the habit of seizing opportunities, then it was time to start being picky about them.

On the other hand, Mother had warned her not to take all of Father's advice, and said that Daphne wasn't allowed to ask about Father's sixth year in Hogwarts until she was at least thirty years old.

But in the end Father had gotten Mother to marry him and successfully plotted his way into a Most Ancient House, so there was that.

Millicent Bulstrode finished her homework and began putting her things away.

Daphne stood up from her desk, and walked over.

Millicent swung out her legs from the table and stood up, slinging her bookbag over one shoulder, then looked over at where Daphne was approaching, the girl's expression puzzled.

"Hey, Millicent," Daphne said as she drew near, making her voice low and excited, "guess what I figured out today?"

"The thing about Salazar Slytherin's ghost helping Granger?" said Millicent. "I already heard about that –"

"No," Daphne said in a hushed whisper, "this is even better."

"Really?" Millicent said, in an equally low excited voice. "What is it?"

Daphne looked around conspiratorially. "Come to my room and I'll tell you."

They went off toward the stairs that led downward, the private rooms were even lower in the lake than the seventh-year dorms...

Soon enough Daphne was sitting in her comfy desk-chair and Millicent had bounced over to the edge of her bed.

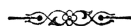
"Quietus," said Daphne, when they were both seated; and then instead of putting her wand away inside her robes, Daphne just let her hand fall naturally down to her side, still holding the wand, just in case.

"All right!" said Millicent. "What is it?"

"You know what I figured out?" said Daphne. "I figured out that you get the gossip so fast, you know about things before they actually happen."

Daphne had half-expected Millicent to turn white and fall over, and she didn't really, but the girl did flinch pretty hard before she started stammering denials.

"Don't worry," said Daphne with her sweetest smile, "I won't tell anyone else you're a seer. I mean, we're friends, right?"



Rianne Felthorne, seventh-year of Slytherin, was working diligently on yet another two-foot essay (she was taking everything except Divination and Muggle Studies and her N.E.W.T. year seemed to consist entirely of homework) when her Head of House strode up to the table she was working at and barked "You will come with me, Miss Felthorne!" and walked away even as she frantically began putting away her parchment and book and quill.

When she caught up with Professor Snape, he was waiting just outside the room and gazing at her with half-lidded eyes that seemed far too intense; and before she could ask what this was about he spun without a word and stalked off through the hallways, so that she had to scramble to keep up.

Their walk took them down a flight of stairs, and then another, below what she'd thought was the lowest level of the Slytherin dungeons. And the corridors began to look older in their appearance, the architecture reverting back in time by centuries into roughened stone held together by crude-looking mortar. She began to wonder if Professor Snape was taking her to the real dungeons that she'd heard rumors of, the true dungeons of Hogwarts that had been sealed off to all but faculty; and if maybe Professor Snape did terrible things down there to innocent helpless young girls but that was probably just wishful thinking on her part.

They went down another flight of stairs, and came out into a room that was no room at all, but an empty rock cavern with a single door, pierced by many dark openings and lit by a single torch of ancient style that fired as they entered.

Professor Snape took out his wand, then, and began to cast Charm after Charm, she lost track of how many; and when the Potions Master was done he turned back toward her, locked his intense eyes on hers, and said in a level voice unlike his usual drawl, "You will say nothing to anyone of this matter, Miss Felthorne, nothing now or ever. If that is acceptable to you, nod. If not, we will turn and go."

She nodded, frightened and with a strange hope dawning in her heart (well, not exactly her heart).

"The task I have for you is very simple, Miss Felthorne," said Professor Snape's toneless voice, "and your extremely generous pay of fifty Galleons is merely to compensate you for being Memory-Charmed afterward."

She drew an involuntary breath. Her family might be rich but they had other daughters and kept her on a tight leash and it was certainly a lot of money for her.

Then her ears caught up with the words Memory-Charmed and for a moment she felt outraged, there was no point if she couldn't keep the memories, what sort of girl did Professor Snape think she was?

"You surely know," said Severus Snape, "of Miss Hermione Granger, the Sunshine General?"

"What?" said Rianne Felthorne in sudden horror and disgust. "She's in her first year! Ew!"

SELF ACTUALIZATION, PLAUSIBLE DENIABILITY, PART VII

THE winter Sun had well set by the time dinner ended, and so it was amid the peaceful light of stars twinkling down from the enchanted ceiling of the Great Hall that Hermione left for the Ravenclaw Tower alongside her study partner Harry Potter, who lately seemed to have a ridiculous amount of time for studying. She hadn't the faintest idea of when Harry was doing his actual homework, except that it was getting done, maybe by house elves while he slept.

Nearly every single pair of eyes in the whole Hall lay on them as they passed through the mighty doors of the dining-room, which were more like siege gates of a castle than anything students ought to go through on the way back from supper.

They went out without speaking, and walked until the distant babble of student conversation had faded into silence; and then the two of them went on a little further through the stone corridors before Hermione finally spoke.

"Why'd you do that, Harry?"

"Do what?" said the Boy-Who-Lived in an abstracted tone, as if his mind were quite elsewhere, thinking about vastly more important things.

"I mean, why didn't you just tell them no?"

"Well," Harry said, as their shoes pattered across the tiles, "I can't just go around saying 'no' every time someone asks me about something I haven't done. I mean, suppose someone asks me, 'Harry, did you pull the prank with the invisible paint?' and I say 'No' and then they say 'Harry, do you know who messed with the Gryffindor Seeker's broomstick?' and I say 'I refuse to answer that question.' It's sort of a giveaway."

"And that's why," Hermione said carefully, "you told everyone..." She concentrated, remembering the exact words. "That if hypothetically there was a conspiracy, you could not confirm or deny that the true master of the conspiracy was Salazar Slytherin's ghost, and in fact you wouldn't even be able to admit the conspiracy existed so people ought to stop asking you

questions about it.”

“Yep,” said Harry Potter, smiling slightly. “That’ll teach them to take hypothetical scenarios too seriously.”

“And you told me not to answer anything –”

“They might not believe you, if you deny it,” said Harry. “So it’s better to say nothing, unless you want them to think you’re a liar.”

“But –” Hermione said helplessly. “But – but now people think I’m doing things for Salazar Slytherin!” The way the Gryffindors had been looking at her – the way the Slytherins had been looking at her –

“It goes along with being a hero,” Harry said. “Have you seen what the Quibbler says about me?”

For a brief second Hermione imagined her parents reading a newspaper article about her, and instead of the story being about her winning a nationwide spelling bee or any of the other ways she’d imagined getting into the papers, the headline said “HERMIONE GRANGER GETS DRACO MALFOY PREGNANT”.

It was enough to make you think twice about the whole heroine business.

Harry’s voice turned a bit more formal. “Speaking of which, Miss Granger, how goes your latest quest?”

“Well,” said Hermione, “unless the ghost of Salazar Slytherin really does show up and tell us where to find bullies, I don’t think we’re going to have much luck.” Not that she was sorry about that.

She glanced over at Harry, and saw the boy giving her a peculiarly intense look.

“You know, Hermione,” the boy said quietly, as though to make sure that nobody else in the world heard, “I think you’re right. I think some people get a lot more help than others in becoming heroes. And I don’t think that’s fair, either.”

And Harry grabbed at her witch’s robes where they lay over her arm, and hustled her into a side-hall of the corridor they were walking through, her mouth gaping open in surprise even as Harry’s wand came into his hand, they rounded a curve of the side-hall and it was so narrow that it was almost pushing her and Harry into each other, even as Harry pointed to the way they’d come and softly said “Quietus”, then a moment later, in the other direction, “Quietus” again.

The boy looked searchingly around them, not just to every side, but even upward toward the ceiling and down toward the floor.

And then Harry stuck a hand in his pouch and said, "Invisibility cloak."

"Gleep?" said Hermione.

Harry was already drawing out folds of shimmering black fabric from the mokeskin device. "Don't worry," the boy said with a small grin, "they're so rare that nobody bothered to make a school rule against them..."

And then Harry held out the dark velvet mesh to her, and said, his voice strangely formal, "I do not give you, but loan you, my cloak, unto Hermione Jean Granger. Protect her well."

She stared at the shimmering velvet of the cloak, cloth that swallowed all the light that fell on it except what glinted from small strange reflections, fabric so perfectly black it should've shown dust or lint or something but it didn't, the longer you looked the more you felt like what you were seeing wasn't really there at all, but then you blinked again and it was just a black cloak.

"Take it, Hermione."

Hardly even thinking, Hermione stretched out her hand to grasp the fabric; and then just as her brain woke up and she started to pull her hand back, Harry let go of the cloak and it started to fall and she grabbed at it without thinking. And the instant her fingers touched and held the cloak she felt an intangible jolt run through her like picking up her wand for the first time; and it was like she heard a song being sung, ever so faintly, in the back of her mind.

"That's one of my quest items, Hermione," Harry said softly. "It belonged to my father, and it's not something I can replace, if it's lost. Don't loan it to anyone else, don't show it to anyone, don't tell anyone it exists... but if you want to borrow it for a while, just come to me and ask."

Hermione finally tore her eyes loose from the depthless black folds and stared back up at Harry.

"I can't –"

"You certainly can," Harry said. "Because there's nothing even the tiniest bit fair about my finding this gift-wrapped in a box next to my bed one morning, and you... not." Harry paused thoughtfully. "Unless you did get your own invisibility cloak, in which case never mind."

Then the implications of invisibility cloak finally dawned on her, and she pointed a shocked finger at Harry, though they were close enough together that she couldn't quite straighten her arm properly, and her voice rose with considerable indignation as she said, "So that's how you disappeared from

the Potions closet! And the time when –” and then she trailed off, because even with an invisibility cloak she still couldn’t see how Harry had...

Harry buffed his fingernails on his robes with artful nonchalance, and said, “Well, you knew there had to be some trick to it, right? And now the heroine will mysteriously know where and when to find bullies – just like she listened to the bullies planning it, even though nobody her age could possibly have turned herself invisible to spy on them.”

There was a pause and a silence.

“Harry –” she said. “I’m – I’m not sure anymore that fighting bullies is such a good idea.”

Harry’s eyes stayed steady on hers. “Because the other girls might get hurt?”

She nodded, just nodded.

“That’s their choice, Hermione, just like it’s yours. I decided not to do the obvious stupid thing that everyone does in books, try to keep you safe and protected and helpless, and have you get really angry at me, and push me away while you go off on your own and get into even more trouble, and then heroically pull through it successfully, after which I’d finally have my epiphany and realize that blah blah blah etcetera. I know how that part of my life story goes, so I’m just skipping over it. If I can predict what I’m going to think later, I might as well go ahead and think it now. Anyway, my point is, you shouldn’t smother your friends to keep them safe, either. Just tell them up front it’s predictably going to go horribly wrong, and if they still want to be heroines after that, fine.”

It was at times like this that Hermione wondered if she was ever going to get used to the way Harry thought. “Harry, I really,” her voice stuck for a second, “really, really don’t want them getting hurt! Especially because of something I started!”

“Hermione,” Harry said seriously, “I’m pretty sure you did the right thing. I don’t see what could realistically happen to them that would be worse for them, in the long run, than not trying.”

“What if they get badly hurt?” Hermione said. Her voice felt blocked in her throat; she remembered Captain Ernie saying how Harry had just stared straight into the eyes of a bully as the bully bent his finger back, before Professor Sprout had arrived to save him; and there was another thought that came after that, about Hannah and her delicate hands with the fingernails that she carefully painted in Hufflepuff yellow every morning, but that wasn’t

allowed to be imagined. “And then – they’ll never do anything courageous, ever again –”

“I don’t think it works like that,” Harry said steadily. “Even if it all goes mind-bogglingly wrong, I don’t think it works like that inside a human mind. The important thing is believing about yourself that you’re someone who can break your boundaries. Trying and getting hurt can’t possibly be worse for you than being... stuck.”

“What if you’re wrong, Harry?”

Harry paused for a moment, and then shrugged a little sadly, and said, “What if I’m right?”

Hermione looked back at the black mesh running over her hand. From the inside the cloak felt strangely soft and yet firm against her palm, as if it was trying to give her hand a reassuring hug.

Then she lifted her arm back up, holding the cloak back to Harry.

Harry didn’t move to take it.

“I –” said Hermione. “I mean, thank you, thank you a lot, but I’m still thinking about it, so you can take it back for now. And... Harry, I don’t think it’s right to spy on people –”

“Not even on known bullies, to rescue their victims?” Harry said. “I’ve never been bullied, but I’ve been through a realistic simulation, and it didn’t feel very pleasant. Have you ever been bullied, Hermione?”

“No,” she said in a quiet voice, and went on holding out Harry’s invisibility cloak to him.

Finally Harry took back his cloak – she felt a small twitch of loss as the inaudible song vanished from the back of her mind – and started to stuff the black material back into his pouch.

As the pouch ate the last of the fabric, Harry turned from her, to break the Quieting Barrier –

“And, um,” Hermione said. “That’s not the Cloak of Invisibility, is it? The one we read about in the library on page eighteen of Paula Vieira’s translation of Gottschalk’s *An Illustrated Scroll of Lost Devices*?”

Harry turned his head back, grinning slightly, and said in exactly the same tone of voice he’d used earlier with the other students at dinner, “I cannot confirm or deny that I possess magical artifacts of incredible power.”



When Hermione climbed into bed that night she was still trying to decide. Her life had been simpler at dinnertime, back when there hadn't been any practical way for them to find bullies; and now she had to choose again; not for herself, this time, but for her friends. In her mind's eye she kept seeing Dumbledore's lined face and the pain it hadn't quite hidden, and in her mind's ears she kept hearing Harry's voice saying 'That's their choice, Hermione, just like it's yours.'

And her hand kept remembering the sensation of the cloak against her fingers, replaying it over and over in her mind. There was a power to the feeling that compelled her thoughts to return to it, and to the song she'd heard / hadn't heard in a part of her mind and magic which now lay silent once more.

Harry had spoken to the cloak like it was a person, telling it to take good care of her. Harry had said the cloak had belonged to his father, that he couldn't replace it if it was lost...

But... Harry wouldn't really do that, would he?

Just hand her one of the three Deathly Hallows created centuries before Hogwarts?

She could say that she felt flattered, but this went way beyond feeling flattered, into making her wonder just what she was to Harry, exactly.

Maybe Harry was the sort of person who went around loaning ancient lost magical artifacts to anyone he considered a friend, but –

But when she thought about which part of his life Harry had said he'd skipped over, the part where he tried to keep her safe and protected...

Hermione stared up at the ceiling of the Ravenclaw dorm. Somewhere beyond her bed, Mandy and Su were talking. She'd turned up her Quieting Charm to where she couldn't hear the exact words, but could still hear their faint murmur; there was something comforting about sleeping in a dorm with the other girls. Harry kept his own Quieter turned up all the way, she knew.

She was starting to wonder if maybe Harry actually did, well...

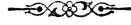
You know...

Like her.

It took Hermione Granger a long time to fall asleep that night.

And when she woke up the next morning there was a small slip of parchment peeking out from under her pillow which said

At half-past ten you will find a bully in the fourth passageway to the left of the hall leaving the Potions classroom – S.



When Hermione entered the Great Hall that morning, her stomach was filled with flying butterflies the size of Hippogriffs; even as she approached the Ravenclaw breakfast table she still hadn't decided what to do.

There was an empty place next to Padma, she saw. That would be where to sit down, if she was going to tell Padma and then ask Padma to tell Daphne and Tracey.

Hermione walked toward the empty place next to Padma.

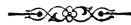
There were words waiting in her throat, Padma, I got a mysterious message –

And she could feel a huge brick wall inside her, stopping the words from coming out. She'd be putting Hannah and Susan and Daphne in danger. Taking them and leading them by the hand straight into trouble. That was Wrong.

Or she could just go try to handle the bully herself, without telling her friends anything, and that, quite obviously, was also Wrong.

Hermione knew she was being faced with a Moral Dilemma, just like all those wizards and witches she'd read about in stories. Only in stories people always got a right choice and a wrong choice, not two wrong ones, which seemed a bit unfair. But she had the sense, somehow – maybe it came from the way Harry always talked about how the history books would see them – that she was faced with a Heroic Decision, and that her whole life might end up going one way or another, depending on what she chose right now, this morning.

Hermione sat down at the table without looking to either side, just gazing at the plate and silverware like they might have answers hidden inside, thinking as hard as she ever had, and a few seconds later she heard Padma's voice whispering almost in her ear, "Daphne says she knows where a bully's going to be at ten-thirty today."



Doomed.

They were all doomed, in Susan Bones's opinion.

Auntie sometimes told stories which started out like this, people doing something they knew was stupid, and the stories usually ended with someone being doomed all over the floor and all over the walls and getting on Auntie's shoes.

"Hey, Padma," muttered Parvati, her voice just barely audible over the soft impacts of eight girls tiptoeing through the corridor leading to the Potions classroom, "d'you know why Hermione's been sighing all morning –"

"No talking!" hissed Lavender, the harsh whisper sounding much louder than Parvati's mutter. "You never know when Evil might be listening!"

"Shhh!" said three other girls even more loudly.

Utterly, totally, quite extremely doomed.

As they approached the fourth passageway to the left of the Potions classroom, where Daphne's mysterious informant had said the bullying would take place, the eight of them moved slower, the sound of their feet got softer, and finally General Granger made the gesture that meant Halt, I'll look ahead.

Lavender raised a hand, then, and when Hermione turned to look at her, Lavender, looking puzzled, pointed straight down the corridor, gestured to herself, and then tried to sign something else that Susan didn't understand –

General Granger shook her head, and once again, this time with slower, more exaggerated movements, made the sign for Halt, I'll look ahead.

Lavender, looking even more puzzled, pointed back the way they'd come, and made a bouncing gesture with her other hand.

Now everyone else was looking even more confused than Lavender, and Susan thought with some acerbity that evidently one hour of practice done two days ago wasn't enough to remember a new set of code signals.

Hermione pointed at Lavender, then at the floor beneath Lavender's feet, the expression on her face making it very clear that the intended meaning was You. Stay. Here.

Lavender nodded.

Doom doom doom, went the words of the Chaos Legion's marching song through Susan's mind, doom doom doom doom doom doom...

Hermione reached into her robes, and drew out a little rod with a mirror on the end of it and an eyepiece. Very very softly indeed, the Ravenclaw girl crept up to the wall, right next to where the passageway opened off the corridor, and peeked just the tip of the eyepiece around the corner.

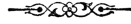
Then a little more.

Then a little more.

Then General Granger cautiously stuck her head around the side.

General Granger turned back to them, nodded, and made the hand gesture for follow me.

Susan felt a little better as she crept forward. The part of the Plan which called for them to arrive thirty minutes before the bully had, apparently, actually worked. Maybe they were only slightly doomed...?



At ten-twenty-nine, almost on the dot, the bully showed up. If anyone had been present to hear – though the corridor was apparently empty – they would have heard his shoes clicking solidly through the main corridor, entering the passageway, walking toward where the passageway turned its first corner, turning that corner, and then stopping in some surprise upon seeing that the passageway now terminated in a solid brick wall where no wall had been before.

Then the bully shrugged and turned away, as he leaned back to watch the main passage from just around the corner.

It was the castle Hogwarts, after all.

Behind the hastily Transfigured thin panels they'd assembled into the outward appearance of a brick wall, the girls waited; not speaking, not moving, hardly even breathing, but watching through the eyeholes they'd left themselves.

As Susan's gaze took in the bully, she could feel the tightening of her chest all the way into her toes. The boy looked to be in his seventh-year if not older, and his robes were trimmed in green instead of the red they'd been hoping for, and he had muscles, and after staring for a bit longer, Susan realized his stance had the balance that meant that he dueled.

Then they all heard the sound of more feet approaching from the corridor. The fourth-year Gryffindors and Slytherins had just been let out of Potions class.

The footsteps pattered past, and diminished and faded, and the bully didn't do anything. For a moment Susan felt an instant of relief –

Then another, smaller group of footsteps approached.

The bully still didn't do anything, as the footsteps went past.

That happened a few more times.

And then, as there approached the faintly audible sound of one last set of footsteps, the seven girls heard the bully's voice saying, clear and cold and quiet, "Protego".

Someone did gasp then, though fortunately very very quietly. If they couldn't get in even a single shot –

The bullies were learning already, Susan realized, she hadn't expected S.P.H.E.W. to be able to do this very often before the bullies caught on – but – Hermione had already defeated three bullies – and the school had been buzzing with speculation about Salazar Slytherin's ghost, yesterday –

He's expecting us!

Susan would have whispered to give up, to abort the plan, only there was no way to convey a message to –

"Silencio," said the bully in a soft, deliberate voice with his wand pointed toward the corridor, the blue haze of his Shielding Charm shimmering around him. "Accio victim."

When the fourth-year boy came into their field of vision he was dangling upside down as if an invisible hand were holding him high by one leg, his red-trimmed robes beginning to slide down his thighs to reveal the pants beneath. His mouth was opening and closing helplessly, no sound coming out.

"I suppose you're wondering what's going on," the seventh-year Slytherin said in a quiet, cold voice. "Don't worry. It's so simple even a Gryffindor could understand."

With that, the Slytherin's left hand formed a fist and drove hard into the Gryffindor's belly. The fourth-year boy's body jerked around frantically, but still no words left his mouth.

"You're my victim," said the older Slytherin. "I'm a bully. I'm going to beat you up. And we'll see if anyone stops me."

It was at that moment that Susan realized it was a trap.

And in almost the same moment, there rang out the mighty and high-pitched voice of a young girl, crying, "Stop, evildoer! Finite Incantatem!"

Lavender, thought Susan, agonized. The Gryffindor girl had volunteered to be a distraction, while the rest of them executed a flank attack from where the bully wouldn't expect it, that had been the plan, only now –

"In the name of Hogwarts," cried Lavender's voice, though they couldn't see her, "and in the name of heroines everywhere, I command you to let go of that EEK!"

“Expelliarmus,” said the bully. “Stupefy. Accio stupid heroine.”

When Lavender floated into their vision, dangling by one foot and unconscious, Susan blinked; the girl was dressed in a bright crimson-and-gold skirt and blouse, instead of her usual Hogwarts robes.

The bully was also giving the girl’s upside-down body an odd look, and then he pointed his wand at her and said “Finite Incantatem,” but the clothes stayed the same.

Then the bully shrugged, and, still facing in the direction of Lavender instead of the dangling fourth-year boy, drew back his fist –

“Lagann!” yelled five voices, and five green spirals blasted from five wands aimed through five holes in the false wall, and an instant later Hermione’s voice shouted “Stupefy!”

Five green spirals shattered ineffectually on blue haze, and Hermione’s red bolt bounced off the haze and struck the fourth-year boy, who jerked and then was still.

And the seventh-year bully turned around, smiling grimly, as the first-year girls screamed and charged.



Susan’s eyes flew open and instantly she was rolling away from where she’d lain on the floor, her lungs still on fire and her whole body still aching from when she’d been hit, the battle had only moved forward a few seconds from what she could see, Hannah’s body falling with her arm still stretched out toward Susan, “Glisseo!” shouted Hermione but the older boy just slashed his wand down leaving a trail of green glow behind and Hermione’s Charm visibly disrupted into a shower of blue-white sparks, then in almost the same motion the bully said “Stupefy!” and Hermione was blown backward and Susan summoned up all the magic she had left and shouted “Innervate!” at Hermione’s body even as the bully turned toward her, the bully’s wand pointed in her direction again and then Padma yelled “Prismatis!” just before the bully shouted “Impedimenta!”, the rainbow sphere forming around the bully and the seventh-year Slytherin staggered as his own hex was reflected back at him, but an instant later the bully’s wand swept back to tap himself and then Padma’s Prismatic Sphere shattered like a blown soap bubble as the bully’s wand cut through it and “Innervate!” yelled Parvati at Hannah’s body and Tracey and Lavender screamed at the same time, “Wingardium Leviosa!”

–



Hannah Abbott held out her wand with a hand that trembled with exhaustion, she didn't have enough magic left for even one Innervate, now.

The rest of the passageway was silent, scattered bodies lying across the ground, Padma and Tracey and Lavender, Hermione and Parvati in a heap against one wall, Susan standing in petrified rigor as her eyes tracked it all helplessly, even the Gryffindor boy lying sprawled and motionless (Hermione had woken him and he'd fought, but it hadn't been enough).

It had been a very short battle.

The bully was still smiling, the only signs of his exertion a wavering ripple in the blue glow surrounding him, and a few beads of sweat on his forehead.

The bully raised his arm, wiped the sweat off his forehead, and stalked toward her like a man-shaped living Lethifold.

Hannah turned and fled, spun and ran with screams kept bound in her choking throat, sprinted past the fallen paneling of the fake brick wall, ran down the passageway with all the speed she could muster, weaving as much as she could –

Just before Hannah got to the turn in the passageway, the bully's voice from behind her said "Cluthe!" and she got awful cramps all through her legs, she fell down and slid and hit her head against the wall, only she didn't even notice the pain of the smack as she started to scream with the twisting muscles –

The bully was still stalking toward her, Hannah saw as she turned her head; approaching her slowly, still wearing that dreadful smile.

And she rolled, despite the pain as her leg muscles knotted up around themselves, she rolled around the corner of the passageway, and screamed, "Go away!"

"I think not," said the bully, his voice deep and scary like that of a grown man, sounding very close at hand now.

The bully walked around the corner and Daphne Greengrass stabbed her Most Ancient Blade directly into his groin.

There was a flash that lit up the whole corridor –



It was with a subdued mien that seven girls left Madam Pomfrey's office, leaving one of their own behind in a hospital bed.

Hannah would be all right in about thirty-five minutes, the healer had said; torn muscles were easy to mend.

Daphne had done all the talking, and according to her, Hannah had suffered a mishap with a Road-Running Charm which had caused the leg cramps. Madam Pomfrey had given them a sharp look but hadn't argued, even though that Charm was around six years above their level.

Madam Pomfrey had also given Daphne a potion to help with her state of total magical exhaustion, and warned her not to cast any spells for the next three hours. That, supposedly, was from Daphne using up too much magic trying to Finite Hannah, rather than the Most Ancient Blade drawing out all of her power to break the Protego.

The rest of them had decided not to say anything about the bruises under their robes until they could get some older girls to cast Episkey. There were limits to what Daphne could talk around.

The whole thing, Susan thought, had been too close, much too close. If the bully had so much as looked around the corner – if he'd taken a moment to recast his Shielding Charm –

"We should stop," said Susan, as soon as the seven of them had gotten out of hearing range of the healer's office. "We should stop doing this."

For some reason, then, even though they were supposed to vote on this sort of thing, everyone turned to look at General Granger.

The Sunshine General didn't seem to see them looking at her, she just strode on, gazing off straight ahead.

After a little while, Hermione Granger said, in a voice that sounded thoughtful and a little sad, "Hannah said she didn't want us to stop. I'm not sure it's right for us to... be less brave for her, than she is."

All the other girls, except Susan, nodded at that.

"I think that's got to be as bad as it gets," said Parvati. "And we can handle it. We've proved that now."

Susan couldn't think of anything to say to that. She didn't think that shrieking at the top of her lungs about blatant stupidity and DOOM would be persuasive. And she couldn't just leave the other girls, either. Wasn't it enough to be cursed with hard work, why did Hufflepuffs have to be loyal on top of everything else?

"By the way, Lavender," said Padma. "What in the name of Merlin's underpants were you wearing back there?"

"My hero outfit," said the Gryffindor girl.

Daphne sounded weary, as she spoke without turning her own head from where she was plodding through the hall. "It's the costume of the Soldier of Gryffindor from the play *Chronicles of the Lunarian Soldiers*."

"Did you Transfigure it?" said Parvati, looking puzzled. "But the bully cast Finite on you –"

"Nope!" Lavender said. "It's real! See, I just Transfigured my hero outfit into a regular shirt and skirt beforehand, so all I had to do was cast Finite on myself after I saw the bully. Do you want your own, Parvati? I got mine made yesterday by Katarina and Joshua in sixth-year, for twelve Sickles –"

"I think," General Granger said in a careful voice, "that would make us all look a little silly."

"Well," said Lavender, "we should vote on whether to –"

"I think," General Granger said, "that no matter what anyone votes, I'm not going to be caught dead wearing one of those costumes –"

Susan ignored the argument. She was trying to think up some sort of clever strategy for being less doomed.



The whole Great Hall went silent, even if only for a moment, as the seven of them walked into lunch.

Then the applause started.

It was scattered, not the massive applause of everyone applauding at once. A lot of it came from the Gryffindor table, less from Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw, and none from Slytherin.

Daphne felt her face tightening. She'd hoped – well, maybe after they found a Gryffindor bully to stop and a Slytherin to rescue, her fellow Slytherins would realize –

She looked at the Hufflepuff table.

Neville Longbottom was applauding with his hands held high above his head, although he wasn't smiling. Maybe he'd heard about Hannah, or maybe he was wondering why Hannah wasn't there.

Then, not quite able to help herself, she glanced toward the Head Table.

Professor Sprout's face was lined with concern. She and Professor McGonagall were leaning their heads toward Headmaster Dumbledore, who had a solemn look, and all their lips were moving quickly. Professor Flitwick looked more resigned than anything else, and Quirrell, face slack, was taking trembling stabs at his soup using a spoon gripped in a fist.

Professor Snape was looking directly at –
Her?

Or – at Hermione Granger, standing next to her?

A small, thin smile crossed the Potions Master's face, and he raised his hands, brought them together once in a motion that was too slow to be a real clap; and then the Potions Master turned back to his plate, ignoring the conversations around him.

Daphne felt a little chill go down her spine, and she hastily turned to walk toward the Slytherin table. Susan and Lavender and Parvati peeled off from their group, heading toward the Hufflepuff and Gryffindor tables on the other side of the Great Hall.

It happened as they were passing the part of the Slytherin table where the Slytherin Quidditch team sat.

That was when Hermione stumbled suddenly, stumbled hard like she was being yanked off her feet, and went sprawling into the gap between where Marcus Flint and Lucian Bole sat, and there was a sad little splutching sound as Hermione's face ended up in Flint's plate of steak and mashed potatoes.

Everything seemed to happen too quickly then, or maybe it was just Daphne herself who was thinking too slow, as Flint let out a bellow of indignation and his hand yanked Hermione back and threw her into the Ravenclaw table, and she bounced off a student's back and collapsed onto the ground –

The quiet spread out in ripples.

Hermione pushed herself up on her hands, though she didn't get all the way to her feet, Daphne could see that her whole body was shaking, and that her face was still covered with mashed potatoes with scattered pieces of steak.

For a long moment, nobody spoke, nobody moved. Like nobody in the whole Great Hall could imagine, any more than Daphne could, what happened next.

Then Flint's powerful voice, the voice of the Slytherin Captain that belled commands on the Quidditch pitch, said in a dangerous rumble, "You ruined my food, girl."

Another moment of frozen silence. Hermione's head – Daphne could see it trembling – turned to look at the Slytherin Quidditch Captain.

"Apologize to me," said Flint.

Harry Potter started to push himself up from the Ravenclaw table, and then stopped abruptly, halfway to his feet, as if he'd just thought of something

—

Then five other people stood up from the Ravenclaw table.

All of the Slytherin Quidditch team stood up, their wands coming into their hands, and then students stood up at the Gryffindor table and at the Hufflepuff table and without thinking Daphne turned to look at the Head Table and she saw that the Headmaster was still sitting down, watching, just watching, Dumbledore was just watching and he had one hand out as though to restrain Professor McGonagall – in just one second someone would shout a spell and then it would be too late, why wasn't the Headmaster doing anything –

And a voice said, "My apologies."

Daphne turned back to look, her mouth gaping open in absolute shock.

"Scourgify," said that smooth voice, and the mashed potatoes vanished from Hermione's face, revealing the Ravenclaw's surprised expression as Draco Malfoy approached her, sheathed his wand again, and then knelt to one knee beside her and offered her a hand.

"Sorry about that, Miss Granger," said Draco Malfoy's polite voice. "I guess someone thought they were being funny."

Hermione took Draco's hand, and Daphne suddenly realized what was about to happen –

But Draco Malfoy didn't raise Hermione halfway up and then drop her. He just pulled her to her feet.

"Thanks," said Hermione.

"You're welcome," Draco Malfoy said in a loud voice, not looking to either side to see where all four Houses of Hogwarts were staring at him in total shock. "Just remember, being cunning and ambitious doesn't mean you have to be like that."

And then Draco Malfoy went back to his seat at the Slytherin bench and sat down like he hadn't – he hadn't just – he'd just –

Hermione went to the nearest empty place at the Ravenclaw bench and sat down.

A number of other people, rather slowly, sat down.

"Daphne?" said Tracey. "Are you all right?"



Draco's heart was hammering in his chest so hard he worried it might explode right out of his chest in a shower of blood, like that curse Amycus Carrow had used once on a puppy.

Draco's face stayed completely controlled, because he knew (it'd been drilled into him over and over) that if he showed the slightest sign of the fear he was feeling, his Housemates would rip him apart like a swarm of Acromantulas.

There'd been no time to check with Harry Potter, no time to plot, no time to think, just the instant of realizing that the time to start rescuing Slytherin's reputation was right then.

From all sides of the long Slytherin table, angry faces stared at Draco.

But they were outnumbered by the faces that just looked puzzled.

"All right, I give up," said a sixth-year boy that Draco didn't recognize, sitting across from him and two places to his right. "Why did you do that, Malfoy?"

Although his mouth was very dry, Draco didn't swallow. That would have been a sign of fear. Instead he took a bite of carrots, which had the most moisture of anything on his plate, and chewed and swallowed, thinking as rapidly as he could.

"You know," Draco said, making his voice as cutting as he could – as his heart thumped even harder in his chest, as everyone around him stopped talking to listen – "there's probably some way to make Slytherin look even worse than attacking eight first-year girls from all four Houses who are working together to stop bullies, but I can't think of how. This way we get the benefit of what Greengrass is doing."

The puzzled faces stayed puzzled.

"What?" said the sixth-year boy, and "Wait, what benefit?" said a fifth-year girl sitting to his right.

"It makes Slytherin House look better," said Draco.

The Slytherins around him were giving him quizzical gazes like he'd just tried to explain algebra.

"Look better to who?" said the sixth-year boy.

"But you just helped a mudblood," said the fifth-year girl. "How's that supposed to look good?"

Draco's throat closed up. His brain was experiencing a hideous malfunction during which it couldn't think of anything to say except the truth –

Then, "It's probably some kind of tremendously clever scheme Malfoy's got going," said a fifth-year boy. "You know, like in *The Tragedy of Light*, where everything that looks like a setback is part of the plot. And it ends with Granger's head on a stick and nobody suspecting that it was him."

"That makes sense," someone said from further down the table, and there was a lot of nodding.



"Do you know what the boss's up to?" Vincent muttered in an undertone.

Gregory Goyle didn't reply. In his mind he could hear very clearly his master's voice, saying, I can't believe I believed every word of that, the day the rumor had started about Salazar Slytherin showing Potter and Granger where to find bullies.

"Mr. Goyle?" whispered Vincent.

Gregory Goyle's lips shaped the words, Oh no, but no sound came out.



Hermione had left lunch early that day, for some reason she hadn't felt hungry. Those few seconds of horrible humiliation had kept burning through her mind, over and over, the feeling of her face squishing into the mashed potatoes and then being thrown through the air and then the Slytherin's boy's voice saying 'Apologize to me'... it might have been the first time in her whole life that she'd felt like hating someone. The boy who'd thrown her (Marcus Flint, they'd said his name was) and whoever had cast the tripping Jinx on her in the first place... she'd felt it, for one horrible instant she'd wanted to go tell Harry that if he started getting creative on her behalf, she wouldn't object.

She hadn't been a minute out of the Great Hall before she'd heard the sound of running feet behind, and turned to see Daphne racing toward her.

And listened to what her Sunshine Soldier had to say...

"Don't you understand?" Daphne's voice was barely below a shriek. "Just because someone's nice to you doesn't mean they're your friend! He's Draco Malfoy! His father's a Death Eater, all the parents of all his friends are Death Eaters – Nott, Goyle, Crabbe, everyone around him, do you get it? They all despise Muggleborns, they want everyone like you to die, they think you're good for nothing but being a sacrifice in horrible Dark rituals! Draco is the next Lord Malfoy, he's been raised from birth to hate you and he's been raised

from birth to lie!” Daphne’s gray-green eyes stared fiercely at her, demanding assent and understanding.

“He –” Hermione said falteringly. She remembered the rooftop, the awful jolt as she started to fall, Draco Malfoy’s hand grabbing hers and holding it so hard that she’d had bruises afterward. She’d had to tell him twice before he finally let her fall. “Maybe Draco Malfoy isn’t like them –”

Daphne’s whisper was almost a scream. “If he doesn’t end up doing you ten times as hard as he just helped you, his life is over, do you understand? I mean Lucius Malfoy would literally disinherit him! D’you know what the chance is that he’s not up to something?”

“Tiny?” said Hermione in a small voice.

“Zero!” hissed Daphne. “I mean none! I mean less than zero! I mean the chance is so small that you couldn’t find it with three Magnifying Charms and a Point-Me spell and – and – and an ancient map and a centaur prophet! Everyone in Slytherin knows he’s plotting to do something to you and doesn’t want to be suspected, I heard someone say he was seen pointing his wand at you just before you tripped – don’t you see? This is all part of Malfoy’s plan!”



Draco sat eating his steak with roasted cauliflower florets and Ashwinder sauce (it wasn’t made from real Ashwinder eggs, it just tasted like fire), trying not to laugh and trying not to cry.

He’d heard about plausible deniability, but hadn’t realized how much it mattered until he found that Malfoys didn’t have any.

“You want to know my plot?” said Draco. “Here’s my plot. I’m not going to do anything and then the next time people think I’m plotting something, they won’t be sure.”

“Huh...” said the fifth-year boy. “I don’t think I believe you, that doesn’t sound cunning enough to be really it –”

“That’s what he wants you to think,” said the fifth-year girl.



“Albus,” Minerva said dangerously, “did you plan all this?”



“Well, if I did snap my fingers under the table, I wouldn’t just tell you that –”



The Defense Professor's quavering hand dropped his spoon into the soup again.



"What do you mean, set you up?" said Millicent. The two of them were sitting cross-legged on Daphne's bed, having come there straight from the Great Hall after lunch. "With my Seer's eyes that stare through Time Itself, I saw you winning."

Daphne stared at Millicent, her own merely mortal eyes rather narrowed at the moment. "That boy was expecting us."

"Well, yeah!" said Millicent. "Everyone knows you're hunting bullies!"

"Hannah got hit by a really painful hex," Daphne said. "She had to visit a healer, Millicent! If we're friends you should've warned me!"

"Look, Daphne, I told you –" The Slytherin girl paused, as if trying to remember something, and then said, "I mean, I told you, what I See has to come to pass. If I try to change it, if anyone tries to change it, really terrible, awful, no good, extremely bad things will happen. And then it'll come to pass anyway. If I See you getting beaten up, I can't tell you that, because then you'd try to not go, and then –" Millicent stopped.

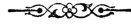
"And then?" Daphne said skeptically. "I mean, what happens if we just don't go?"

"I don't know!" said Millicent. "But it probably makes being eaten by Lethifolds look like a tea party!"

"Look, even I know that's not how prophecies work," Daphne said, then paused. "At least prophecies don't work like that in plays..." Admittedly, there were all sorts of tragedies where trying to avoid a prophecy made it happen, or where, on the other hand, trying to go along with a prophecy was the only reason why it happened. But you could make prophecies happen your own way if you were clever enough; or someone who loved you enough could take your place; or with enough effort it was possible to break a prophecy outright... Then again, in plays the Seers never remembered what they Saw, either...

Millicent must have seen Daphne's hesitation, because the other girl started looking a little more confident. "Well," Millicent said sharply, "this isn't a play! Look, I'll tell you if I See it being a hard battle or an easy one. But

that's all I can do, you understand? And if I say 'hard' you can't not show up! Or – or –" Millicent's eyes rolled back in her head, and she intoned hollowly, "Those who try to cheat their destinies will come to sad and gloomy ends –"



Professor Sprout shook her head, her face looking tight.

"But –" said Susan. "But you helped Harry Potter that one time –"

"And it was made quite clear to me," Professor Sprout said in a voice that sounded like someone was using a Shrinking Charm to squeeze her throat, "that it was Professor Snape's job, and not mine, to keep order in Slytherin House – Miss Bones, please, you don't have to do this if –"

"Yes, I do have to," Susan said unhappily. "I'm a Hufflepuff, we have to be loyal."



"A mysterious parchment under your pillow?" said Harry Potter, looking up from where he was sitting, in the Quieted nook where they were studying. Then the boy's green eyes narrowed. "It wasn't from Santa Claus, was it?"

Pause.

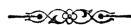
"Okay," said Hermione. "I'm not going to ask, and you're not going to tell me, and we're both going to pretend you never said that and I don't know anything about it –"



Susan approached the table as soon as the older girl was alone, glancing around the Hufflepuff common room to make sure nobody was watching (the way Auntie had taught her to do it, so that it wouldn't be obvious that she was looking).

"Hey, Susie," said the seventh-year Hufflepuff. "Do you already need more –"

"Can I please talk to you privately for a bit?" Susan said.



Jaime Astorga, seventh-year of Slytherin, and until recently considered a promising upstart on the youth dueling circuit, stood ramrod straight in

Professor Snape's office, with his teeth clenched tight and sweat trickling down his spine.

"I distinctly recall," said the Head of his House in a sardonic drawl, "that I warned you, and a number of others this very morning, that there were certain first-year girls who might prove annoying, if a fighter were incautious and allowed himself to be taken by surprise."

Professor Snape stalked in a slow circle around him.

"I –" said Jaime, as more sweat beaded on his forehead. He knew how ridiculous it sounded, how much of a pathetic excuse. "Sir, they shouldn't have been able to –" One first-year-girl shouldn't have been able to break his Protego, no matter what sort of ancient Charm she used – Greengrass must have had help –

But it was very clear that his Head of House wouldn't believe that.

"Oh, I quite agree," murmured Snape in a low tone, instinct with menace. "They shouldn't have. I begin to wonder if Mr. Malfoy, whatever his plotting, has a point, Astorga. It cannot be good for the repute of Slytherin's House if our fighters, rather than demonstrating their strength, lose to little girls!" Snape's voice had risen. "It is well that you had the good taste to be defeated by a little girl who is a fellow Slytherin of a Noble House, Astorga, or I would deduct points from you myself!"

Jaime Astorga's fists clenched at his side, but he couldn't think of a thing to say.

It was some time before Jaime Astorga was allowed to leave the presence of his Head of House.

And afterward, only the walls, the floor, and the ceiling saw Severus Snape's smile.



That evening Draco was visited by his father's owl, Tanaxu, who wasn't green but only because there weren't such things as green owls. The best Father had been able to find was an owl of the purest silver feathers, with great luminous green eyes, and a beak as sharp and cruel as any snake's fang. The parchment wrapped around Tanaxu's leg was short and to the point:

What are you doing, my son?

The parchment that Draco sent back was equally short, and it said,

I am trying to stop harm done to Slytherin's reputation, father.

In as much time as it took for an owl to fly from Hogwarts to Malfoy Manor and back again, the family owl bore another message to Draco, and this one said only:

What are you really doing?

Draco stared at the parchment he'd unwrapped from the owl's leg. His hands trembled, as he held up the parchment to the light of his fireplace. Five words, carved in black ink, shouldn't have been scarier than death.

There wasn't very much time to think. Father knew exactly how long it took for a message to go from Malfoy Manor to Hogwarts and back again; he would know if Draco delayed to compose a careful lie.

But Draco still waited until his hand stopped trembling, before he wrote his reply, the only answer he'd thought of that Father might accept.

I am preparing for the next war.

Draco wrapped that parchment around the owl's leg and tied it, and then sent Tanaxu winging out from his room, through the halls of Hogwarts, into the night.

He waited, but no reply came.

SELF ACTUALIZATION, THE SACRED AND THE MUNDANE, PART VIII

THE red jet of fire took Hannah full in the face, flipping her end-over-heels and smacking her head straight into the stone wall, where her pale face seemed to linger for an instant, framed by flying strands of brown-golden hair, before she collapsed to the ground in a heap of robes, as the third and final volley of blazing green spirals brought down their foe's Shield Charm.

The March days marched by, filled with lectures and study and homework, breakfast and lunch and dinner.

The Gryffindor boy stared at the eight of them, tension in every line of his body's frame, his face working soundlessly; and then his hands released their clenched grasp on the Slytherin boy's lapels, and he walked away without anyone saying a word. (Well, Lavender almost said a word – her mouth was just opening in indignation, maybe because she hadn't gotten a chance to declaim her speech – but luckily Hermione spotted it and made the gesture that meant SHUT UP.)

Then there was sleeping, of course. You wouldn't want to forget about sleeping just because it seemed so normal.

"Innervate!" said the young voice of Susan Bones, and Hermione's eyes flew open and her lips drew in air with a gasp, her lungs feeling heavy like there was a huge weight resting on her chest. Beside her, Hannah was already sitting up, holding her head in her hands and grimacing. Daphne had warned them that this would be a 'hard' fight, creating a certain trepidation in Hermione, and indeed in all of them. Except maybe Susan, who'd just shown up at the appointed meeting-time, and walked alongside them without speaking, and fought the seventh-year bully until she was the last girl standing. Maybe the Gryffindor had been reluctant to fight the last daughter of Bones, or maybe Susan had just gotten very lucky; at any rate, when Hermione had tried to sit up again, she'd realized that her chest had felt heavy because there

was, in fact, a rather large body sprawled on top of her.

And you wouldn't want to forget about magic either, even if the actual moment of casting a spell only formed a very small part of your day. It was the whole point of Hogwarts, after all.

"Okay, how about if we all ride around on skateboards?" said Lavender. "We could get places faster than walking. And we'd look really awesome on skateboards, Muggle artifacts may not be as fast as broomsticks but they look cooler – we should vote on it –"

As for the remaining fractions of time, you would fill that according to your nature: gossip about upper-year romances, or books and study sessions.

Hermione reached out a trembling hand to grasp her copy of *Hogwarts: A History* from where it had fallen, the ever-comforting book only a pace distant from where she herself had ended up on the floor, after the red-robed upper-year girl had "bumped" her into a wall. And then the older Gryffindor witch had walked away without a look back, only a whispered "Salazar's –" and a word that hurt her more than anything the Slytherins said about mudbloods, 'mudblood' was just a strange wizarding word but Hermione knew the word the Gryffindor had said. She couldn't get used to it, she just couldn't get used to being hated. It still hurt just as much every time it happened, and somehow it hurt even more coming from the Gryffindors who were supposed to be the good ones.

Harry had divided up eight of his soldiers among the other armies, as ordered; he'd voluntarily given up two Chaotic Lieutenants, sending Dean Thomas to Dragon Army and then trading Seamus Finnigan to her for Blaise Zabini, who Harry had said was being "underutilized" in Sunshine. Lavender had elected to join most of SPHEW in Sunshine; Tracey had decided to stay with Chaos.

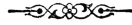
"So you can work your charms on General Potter?" said Lavender, as Hermione ignored both of them as hard as she could. "I've got to say, Traces, I think our Sunshine General has him pretty well sewn up by now – you'd have better luck convincing Hermione that the three of you should have one of those, you know, arrangements –"

Nobody had figured out yet what Draco Malfoy was plotting.

"Certain?" said Harry Potter, sounding rather reluctant. "You know a rationalist isn't ever certain of anything, Hermione, not even that two and two make four. I can't actually read Malfoy's mind, and if I could, I couldn't be certain he wasn't a perfect Occlumens. All I can say is that based on what

I've seen of Malfoy, it's a lot more plausible than Daphne Greengrass thinks, that he actually is trying to show the Slytherins a better way. We should... we really should try to go along with that, Hermione."

(Well, Harry seemed to think Draco Malfoy was a good guy. But then the trouble was that Harry also tended to trust people like Professor Quirrell.)



"Professor Quirrell," Harry said, "I'm worried about the hatred Slytherin House seems to be developing for Hermione Granger."

They were sitting in the Defense Professor's office, Harry sitting far back from the teacher's desk (and the sense of pending disaster was still noticeable, even then), the empty bookcase still framing Professor Quirrell's balding head. The cup balanced on Harry's thigh was filled with Professor Quirrell's obscure, probably-expensive Chinese tea, and it said something about the way Harry had been thinking lately that he'd needed to make a conscious decision to drink it.

"And this concerns me for what reason?" said Professor Quirrell, sipping his tea.

"Yes, well," said Harry, "I'm just going to ignore that – oh, stop that, Professor Quirrell, you've been plotting to restore Slytherin House's reputation since at least the first Friday of this year."

There might have been a tiny crack of a smile, at the edges of those thin pale lips; and then again, there might not have been. "I think Slytherin's House will do well enough in the end, Mr. Potter, regardless of the fate of one girl. But I do agree that the present outlook is not favorable for your little friend. The bullies of two Houses, many of them with powerful and well-connected families, see Miss Granger as a threat to their reputation and a shame to their pride. As powerful a motive as that is to hurt her, it pales compared to the raw envy of the Gryffindors, who see an outsider gaining the laurels of heroism which they have dreamed of since childhood." Now the smile on Professor Quirrell's lips was definite, though slight. "And then there are those of Slytherin House who hear that Salazar Slytherin's ghost has abandoned them to favor a mudblood. I wonder if you can even conceive, Mr. Potter, of how such as they would react? Those who do not believe it would cheerfully kill Miss Granger for the insult. And as for those Slytherins who wonder deep down, in some quiet place within themselves, if it might perhaps be true... their inner panic is something scarcely to be contemplated."

Professor Quirrell sipped his tea equably. "When you are more experienced, Mr. Potter, you will see such consequences in advance of your plotting. As it stands, you are being ill-served by your willful ignorance of all human nature you deem unpleasant."

Harry sipped his own tea.

"Ah..." said Harry. "Professor Quirrell... help?"

"I already offered Miss Granger my help," said Professor Quirrell, "as soon as I foresaw what would develop. My student told me, in polite terms, to stay out of her business. Nor would she tell you anything different, I expect. As I have little to truly gain or lose in this matter, I hardly intend to press the point." The Defense Professor shrugged, his teacup held steady in the exactly-right polite grip, so that the surface of the liquid did not even ripple as Professor Quirrell leaned back within his chair. "Do not worry too much, Mr. Potter. Emotions run high around Miss Granger, but she is in less danger than you might imagine. When you are older, you will learn that the first and foremost thing which any ordinary person does is nothing."



The envelope which the Slytherin System had delivered to Daphne at lunch was unsigned, as always; the parchment within named a time and a place and said, simply, "Hard."

That wasn't what had concerned Daphne. What had concerned Daphne was that Millicent didn't seem to be looking in her or Tracey's direction at lunch that day. She'd just stared straight ahead at her plate and eaten. Millicent had looked up just once that Daphne saw, in the direction of the Hufflepuff table, and then looked quickly back down again; though Daphne was too far away to see the expression on Millicent's face, since Millicent had sat down far away from her and Tracey.

Daphne had thought about that during lunch, with a sick feeling in her stomach unlike anything she'd felt before, and which had caused her to stop eating halfway through her first plate.

What I See has to come to pass... it probably makes being eaten by Lethifolds look like a tea party...

It wasn't any conscious decision that Daphne made, nothing like Slytherins were supposed to do, no weighing of the benefits to herself.

Instead –

Daphne told Hannah and Susan and everyone, that her informant had warned her that the next bully was going to target Hufflepuffs in particular, and that the bully planned to risk the teachers' wrath in order to really hurt either Hannah or Susan, like seriously, and the two of them needed to stay out of this one.

Hannah had agreed to stay out of it.

Susan had –



“What are you doing here?” yelled General Granger, though it was sort of a yell and a whisper at the same time.

Susan's round face didn't change, like the Hufflepuff girl had suddenly developed the sort of experienced blankness that Daphne's own Mother used. “Am I here, really?” Susan said calmly.

“You said you wouldn't come!”

“Did I say that?” said Susan. She flipped her wand casually in one hand, leaning against the stone wall of the corridor where they were waiting, her reddish-brown hair somehow arranging itself in perfect order against the yellow trim of her witch's robes. “I wonder why. Maybe I didn't want Hannah to get any strange ideas. Hufflepuff loyalty, you know.”

“If you don't leave,” said the Sunshine General, “I'll call a mission abort, and we'll all go back to our study halls, Miss Bones!”

“Hey!” said Lavender. “We didn't vote on –”

“That's fine by me,” said Susan, who was keeping a steady gaze on the other end of the corridor where it merged into the tiled hallway where they'd been told to expect the bully. “I'll just stay here myself, then.”

“Why –” said Daphne. Her heart was in her throat. If I try to change it, if anyone tries to change it, really terrible, awful, no good, extremely bad things will happen. And then it'll come to pass anyway... “Why are you doing this?”

“It's not like me,” said Susan. “I know. But –” Susan shrugged. “People don't always behave like themselves, you know.”

They pleaded.

They begged.

Susan didn't even say anything anymore, she just kept watching, waiting.

Daphne was nearly crying, she kept wondering if she'd caused this, if trying to change Fate was making this happen worse –

“Daphne,” said Hermione, her voice sounding much higher than usual, “go get a teacher. Run.”

Daphne spun on her heels and started to pelt down the other direction of the stony corridor, and then she realized, and she turned back to where all the other girls except Susan were watching her go, and Daphne, feeling like she was about to throw up, said, “I can’t...”

“What?” said Hermione.

“I think it gets worse every time you try to fight it,” said Daphne. That was how it worked in plays, sometimes.

Hermione stared at her, and then Hermione said, “Padma.”

The other Ravenclaw girl just tore right out of there without arguing. Daphne watched her go, knowing that Padma wasn’t as good a runner as her, and now wondering if maybe that would turn out to be the only reason why help would come too late...

“Bullies are here,” Susan said laconically. “Huh, they’ve got a hostage.”

They all whirled, and looked, and saw –

Three older bullies, Daphne’s eyes recognized Reese Belka who was a top lieutenant in one of the seventh-year armies, and Randolph Lee who was number two in the Hogwarts dueling club, and worst of all, Robert Jugson III, in his sixth year, whose father was almost certainly a Death Eater.

All three were surrounded by Shielding Charms, blue hazes that glowed beneath the surface in ribbons of other color and showed occasional faceting above, multi-layered shields like the three of them thought they were fighting serious duelists and had expended energy accordingly.

And behind them, bound and supported by glowing ropes, was Hannah Abbott. Her eyes were wide and panicked and her mouth was moving, though they couldn’t hear anything through the Quietus they’d put up earlier.

Then Jugson made an offhand gesture with his wand, and the glowing ropes flung Hannah at them, there was a small pop as Hannah’s body blew through the Quieting barrier, Susan’s wand was instantly pointing at Hannah and Susan’s voice muttered “Wingardium Leviosa” –

“Run!” screamed Hannah, as she was gently lowered to the ground.

But the corridor behind them and in front of them was now blocked with a glowing gray field, a barrier spell that Daphne didn’t recognize.

“Do I need to explain what this is about?” Lee said with false joviality. The seventh-year duelist was sporting a smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “Well, just in case, you little inconveniences, and that includes you Miss Greengrass,

you've been quite enough trouble and you've told quite enough lies. We brought your little friend just to make sure everyone knew we got all of you – though I suppose the other Ravenclaw girl is hiding around a corner or clinging to the ceiling somewhere? Well, no matter. This is your –”

“Enough talk,” said Robert Jugson III, “time for pain,” and raised his wand. “Cluthe!”

Simultaneously Susan pointed her wand and said “Prismatis!” and a small rainbow sphere formed in midair almost instantly, the miniature barrier so condensed and bright that it stayed intact even as Jugson’s hex hit it and bounced off toward Belka, whose wand flashed to swat away the dark bolt; and then a moment later the many-colored blaze was gone.

Daphne’s eyes went wide for a moment; she’d never thought of using a Prismatic Sphere like that –

“Jugsy, honey?” said Belka. Her lips widened in a vicious smile. “I thought we discussed this. First we beat them, then we play.”

“P-please,” said Hermione Granger in a faltering voice, “let them go – I, I, I promise I’ll –”

“Oh, really,” said Lee in an annoyed tone. “Are you about to offer to turn yourself over if we let the others go? We’ve got all of you, now.”

Jugson smiled, then. “It could be funny,” said the sixth-year junior Death Eater, softly and with menace. “How about if you lick my shoes, mudblood, and one of your friends can go? Pick whichever one you like best, leave the others to get hurt.”

“Nope,” said the young voice of Susan Bones, “not going to happen,” and with a blindingly fast motion the Hufflepuff girl leapt leftward just as a red stunbolt erupted from Belka’s wand, Daphne could hardly see the movement as Susan seemed to hit the corridor wall and then bounce off it like she was a rubber ball and her legs smashed into Jugson’s face, it didn’t go through the shield but the sixth-year went sprawling backward with the impact and Susan followed him downward and her foot stamped down on the boy’s wand arm, again being repelled by the shield, “Elmekia!” shouted Lee and Parvati shouted “Prismatis!” and the rainbow wall formed but the fiery blue blast passed right through it like it wasn’t even there, the bolt missed Susan by inches, there was a whirlwind of motion that Daphne couldn’t follow during which Belka had her feet knocked out from under her, but the older witch just rolled back to a stand and then –

Daphne saw it coming, and her lips started to mouth “Pris-” but it was

already too late.

Three blasts of brilliance slammed into Susan at once, she had her wand raised as though she could counter them and there was a white flash as the hexes struck the magical wood, but then Susan's legs convulsed and sent her flying into a corridor wall. Her head hit with a strange cracking sound, and then Susan fell down and lay motionless with her head at an odd-seeming angle, her wand still clutched in one outstretched hand.

There was a moment of frozen silence.

Parvati scrambled over to where Susan lay, pressed a thumb over the pulse point on Susan's wrist, and then – then slowly, tremblingly, Parvati rose to her feet, her eyes huge –

"Vitalis revelio," said Lee just as Parvati opened her mouth, and Susan's body was surrounded by a warm red glow. Now the seventh-year boy really was grinning. "Probably just a broken collarbone, I'd say. Nice try, though."

"Merlin, they are tricky," said Jugson.

"You had me going for a second there, dearies." The seventh-year girl wasn't smiling at all.

"Tonare!" screamed Daphne, raising her wand above her head and focusing harder than she ever had in her life. "Rava calvaria! Lucis –"

She didn't even see the hex that got her.



Hermione felt the jolt of Innervation bringing her awake, and out of some intuitive strategism she didn't roll to her feet right away; it had been a completely hopeless battle and she didn't know what she could do but some instinct told her that leaping to her feet wasn't it.

Just a crack, Hermione opened her eyes, and the thin rays of light that entered them showed Parvati backing away from all three bullies, the last girl standing that Hermione could see.

And her eyes also showed Tracey fallen not far away from her, and Hermione's wand was still in her hand; and so, desperately hoping the Slytherin girl would show more sense than she usually did, Hermione made the wand movements as subtly as she could, and hardly moving her lips, whispered, "Innervate."

Hermione felt the spell working, but Tracey didn't move. Hermione hoped it was because Tracey was being cunning, and waiting to...

What could they do?

Hermione didn't know, and the panic that had waited through the moments of fighting was starting to eat her up inside now that she was still, now that she was trying to think, now that she could see that it was all absolutely hopeless.

That was when Hermione heard a thud, and though it was out of her field of vision now, she knew that Parvati had fallen.

A moment of silence came, and passed.

"Now what?" said the voice of the scary-soft boy.

"Now we wake up the mudblood," said the precise voice of the scary-formal boy, "and find out who's really behind them, not Salazar Slytherin's ghost."

"No, dears," said the voice of the scary-sweet girl, "first we bind them all very securely –"

And then there was a sound like lightning and thunder and Hermione's eyes widened in shock before she could stop herself, and in her widened field of vision she saw the scary-soft boy convulsing as yellow arcs of energy crawled over him like giant blazing worms. His wand flew out of his hand as he collapsed to the ground, twitching, and then a moment later he lay still.

"Is everyone else asleep now?" said a voice. "Good."

Susan Bones rose from the floor near where the scary-soft boy had stood, neck still oddly bent. Then she rolled her head around her shoulders, a casual loose motion, and her head was straight again.

The round-faced first-year girl stood facing the remaining two bullies with one hand cocked on her hip.

Grinning.

And surrounded by faceted blue haze.

"Polyjuice!" spat the bully-girl.

"Polyfluis Reverso!" roared the remaining boy bully.

Something like the form of a mirrored scarf spat out of his wand –

Passed without resistance through the haze surrounding Susan –

For an instant, she glowed in a strange mirror-color, like a reflection of herself –

And then the glow faded.

The young girl still stood there, hand on her hip.

"Wrong," said Susan.

"And this is the truth," said Susan. "In case nobody ever told you –"

In her small hand a wand rose up, blurred by the blue haze surrounding it.

"You don't mess with the 'Puffs," said Susan, and with a grey flash so bright it hurt Hermione's half-closed eyes, the real battle started.

It went on for a while.

Some of the ceiling got melted.

The girl-bully tried to cry a truce, that they would leave and take Jugson with them, and Susan roared out the syllables of a curse Hermione recognized as Abi-Dalzim's Horrid Wilting which was illegal in seven countries.

Eventually the girl-bully lay unconscious and unawakenable on the ground, and the last boy-bully had fled leaving his companions' bodies behind, and Susan was leaned over against one wall, covered in sweat and her scorched robes soaked through with wet spots, gasping for breath, and clutching at her right shoulder using her left hand.

After a while Susan straightened up, and turned to look back at where her fellow witches were sleeping on the floor.

Well, they should've been sleeping on the floor.

Lavender was already sitting up with eyes as wide as watermelons.

"That..." said Lavender.

"Was..." said Tracey.

"What?" said Hermione.

"I mean, what?" said Parvati.

"Cool!" said Lavender.

"Oh, hell," said Susan Bones. Her face had already looked a little pale beneath the sweat, and now it was getting paler, looking almost frighteningly white. "Ah... could I convince you that you hallucinated all that?"

There was a rapid exchange of glances. Hermione looked at Parvati, Parvati looked at Lavender, Lavender briefly locked gazes with Tracey.

The four of them looked back at Susan and shook their heads.

"Oh, hell," said Susan again. "Look I'll be back in a few minutes but I've really got to go now please don't say anything bye!"

And Susan ran out into the hallway, moving surprisingly fast, before anyone could say another word.

"No, seriously, what?" said Parvati.

"Innervate," said Hermione, pointing her wand at Daphne, whose body she hadn't been able to see before; and Lavender pointed her wand at Hannah's body and said the same.

Hannah's eyes opened and she tried frantically to roll to her feet, but collapsed to the ground halfway through.

"It's okay, Hannah!" said Lavender. "We won."

"We what?" said Hannah from her little heap on the floor.

Daphne hadn't stirred, but Hermione could see her chest rising and falling, and the breathing rhythm looked normal enough. "I think she's okay," said Hermione, "but –" She took a moment to swallow, her mouth was still dry. This had all gotten way, way, way out of hand. "I think we ought to take Daphne to Madam Pomfrey's..."

"Sure, sure, just give me a second here and I'll probably be fine," said Parvati.

"Excuse me," Hannah said in a tone that was polite, but firm. "How did we win? And why does the ceiling look all melty?"

There was a pause.

"Susan did it," said Tracey.

"Yeah," said Parvati, voice only slightly shaky as she stood up and started to brush off her red-trimmed robes, "it turns out that Susan Bones is the Heir of Hufflepuff and she's opened up the long-lost entrance to Helga Hufflepuff's Chamber of Hard Work and Practice."

"Huh?" said Hannah, who was feeling over herself as if to make sure all her body parts were still there. "I thought that was just something Professor Sprout says to teach us an Important Moral Lesson – Susan is?"

Slowly, Hermione was beginning to feel a bit more together. It hadn't really been more than thirty seconds of extreme terror, at least not the parts she'd been conscious for. "Actually," Hermione said carefully, as her mind started to work again, "I'm pretty sure that is just something Professor Sprout says, it wasn't in *Hogwarts: A History* or anywhere else I've read –"

"She's a double witch!" shouted Tracey, her voice so high it cracked. "She is! She's one of them! She's been this whole time!"

"What?" yelled Parvati, twisting around to look at Tracey. "That is the looniest thing –"

"Of course!" said Lavender, now all the way on her feet and starting to bounce up and down with excitement. "I should've realized!"

"Susan's a what?" said Hermione.

"A double witch!" said Tracey.

"You see," said Lavender, speaking very rapidly, "There've always been stories, about these children who are born as super magicians who can cast spells

no one else can, and there's a whole secret school hidden inside Hogwarts with classes that only they can see and go to –"

"Those are just stories!" yelled Parvati. "That's not how real life works! I mean, sure, I read those books too –"

"Just a minute, please," said Hermione. Maybe her mind was feeling a little slow after all. "You mean even though you already get to go to a magical school and everything, you still want to go to a double magical school?"

Lavender looked at her, puzzled. "What?" said Lavender. "Who wouldn't want to have super extra magical powers? It would be like this whole amazing destiny and everything! It'd mean you were special!"

Hannah nodded to that, looking up from where she'd crawled to Daphne's side and was checking the girl for broken bones. "I wish I was a double witch," Hannah said, and then, sounding a little sadder, "though I don't believe there is any such thing, really... what did you see Susan do, exactly? I mean, are you sure you weren't just seeing things after getting stunned?"

Hermione truly, truly couldn't find any words at this point.

"Oh, no," said Tracey. The Slytherin girl spun around to look at the entrance to the corridor, her robes fluttering around her. "Oh no! We've got to get out of here! We've got to get away before Susan comes back with someone who can Super-Memory-Charm us!"

"Susan wouldn't do that!" said Parvati. "I mean, if there even was –"

"WHAT'S GOING ON HERE?" roared a high-pitched squeaky voice, as Professor Flitwick stormed into the partially melted corridor like a small, dangerously compressed package of pure academic fury, an ashen-faced Padma gasping along behind him.



"What happened?" Susan blurted to the girl who looked exactly like her, except for the scorched robes damp with sweat.

"Ooh, great question!" said the other Susan Bones as she rapidly skinned off what was left of her borrowed clothes. A moment later the girl began to Metamorphose back into her more accustomed form of Nymphadora Tonks. "Sorry but I couldn't think of anything myself so you've got about three minutes to decide on an answer to that –"



As Daphne Greengrass observed afterward with some acidity, the flaw in Hermione's cunning plan to make sure that House points were taken evenly from all four Houses if they got caught, was that it didn't work on detentions.

They'd all agreed to keep their mouths shut about Susan's mysterious powers – even Tracey, after Susan threatened to have her Super-Memory-Charmed if she didn't promise. Unfortunately, they discovered at dinnertime that someone had forgotten to tell the bullies about their agreement, and also that Susan Bones had sacrificed her soul to dreadful forbidden powers which now inhabited the hulk of her body and that was why they'd all gotten detention.

"Hermione?" Harry Potter said to her from beside her at the dinner table, his voice very tentative. "Please don't take offense, and I'll understand if you say it's none of my business, but I think all this is starting to spin out of control."

Hermione went on mashing the slice of chocolate cake on her plate into a seamless mush of cake and icing. "Yes," Hermione said, her voice might have been a little acerbic, "that was what I said to Professor Flitwick while I was apologizing to him, that I knew things had gotten out of hand, and he yelled: Really, Miss Granger? Do you think? in a squeak so loud that my ears caught on fire. I mean my ears actually caught on fire. Professor Flitwick had to put them out again."

Harry had put his hand to his forehead. "Excuse me," Harry said. His face was perfectly straight. "Sometimes I still have a little trouble getting used to that sort of thing. Hey, Hermione, remember when we were young and naive and we still thought the world was a relatively understandable place?"

Hermione put her fork down and looked at him for a moment. "Do you sometimes wish you were a Muggle, Harry?"

"Huh?" said Harry. "Well, of course not! I mean, even if I was a Muggle, I'd probably have tried someday to take over the worrrrrlllll-" as Hermione gave him a look and the boy hastily swallowed the word and said, "I mean optimize of course, you know that's what I really mean, Hermione! My point is, it's not like my goals would change one way or another. But with magic it's going to be a lot easier to get things done than if I had to do stuff using only the Muggle capability set. If you think about it logically, that's why I'm going to Hogwarts instead of just ignoring all this and studying for a career in nanotechnology."

Hermione, having finished hand-crafting her Chocolate Cake Sauce,

began to dip her carrots in it and eat them.

"Why do you ask?" said Harry. "Do you wish you were back in the Muggle world?"

"Not exactly," Hermione said, as she crunched into both the carrot and the chocolate. "I was just, well, feeling strange about having wanted to be a witch... Did you want to be a wizard when you were little?"

"Of course," Harry said promptly. "I also wanted psychic powers and super-strength and adamantium-reinforced bones and my own flying castle and sometimes I felt sad that I might have to settle for just being a famous scientist and an astronaut."

Hermione nodded. "You know," she said softly, "I think the witches and wizards who grow up here don't really appreciate magic properly..."

"Well, of course they don't," Harry said, "that's what gives us our advantage. Isn't that obvious? I mean seriously, that was bloody obvious to me within five minutes of walking into Diagon Alley." There was a puzzled look on the boy's face, like he couldn't understand why she was paying attention to something so ordinary.

SELF ACTUALIZATION, ESCALATION OF CONFLICTS, PART IX

HARRY walked forward a step, then another step, until a sense of unease began to pervade him, a disquiet in his nerves.

He said nothing, lifted no hand; the pervading sense of unease would say it for him.

From behind the closed door of the office came a whisper, carrying through the door as though no door were present.

"It is not my office hours," said that cold whisper, "nor yet the time of our meeting. I take ten Quirrell points from you, and be glad it is not more."

Harry stayed calm. Going through Azkaban had recalibrated his scale of emotional disturbances; and losing a House point, which had formerly rated five out of ten, now lay somewhere around zero point three. Harry's voice was likewise level, as he said, "You made a testable prediction and it was falsified, Professor. I only wished to note that."

As Harry turned to go, he heard the door opening behind him, and he swung back around in some surprise.

Professor Quirrell was leaning back in his chair, his head lolling back against its rest, as a parchment floated before him. Both the Defense Professor's hands rested limply on the desk, as though nerveless. He might have been a corpse, excepting that the ice-blue eyes still moved, back and forth, back and forth.

The parchment vanished, and was replaced by another so quickly it was like the material had only flickered.

Then the lips moved as well. "And from this," whispered the lips, "you infer what, Mr. Potter?"

Harry was shaken by the sight, but his voice stayed even as he said, "That ordinary people do not always do nothing, and that Hermione Granger is in more danger from Slytherin House than you thought."

The lips curved, ever so barely. "So you think I have failed in my grasp of human nature. But that is hardly the only possibility, boy. Do you see the

other?”

Harry furrowed his brows as he stared at the Defense Professor.

“I tire of this,” the Defense Professor whispered. “You will stand there until you see it for yourself, or else leave.” As though Harry had stopped existing, the Defense Professor’s eyes looked back to the parchment, once more scanning back and forth.

It was six parchments later that Harry saw it, and said out loud, “You think your prediction failed because there was some other factor at work which was not in your model. Some reason why Slytherin House hates Hermione more than you realized. Like when the orbital calculations for Uranus were wrong, and the problem wasn’t in Newton’s Laws, it was that they didn’t know about Neptune –”

The parchment vanished, and was not replaced. The head rose from its lolling position then, facing Harry more directly, and the voice which issued forth was quiet, but not toneless. “I think, boy,” Professor Quirrell said softly, but in something approaching his normal voice, “that if all Slytherin House hated her so much, I would have seen it. And yet three formidable fighters of that House did something rather than nothing, at risk and at cost to themselves. What force could have moved them, or willed their motion?” The icy blue glitter of the Defense Professor’s eyes met Harry’s own gaze. “Some hand possessed of influence within Slytherin, perhaps. Then how would that hand have benefited itself by harm done to the girl and her followers?”

“Um...” said Harry. “It would have to be someone threatened by Hermione somehow, or someone who would get the credit if she was hurt? I don’t know anyone who fits that profile, but then I don’t know much about anyone in Slytherin outside first-year.” The thought was also coming to Harry that deducing a hidden mastermind from a single mildly-unexpected attack seemed like insufficient evidence to support the prior improbability of the theory; but then it was Professor Quirrell who was doing the deducing...

The Defense Professor was just looking at Harry, eyelids slightly lowered as though in impatience.

“And yes,” said Harry, “I am sure that Draco Malfoy isn’t behind it.”

A hiss of outward air like a sigh. “He is the son of Lucius Malfoy, trained to the most exacting standards. Whatever you have seen of him, even in what seem to be unguarded moments when his mask slips and you trust that you have seen the truth beneath, even that may all be part of the face he chooses to show you.”

Only if Draco successfully cast the Patronus Charm as part of keeping up the act. But Harry didn't say that, of course; instead he just grinned slightly, and said, "So either you've really never read Draco's mind, or that's just what you want me to think."

There was a pause. One of the hands turned over, beckoned a finger.

Harry stepped into the room. The door closed behind him.

"That was not something you should have said aloud in human speech," said Professor Quirrell's soft voice. "Legilimency, on Malfoy's heir? Did Lucius Malfoy learn of it, he would have me assassinated outright."

"He would try," Harry said. It should have won a crinkle of Professor Quirrell's eyes, but the Defense Professor's face was unmoving. "But sorry."

When the Defense Professor spoke again, his voice had once more become a cold whisper. "I suppose I could, and pity the assassin." His head fell back against the chair, lolled to one side, the eyes no longer meeting Harry's. "But these small games hardly hold my interest as they stand. Add Legilimency, and it ceases to be a game at all."

Harry hardly knew what to say. He'd seen Professor Quirrell in an angry mood once or twice before, but this seemed emptier, and Harry didn't know what to say to it. What's bothering you, Professor Quirrell? he could not ask.

"What does hold your interest?" Harry said a few moments later, after he'd worked it out as a safer-seeming strategy for redirecting Professor Quirrell's attention to positive things. Citing experimental results about keeping a gratitude journal as a strategy for improving life happiness didn't seem like it would be taken well.

"I will tell you what does not hold my interest," said that icy whisper. "Grading Ministry-mandated essays does not hold my interest, Mr. Potter. But I have undertaken the position of Defense Professor at Hogwarts, and I will see it through to its end." Another parchment appeared in front of Professor Quirrell's head, and his eyes began to scan it. "Reese Belka held a high position in my armies before her folly. I will offer her the chance to stay rather than being expelled, if she tells me exactly of the forces which moved her. And I shall make clear to her what will happen if she lies. I do permit myself to read faces."

The Defense Professor's finger pointed past Harry, toward the door.

"But whether you were wrong about human nature," Harry said, "or whether there's some extra force at work in Slytherin House – either way, Hermione Granger is in more danger than you predicted. Last time it was

three strong fighters, so what happens after –”

“She wishes not my help, nor yours,” said a soft cold voice. “I no longer find your concerns so entertaining as I once did, Mr. Potter. Go.”



Somehow, even though they were all equals and she definitely wasn't in charge, it was always Hermione who ended up speaking first in this sort of situation.

The four tables of Hogwarts, the four Houses having breakfast, were glancing over at where they, the eight members of S.P.H.E.W., had gathered off to one side.

Professor Flitwick was also staring sternly at all of them from the Head Table. Hermione wasn't looking there, but she could feel Professor Flitwick's gaze on the back of her neck. Literally feel it. It was really creepy.

“Why'd you tell Tracey you wanted to talk to us, Mr. Potter?” said Hermione, her tone crisp.

“Professor Quirrell expelled Reese Belka from her army last night,” Harry Potter said. “And from all her other after-school Defense activities. Do any of you see the significance of that? Miss Greengrass? Padma?”

Harry's eyes swept over them, as Hermione exchanged a puzzled glance with Padma, and Daphne shook her head.

“Well,” Harry said quietly, “I wouldn't actually expect you to. But what it means is that you're in danger, and I don't know how much danger.” The boy squared his shoulders, looking straight into Hermione's eyes. “I wasn't going to say this, but... I just wanted to offer to put you under whatever protection I could give. Make it clear to everyone that anyone who messes with you, is messing with the Boy-Who-Lived.”

“Harry!” said Hermione sharply. “You know I don't want –”

“Some of them are my friends too, Hermione.” Harry didn't take his eyes from hers. “And it's their decision, not yours. Padma? You told me that I owed you no debt for what I did, and that's the sort of thing a friend would say.”

Hermione broke her gaze from Harry, to look at where Padma was shaking her head.

“Lavender?” Harry said. “You fought well in my army, and I'll fight for you if you wish it.”

"Thank you, General!" Lavender said crisply. "I mean Mr. Potter. No, though. I'm a heroine and a Gryffindor, and I can fight for myself."

There was a pause.

"Parvati?" Harry said. "Susan? Hannah? Daphne? I don't know any of you so well, but it's something I would offer anyone who came to ask it of me, I think."

One by one, the other four girls shook their heads.

Hermione realized what was coming, then, but she didn't see a single thing she could do about it.

"And my loyal soldier, Chaotic Tracey?" said Harry Potter.

"Really?" gasped Tracey, oblivious to the stabbing glares that Hermione and every other girl were directing at her. Tracey's hands flew artfully to her cheeks, though she didn't actually manage to blush, not that Hermione could see; and her brown eyes were, if not shining, at least opened very wide. "You'd do that? For me? I mean – I mean, of course, absolutely, General Chaos –"



And so it was on that very morning that Harry Potter went over to the Gryffindor table, and then the Slytherin table, and told both Houses that anyone who hurt Tracey Davis, regardless of what she was doing at the time, would, quote, learn the true meaning of Chaos, unquote.

It was with considerable restraint that Draco Malfoy managed to prevent himself from slamming his head repeatedly into his plate of toast.

They weren't exactly scientists, the bullies of Hogwarts.

But even they, Draco knew, were going to want to test it.



The Society for the Promotion of Heroic Equality for Witches hadn't announced it, it didn't seem like it would do any good to announce it. But they had all quietly decided (or, in the case of Lavender, been shouted into it by all seven other girls) to take a break from fighting bullies for a while, at least until their Heads of House weren't looking at them quite so sharply anymore, and older students had stopped bumping Hermione into walls.

Daphne had told Millicent that they were taking a break.

And so it was with some puzzlement, a few days later, that Daphne looked at the parchment delivered to her at lunch, drawn in a hand so shaky it was almost unreadable, saying:

2 this afternoon at the top of the stairs going up from the library
 REALLY IMPORTANT everyone has to be there – Millicent

Daphne looked around, but she couldn't see Millicent anywhere in the Great Hall.

"A message from your informant?" said Hermione, when Daphne told her. "That's odd – I didn't –"

"You didn't what?" said Daphne, after the Ravenclaw girl had stopped in mid-sentence.

The Sunshine General shook her head and said, "Listen, Daphne, I think we need to know where these messages come from before we keep following them. Look at what happened last time, how could anyone have known where those three bullies would be, unless they were in on it?"

"I can't say –" Daphne said. "I mean, I can't say anything, but I know where the messages come from, and I know how anyone can know."

Hermione gave Daphne a look that, for a moment, made the Ravenclaw girl look scarily like Professor McGonagall.

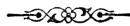
"Uh huh," said Hermione. "And do you know how Susan suddenly turned into Supergirl?"

Daphne shook her head, and said, "No, but I think it might be really important that if we get a message saying we should be somewhere, everyone has to be there." Daphne hadn't seen what had happened with Susan, after Daphne had tried to avert the prophecy by keeping Susan away. But she'd been told about it afterward, and now Daphne was afraid that...

She might have possibly...

Might possibly have Broken Something...

"Uh huh," said Hermione, who was doing the McGonagall Stare again.



Nobody seemed to know where it had started, who had started it. If you'd tried tracing it afterward, tracked it back word by word and mutter by mutter, you probably would have found it all going in a huge circle.

Peregrine Derrick was tapped on his shoulder as he left Potions that morning.

Jaime Astorga heard a whisper in his ear at lunch.

Robert Jugson III discovered a tiny folded note under his plate.

Carl Sloper overheard two older Gryffindors whispering about it, and they gave him significant glances as they walked past.

Nobody seemed to know where the word began, or who had first spoken it, but it named the place, and it named the time, and it said that the color would be white.



“Every single one of you had better be absolutely clear on this,” said Susan Bones. The Hufflepuff girl, or whatever strange power had possessed her, wasn’t even pretending to act normal anymore. The round-faced girl was striding through the halls with a firm, confident gait. “If we get there and it’s just one bully, that’s fine, you can fight them the regular way. My mysterious superpowers won’t activate if there are no innocents in danger. But if five seventh-year bullies jump out of a closet, you know what you do? That’s right, you run away and let me fight them. Finding a teacher is optional, the important thing is that you run away as soon as I create an opening. In a fight like that you are liabilities. You are civilian targets I have to worry about protecting. So you will get away as fast as possible and you will not try to do anything heroic or so help me, the hour you get out of your healer’s beds I will personally show up and kick your asses right back in. Are we all clear on that?”

“Yes,” squeaked most of the girls, though in Hannah’s case it came out, “Yes, Lady Susan!”

“Don’t call me that,” snapped Susan. “And I don’t think I heard you, Miss Brown! I’m warning you, I have friends who write plays and if you do anything dumb, posterity will remember you as Lavender, the Amazing Stupid Hostage.”

(Hermione was beginning to worry about just how many other Hogwarts students besides Harry had mysterious dark sides, and whether she was likely to develop one if she kept hanging out with them.)

“Alright, Captain Bones,” said Lavender in an unusually respectful tone, as they turned another corner along the shortest way to the library, passing through a rather large corridor studded with six sets of double doors, three sets on either side. “Can I ask if there’s any way for me to become a double witch?”

“Sign up for the Auror preparation program in your sixth year,” said Susan. “It’s the next best thing. Oh, and if a famous Auror offers to oversee your summer internship, just ignore anyone who warns you that he’s a terrible influence or that you’re almost certainly going to die.”

Lavender was nodding rapidly. “Got it, got it.”

(Padma, who hadn’t actually been there last time, was giving Susan very skeptical looks.)

Then Susan suddenly stopped in place and her wand snapped up and she said, “Protego Maximus!”

A jolt of adrenaline went through Hermione, she was instantly drawing her wand and spinning around –

But she couldn’t see anything wrong, through the greater blue haze now surrounding them all.

The other girls, who had likewise pulled into formation, were also looking puzzled.

“Sorry!” said Susan. “Sorry, girls. Give me a moment to check this place out. Thinking of a certain person has just reminded me that this hall we’re in right now, with all those doors, would be an excellent place for an ambush.”

There was a moment of silence.

“Now,” said a harsh male voice, blurred into unidentifiability by a buzzing undertone.

All six sets of double doors slammed open.

White robes filed silently forward, all-concealing white robes without marks of House affiliation and white cloth hiding the faces beneath the hoods. They marched out, and marched out, crowding the great corridor in numbers too high to count easily. Less than fifty robes, probably. Certainly more than thirty. All of them already surrounded by blue haze.

Susan said some Extremely Bad Words, so awful that at almost any other time, Hermione would have noticed.

“That message!” Daphne cried in sudden horror. “It wasn’t from –”

“Millicent Bulstrode?” said the voice and its buzzing undertone. “No, it wasn’t. You see, Miss Greengrass, if the same girl sends off a Slytherin message every day you fight a bully, pretty soon someone else will notice. We’ll have a talk with her after we’re done with you.”

“Miss Susan,” said Hannah in a voice just starting to quaver, “can you be super enough to –”

Wands rose in many hands. There came a series of blinding flashes of green light, a massive volley of shieldbreakers, at the end of which there was no more protective blue dome surrounding them, and Susan had fallen to her knees, clutching her head.

Barriers of solid blackness had sprung into being at both ends of the corridor. Behind the double doors that Hermione could see into, there were only unused classrooms, very dead ends.

"No," said the male voice with that buzz overlaid, "she can't. In case you haven't noticed, you've gotten quite a lot of people very angry at you and we have no intention of losing this time. All right everyone, prepare to fire."

The wands around the perimeter aimed again, low enough that their enemies wouldn't hit each other if they missed.

And then another male voice, with a similar buzz accompanying it, suddenly said "Homenum Revelio!"

An instant later there was another massive volley of shieldbreakers and hexes, fired on reflex at the suddenly revealed figure, shattering the shields which had almost immediately begun to form around it –

And then, as that same figure fell to the ground, a stunned silence.

"Professor Snape?" said the second voice. "He's the one who's been interfering?"

It was the Potions Master of Hogwarts who now lay unconscious on the stone floor, the dirt-spotted robes stirring for a final moment before they settled in place, his fallen hand outstretched toward where his wand was slowly rolling away.

"No," said the first male voice, now sounding a bit more uncertain. Then it rallied, "No, that can't possibly be it. He heard us passing the word, of course, and came along to make sure nobody screwed it up again. We'll wake him up afterward and apologize and he'll Memory-Charm the children so they don't remember, he's a Professor so he can do that. Anyway, we should make sure we're really alone now. Veritas Oculum!"

Fully two dozen different Charms must have been spoken, then, but no more invisible people showed up. One of them in particular made Hermione's heart sink; she recognized it as the Charm which had been listed alongside the description of the True Cloak of Invisibility, which would not reveal the Cloak, but would tell you whether it or certain other artifacts were nearby.

"Girls?" whispered Susan. She was slowly pushing herself to her feet, though Hermione could see her limbs swaying and quivering. "Girls, I'm

sorry for what I said before. If you've got anything clever and heroic to try, you might as well try it."

"Oh, yeah," Tracey Davis said then, her voice trembling. "I almost forgot." The Slytherin girl raised her voice, and spoke.

"Hey, all of you!" yelled Tracey in a high-pitched shaky shout. "Hey, are you planning to hurt me too?"

"Yes, actually," said the buzzing voice of the leader. "We are."

"I'm under Harry Potter's protection, you know! Anyone who tries to hurt me will learn the true meaning of Chaos! So are you going to let me go?" It should have sounded defiant. It came out sounding terrified.

There was a pause. Some of the hoods of the robes turned to face each other, then turned back to face the girls.

"Hm..." said the buzzing male voice. "Hm... no."

Tracey Davis put her wand away into her robes.

Slowly, deliberately, she raised her right hand high in the air, and pressed her thumb and forefingers together.

"Go ahead," said that voice.

Tracey Davis snapped her fingers.

There was a long, awful pause.

Nothing happened.

"Yes, well," said the voice –

Tracey said, her voice sounding even higher and shakier, "Acatlha, mundatus sum." Her hand, stretching up still further, snapped its fingers a second time.

A nameless chill went down Hermione's spine then, a frisson of fear and disorientation like she'd just felt the floor tilt beneath her, threatening to spill her into some darkness lying beneath.

"What's she –" began a buzzing female voice.

Tracey's face looked pale, twisted with fear, but her lips moved, spilled forth sound in a high chant, "Mabra, brahoring, mabra..."

A chill wind seemed to spring up within the confines of the corridor, a dark breath that caressed their faces and touched their hands with ice.

"Fire at her on my count!" shouted the leading voice. "One, two, three!" and maybe-forty voices roared spells, creating a huge concentric array of fiery bolts that lit the wide corridor brighter than the Sun –

– for the short moment before the bolts struck and vanished upon a dark red octagon that appeared in the air around the girls, and then disappeared a moment later.

Hermione saw it, she saw it but she still couldn't imagine it; she couldn't imagine a Shielding Charm that powerful, a spell that would withstand an army.

And Tracey's voice went on chanting, her voice sounding louder and more confident, and her face screwed up like she was trying to remember something very exactly.

“Shuffle, duffle, muzzle, muff.
Fista, wista, mista-cuff.”

Now all those present could feel it, heroines and bullies alike, the sensation of some dark will pressing down on them, a tingling in the air as something built and built and built. All the blue hazes around the white robes, all the shielding spells, had died out without any visible hex touching them. There were more flashes of light as more desperate spells were fired, but they fizzled out in midair like candle-flames touching water.

The black barriers at the two ends of the corridor had dissipated like smoke beneath the growing pressure, but their evaporation revealed the exits sealed, blocked by tiled slats of dark metal that looked stained as though with blood; and as Tracey chanted “Lemarchand, Lament, Lemarchand,” a dreadful blue light began to shine out from beneath the metal slats and between them; and the six sets of double doors slammed shut all at once, as panicked white-robed bullies began to pound on them and howl.

Then Tracey's hand slashed to her left, and she cried “Khornath!”, then her hand pointed below her and “Slaaneth!”, above her “Nurgolth!”, and then, to her right, “TZINTCHI!”

Tracey paused, took a deep breath; and Hermione found her voice and cried, “Stop! Tracey, stop!”

But there was a strange wild smile on Tracey's face. She raised her hand still higher, and snapped her fingers a third time; and when she spoke again, beneath her high girlish voice there was an undertone as though some lower chorus were chanting along with her.

“Darkness beyond darkness, deeper than pitchest black.
Buried beneath the flow of time...”

From darkness to darkness, your voice echoes in the emptiness,
Unknown to death, nor known to life."

"What are you doing?" shrieked Parvati, and the Gryffindor girl stretched out a hand as though to pull down the Slytherin, who was now starting to float upward into the air; and both Daphne and Susan grabbed Parvati's arm at the same time and Daphne cried out, "Don't, we don't know what will happen if the ritual is interrupted!"

"Well what happens if it gets COMPLETED?" screamed Hermione, as close as she'd ever come to total brain meltdown.

Susan's face was white as chalk, and she whispered, "I'm sorry, Mad-Eye..."

And Tracey spoke on, her body floating higher and higher off the floor, her black hair whipping wildly around her in the chill winds.

"You who know the gate, who are the gate, the key and guardian
of the gate:
I bid you open the way for him, and manifest his power before
me!"

The corridor was plunged then into utter darkness and silence, so that only Tracey could be seen and heard, like there was nothing left in the universe except her and the light illuminating her from some nameless source.

The shining girl raised her hand one final time, and with dreadful gravity, pressed her thumb and forefinger together.

And within the darkness Hermione looked at Tracey's face and saw that the Slytherin girl's eyes were now, to the exact shade, the green of Harry Potter's.

"Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres!
Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres!
HARRY JAMES POTTER-EVANS-VERRES!"

There was a snap like thunder, and then –



Harry had chosen to assume a rather relaxed posture, as he sat in a low chair before the mighty desk of the Headmaster of Hogwarts: one leg cocked over his knee, and his arms sprawling casually to either side. Harry was doing his

best to disregard the noise from the surrounding devices, although the one directly behind him that sounded like an owl hooting desperately as it was put through a woodchipper was pretty difficult to ignore.

"Harry," the old wizard said from behind the desk, the aged voice level as the blue eyes stared out at him from beneath the shining half-moon spectacles. Headmaster Dumbledore had garbed himself in robes of midnight purple; not true formal black, but dark enough to come close indeed to deadly seriousness, as the wizarding world counted the meaning of fashions. "Were you... responsible for this?"

"I cannot deny that my influence was at work," Harry said.

The old wizard took off his glasses, leaned forward to stare at Harry directly, blue eyes to green. "I will ask you one question," the Headmaster said in a quiet voice. "Do you think that what you did today was – appropriate?"

"They were bullies and they came to that hallway with the direct intent of hurting Hermione Granger and seven other first-year children," Harry said levelly. "If I am not too young for moral judgment, then neither are they. No, Headmaster, they didn't deserve to die. But they did deserve to be stripped naked and glued to the ceiling."

The old wizard put his glasses back on. For the first time that Harry had seen of him, the Headmaster seemed to be at a loss for words. "As Merlin himself is my witness," said Dumbledore, "I haven't the faintest notion of how I ought to react to this."

"That's pretty much the effect I was aiming for," said Harry. He felt like he ought to be whistling a merry tune, but unfortunately he had never learned how to whistle reliably.

"I need not ask you who is directly responsible," said the Headmaster. "Only three wizards within Hogwarts might be powerful enough. I myself did not do it. Severus has assured me he was not involved. And the third..." The Headmaster shook his head in some dismay. "You loaned the Defense Professor your Cloak, Harry. I do not think that was wise. For now that he has escaped detection by simple Charms, he surely knows that it is a Deathly Hallow – if, indeed, he did not know from its first touch upon his flesh."

"Professor Quirrell had already deduced my possession of an invisibility cloak," Harry said. "And knowing him, he has probably guessed that it is a Deathly Hallow. But in this case, Headmaster, it so happens that Professor Quirrell was under one of those face-concealing white robes."

There was another pause.

"How very cunning," said the Headmaster. He leaned back in his throne and sighed. "I have spoken to the Defense Professor. Just before you, indeed. I did not quite know what to say. I told him that this was not the approved Hogwarts policy for dealing with infractions of hallway discipline, and that I did not feel it was appropriate for a Hogwarts professor to do what he had done."

"And what did Professor Quirrell say to that?" said Harry, who was not impressed with Hogwarts's current policies for enforcing hallway discipline.

The Headmaster wore a look of resignation. "He said: Fire me."

Somehow Harry managed not to cheer out loud.

The Headmaster frowned. "But why did he do it, Harry?"

"Because Professor Quirrell doesn't like school bullies and I asked very politely," said Harry. And he was feeling bored and I thought this might cheer him up. "Either that or it's part of some incredibly deep plot."

The Headmaster rose up from behind the desk, began to pace back and forth before the hatstand that held the Sorting Hat and the red slippers. "Harry, do you not feel that all of this has gotten a bit..."

"Awesome?" offered Harry.

"Utterly and completely out of hand would say it better," said Dumbledore. "I am not sure there has ever been a time in the whole history of this school when things have become so, so... I don't have a word for this, Harry, because things have never become like this before, and so no one has ever needed to invent a word for it."

Harry would have tried to invent words to express how deeply complimented he felt, if he hadn't been snerking too hard to speak.

The Headmaster was regarding him with increasing graveness. "Harry, do you understand at all why I find these events concerning?"

"Honestly?" said Harry. "No, not really. I mean, of course Professor McGonagall would object to anything that breaks up the dull monotony of the Hogwarts school experience. But then Professor McGonagall wouldn't set a chicken on fire."

The frown lines deepened on Dumbledore's wrinkled face. "That, Harry, is not what disturbs me," the Headmaster said quietly. "There was a full battle fought in these halls!"

"Headmaster," Harry said, trying to keep his voice carefully respectful, "Professor Quirrell and I did not choose for that battle to happen. The bullies did that. We just decided to have the Light side win. I know there are times

where the boundaries of morality are uncertain, but in this case the line separating the villains and the heroines was twenty meters tall and drawn in white fire. Our intervention may have been weird, but it certainly wasn't wrong –"

Dumbledore had gone back to his desk, sat down in his padded throne with a dull thump, and was now covering his face with both his hands.

"Am I missing something here?" Harry said. "I thought you'd be secretly on our side, Headmaster. It was the Gryffindor thing to do. The Weasley twins would approve, Fawkes would approve –" Harry glanced at the golden perch, but it was empty; either the phoenix had more important things to do, or the Headmaster hadn't invited him to today's meeting.

"That," said the Headmaster in an old and tired and somewhat muffled voice, "is precisely the problem, Harry. There is a reason why courageous young heroes are not put in charge of schools."

"All right," Harry said. He couldn't quite keep the skepticism out of his voice. "What am I missing this time?"

The old wizard lifted his head, his face now solemn, and calmer. "Listen, Harry," said Dumbledore, "hear me well; for all who wield power must learn this in time. Some things in this world are, indeed, truly simple. If you pick up a stone and drop it again, the earth will be no heavier for it, the stars will not move from their paths. I say this, Harry, so that you know I am not pretending to be wise, when I tell you that even as some things are simple, others are complex. There are greater wizardries which leave marks upon the world, and marks upon those who wield them, as a simple Charm would not. Those wizardries demand hesitation, consideration of consequence, a moment to weigh the meaning of their marks. And yet the most intricate magics known to me are simpler than the simplest soul. People, Harry, people are always marked, by what they do and by what is done to them. Do you, then, understand how to say, 'Here is the line between hero and villain!' is not enough to say that what you did was right?"

"Headmaster," Harry said evenly, "this is not a decision I made at random. No, I don't know what exact effect this will have on every single one of the bullies present. But if I always waited for perfect information before I acted, I would never do anything. When it comes to the future psychological development of, say, Peregrine Derrick, beating up eight first-year girls probably wouldn't have been good for him. And it wasn't enough to just stop them quietly and quickly, since then they would just try again later; they had to see

that there was a protective power worth fearing.” Harry’s voice stayed level. “But of course, since I am a good guy, I didn’t want to permanently injure them or even cause them any pain; and yet the penalty had to be enough to weigh on the minds of anyone thinking about trying it again. So, after weighing the expected outcomes as best I could with my boundedly rational intellect, I thought it would be wisest to strip the bullies naked and glue them to the ceiling.”

The young hero stared directly into the old wizard’s gaze, unflinching green eyes locked with the blue behind the spectacles.

And since I wasn’t there and didn’t do anything personally, there’s no lawful way to punish me under the Hogwarts school rules; the only one who acted was Professor Quirrell, and he’s fireproof. And just breaking the rules to get at me wouldn’t be a wise thing to do to the hero you’re grooming to fight Lord Voldemort... This time Harry actually had tried to think through all the ramifications in advance, before he’d made the suggestion to Professor Quirrell; and for once the Defense Professor hadn’t called him a fool, just slowly smiled and then begun to laugh.

“I understand your intentions, Harry,” the old wizard said. “You think you have taught the bullies of Hogwarts a lesson. But if Peregrine Derrick could learn that lesson, he would not be Peregrine Derrick. He will only be provoked more by what you do – it is not fair, it is not right, but that is the way it is.” The old wizard closed his eyes, as though in brief pain, and then opened them again. “Harry, the most painful truth any hero must learn is that the right cannot, should not, must not win every battle. All of this began when Miss Granger fought three older enemies and won. If she had been content with this, the echoes of her deed would have died away in time. Yet instead she banded together with her classmates and raised her wand in open challenge to Peregrine Derrick and all his kind; and his kind cannot but raise their own wands in answer. So Jaime Astorga went hunting her, and in the natural course he would have beaten her; it would have been a sad day, but it would have ended there. There is not enough magic in eight first-year witches all together to defeat such a foe. But you could not accept that, Harry, could not let Miss Granger learn her own lessons; and so you sent the Defense Professor to watch over them invisibly, and pierce Astorga’s shields when Daphne Greengrass struck at him –”

What? thought Harry.

The old wizard went on speaking. “Each time you intervened, Harry, it

escalated matters further and yet further. Soon Miss Granger was facing Robert Jugson himself, the son of a Death Eater, with two strong allies at his side. Painful indeed it would have been for her, if Miss Granger had lost that battle. And yet again by your will and Quirinus's hand, this time shown more openly, she won."

Harry was still struggling with the notion of the Defense Professor watching invisibly over S.P.H.E.W., guarding the heroines from harm.

"And so," the old wizard finished, "that is how we came to today, Harry, to forty-four students attacking eight first-year witches. A full battle in these halls! I know it was not your intent, but you must accept some measure of responsibility. Such things did not happen before you came to this school, not through all my decades in Hogwarts; neither when I was a student nor when I was a Professor."

"Thank you very much," Harry said evenly. "Though I think Professor Quirrell deserves more credit than me."

The blue eyes widened. "Harry..."

"Those bullies were attacking victims long before this year," Harry said. Despite his best efforts, his voice was starting to rise. "But nobody seems to have taught the students that they're allowed to fight back. I know it's much harder to ignore a two-sided fight than some helpless victims getting hexed or almost pushed out of windows, but it's not exactly worse, is it? I wish I'd read more of Godric Gryffindor's writings so I could quote him, there's got to be something in there about this. Open battle may be louder than the victims suffering in silence, it may be harder to pretend that nothing is happening, but the final result is better –"

"No, it is not," Dumbledore said. "It is not, Harry. To always fight the darkness, to never let evil pass unchallenged – that is not heroism, but simple pride. Even Godric Gryffindor did not think that every war was worth fighting, though he went his whole life from one battle to another." The old wizard's voice went quieter. "In truth, Harry, the words you speak – they are not evil. No, not evil, and yet they have frightened me. You are one who might someday wield great power, over wizardry, over your fellow wizards. And if, come that day, you still think that evil must never pass unchallenged –" Now a note of real worry had entered the Headmaster's voice. "The world has grown more fragile since the age when Hogwarts was raised; I fear it cannot bear the fury of another Godric Gryffindor. And he was slower to his wrath than you." The old wizard shook his head. "You are too ready to fight,

Harry. Much too ready to fight, and Hogwarts itself is becoming a more violent place around you."

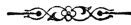
"Well," Harry said carefully, after weighing his words. "I don't know if it will help to say this, but I think you're getting the wrong impression of what I'm all about. I don't like real fighting either. It's scary, and violent, and somebody might get hurt. But I didn't fight today, Headmaster."

The Headmaster frowned. "You sent the Defense Professor in your place –"

"Professor Quirrell didn't do any fighting either," Harry said calmly. "There wasn't anyone there strong enough to fight him. What happened today wasn't fighting, it was winning."

It was a while then before the old wizard spoke. "That may be as it may be," the Headmaster said, "but all these conflicts must end. I can hear the strain in the air, and with each of these clashes, it rises. All this must end, decisively and soon; you must not stand in the way of its ending."

The old wizard gestured toward the great oaken door of his office, and Harry departed through it.



It was with some surprise that Harry stepped out from between the huge grey gargoyles which had made way for him, and saw that Quirinus Quirrell was still slumped against the stone of the corridor wall, a thick thread of spittle drooling from his slack mouth onto his Professorial robes, in just the same position he'd occupied when Harry had first gone up into the Headmaster's office.

Harry waited, but the slumped man didn't rise up; and after long awkward seconds, Harry began to walk down the corridor again.

"Mr. Potter?" came a soft call, after Harry had turned two corners; a quiet voice carrying unnaturally through the halls.

When Harry had returned he found Professor Quirrell still slumped against the wall, but the pale eyes now watched him with keen intelligence.

I'm sorry to have tired you out –

It was something that Harry couldn't say. He'd noticed the correlation between the effort Professor Quirrell expended and the time he had to spend 'resting'. But Harry had reasoned that if the effort was too painful or detrimental, surely Professor Quirrell would just say no. Now Harry was wondering if that reasoning had actually been correct, and if not, how to apologize...

The Defense Professor spoke in a quiet voice, the rest of the body unmoving. "How went your meeting with the Headmaster, Mr. Potter?"

"I'm not sure," Harry said. "Not the way I predicted. He seems to believe the Light should lose a lot more often than I'd consider wise. Plus I'm not sure he understands the difference between trying to fight and trying to win. It explains a lot, actually..." Harry hadn't read much about the Wizarding War, but he'd read enough to know that the good guys probably had acquired a pretty accurate picture of who most of the worst Death Eaters were, and hadn't just owled them all hand grenades over the course of five minutes.

A soft, soft laugh from the pale lips. "Dumbledore does not comprehend the enjoyment of winning, just as he does not comprehend the enjoyment of the game. Tell me, Mr. Potter. Did you suggest this little plan with the deliberate intention of relieving my tedium?"

"That was among my many motives," Harry said, because some instinct had warned that he couldn't just say Yes.

"Do you know," the Defense Professor said in soft reflective tones, "there are those who have tried to soften my darker moods, and those who have indeed participated in brightening my day, but you are the first person ever to succeed in doing it deliberately?" The Defense Professor seemed to straighten up from the wall with a peculiar motion which might have included magic as well as muscle; and the Defense Professor began to walk away without a look back in Harry's direction. Only a single small gesture of one finger indicated that Harry was to follow.

"I particularly enjoyed that chant you composed for Miss Davis," said Professor Quirrell after they had walked a short distance. "Though you might have been wiser to consult me in advance, before giving it to her to memorize." One hand bestirred itself to within the Defense Professor's robes and drew forth a wand, which traced a small gesture in the air, after which all the faraway sounds of the castle Hogwarts fell silent. "Tell me honestly, Mr. Potter, have you somehow acquired a familiarity with the theory of Dark rituals? That is not the same as confessing an intent to cast them; many wizards know the principles."

"No..." Harry said slowly. He had decided some time ago against trying to sneak into the Restricted Section of the Hogwarts library, for much the same reason he'd decided a year earlier not to look up how to make explosives out of common household materials. Harry prided himself on at least having more sense than people thought he did.

“Oh?” said Professor Quirrell. The man was walking more normally now, and the lips curved about in a peculiar smile. “Why, perhaps you possess a natural talent for the field, then.”

“Yes, well,” Harry said wearily. “I suppose Dr. Seuss also has a natural talent for Dark rituals, because the part about shuffle, duffle, muzzle, muff came from a children’s book called Bartholomew and the Oobleck –”

“No, not that part,” said Professor Quirrell. His voice grew a little stronger, took on some of its normal lecturing tone. “An ordinary Charm, Mr. Potter, can be cast merely by speaking certain words, making precise motions of the wand, expending some of your own strength. Even powerful spells may be invoked in this way, if the magic is efficient as well as efficacious. But with the greatest of magics, speech alone does not suffice to give them structure. You must perform specific actions, make significant choices. Nor is the temporary expenditure of your own strength sufficient to set them in motion; a ritual requires permanent sacrifice. The power of such a greater spell, compared to ordinary Charms, can be like day compared to night. But many rituals – indeed, most – happen to demand at least one sacrifice which might inspire squeamishness. And so the entire field of ritual magic, containing all the furthest and most interesting reaches of wizardry, is widely regarded as Dark. With a few exceptions carved out by tradition, of course.” Professor Quirrell’s voice took on a sardonic tinge. “The Unbreakable Vow is too useful to certain wealthy Houses to be outlawed entirely – even though to bind a man’s will through all his days is indeed a dread and terrible act, more fearsome than many lesser rituals that wizards shun. A cynic might conclude that which rituals are prohibited is not so much a matter of morality, as habit. But I digress...” Professor Quirrell made a brief coughing sound, a clearing of his throat. “The Unbreakable Vow requires three participants and three sacrifices. The one who receives the Unbreakable Vow must be one who could have come to trust the Vower, but chooses instead to demand the Vow from them, and they sacrifice that possibility of trust. The one who makes the Vow must be someone who could have chosen to do what the Vow demands of them, and they sacrifice that capacity for choice. And the third wizard, the binder, permanently sacrifices a small portion of their own magic, to sustain the Vow forever.”

“Ah,” Harry said. “I’d wondered why that spell wasn’t used all over the place, every time two people have difficulty trusting each other... although... why don’t wizards on their deathbeds charge money to bind Unbreakable

Vows, and use that to leave an inheritance for their children –”

“Because they are stupid,” said Professor Quirrell. “There are hundreds of useful rituals which could be performed if men had so much sense; I could name twenty without stopping to draw breath. But in any case, Mr. Potter, the thing about such rituals – whether or not you choose to term them Dark – is that they are shaped to be magically efficacious, not to appear impressive when performed. I suppose there is a certain tendency for the more powerful rituals to require more dreadful sacrifices. Even so, the most terrible ritual known to me demands only a rope which has hanged a man and a sword which has slain a woman; and that for a ritual which promised to summon Death itself – though what is truly meant by that I do not know and do not care to discover, since it was also said that the counterspell to dismiss Death had been lost. The most dread chant I have encountered does not sound even a hundredth as fearsome as the chant you composed for Miss Davis. Those among the bullies who had a passing familiarity with Dark rituals – and I am certain that there were some – must have been terrified beyond the capacity of words to describe. If there existed a true ritual which appeared that impressive, Mr. Potter, it would melt the Earth.”

“Um,” said Harry.

Professor Quirrell’s lips twisted further. “Ah, but the truly amusing thing was this. You see, Mr. Potter, the chant of every ritual names that which is to be sacrificed, and that which is to be gained. The chant which you gave to Miss Davis spoke, first, of a darkness beyond darkness, buried beneath the flow of time, which knows the gate, and is the gate. And the second thing spoken of, Mr. Potter, was the manifestation of your own presence. And always, in each element of the ritual, first is named that which is sacrificed, and then is said the use commanded of it.”

“I... see,” said Harry, as he trod through the halls of Hogwarts after Professor Quirrell, following him toward the Defense Professor’s office. “So my chant, the way I wrote it, implies that the Outer God, Yog-Sothoth –”

“Was permanently sacrificed in a ritual which but briefly manifested your presence,” said Professor Quirrell. “I suppose we will discover tomorrow whether anyone took that seriously, when we read the newspapers and see whether all the magical nations of the world are banding together in a desperate effort to seal off your incursion into our reality.”

They walked on, as the Defense Professor began chuckling, odd throaty sounds.

The two of them didn't talk after that until they came to the Defense Professor's office, and then the man halted with his hand upon the door.

"It is a very strange thing," the Defense Professor said, his voice now soft again, almost inaudible. The man was not looking at Harry, and Harry saw only his back. "A very strange thing... There was a time when I would have sacrificed a finger from my wand hand, to work upon the bullies of Hogwarts as we have worked upon them this day. To make them fear me as they now fear you, to have the deference of all the students and the adoration of many, I would have given my finger for that. You have everything now that I wanted then. All that I know of human nature says that I should hate you. And yet I do not. It is a very strange thing."

It should have been a touching moment, but instead Harry felt a coldness traveling down his spine, as though he were a little fish in the sea, and some vast white shark had just looked him over and decided after a visible hesitation not to eat him.

The man opened the door to Defense Professor's office, and passed within, and was gone.



Aftermath:

Her fellow Slytherins were looking at Daphne like... like they didn't have the faintest idea of how to look at her.

The Gryffindors were looking at her like they didn't have the faintest idea of how to look at her.

Showing no fear, Daphne Greengrass strode into the Potions classroom, wrapped in the imperious dignity of a Noble and Most Ancient House. Inside she was feeling much the same way everyone else probably did.

It had been two hours since the What? when the What? had happened and Daphne's brain was still going: What? What? What?

The classroom was quiet as they all waited for Professor Snape to arrive. Lavender and Parvati sat near a cluster of other Gryffindors, surrounded by silent stares. The two of them were looking over each other's homework before class started, and nobody else was helping them or talking to them. Even Lavender, who Daphne would have sworn could never be fazed by anything, seemed subdued.

Daphne sat down at her desk, and took Magical Draughts and Potions out of her bag, and began looking over her own homework, doing her very best to act normal. People stared at her, and said nothing –

A gasp went through the whole classroom. Girls and boys flinched back, leaning away from the door like they were stalks of wheat touched by a gust of wind.

In the door stood Tracey Davis, wrapped in a black tattered cloak which had been draped over her Hogwarts uniform.

Tracey walked slowly into the classroom, swaying slightly with each step, looking like she was trying to drift. She sat down at her accustomed desk, which happened to be right next to Daphne's.

Slowly Tracey's head turned to stare at Daphne.

"See?" the Slytherin girl said in a low, sepulchral tone. "I told you I'd get him before she did."

"What?" blurted Daphne, who immediately wished she hadn't said anything.

"I got Harry Potter before Granger did." Tracey's voice was still low, but her eyes were gleaming with triumph. "See, Daphne, what General Potter wants in a girl isn't a pretty face or a pretty dress. He wants a girl willing to channel his dread powers, that's what he wants. Now I'm his – and he's mine!"

This announcement produced a frozen silence through the whole classroom.

"Excuse me, Miss Davis," said the cultured voice of Draco Malfoy, who seemed unconcerned as he shuffled through his own Potions parchments. The other scion of a Most Ancient House didn't so much as glance up from his desk, even as everyone else turned to look at him. "Did Harry Potter actually tell you that? Using those words?"

"Well, no..." Tracey said, and then her eyes flashed angrily. "But he'd better take me in, now that I've sacrificed my soul to him and everything!"

"You sacrificed your soul to Harry Potter?" gasped Millicent. There was a clatter from the other side of the room as Ron Weasley dropped his inkwell.

"Well, I'm pretty sure I did," said Tracey, sounding briefly uncertain before she rallied. "I mean, I looked at myself in a mirror and I look paler now, and I can always feel darkness surrounding me, and I was a conduit for his dread powers and everything... Daphne, you also saw my eyes go green, right? I didn't see it myself but that's what I heard afterward."

There was a pause, broken only by the sounds of Ron Weasley trying to clean up his desk.

“Daphne?” said Tracey.

“I don’t believe it,” said an angry voice. “There’s no way the next Dark Lord would take you to be his bride!”

Slowly, and with considerable disbelief, heads turned to stare at Pansy Parkinson.

“Hush, you,” said Tracey, “or I’ll...” The Slytherin girl paused. Then Tracey’s voice went even lower, and she said, “Hush, you, or I’ll devour your soul.”

“You can’t do that,” said Pansy, in the confident tones of a hen which had worked out a perfectly good pecking order where she was at the top, and wasn’t about to go updating that belief based on mere evidence.

Slowly, like she was trying to float, Tracey got up from her desk. There were more gasps. Daphne felt like she’d been Petrified in place within her chair.

“Tracey?” said Lavender in a small voice. “Please don’t do all that again. Please?”

Now Pansy was showing definite nervousness as Tracey swayed toward her desk. “What d’you think you’re doing?” Pansy said, not quite managing to sound indignant.

“I told you,” Tracey said menacingly. “I’m going to devour your soul.”

Tracey bent down over Pansy, who sat frozen at her desk; and, with their lips almost touching, made a loud inhaling noise.

“There!” said Tracey as she straightened. “I ate your soul.”

“No you didn’t!” said Pansy.

“Did too!” said Tracey.

There was a very slight pause –

“Merlin, she did!” cried Theodore Nott. “You look all pale now, and your eyes seem empty!”

“What?” screeched Pansy, turning pale. The girl leapt up from her desk and began frantically rummaging through her bookbag. After Pansy drew out a mirror and looked at herself, she turned even paler.

Daphne abandoned all pretense of aristocratic poise and let her head fall to the desk with a dull thud, as she wondered whether going to the same school as all the other important families was really worth going to the same school as the Chaos Legion.

“Ooh, you’re in trouble now, Pansy,” said Seamus Finnigan. “I don’t know exactly what happens when a Dementor Kisses you, but if Tracey Davis kisses you that’s probably even worse.”

“I’ve heard about people without souls,” Dean Thomas said gloomily. “They have to dress all in black, and they write awful poetry, and nothing ever makes them happy. They’re all angsty.”

“I don’t want to be angsty!” cried Pansy.

“Too bad,” said Dean Thomas. “You’ve got to be, now that your soul’s gone.”

Pansy turned, and stretched out a begging hand toward Draco Malfoy’s desk. “Draco!” she said pleadingly. “Mr. Malfoy! Please, make Tracey give me back my soul!”

“I can’t,” said Tracey. “I ate it.”

“Make her throw it up!” yelled Pansy.

The heir of Malfoy had slumped forward, resting his head in both hands, so that nobody could see his face. “Why is my life like this?” said Draco Malfoy.

A wild babble of whispers started up as Tracey returned to her desk, now smiling in satisfaction, while Pansy stood in the midst of the classroom, wringing her hands and tears starting from her eyes –

“Be. Quiet.”

The soft, lethal voice seemed to fill the whole classroom as Professor Snape stalked in through the door. His face was angrier than Daphne had ever seen it, sending a jolt of genuine fear down her spine. Hastily she looked down at her homework.

“Sit down, Parkinson,” the Potions Master hissed, “and you, Davis, take off that ridiculous cloak –”

“Professor Snaaaaape!” wailed Pansy Parkinson in tears. “Tracey ate my soooooouul!”

SELF ACTUALIZATION FINAL, RESPONSIBILITY

IT was a looping, meandering alley in the midst of Hogwarts, wandering like a stray lock of hair; sometimes crossing itself, it seemed, but you couldn't ever get to the end if you gave into the temptation of apparent shortcuts.

At the end of the tangle, six students leaned against rough stones, robes black against the grey walls and trimmed in green, eyes darting from one to each other. Torches burned in the windowless sconce, casting light to ward off the darkness and heat to ward off the chill of the Slytherin dungeons.

"I am certain," Reese Belka snapped, "absolutely certain, that was no true ritual. Little firstie witches can't do that kind of magic, and even if they could, who's ever heard of a Dark ritual which sacrifices a sealed horror for – that?"

"Were you –" said Lucian Bole. "I mean – after that girl snapped her fingers –"

Belka's glare should have melted him. "No," she spat, "I was not."

"That is, she wasn't naked," drawled Marcus Flint, his broad shoulders leaning back in apparent relaxation against the lumpy stone surface. "Covered in chocolate frosting, yes, but not naked."

"This day Potter has offered great insult to our Houses," said the grim voice of Jaime Astorga.

"Yes, well, I'm sorry to be blunt," Randolph Lee said evenly. The seventh-year duelist rubbed at his chin, where a faint fuzz of beard had been allowed to grow. "But when someone sticks you to the ceiling, it's a message, Astorga. It's a message which says: I'm an incredibly powerful Dark Wizard who could've done anything to you I damn well pleased, and I don't care if your House is offended, either."

Robert Jugson III gave a soft, low laugh at this, a chuckle that sent chills down several spines. "It makes you wonder if you picked the wrong side, doesn't it? I've heard tales about messages like that, sent at the old Dark Lord's bidding..."

"I'm not ready to kneel to Potter just yet," said Astorga, staring hard into Jugson's eyes.

"Neither am I," said Belka.

Jugson was holding his wand, and he turned it idly back and forth in his fingers, pointing it up and then downward. "Are you a Gryffindor or a Slytherin?" said Jugson. "Everyone's got a price. Everyone smart."

This statement produced a moment of silence.

"Shouldn't Malfoy be here?" Bole said tentatively.

Flint gave a dismissive flick of his fingers. "Whatever Malfoy's plotting, he wants to put on an air of innocence. He can't be seen missing at the same time as us."

"But everyone knows that already," said Bole. "Even in the other Houses."

"Yes, very clumsy," said Belka. She snorted. "Malfoy or no, he's just a little firstie and we don't need him here."

"I will owl my father," Jugson said softly, "and he will speak to Lord Malfoy himself –" Abruptly, Jugson stopped speaking.

"I don't know about you, dearies," Belka said with fake sweetness, "but I don't plan on running scared from a false ritual, and I'm not done with Potter and his pet mudblood."

Nobody answered. All their gazes were looking past her.

Slowly, Belka turned around to see what the others were staring at.

"You will do nothing," hissed their Head of House. Severus Snape's face was enraged, when he spoke small spots of spittle flew from his mouth, further dotting his already-dirtied robes. "You fools have done enough! You have embarrassed my House – lost to first-years – now you speak of embroiling noble Lords of the Wizengamot in your pathetic childish squabbles? I shall deal with this matter. You will not embarrass this House again, you will not risk embarrassing this House again! You are done with fighting witches, and if I hear otherwise –"



If you thought they'd be sitting next to each other at dinnertime, after that, you'd be quite mistaken.

"What does she want from me?" came the plaintive cry of a boy who, for all his extensive reading in the scientific literature, was still a bit naive about certain things. "Did she want to get beaten up?"

The upper-year Ravenclaw boys who'd sat down next to him at the dinner-table exchanged swift glances with each other until, by some unspoken protocol, the most experienced of their number spoke.

"Look," said Arty Grey, the seventh-year who was leading in their competition by three witches and a Defense Professor, "the thing you've got to understand is, just because she's angry doesn't mean you lost points. Miss Granger is angry because she got all frightened and you're there to be blamed, you understand? But at the same time, even though she won't admit it, she'll be touched that her boyfriend went to such ridiculous and frankly insane lengths to protect her."

"This is not about points," ground out Harry Potter, the words visibly escaping from between his clenched teeth. Dinner sat ignored on the table in front of him. "This is about justice. And I. Am. Not. Her. Boyfriend!"

This was met by a certain amount of sniggering from all present.

"Yeah, well," said a sixth-year Ravenclaw boy, "I think after she kisses you to bring you out of Dementation and you stick forty-four bullies to the ceiling for her, we've gone way past 'she's not my girlfriend, really' and into the question of what your kids will be like. Wow, that's a scary thought..." The Ravenclaw trailed off and then said, in a smaller voice, "Please don't look at me like that."

"Look," said Arty Grey, "I'm sorry to be blunt about this, but you can have justice or you can have girls, you can't have both at the same time." He clapped a companionable hand on Harry Potter's shoulder. "You've got potential, kid, more potential than any wizard I've ever seen, but you've got to learn how to use it, you know? Be a bit sweeter to them, learn some spells to clean up that mess you call hair. Above all, you need to hide your evilness better – not too well, but better. Nice well-groomed boys get girls, and Dark Wizards also get girls, but nice well-groomed boys suspected of being secretly Dark get more girls than you can imagine –"

"Not interested," Harry said flatly, as he picked up the boy's hand from his shoulder and unceremoniously dropped it.

"But you will be," said Arty Grey, his voice low and foreboding. "Ah, you will be!"

Elsewhere along the same table –

"Romantic?" shrieked Hermione Granger, so loudly that some of the girls next to her winced. "What part of that was romantic? He didn't ask! He never asks! He just sends ghosts after people and glues them to ceilings and

does whatever he wants with my life!”

“But don’t you see?” said a fourth-year witch. “It means that even though he’s evil, he loves you!”

“You’re not helping,” said Penelope Clearwater a little further down the table, but she was ignored. Several older witches had started toward Hermione, after she’d sat down at the extreme opposite end of the table from Harry Potter, but then a swifter cloud of younger girls had surrounded Hermione in an impenetrable barrier.

“Boys,” said Hermione Granger, “should not be allowed to love girls without asking them first! This is true in a number of ways and especially when it comes to gluing people to the ceiling!”

This was also ignored. “It’s just like a play!” sighed a third-year girl.

“A play?” said Hermione. “I’d like to see the play where anything like this happens!”

“Oh,” said the third-year girl, “I was thinking of that really romantic one where there’s this very nice, sweet boy who makes a Floo call, only he mispronounces his destination and stumbles out into this room full of Dark Wizards who are performing a forbidden ritual that should’ve stayed forever lost to time, and they’re sacrificing seven victims in order to unseal this ancient horror which is supposed to grant someone a wish if it’s freed, so of course the boy’s presence interrupts the ritual, and as the horror is eating all the Dark Wizards and everyone is dying the boy’s last thought is that he wishes he could’ve had a girlfriend, and the next thing you know the boy is lying in the lap of this beautiful woman whose eyes are burning with a dreadful light, only she doesn’t understand anything about being human so the boy always has to stop her eating people. This is just like that play, only you’re the boy and Harry Potter is the girl!”

“That...” Hermione said, feeling quite surprised. “That actually does sound something like –”

“It does?” blurted a second-year girl sitting across the table, who was now leaning forward, looking horrified and yet even more fascinated.

“No!” said Hermione. “I mean – he’s not my boyfriend!”

Two seconds later, Hermione’s ears caught up with what her lips had just said.

The fourth-year witch put her hand on Hermione’s shoulder and gave her a comforting squeeze. “Miss Granger,” she said in a soothing voice, “I think if you’re really honest with yourself, you’ll admit that the real reason

you're angry with your dark master is that he channeled his unspeakable powers through Tracey Davis instead of you."

Hermione's mouth opened but her throat locked up before the words came out, which was probably a good thing, because if she'd actually yelled that loudly it would've broken something.

"How's that possible, actually?" said the third-year girl. "I mean for Harry Potter to work through another girl even though he's bound himself to you? Do the three of you have one of those, you know, arrangements?"

"Gaaaaack," said Hermione Granger, her throat still locked, her brain halted, and her vocal cords spontaneously making a noise like she was coughing up a yak.



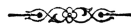
(Later.)

"I don't understand why you're being so unreasonable," said another second-year witch, who'd replaced the third-year-girl after Hermione had threatened to ask Tracey to eat her soul. "I mean, really, if someone like Harry Potter rescued me, I'd be – sending him thank-you cards, and hugging him, and," the girl's face was a bit red, "well, kissing him, I'd hope."

"Yeah!" said the other second-year witch. "I've never understood why girls in plays get angry when the main character goes out of his way to be nice to them. I wouldn't act like that if the hero liked me."

Hermione Granger had dropped her head to the dinner table, her hands slowly pulling at her hair.

"You just don't understand male psychology," the fourth-year witch said in an authoritative voice. "Granger's got to make it look like she can mysteriously resist his seductive charm."



(Even later.)

And so before long Hermione Granger had turned to the only person left she could talk to, the only person guaranteed to understand her point of view –

"They're all mad," said Hermione Granger as she strode vigorously toward Ravenclaw tower, having left dinner a bit early. "Everyone except you and me, Harry, I mean everyone except us in this whole school of Hogwarts, they're all entirely mad. And Ravenclaw girls are the worst, I don't know what

Ravenclaw girls go reading when they get older, but I'm certain they ought not to be reading it. One witch asked me if the two of us had soul-bonded, which I'm going to look up in the library tonight, but I'm pretty sure has never actually happened –"

"I don't even know a name for this kind of fallacious reasoning," said Harry Potter. The boy was walking normally, which meant he often had to skip forward a few steps to match her own indignation-fueled speed. "I seriously think if it was up to them, they'd be dragging us off this minute to get our names changed to Potter-Evans-Verres-Granger... Ugh, saying that out loud makes me realize how awful it sounds."

"You mean your name would be Potter-Evans-Verres-Granger and mine would be Granger-Potter-Evans-Verres," said Hermione. "It's too horrible to imagine."

"No," said the boy, "House Potter is a Noble House, so I think that name stays in front –"

"What?" she said indignantly. "Who says we have to –"

There was a sudden awful silence, broken only by the thuds of their shoes.

"Anyhow," Hermione said hastily, "some of the crazy things they said at dinner got me thinking, so I just want to say, Harry, that I really am grateful to you for saving me and everybody from getting beat up, and even though some parts of this afternoon upset me, I'm sure we can just talk about it calmly."

"Ah..." Harry said with a faint and tentative smile, his eyes showing a mixture of befuddlement and apprehension, "that's... good, I guess?"

To be specific, there'd been the fourth-year witch explaining that, since Harry was the evil wizard who'd fallen in love with Hermione, and Hermione was the pure and innocent girl who would either redeem him or get seduced by the Dark Arts herself, it followed that Hermione had to be perpetually indignant at anything Harry did, even if it was him heroically saving her from certain doom, just so that their romance wouldn't resolve itself before the end of Act IV. And then Penelope Clearwater, who Hermione had really thought was smarter than that, had remarked in a loud voice that for identical reasons it was impossible for Hermione to just go over and talk sensibly with Harry about why she was feeling hurt, and anyway Dark Wizards were attracted to passionate defiance in a woman, not logic. This was the point at which Hermione had shoved herself up from the benches, stomped furiously over to where Harry was sitting, and asked him in a reasonable voice if the two of

them could go for a walk and sort things out.

"So in other words," Hermione said in her calmest voice ever, "you're not really in trouble with me, I'm still talking to you, we're still friends, and we're still studying together. We're not having a fight. Right?"

Somehow this only seemed to increase Harry Potter's apprehension. "Right," said the Boy-Who-Lived.

"Great!" said Hermione. "So, have you worked out why I was upset, Mr. Potter?"

There was a pause. "You wanted me to keep out of your affairs?" Harry said cautiously. "I mean – I know you wanted to do things on your own. And I was staying out of your way, until I'd heard you'd gotten ambushed by three junior Death Eaters and, honestly, I wasn't expecting that. Professor Quirrell wasn't expecting that. I started to worry you'd gotten in over your head and then, no offense Hermione, forty-four bullies in a massed ambush is way beyond what anyone could handle without help. That's why I thought you really needed help just that once –"

"No, that part's fine," said Hermione. "We were in over our heads, honestly. Please guess again, Mr. Potter."

"Um," said Harry. "What Tracey did... startled you?"

"Startled me, Mr. Potter?" There might have been a touch of acidity in her voice. "No, Mr. Potter, I was scared. I was frightened. I wouldn't want to admit to being afraid of just dragons or something, people might think I was cowardly, but when you can hear distant voices crying 'Tekeli-li! Tekeli-li!' and there's pools of blood seeping out from under all the doors, then it's okay to be scared."

"I am sorry," Harry said with what sounded like genuine regret. "I thought you'd realize it was me."

"And the reason we all got scared like that, Mr. Potter, was that you didn't ask first!" Despite her intentions, Hermione found her voice was rising again. "You should've asked me before you did something like that, Harry! You should've said very specifically, 'Hermione, can I make blood come out from under the doors?' It's important to be specific when you're asking about that sort of thing!"

The boy rubbed the back of his neck as he walked. "I... honestly, I just thought you'd have to say no."

"Yes, Mr. Potter, I could've said no. That's the whole point of asking first, Mr. Potter!"

"No, I mean you'd have had to say no, whether or not it was what you really wanted. And then all of you would've gotten beaten up and it would've been my fault for asking first."

Hermione's eyebrows went up in a bit of surprise, and she kept walking for a few steps while she tried to understand this. "What?" she said.

"Well..." the boy said a bit slowly. "I mean... you're the Sunshine General, aren't you? You couldn't say yes to me scaring people, not even bullies, not even to save your friends from getting beaten up. You would've had to say no, and then you would've gotten hurt. This way, you can tell people honestly that you had no idea and that it wasn't your fault. That's why I didn't warn you."

Hermione stopped walking, turned to face Harry full on instead of just turning her head. Her voice was carefully even as she said, "Harry, you've got to stop coming up with clever reasons for doing stupid things."

Harry's eyebrows flew up. After a moment he said, "Look... I know what you mean, of course, but there's still the question of whether it's actually is a good idea, not just a clever one –"

"I understand why you did what you did today," Hermione said. "But I want you to promise that from now on, you'll ask me first, always, even if you can come up with a reason why you shouldn't."

There was a pause that stretched, and Hermione could feel her heart sinking.

"Hermione –" Harry started to say.

"Why?" The frustration burst out into her voice. "Why is it so awful? All you have to do is ask!"

Harry's eyes were very serious. "Who in S.P.H.E.W. do you try hardest to defend, Hermione? Who are you most afraid for, when you fight?"

"Hannah Abbott," Hermione said without having to think about it, and then felt a little bad, because Hannah was trying hard and she had improved a lot –

"Would you feel okay about trusting someone else, like Tracey, with final responsibility for protecting Hannah? If you knew Hannah was about to walk into an ambush, and you came up with a plan for protecting her, would you feel good about letting Tracey say whether or not you were allowed to do it?"

"Well... no?" said Hermione, puzzled.

The green eyes of the Boy-Who-Lived were steady on hers. "Would you trust Hannah to have the final say in whether she needed protecting?"

"I –" said Hermione, and then paused. It was strange, she knew the right answer and she also knew the right answer wasn't actually true. Hannah was trying so hard to prove she wasn't afraid, even though she was, and it was easy to see how the Hufflepuff girl might try too hard –

Then Hermione realized the implication. "You think I'm like Hannah?"

"Not... exactly..." Harry ran his hands through his mess of hair. "Listen, Hermione, what would you have suggested doing, if I'd warned you about an ambush by forty-four bullies?"

"I would've done the responsible thing and told Professor McGonagall and let her take care of it," Hermione said promptly. "And then there wouldn't have been darkness and people screaming and horrible blue light –"

But Harry just shook his head. "That's not the responsible thing to do, Hermione. It's what someone playing the role of a responsible girl would do. Yes, I thought of going to Professor McGonagall. But she would've only stopped the disaster once. Probably before any disturbance happened in the first place, like by telling the bullies she knew. If the bullies got punished just for plotting, it would be by losing House points, or at worst a day's detention, not anything that would really scare them. And then the bullies would have tried again. Fewer of them, with better operational security so I didn't hear about it. They would probably ambush one of you, alone. Professor McGonagall doesn't have the authority to do something scary enough to protect you – and she wouldn't have overstepped her authority, because she's not really responsible."

"Professor McGonagall isn't responsible?" Hermione said incredulously. She jammed her hands on her hips, now openly glaring at him. "Are you nuts?"

The boy didn't blink. "You could call it heroic responsibility, maybe," Harry Potter said. "Not like the usual sort. It means that whatever happens, no matter what, it's always your fault. Even if you tell Professor McGonagall, she's not responsible for what happens, you are. Following the school rules isn't an excuse, someone else being in charge isn't an excuse, even trying your best isn't an excuse. There just aren't any excuses, you've got to get the job done no matter what." Harry's face tightened. "That's why I say you're not thinking responsibly, Hermione. Thinking that your job is done when you tell Professor McGonagall – that isn't heroine thinking. Like Hannah being

beat up is okay then, because it isn't your fault anymore. Being a heroine means your job isn't finished until you've done whatever it takes to protect the other girls, permanently." In Harry's voice was a touch of the steel he had acquired since the day Fawkes had been on his shoulder. "You can't think as if just following the rules means you've done your duty."

"I think," Hermione said evenly, "that you and I might disagree about some things, Mr. Potter. Like whether you or Professor McGonagall is more responsible, and whether being responsible usually involves people running around and screaming, and how much it's a good idea to follow school rules. And just because we disagree, Mr. Potter, doesn't mean that you get the final say."

"Well," said Harry, "you asked what was so awful about having to ask you first, and it was a surprisingly good question, so I examined my mind and that's what I found. I think my real fear is that if Hannah is in trouble and I come up with a way to save her that seems weird or dark or something, you might not weigh the consequences to Hannah. You might not accept the heroine's responsibility of coming up with some way to save her, somehow, no matter what. Instead you'd just carry out the role of Hermione Granger, the sensible Ravenclaw girl; and the role of Hermione Granger automatically says no, whether or not she has a better plan in mind. And then forty-four bullies will take turns beating up Hannah Abbott, and it'll all be my fault because I knew, even if I didn't want reality to be that way, I knew that was how it would go. I'm pretty sure that was my secret, wordless, unutterable fear."

The frustration was building up inside her again. "It's my life!" Hermione burst out. She could imagine what it would be like with Harry messing with her all the time, constantly inventing justifications not to ask her first and not to listen to her objections. She shouldn't have to win an argument just to – "There'll always be some reason, you can always say I'm not thinking right! I want my own life! Otherwise I'll walk away, I really will, I mean it Harry."

Harry sighed. "This is exactly where I didn't want things to end up, and here we are. You're afraid of just the same thing I am, aren't you? Afraid that if you let go of the steering wheel, we'll crash." The corners of his lips twisted, but it didn't look like a real smile. "That's something I can understand."

"I don't think you understand at all!" Hermione said sharply. "You said we'd be partners, Harry!"

That stopped him, she could see it stop him.

"How about this?" Harry said at last. "I'll promise to ask you first before I do anything that could be interpreted as meddling in your affairs. Only you've got to promise me to be reasonable, Hermione. I mean really, genuinely, stop and think for twenty seconds first, treat it as a real choice. The sort of reasonableness where you realize I'm offering a way to protect the other girls, and that if you automatically say no without considering it properly, there's this actual consequence where Hannah Abbott ends up in the hospital."

Hermione stared at Harry, as his recitation wound down.

"Well?" said Harry.

"I shouldn't have to make promises," she said, "just to be consulted about my own life." She turned from Harry and began walking toward the Ravenclaw tower, not looking at him. "But I'll think about it, anyway."

She heard Harry sigh, and after that they walked in silence for a while, passing through an archway of some reddish metal like copper, into a corridor that was just like the one they'd left except that it was tiled in pentagons instead of squares.

"Hermione..." said Harry. "I've been watching you and thinking, since the day you said you were going to be a hero. You've got the courage. You'll fight for what's right, even in the face of enemies that would scare other people away. You've certainly got the raw intelligence for it, and you're probably a better person inside than I am. But even so... well, to be honest, Hermione... I can't quite see you filling Dumbledore's shoes, leading magical Britain's fight against You-Know-Who. Not yet, anyway."

Hermione had turned her head to stare at Harry, who just went on walking, as though lost in thought. Fill those shoes? She'd never tried to imagine herself that way. She'd never imagined imagining herself that way.

"And maybe I'm wrong," Harry said as they walked. "Maybe I've just read too many stories where the heroes never do the sensible thing and follow the rules and tell their Professor McGonagalls, so my brain doesn't think you're a proper storybook hero. Maybe it's you who's the sane one, Hermione, and me who's just being silly. But every time you talk about following rules or relying on teachers, I get that same feeling, like it's bound up with this one last thing that's stopping you, one last thing that puts your PC self to sleep and turns you into an NPC again..." Harry let out a sigh. "Maybe that's why Dumbledore said I should have wicked stepparents."

"He said what?"

Harry nodded. "I still don't know whether the Headmaster was joking

or... the thing is, he was right in a way. I had loving parents, but I never felt like I could trust their decisions, they weren't sane enough. I always knew that if I didn't think things through myself, I might get hurt. Professor McGonagall will do whatever it takes to get the job done if I'm there to nag her about it, she doesn't break rules on her own without heroic supervision. Professor Quirrell really is someone who gets things done no matter what, and he's the only other person I know who notices stuff like the Snitch ruining Quidditch. But him I can't trust to be good. Even if it's sad, I think that's part of the environment that creates what Dumbledore calls a hero – people who don't have anyone else to shove final responsibility onto, and that's why they form the mental habit of tracking everything themselves."

Hermione didn't say anything to that, but she was thinking back to something Godric Gryffindor had written near the end of his very short autobiography. Briefly and without any explanation, because the scroll had been meant to be copied by hand, centuries before the Muggle printing press had inspired wizards to invent the Reading-Writing Quill.

No rescuer hath the rescuer, Godric Gryffindor had written. No Lord hath the champion, no mother and no father, only nothingness above.

If that was the price of being a hero, Hermione wasn't sure she wanted to pay it. Or maybe – though it wasn't the sort of thing she would have thought, before she started hanging around Harry – maybe Godric Gryffindor had gotten it wrong.

"Do you trust Dumbledore?" Hermione said. "I mean, he's right here in our school and he's the most legendary hero in the whole world –"

"He was the most legendary hero," said Harry. "Now he sets chickens on fire. Honestly, does Dumbledore seem reliable to you?"

Hermione didn't answer.

Side by side, the two of them began to climb huge wide spiral stairs, the steps alternating between bronze metal and blue stone; the final approach to where the Ravenclaw portrait waited to guard their dorm with silly riddles.

"Oh, and I just thought of something I should tell you," Harry said when they were about halfway up. "Since it affects your life and all. Think of it as a sort of down payment –"

"What is it?" said Hermione.

"I predict S.P.H.E.W. is about to retire."

"Retire?" Hermione said, almost stumbling on one of the stairs.

"Yeah," Harry said. "I mean, I could be wrong, but I suspect the teachers are about to clamp down hard on fighting in the corridors." Harry was grinning as he spoke, a glint in his eyes behind the glasses hinting at secret knowledge. "Cast new wards to detect offensive hexes, or start verifying reports of bullying using Veritaserum – I can think of several ways they might shut it down. But if I'm right, it's something to celebrate, Hermione, you and all of you. You kicked up enough public ruckus that you got them to actually do something about the bullying. All the bullying."

Slowly, then, a smile began to creep up her lips, and as she reached the top of the stairs and began walking toward the Ravenclaw portrait for her riddle, Hermione felt rather lighter on her feet, a wonderful lifting feeling spreading through her like she'd been pumped full of helium.

Somehow, despite all the effort the eight of them had put in, she hadn't expected that much, she hadn't expected it to actually work.

They'd made a difference...



It was the end of breakfast-time on the next morning.

The students from every year sat very still in their benches, all heads turned in the same direction, toward the Head Table, before which one lone first-year girl stood rigid and motionless, her head tilted back to stare up at the Head of House Slytherin.

Professor Snape's face was twisted with fury and triumph, vindictive as any painting of a Dark Wizard; and behind him the other Professors sat at the Head Table, watching with faces as though carved from stone.

"– permanently disbanded," spat the Potions Master. "Your self-proclaimed Society is outlawed within Hogwarts, by my decision as a Professor! If your Society or any member of it is discovered fighting in the hallways again, Granger, you will be personally held responsible and expelled, by me, from the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry!"

That first-year girl stood there, before the Head Table where she'd been called before only to receive commendations and smiles; stood there with her spine held tall and upright in its curve like a centaur's bow, giving nothing to the enemy.

That first-year witch stood there with all tears and anger bottled, her face still, nothing changing of her outward appearance, while something slowly broke inside her, she could feel it breaking.

It broke further when Professor Snape gave her two weeks detention for the crime of violence in school, sneering with the contemptuous face he'd shown them all on the first day of Potions, and with a little twist in the corner of his smile that said the Potions Master knew exactly how unfair he was being.

Whatever-it-was inside her cracked all the way through, from top to bottom, when Professor Snape took one hundred points from Ravenclaw.

It ended, then, and Snape told her she was dismissed.

She turned around and saw that at the Ravenclaw table, Harry Potter was sitting still in his place, she couldn't see his expression from here, she saw his fists on the table but she couldn't see if they were clenched white like her own. She had whispered to him, when Professor Snape had called her, that he wasn't to do anything without asking first.

Hermione wheeled back again to look at the Head Table, just as Snape was turning away from her to resume his place.

"I said you're dismissed, girl," said the sneering voice, but there was a pleased smile on Snape's face, like he was waiting for her to do something –

Hermione strode forward another five steps toward the Head Table and said in a breaking voice, "Headmaster?"

Utter silence filled the Great Hall.

Headmaster Dumbledore said nothing, didn't move. It was as though he, too, was just carved from stone.

Hermione turned her gaze to look at Professor Flitwick, whose head, barely visible above the table, seemed to be staring down into his lap. Beside him, Professor Sprout's face was very tight, she seemed to be forcing herself to watch, and her lips were trembling, but she said nothing.

Professor McGonagall's chair was empty, the Deputy Headmistress hadn't shown up to breakfast that morning.

"Why aren't any of you saying anything?" said Hermione Granger. Her voice was trembling with the last of her hope, the last desperate reach for help from that place inside her. "You know what he's doing is wrong!"

"Two more weeks' detention, for insolence," Snape said silkily.

It shattered.

She looked at the Head Table for a few seconds longer, at Professor Flitwick and Professor Sprout and the empty place where Professor McGonagall should've been. Then Hermione Granger turned and began walking toward the Ravenclaw table. There was a babble of voices starting up, as the

students came unfrozen from where they'd sat. And then, as she was almost to the Ravenclaw table –

The dry voice of Professor Quirrell cut through everything, and that voice said, "One hundred points to Miss Granger for doing what is right."

Hermione almost fell over her own feet; and then she continued forward, even as Snape shouted something furious, even as Professor Quirrell leaned back in his chair and began to laugh, even as Dumbledore's voice was saying something she didn't catch and then she was sitting down at the Ravenclaw table again next to Harry Potter. Harry Potter was frozen beside her, he looked like someone who didn't dare move. "It's all right," her voice said to him, automatically without there being any choice or thought involved, although really it wasn't right at all. "But can you see if you can get me out of Snape's detentions, like you did yourself that time?"

Harry Potter nodded, a single jerky motion of his head. "I –" said Harry. "I – I'm sorry, this – this is all my fault –"

"Don't be ridiculous, Harry." It was odd how her voice was coming out all normal, and without her thinking about what to say. Hermione looked down at her breakfast plate, but eating seemed to be clearly out of the question, there was a roiling and churning in her stomach which suggested that she was already on the verge of throwing up, which was odd because she could have sworn her whole body felt numb, like she wasn't feeling anything, at the same time.

"And," her voice said, "if you want to break school rules or something, you can ask me about it, I promise I won't just say no."



Non est salvatori salvator,
neque defensori dominus,
nec pater nec mater,
nihil supernum.
– Godric Gryffindor, 1202 C.E.

INTERLUDE WITH THE CONFESSOR: SUNK COSTS

RIANNE Felthorne descended the stairs of roughened stone and crude mortar, keeping a Lumos lit through the distances between fire-sconces, holding aloft her wand through the gaps from light to light.

She came to the empty rock cavern pierced by many dark openings, lit by a torch of ancient style that fired as she entered.

There was no one else there, as yet, and after long minutes of nervous standing, she began the spell to Transfigure a cushioned sofa large enough for two people to sit, or maybe even lie down on. A simple wooden stool would have been easier, she could have done that in fifteen seconds, but – well –

Even when the sofa was fully conjured, Professor Snape still hadn't arrived, and she sat down on the left side of her sofa with her pulse hammering in her throat. Somehow she was only becoming more nervous, not less, as the delay stretched.

She knew this was the last time.

The last time before all these memories went away, and Rianne Felthorne found herself in a mysterious cavern, wondering what was going on.

There was something about it that felt like dying.

The books said a properly done Obliviation wasn't harmful, people forgot things all the time. People dreamed, and then woke up without remembering their dreams. Obliviation didn't even involve that much discontinuity, just a brief instant of disorientation; it was like being distracted by a loud noise and losing track of a thought you couldn't seem to remember afterward. That was what the books said, and why Memory Charms were fully approved by the Ministry for all authorized governmental purposes.

But still, these thoughts, the thoughts she was thinking right now; soon nobody would have them anymore. When she looked ahead in the future, there was nobody to complete the thoughts she wasn't finished thinking. Even if she managed to tie up all the loose ends in her mind over the next

minute, there wouldn't be anything left of it afterward. Wasn't that exactly what you would find yourself reflecting on, if you were going to die in the next minute?

There came the sound of muffled steps...

Severus Snape emerged into the cavern.

His eyes moved to her sitting on the sofa, and a strange expression crossed his face; strange because it wasn't sardonic, or angry, or cold.

"Thank you, Miss Felthorne," Snape said quietly, "that was considerate of you." The Potions Master took out his wand and performed the usual privacy Charms, and then he moved toward her, and sat down heavily beside her on the Transfigured sofa.

Her pulse was now pounding for another reason entirely.

She slowly turned to look at Professor Snape, and saw that his head was leaning back against the sofa, and his eyes were closed. Not sleeping, though. His face appeared tense, unrelaxed, bearing pain.

She knew – she was suddenly certain – that she was only allowed to see this sight because she wouldn't remember it afterward; and that nobody before her had ever been allowed to see it.

The frantic conversation going on inside Rianne Felthorne's mind sounded something like this: I could just lean over and kiss him, you are completely out of your tiny mind, his eyes are closed I bet he wouldn't stop me in time, I bet it would be years before anyone found your body –

But Professor Snape opened his eyes then (to her inner disappointment and relief), and said, in a more normal voice, "Your payment, Miss Felthorne." From his robe he took a ruby, cut to Gringotts standard, and held it out toward her. "Fifty facets. I will not mind if you count them."

She held out a trembling hand, hoping that Snape would press the ruby into her fingers, that she would feel a touch of his skin alive against hers.

But instead Snape raised his hand slightly and dropped the ruby into her hand, then leaned back against the couch. "You will remember finding it lying on the ground of this cavern, where you came exploring," said Snape. "And since nobody except you will actually believe that, you will remember thinking that it would be less troublesome if you deposited the money into a separate box in Gringotts."

For a stretch there was only the faint crackling of the torch.

"Why –" Rianne Felthorne said. He knows I won't remember. "Why did you do it? I mean – you said to tell you where bullies would be, and who they

would be, but not whether Granger would be there. And I know, the way the Time-Turner works, if you want to make Granger be there, you can't be told whether it's already happened. So I did work out that we were the ones telling her where to go. We were, weren't we?"

Snape nodded without speaking. He had closed his eyes again.

"But," said Rianne, "I didn't understand why you were helping her. And now – after what you did to Granger in the Great Hall – I just don't understand at all." Rianne had never thought of herself as particularly nice. She'd taken little notice of the controversy over the Sunshine General. But something about helping Granger fight bullies had... well, she'd gotten used to thinking of that as the good side, and thinking of herself as being on the good side. And she'd found she actually liked it. It was hard, to just let that go. "Why'd you do that, Professor Snape?"

Snape shook his head, his face tightened.

"Is –" Rianne said falteringly. "I mean – so long as we're here – is there anything you do want to talk about?" There was something she wanted to say, but she couldn't make the words pass her own lips.

"I can think of one matter," Snape said after a pause. "If you are interested, Miss Felthorne."

Snape's eyes were still shut, so she couldn't just nod her head. Her voice almost broke, when she forced herself to say "Yes."

"There's a certain boy in your class who likes you, Miss Felthorne," Snape said from behind his closed eyes. "I won't say his name. But he watches you every time you walk across the room, when he thinks you aren't looking. He dreams about you and desires to possess you, but he's never asked you for so much as a kiss."

Her heart started hammering even harder.

"Please tell me the honest truth, Miss Felthorne. What do you think of that boy?"

"Well –" she said. She was stumbling over her words. "I think – to never even ask for one kiss – would be –"

Sad.

Just too pitiful.

"Weakness," she said, her voice trembling.

"I agree," said Snape. "Suppose that boy had helped you, though. Would you think that you owed him a kiss, if he asked?"

She inhaled sharply –

“Or would you think,” Snape continued, his eyes still closed, “that he was just being bothersome?”

The words stabbed into her like a knife and she couldn’t help gasping out loud.

Snape’s eyes flew open, and his gaze met hers across the sofa.

Then the Potions Master began to laugh, small sad chuckles.

“No, not you, Miss Felthorne!” Snape said. “Not you! We really are talking about a boy. One who attends your Potions class, in fact.”

“Oh,” she said. She tried to remember what Snape had said before, now feeling rather unnerved as she thought of some boy watching her, always silently watching. “Well, um, in that case. That’s kind of creepy, actually. Who is it?”

The Potions Master shook his head. “It doesn’t matter,” said Snape. “Out of curiosity, what would you think if that boy were still in love with you years later?”

“Um,” she said, feeling a bit confused, “that would be totally pathetic?”

The torch crackled a bit in the cavern.

“It’s strange,” Snape said quietly. “I have had two mentors, over the course of my days. Both were extraordinarily perceptive, and neither one ever told me the things I wasn’t seeing. It’s clear enough why the first said nothing, but the second...” Snape’s face tightened. “I suppose I would have to be naive, to ask why he stayed silent.”

The quiet stretched, while Rianne tried frantically to think of something to say.

“It is an odd thing,” Snape said, his voice still softer, “to look back after only thirty-two years, and wonder when your life was ruined past all rescuing. Was it determined when the Sorting Hat cried ‘Slytherin!’ for me? It seems unfair, since I was offered no choice; the Sorting Hat spoke the moment it touched upon my head. Yet I cannot claim it named me untruly. I never treasured knowledge for its own sake. I was not loyal to the one person I called friend. I was never one for righteous fury, then or now. Courage? There is no bravery in risking a life already ruined. My little fears have always mastered me, and I never turned aside from any of the paths I walked down, for those little fears. No, the Sorting Hat could never have put me in her House. Perhaps my final loss was determined, even then. Is that fair, I ask, even if the Sorting Hat speaks truly? Is it fair that some children should possess more courage than others, and thus a man’s life be judged?”

Rianne Felthorne was starting to realize that she'd never had the tiniest inkling of who her Potions Master was inside, and unfortunately all these dark hidden depths weren't helping her with her problem.

"But no," Snape said. "I know where it went wrong for the last time. I could point to the very day and hour I missed my final chance. Miss Felthorne, did the Sorting Hat offer you Ravenclaw?"

"Y-yes," she said without thinking.

"Have you ever been any good at riddles?"

"Yes," she said again, because whatever Professor Snape was about to say, she wouldn't hear it if she said no.

"I am terrible at riddles," Snape said in a distant voice. "I was once given a riddle to solve, and I did not understand even the simplest part until too late. I did not even realize the riddle was meant for me until too late. I thought I had merely happened to overhear it, when in truth it was I who was overheard. So I sold my riddle to another, and that is when the wreckage of my life passed beyond retrieval." Snape's voice was still distant, sounding more abstracted than sorrowful. "And even now, I understand nothing of importance. Tell me, Miss Felthorne, suppose a man were carrying a knife, and he tripped over a baby and stabbed himself. Would you say that the baby had," Snape's voice lowered, as though he were imitating some still deeper voice, "THE POWER TO VANQUISH him?"

"Um... no?" she said hesitantly.

"Then what does it mean to have the power to vanquish someone?"

Rianne considered the puzzle. (Wishing, not for the first time in her life, that she had chosen Ravenclaw and to perdition with her parents' disapproval; but the Sorting Hat had never offered her Gryffindor.) "Well..." Rianne said. She was having trouble putting her thoughts into words. "It means you've got the power, but you don't have to do it. It means you could do it if you tried –"

"Choice," the Potions Master said in the same faraway voice, as though he wasn't really talking to her at all. "There will be a choice. That is what the riddle seems to imply. And that choice is not a foregone conclusion to the chooser, for the riddle does not say, will vanquish, but rather the power to vanquish. How would a grown man mark a baby as his equal?"

"What?" said Rianne. She didn't understand that at all.

"Marking a baby is simple. Any strong Dark curse would produce a lasting scar. But such may be done to any child. What mark would signify

that a baby was your equal?"

She answered with the first thought that came to mind. "If you signed a betrothal contract, that would mean you'd be equals with them someday, when they grew up and you got married."

"That..." said Snape. "That's probably not it, Miss Felthorne, but thank you for trying." The long delicate fingers, honed by stirring potions to unimaginably fine tolerances, reached up and rubbed at the temples of the man's forehead. "It is enough to drive me to madness, so much hinging on such fragile words. Power he knows not... it must be more than some unknown spell. Not something he could acquire simply by practice and study. Some innate talent? No one can learn to be a Metamorphmagus... and yet that hardly seems like a power he knows not. Nor can I see how either could destroy all but a remnant of the other; I can see it in one direction, but not the reverse..." The Potions Master sighed. "And none of this means anything to you, does it, Miss Felthorne? The words are nothing. The words are shadows. It is her intonation which carries the meaning and that is something I've never been able to..."

The Potions Master trailed off, while Rianne stared at him.

"A prophecy?" Rianne said in a high squeak. "You heard a prophecy?" She'd taken Divination for a couple of months before dropping it in disgust, and she knew that much about how it worked.

"I will try one last thing," said Snape. "Something I have not tried before. Miss Felthorne, listen to the sound of my voice, the way I say it, not the words themselves, and tell me what you think it means. Can you do that? Good," said Snape, as she nodded obediently, though she wasn't sure at all what she was supposed to do.

And Severus Snape drew a breath, and intoned, "FOR THOSE TWO DIFFERENT SPELLETS CANNOT EXIST IN THE SAME VULD."

It sent shivers down her spine, all the worse for knowing the hollow words had been spoken in imitation of a true prophecy. Unnerved, she blurted out the first thing which came to mind, which might have been influenced by her present company. "Those two different ingredients cannot exist in the same cauldron?"

"But why not, Miss Felthorne? What is the meaning of a statement like that? What are we really being told?"

"Ah..." she hazarded. "If the two ingredients mix, they'll catch fire and burn the cauldron?"

Snape's face did not change expression in the slightest.

"Perhaps," Snape finally said, after they'd sat on the sofa in awful silence for what seemed like minutes. "It would explain the word must. Thank you, Miss Felthorne. Once again you have been most helpful."

"I –" she said, "I was glad to –" and the words stuck in her throat. The Potions Master had thanked her with a tone of finality, and she knew that the time of the Rianne Felthorne who remembered these moments was drawing to an end. "I wish I didn't have to forget this, Professor Snape!"

"I wish," Severus Snape said in a whisper so low she could hardly hear it, "that everything had been different..."

The Potions Master stood up from the sofa, the weight of his presence vanishing from beside her. He turned and drew his wand from his robes, pointing it at her.

"Wait –" she said. "Before that –"

Somehow it was unbelievably hard to take the first step from fantasy to reality, from imagining to doing. Even if it was only one step and would never go any further. The gap stretched like the distance between two mountains.

The Sorting Hat had never offered her Gryffindor...

...was it fair that thus a woman's life be judged?

If you can't say it now, when you won't even remember it afterward – when nothing will continue from this moment, just as if you were to die – then when will you ever say it, to anyone?

"Can I have a kiss first?" said Rianne Felthorne.

Snape's black eyes studied her so intensely that her blush started to reach all the way to her chest, and she wondered if he knew perfectly well that she was still being weak, and it wasn't a kiss she'd truly wanted.

"Why not," the Potions Master said quietly, and he leaned his head down over the sofa and kissed her.

It was nothing like she'd imagined. In her fantasies Snape's kisses were fierce, seized from her, but this was – it was just awkward, actually. Snape's lips pressed down too hard on hers, forcing them back against her teeth, and the angle wasn't right and their noses were sort of bending and his lips were too tight and –

Only as the Potions Master straightened back up again, raising his wand once more, did she realize.

"That wasn't –" she said in a wondering voice, looking up at him. "That wasn't – was it – your first –"

Rianne Felthorne blinked at the stone cavern she'd discovered, still holding the extraordinary ruby she'd found embedded in the dirt of one corner. It was an incredible windfall, and she didn't know why looking at the ruby made her feel so sad, like she'd forgotten something, something that had been precious to her.

SELF ACTUALIZATION, AFTERMATHS: SURFACE APPEARANCES

Aftermath: Albus Dumbledore and –

THE old wizard sat alone at his desk, in the unsilence of the Headmaster's office, amid the innumerable and unnoticed devices; his robes a gentle yellow, of soft fabric, not such clothing as he ordinarily wore before others. His wrinkled hand held a quill scratching away at an official-looking parchment. If you had somehow been there to watch his lined face, you would have been unable to deduce anything more about the man himself than you understood of the enigmatic devices. You might have observed that the face looked a little sad, a little tired, but then Albus Dumbledore always looked like that when he was alone.

In the Floo hearth there were only scattered ashes without a hint of flame, a magical door that had been shut so solidly as to stop existing. On the material plane, the great oaken door to the office had been closed and locked; beyond that door, the Endless Stairs stayed motionless; at the bottom of those stairs, the gargoyles that blocked the entrance did not flow, their pseudo-life withdrawn to leave solid rock.

Then, even as the quill was in the middle of penning a word, even as it was in the middle of scratching a letter –

The old wizard shot to his feet with a speed that would have shocked anyone watching, abandoning the quill in mid-letter to fall onto the parchment; like lightning he spun on the oaken door, his yellow robes whirling around him and a wand of dread power leaping into his hand –

And as abruptly, the old wizard paused, halting his motion even as the wand came to bear.

A hand struck upon the oaken door, three times knocking.

More slowly, now, that grim wand went back into the dueling holster strapped beneath the old wizard's sleeve. The ancient man moved forward a few paces, drew himself up into a more formal stance, composed his face. Nearby upon the desk, the quill moved to the side of the parchment, as

though it had been carefully placed there rather than dropped in haste; and the parchment itself flipped over to show blankness.

With a silent twitch of his will, the oaken door swung open.

Hard as stones, the green eyes glared at him.

"I admit that I am impressed, Harry," the old wizard said quietly. "The Cloak of Invisibility would have let you evade my lesser means of vision; but I did not sense my golems step aside, nor the stairs turning. How did you come here?"

The boy walked into the office, step by deliberate step until the door closed smoothly behind him. "I can go anywhere I choose, with or without permission," that boy said. His voice seemed calm; too calm, perhaps. "I am in your office because I decided to be here, and to hell with passwords. You are greatly mistaken, Headmaster Dumbledore, if you think that I stay in this school because I am a prisoner here. I simply have not chosen, yet, to leave. Now keeping that in mind, why did you command your agent, Professor Snape, to break the agreement we made in this office, that he would not torment any student in her fourth year or below?"

The old wizard looked at the angry young hero for a long moment. Then, slowly enough not to alarm the boy, those wizened fingers drew open one of the manifold drawers of the desk, lifted out a sheet of parchment, laid it upon the desk. "Fourteen," the old wizard said. "It is not the number of all the owls sent last night. Only the owls sent to families with a seat on the Wizengamot, or families of great wealth, or families already allied with your foes. Or, in the case of Robert Jugson, all three; for his father, Lord Jugson, is a Death Eater, and his grandfather a Death Eater who died by Alastor Moody's wand. What the letters said, I do not know, but I can guess. Do you still not understand, Harry Potter? Each time Hermione Granger won, as you put it, the danger to her from Slytherin grew again, and yet again. But now the Slytherins have triumphed over her, easily and safely, without violence or lasting harm. They have won, and need fight no more..." The old wizard sighed. "So I had planned. So I had hoped. So it would have been, if the Defense Professor had not taken it upon himself to intervene. Now the dispute goes to the Board of Governors, where Severus will seem to conquer the Defense Professor; but that will not feel the same to the Slytherins, it will not have been over and finished in a moment, to their satisfaction."

The boy advanced further into the room, his head tilting back further to look up at the half-moon glasses; and somehow it was like the boy was

looking down at the Headmaster, rather than up. "So this Lord Jugson is a Death Eater?" the boy said softly. "Good. His life is already bought and paid for, then, and I can do anything I want to him without ethical problems –"

"Harry!"

The boy's voice was clear as ice, frozen of purest water from some untouched spring. "You seem to think that the Light should live in fear of the darkness. I say it should be the other way around. I'd prefer not to kill this Lord Jugson, even if he is a Death Eater. But one hour of brainstorming with the Defense Professor would be plenty of time to come up with some creative way to wreck him financially, or get him exiled from magical Britain. That would serve to make the point, I think."

"I confess," the old wizard said slowly, "that the thought of ruining a five-hundred-year-old House, and challenging a Death Eater to war to the finish, over a scuffle in a Hogwarts hallway, had not occurred to me, Harry." The old wizard lifted a finger to push back his half-moon glasses from where they had slid a little down his nose, during his sudden motion earlier. "I daresay it would not occur to Miss Granger either, nor to Professor McGonagall, nor to Fred and George."

The boy shrugged. "It wouldn't be about the hallways," the boy said. "It would be justice for his past crimes, and I'd only do it if Jugson made the first move. The point isn't to make people scared of me as a wild card, after all. It's to teach them that neutrals are perfectly safe from me, and poking me with a stick is incredibly dangerous." The boy smiled in a way that didn't reach his eyes. "Maybe I'll buy an ad in the Daily Prophet, saying that anyone who wants to carry on this dispute with me will learn the true meaning of Chaos, but anyone who leaves me alone will be fine."

"No," the old wizard said. His voice was deeper now, showing something of his true age and power. "No, Harry, that must not be. You have not yet learned the meaning of fighting, what truly happens when foes meet in battle. And so you dream, as young boys do, of teaching your foes to fear you. It frightens me that you, at far too young an age, might already have enough power to make some part of your dreams into reality. There is no turning of that road which does not lead into darkness, Harry, none. That is the way of a Dark Lord, for certain."

The boy hesitated, then, and his eyes flickered to the empty golden platform where Fawkes sometimes rested his wings. It was a gesture that few would have caught, but the old wizard knew it very well.

"All right, forget the part about teaching them to fear me," the boy said then. His voice was no less hard, but some of the cold had gone from it. "I still don't think you should let children get hurt out of fear of what someone like Lord Jugson might do. Protecting them is the whole point of your job. If Lord Jugson really does try to get in your way, then do whatever it takes to stop him. Give me full access to my vaults, and I'll take personal responsibility for dealing with any fallout from banning bullies in Hogwarts, whether it's Lord Jugson or anyone else."

Slowly the old wizard shook his head. "You seem to think, Harry, that I need merely use my full power, and all foes will be swept aside. You are wrong. Lucius Malfoy controls Minister Fudge, through the Daily Prophet he sways all Britain, only by bare margins does he not control enough of the Board of Governors to oust me from Hogwarts. Amelia Bones and Bartemius Crouch are allies, but even they would step aside if they saw us acting wantonly. The world that surrounds you is more fragile than you seem to believe, and we must walk with greater care. The old Wizarding War never ended, Harry, it only continued in a different form; the black king slept, and Lucius Malfoy moved his chesspieces for a time. Do you think Lucius Malfoy would lightly permit you to take a pawn of his color?"

The boy smiled, now with a touch of coldness again. "Okay, I'll figure out some way to set it up so that it looks like Lord Jugson betrayed his own side."

"Harry –"

"Obstacles mean you get creative, Headmaster. It doesn't mean you abandon the children you're supposed to protect. Let the Light win, and if trouble comes of it –" The boy shrugged. "Let Light win again."

"So might phoenixes speak, if they had words," the old wizard said. "But you do not understand the phoenix's price."

The last two words were spoken in a peculiarly clear voice that seemed to echo around the office, and then a huge rumbling noise seemed to come from all around them.

Between the ancient shield on the wall and the Sorting Hat's hatrack, the stone of the walls began to flow and move, pouring itself into two framing columns and revealing a gap between them, an opening that showed a set of stone stairs leading upward into darkness.

The old wizard turned and strode toward those stairs, and then looked back at where Harry Potter stood. "Come!" said the old wizard. There was no twinkle now in those blue eyes. "Since you have already gone so far as to

force your way here uninvited, you may as well go further.”



There were no railings on those stone steps, and after the first few steps Harry drew his wand and cast *Lumos*. The Headmaster did not look back, did not seem to be looking downward, as though he had climbed the steps often enough to have no need of vision.

The boy knew that he should have been curious, or frightened, but there was no spare brain capacity for that. It was taking all his control not to let the fury simmering inside him boil over any further than it already had.

The stairs went on for only a short distance, one straight rising flight without turns or curves.

At the top was a door of solid metal, looking black in the blue light cast from Harry’s wand, meaning that the metal itself was either black or perhaps red.

Albus Dumbledore lifted up his long wand like a brandished symbol, and again spoke in that strange voice which seemed to echo in Harry’s ears, as though burning itself into his memory: “Phoenix’s fate.”

That last door opened, and Harry followed Dumbledore inside.

The room beyond seemed to be made of black metal like the door that led to it. The walls were black, the floor was black. The ceiling above was black, but for a single globe of crystal that hung down from the ceiling on a white chain, and shone with a brilliant silver light that looked like it had been cast in imitation of Patronus light, though you could tell it wasn’t the real thing.

Within the room were pedestals of black metal, each bearing a moving picture, or an upright cylinder half-filled with some faintly shining silver liquid, or a lone small object; a scorched silver necklace, a crushed hat, an untouched golden wedding ring. Many pedestals bore all three, the moving picture and the silver liquid and the item. There seemed to be a good many wizards’ wands upon those pedestals, and many of those wands were broken, or burned, or looked like the wood had somehow melted.

It took that long for Harry to realize what he was seeing, and then his throat suddenly choked; it was like the rage inside him had been hit a hammerblow, maybe the hardest hammerblow of his entire existence.

“These are not all the fallen of all my wars,” Albus Dumbledore said. His back was to Harry, only his grey locks and yellowish robes showed. “Not

even nearly all of them. Only my closest friends, and those who died of my worst decisions, there is something of them here. Those I regret most of all, this is their place.”

Harry couldn’t count how many pedestals were in the room. It might have been around a hundred. The room of black metal was not small, and there was clearly more space left in it for future pedestals.

Albus Dumbledore turned and regarded Harry, the deep blue eyes set like steel in his brow, but his voice, when he spoke, was calm. “It seems to me that you know nothing of the phoenix’s price,” Albus Dumbledore said quietly. “It seems to me that you are not an evil person, but most terribly ignorant, and confident in your ignorance; as I once was, a long time ago. Yet I have never heard Fawkes so clearly as you seemed to, that day. Perhaps I was already too old and full of grief, when my phoenix came to me. If there is something I do not understand, about how ready I should be to fight, then tell me of this wisdom.” There was no anger in the old wizard’s voice; the impact that drove out your breath like falling off a broomstick was all in the scorched and shattered wands, gleaming gently in their death beneath the silver light. “Or else turn and go from this place, but then I wish to hear no more of it.”

Harry didn’t know what to say. There had been nothing in his own life that was like this, and all the words seemed to fall away. He would find something to say if he looked, but he couldn’t believe, in that moment, that the words would be meaningful. You shouldn’t be able to win any possible argument, just from people having died of your decisions, and yet even knowing that it felt like there was nothing to be said. That there was nothing Harry had any right to say.

And Harry almost did turn and go from that place, except for the understanding which came to him then: that there was probably a part of Albus Dumbledore which always stood in this place, always, no matter where he was. And that if you stood in a place like this you could do anything, lose anything, if it meant that you didn’t have to fight another time.

One of the pedestals caught Harry’s eye; the photograph on it did not move, did not smile or wave, it was a Muggle photograph of a woman looking seriously at the camera, her brown hair twisted into braids of an ordinary Muggle style that Harry hadn’t seen on any witch. There was a cylinder of silvery liquid beside the photograph, but no object; no melted ring or broken wand.

Harry walked forward, slowly, until he stood before the pedestal. “Who

was she?" Harry said, his voice sounding strange in his own ears.

"Her name was Tricia Glasswell," said Dumbledore. "The mother of a Muggleborn daughter, who the Death Eaters killed. She was a detective of the Muggle government, and after that she fed information from the Muggle authorities to the Order of the Phoenix, until she was – betrayed – into the hands of Voldemort." There was a catch in the old wizard's voice. "She did not die well, Harry."

"Did she save lives?" Harry said.

"Yes," the wizard said quietly. "She did."

Harry lifted his gaze from the pedestal to look at Dumbledore. "Would the world be a better place if she hadn't fought?"

"No, it would not," said the old wizard. His voice was tired, and grieving. He seemed more bent now, as though he were folding in on himself. "I see that you still do not understand. I think you will not understand until the day that you – oh, Harry. So very long ago, when I was not much older than you are now, I learned the true face of violence, and its cost. To fill the air with deadly curses – for any reason – for any reason, Harry – it is an ill thing, and its nature is corrupted, as terrible as the darkest rituals. Violence, once begun, becomes like a Lethifold that strikes at any life near it. I... would spare you that lesson the way I learned it, Harry."

Harry looked away from the blue eyes, cast his gaze down at the black metal of the floor. The Headmaster was trying to tell him something important, that was clear; and it wasn't something that Harry thought was stupid, either.

"There was a Muggle once named Mohandas Gandhi," Harry said to the floor. "He thought the government of Muggle Britain shouldn't rule over his country. And he refused to fight. He convinced his whole country not to fight. Instead he told his people to walk up to the British soldiers and let themselves be struck down, without resisting, and when Britain couldn't stand doing that any more, we freed his country. I thought it was a very beautiful thing, when I read about it, I thought it was something higher than all the wars that anyone had ever fought with guns or swords. That they'd really done that, and that it had actually worked." Harry drew another breath. "Only then I found out that Gandhi told his people, during World War II, that if the Nazis invaded they should use nonviolent resistance against them, too. But the Nazis would've just shot everyone in sight. And maybe Winston Churchill always felt that there should've been a better way, some clever way

to win without having to hurt anyone; but he never found it, and so he had to fight.” Harry looked up at the Headmaster, who was staring at him. “Winston Churchill was the one who tried to convince the British government not to give Czechoslovakia to Hitler in exchange for a peace treaty, that they should fight right away –”

“I recognize the name, Harry,” said Dumbledore. The old wizard’s lips twitched upward. “Although honesty compels me to say that dear Winston was never one for pangs of conscience, even after a dozen shots of Firewhiskey.”

“The point is,” Harry said, after a brief pause to remember exactly who he was talking to, and fight down the suddenly returning sense that he was an ignorant child gone insane with audacity who had no right to be in this room and no right to question Albus Dumbledore about anything, “the point is, saying violence is evil isn’t an answer. It doesn’t say when to fight and when not to fight. It’s a hard question and Gandhi refused to deal with it, and that’s why I lost some of my respect for him.”

“And your own answer, Harry?” Dumbledore said quietly.

“One answer is that you shouldn’t ever use violence except to stop violence,” Harry said. “You shouldn’t risk anyone’s life except to save even more lives. It sounds good when you say it like that. Only the problem is that if a police officer sees a burglar robbing a house, the police officer should try to stop the burglar, even though the burglar might fight back and someone might get hurt or even killed. Even if the burglar is only trying to steal jewelry, which is just a thing. Because if nobody so much as inconveniences burglars, there will be more burglars, and more burglars. And even if they only ever stole things each time, it would – the fabric of society –” Harry stopped. His thoughts weren’t as ordered as they usually pretended to be, in this room. He should have been able to give some perfectly logical exposition in terms of game theory, should have at least been able to see it that way, but it was eluding him. Hawks and doves – “Don’t you see, if evil people are willing to risk violence to get what they want, and good people always back down because violence is too terrible to risk, it’s – it’s not a good society to live in, Headmaster! Don’t you realize what all this bullying is doing to Hogwarts, to Slytherin House most of all?”

“War is too terrible to risk,” the old wizard said. “And yet it will come. Voldemort is returning. The black chesspieces are gathering. Severus is one of the most important pieces our own side possesses, in that war. But our evil

Potions Master must, as the saying goes, keep up appearances. If Severus can pay that keep by hurting the feelings of children, only their feelings, Harry,” the old wizard’s voice was very soft, “you would have to be most terribly innocent in the ways of war, to think he had made a poor bargain. Hard decisions do not look like that, Harry. They look – like this.” The old wizard did not gesture. He simply stood where he was, among the pedestals.

“You shouldn’t be Headmaster,” Harry said through the burning in his throat. “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, but you shouldn’t try to be a school principal and run a war at the same time. Hogwarts shouldn’t be part of this.”

“The children will survive,” the old wizard said with tired old eyes. “They would not survive Voldemort. Have you wondered why the children of Hogwarts do not speak much of their parents, Harry? It is because there is always, within earshot, someone who has lost their mother or father or both. That is what Voldemort left behind, the last time he came. Nothing is worth that war beginning again even one day earlier than it must, or lasting one day longer than it must.” The old wizard did gesture now, as though to indicate all the shattered wands. “We did not fight because it seemed righteous to do so! We fought when we had to, when there was no other way left. That was our answer.”

“Is that why you waited so long to confront Grindelwald?”

Harry had uttered the question without quite thinking –

There was a slow time while the blue eyes searched him.

“Who have you been talking to, Harry?” said the old wizard. “No, do not answer. I already know.” Dumbledore sighed. “Many have asked me that question, and always I have turned them aside. Yet in time you must learn the full truth of that matter. Will you swear never to speak of it to another, until I give you leave?”

Harry would have liked to be allowed to tell Draco, but – “I swear,” Harry said.

“Grindelwald possessed an ancient and terrible device,” said Dumbledore. “While he held it, I could not break his defense. In our duel I could not win, only fight him for long hours until he fell in exhaustion; and I would have died of it afterward, if not for Fawkes. But while his Muggle allies yet made blood sacrifice to sustain him, Grindelwald would not have fallen. He was, during that time, truly invincible. Of that grim device which Grindelwald held, none must know, none must suspect, there must be not a single hint. And therefore you must not speak of it, and I will say no more for now. That

is all, Harry. There is no moral to it, and no wisdom. That is all there is.”

Harry slowly nodded. It wasn’t entirely implausible, by the standards of magic...

“And then,” Dumbledore’s voice went on, even quieter, almost as though he were speaking to himself, “since it was I who felled him, they obeyed me when I said he should not die, though they cried by the thousands for his blood. So he was imprisoned in Nurmengard, in the prison that he built, and he abides there until this day. I went to that duel without any intent to kill him, Harry. Because, you see, I had tried to kill Grindelwald once before, a long time ago, and that... that was... it proved to be... a mistake, Harry...” The old wizard was staring now at his long dark-grey wand where he held it in both hands, as though it were a crystal ball out of Muggle fantasy, a scrying pool within which answers could be found. “And I thought, then... I thought that I should never kill. And then came Voldemort.”

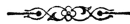
The old wizard looked back up at Harry, and said, in a hoarse voice, “He is not like Grindelwald, Harry. There is nothing human left in him. Him you must destroy. You must not hesitate, when the time comes. To him alone, of all the creatures in this world, you must show no mercy; and when you are done you must forget it, forget that you ever did such a thing, and go back to living. Save your fury for that, and that alone.”

In that office there was silence.

It lasted for some many long seconds, and finally was broken by a single question.

“Are there Dementors in Nurmengard?”

“What?” said the old wizard. “No! I would not have done that even to him –”



The old wizard stared at the young boy, who had straightened, and his face changed.

“In other words,” the boy said, as though talking to himself without any other people in the room, “it’s already known how to keep powerful Dark Wizards in prison, without using Dementors. People know they know that.”

“Harry...?”

“No,” the boy said. The boy looked up, and his eyes were blazing like green fire. “I do not accept your answer, Headmaster. Fawkes gave me a mission, and I know now why Fawkes gave that mission to me, and not to

you. You are willing to accept balances of power where the bad guys end up winning. I am not."

"That too is not an answer," the old wizard said; his face showed nothing of his hurt, he had long practice in concealing pain. "Refusing to accept something does not change it. I wonder now if you are simply too young to understand this matter, Harry, despite your outward airs; only in children's fantasies can all battles be won, and not a single evil tolerated."

"And that's why I can destroy Dementors and you can't," said the boy. "Because I believe that the darkness can be broken."

The old wizard's breath stopped in his throat.

"The phoenix's price isn't inevitable," the boy said. "It's not part of some deep balance built into the universe. It's just the parts of the problem where you haven't figured out yet how to cheat."

The old wizard's lips parted, and no words came forth.

Silver light falling on shattered wands.

"Fawkes gave me a mission," the boy repeated, "and I will carry out that mission if I must break the entire Ministry to do it. That's the part of the answer that you're missing. You don't stop and say, oh well, guess I can't possibly figure out any way to stop bullying in Hogwarts, and leave it at that. You just keep looking until you figure out how to do it. If that requires breaking Lucius Malfoy's entire conspiracy, fine."

"And the true fight, the fight against Voldemort?" the old wizard said in an unsteady voice. "What will you do to win that, Harry? Will you break the whole world? Even if someday you gain such power, you are not yet beyond prices, and perhaps you never will be! For you to act this way now is nothing short of madness!"

"I asked Professor Quirrell why he'd laughed," the boy said evenly, "after he awarded Hermione those hundred points. And Professor Quirrell said, these aren't his exact words, but it's pretty much what he said, that he'd found it tremendously amusing that the great and good Albus Dumbledore had been sitting there doing nothing as this poor innocent girl begged for help, while he had been the one to defend her. And he told me then that by the time good and moral people were done tying themselves up in knots, what they usually did was nothing; or, if they did act, you could hardly tell them apart from the people called bad. Whereas he could help innocent girls any time he felt like it, because he wasn't a good person. And that I ought to remember that, any time I considered growing up to be good."

The old wizard did not show the force of the blow. Only a slight widening of his eyes would have betrayed it, if you had been watching him very closely.

"Don't worry, Headmaster," said the boy. "I haven't gotten my wires crossed. I know that I'm supposed to learn goodness from Hermione and Fawkes, not from Professor Quirrell and you. Which brings me to the actual reason why I came here. Hermione's time is too valuable to waste in detentions. Professor Snape will revoke it, claiming that I blackmailed him."

After a hesitation the old wizard nodded his head, the silver beard swaying slowly beneath. "That would not be best for her, Harry," the old wizard said. "But the detention can be put down as being served with Professor Binns, and you and she can study together in his classroom."

"Fine," the boy said. "I think that was all the business we had together, in the end. You may expect, the next time you seem to be working on the side of the bad guys or letting them win, that I will do whatever I think Fawkes would tell me to, regardless of how much trouble comes of it. I hope we're both clear on that."

Without another word, the boy turned and walked out of the room, through the open door of black metal, the words "Lumos!" and the light of his wand following a moment later.

The old wizard stood there silent, silent amid the ruins of the lives which his own life had left behind. His wrinkled hand rose, shaking, to touch at his half-moon glasses –

The boy poked his head back in. "Would you mind switching on the stairs, Headmaster? I'd rather not go through all the work again to leave the same way I came."

"Go, Harry Potter," the old wizard said. "The stairs will receive you."

(Some time later, an earlier version of Harry, who had invisibly waited next to the gargoyles since 9pm, followed the Deputy Headmistress through the opening that parted for her, stood quietly behind her on the turning stairs until they came to the top, and then, still under the Cloak, spun his Time-Turner thrice.)



Aftermath: Professor Quirrell and –

In a shadowy clearing the Defense Professor waited, his back leaned negligently against the rough grey bark of a towering beech tree as yet unleaved in the late March days, so that its trunk and crown seemed like a pale arm

reaching up from the ground and exploding into a hand of a thousand fingers. Around the Defense Professor and above him were branches so dense that even in the earliest spring, with few trees so much as budding, you could have hardly seen the sky from the ground. The strands of the wooden net crossed and proliferated so many times that if you were on a broomstick above, searching for someone below, you would have found it easier to follow your ears than your eyes. Nor would it have helped that it was almost dark amid the prohibited woods, the unseen sun almost set, so that only a few glows of fading sunlight illuminated the tops of the tallest trees.

Then came the faintest sound of footsteps, almost inaudible even on the forest ground; the gait of a man accustomed to passing unseen. No twig snapped, nor leaf rustled –

“Good afternoon,” said Professor Quirrell. The Defense Professor did not trouble to move his eyes, or his hands from where they rested negligently at his side.

A figure clad in a black cloak shimmered into existence, his head turning to look left and then right. In the figure’s right hand, gripped low, was a wand of wood so grey it was almost silver.

“I do not know why you wished to meet here of all places,” said Severus Snape, his voice cool.

“Oh,” Professor Quirrell said idly, as though the whole matter was of the least importance, “I thought you would prefer privacy. The walls of Hogwarts have ears, and you would not wish the Headmaster to know of your role in yesterday’s affair, would you?”

The March chill seemed to grow deeper, the temperature further fall. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” the Potions Master said icily.

“You know perfectly well what we’re talking about,” said Professor Quirrell in an amused voice. “Really, my good Professor, you should not meddle in the affairs of idiots unless you are ready to defend yourself upon the instant from all their violence.” (The Defense Professor’s hands still lay relaxed and open at his side.) “And yet none of those idiots seem to remember the sight of you falling, nor do the young ladies recall your presence. Which raises the fascinating question of why you would go to the extraordinary length, I dare say the desperate length, of casting fifty-two Memory Charms.” Professor Quirrell tilted his head. “Would you fear so much the opinions of mere students? I think not. Would you dread the matter becoming known to your good friend, Lord Malfoy? But those fools, upon the very spot, invented

a quite satisfactory excuse for your presence. No, there is only one person who holds so much power over you, and who would be most perturbed to find you executing any plot without his knowledge. Your true and hidden master, Albus Dumbledore.”

“What?” hissed the Potions Master, the anger plain upon his face.

“But now, it seems, you are moving on your own; and so I find myself most intrigued as to what you could possibly be doing, and why.” The Defense Professor regarded the black-clad silhouette of the Potions Master with the scrutiny a man might give an exceptionally interesting bug, even if it was still ultimately just a bug.

“I am no servant of Dumbledore’s,” the Potions Master said coldly.

“Really? What astonishing news.” The Defense Professor smiled slightly. “Do tell me all about it.”

There was a long pause. From some tree an owl hooted, the sound huge in the silence; neither man startled or flinched.

“You don’t want me as your enemy, Quirrell,” Severus Snape said, his voice very soft.

“I don’t?” said Professor Quirrell. “How would you know?”

“On the other hand,” the Potions Master continued, voice still soft, “my friends enjoy many advantages.”

The man leaning against the grey bark raised his eyebrows. “Such as?”

“There is much that I know of this school,” said the Potions Master. “Things you might not think I knew.”

There was an expectant pause.

“How incredibly fascinating,” said Professor Quirrell. The man was examining his fingernails with a bored look. “Do go on.”

“I know you have been... investigating... the third-floor corridor –”

“You know nothing of the sort.” The man’s back straightened against the wood. “Do not bluff against me, Severus Snape; I find it annoying, and you are in no position to annoy me. A single glance would tell any competent wizard that the Headmaster has laced that corridor with a ridiculous quantity of wards and webs, triggers and tripwires. And more: there are Charms laid there of ancient power, magical constructs of which I have heard not even rumors, techniques that must have been disgorged from the hoarded lore of Flamel himself. Even He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named would have had trouble passing those without notice.” Professor Quirrell tapped a thoughtful finger on his cheek. “And for the actual lock, a Colloportus laid on an ordinary

doorknob, cast so weakly that it could not have kept out Miss Granger on the day she entered Hogwarts. Never before in my existence have I encountered such a blatant trap.” Now the Defense Professor narrowed his eyes. “I know of no one left in the world against whom such fantastic feats of detection would serve any useful purpose. If there is some wizard possessed of ancient lore, of whom I know nothing, against whom this trap is set – you may trade that information for as much silence as you like, my dear Professor, and a good serving of my favor left over afterward.”

You could have sworn that Professor Quirrell was watching Severus Snape with keen interest. Not the faintest trace of a smile crossed the man’s lips.

There was another long silence in the clearing.

“I do not know who Dumbledore fears,” Snape said. “But I know what bait he has set out, and somewhat of how it is truly guarded –”

“As to that,” said Professor Quirrell, sounding bored again, “I stole it months ago, and left a fake in its place. But thank you kindly for asking.”

“You’re lying,” said Severus Snape after a pause.

“Yes, I am.” Professor Quirrell leaned back against the grey wood again, his eyes drifting up to the dense net of branches, the falling night scarcely visible between the complex crossings. “I simply wished to learn whether you would call me on it, since you are pretending to know so little.” The Defense Professor smiled to himself.

The Potions Master looked like he was about to choke on his own fury. “What do you want?”

“Nothing, really,” said the Defense Professor, continuing to gaze at the forest ceiling. “I was only curious. I suppose I shall just watch and see where your plotting goes, and meanwhile I will say nothing to the Headmaster – so long as you are willing to do me a favor now and then, of course.” A dry smile crossed the face. “You are dismissed for now, Severus Snape. Though I wouldn’t mind having another little chat soon, if you’re willing to speak with me honestly of where your loyalties lie. And I do mean honestly, not the false faces you’ve shown today. You might find you have more allies than you thought. Take some time to think it over, my friend.”



Aftermath: Draco Malfoy and –

A rainbow hemisphere, a dome of solid force with little chromaticity of its own which sent back the infringing light in splintered reflections, iridescent in many colors, as it fractured the shine of the many-splendored chandeliers of the Slytherin common room.

Sheltered beneath the rainbow hemisphere, the terrified face of a young witch who had never fought bullies, who had not joined any of Professor Quirrell's armies, who was getting Acceptable marks at best in her Defense class, who could not have cast a Prismatic Barrier even to save her own life.

"Oh, stop it," said Draco Malfoy, making his voice sound bored despite the sweat that had broken out underneath his robes, as he kept his wand pointed at the barrier that was sheltering Millicent Bulstrode.

He couldn't remember making the decision, there'd just been the two older boys about to hex Millicent, the common room silently staring, and then Draco's hand had just drawn his wand and cast the barrier, leaving his heart to pump itself full of shocked adrenaline while his poor sad brain frantically racked itself for explanations –

The two older boys were straightening up from where they'd been looming over Millicent, turning to Draco, looking at him with a mixture of shock and anger. Gregory and Vincent beside him had already drawn their own wands, but weren't pointing them. All three of them together couldn't have won, anyway.

But the older boys wouldn't hex him. Nobody could possibly be stupid enough to hex the next Lord Malfoy.

It wasn't fear of being hexed that was making Draco sweat beneath his robes, as he desperately hoped the beads of water weren't visible on his forehead.

Draco was sweating because of the dawning and sickening certainty that even if he got away with this now, if he kept down this path, there would come a time when it would all come crashing down; and then he might not be the next Lord Malfoy anymore.

"Mr. Malfoy," said the oldest-looking boy. "Why are you protecting her?"

"So you've located the mistress of the conspiracy," Draco said with a Number Two Sneer, "and it's, let me get this straight now, a first-year girl named Millicent Bulstrode. She's just a conduit, you niddlewit!"

"So?" demanded the older boy. "She still helped them!"

Draco lifted his wand and the Prismatic Sphere winked out. Still talking in a bored voice, Draco said, "Did you know what you were doing, Miss

Bulstrode?”

“N-no,” Millicent stammered from where she was still sitting at her desk.

“Did you know where the Slytherin messages you were passing on were going to?”

“No!” said Millicent.

“Thank you,” Draco said. “All of you please leave her alone, she’s just a pawn. Miss Bulstrode, you may consider the favor you did me in February to have been repaid.” And Draco turned back to his Potions homework, hoping to Merlin and back again that Millicent didn’t say anything incredibly stupid like ‘What favor?’ –

“Then why,” a voice said clearly from across the room, “did those witches go where a note from Millicent told them to go?”

Sweating even more, Draco lifted his head again to look at where Randolph Lee had spoken. “What did the fake note say exactly?” said Draco. “Was it, ‘I command you to go forth in the name of the Dark Lady Bulstrode’ or ‘Please meet me here, sincerely Millicent?’”

Randolph Lee opened his mouth, hesitated for a fractional second –

“I thought so,” said Draco. “That wasn’t a very good test, Mr. Lee, it – it can –” A frantic, nerve-racking moment while he figured out how to say it without using Harry-words like false positive. “It can get the witches to go there if any of them is just friends with Millicent.”

As though the matter had been entirely settled, Draco looked down again at his Potions homework, ignoring (except for the feeling of sick dread in his stomach) the whispers from around the room.

It was only out of the corner of his eye that he caught Gregory staring at him.



Draco’s eyes rested on his Astronomy homework, but he couldn’t make his mind focus there. If you were trying not to think about things Harry Potter had said, pretty much the worst possible thing you could do was look at your textbook’s pictures of the night sky, and try to remember what you weren’t supposed to know about how the planets wandered. Astronomy, a noble and prestigious art, a sign of learning and knowledge; only Muggles possessed secret modern artifacts which could do it a million billion times better using methods that Harry had tried to explain and which Draco still couldn’t begin

to understand except that apparently it didn't even take magic to make things do Arithmancy.

Draco looked at the pictures of constellations, and wondered if it was like this in the other Houses, if people were always threatening each other in Ravenclaw.

Harry Potter had told him once that soldiers on a battlefield didn't really fight for their country. Patriotism might get them to the battlefield in the first place, but once they were there, they fought to protect each other, the friends they'd trained with who were right in front of them. And Harry had observed, and Draco had known that it was true, that you couldn't use loyalty to a leader to power a Patronus Charm, it wasn't quite the right kind of warm and happy thought. But thinking of protecting someone beside you –

That, Harry Potter had said thoughtfully, was probably why the Death Eaters had fallen apart the moment the Dark Lord had departed. They hadn't been warm enough to each other.

You could recruit a group that included Bellatrix Black and Amycus Carrow alongside Lord Malfoy and Mr. MacNair, and keep them in line with the Cruciatus Curse. But the instant the master of the Dark Mark was gone, you didn't have an army anymore, you had a circle of acquaintances. That was why Father had failed. It hadn't even really been his fault. There'd been nothing Father could have done, after inheriting Death Eaters who weren't really friends with each other.

And even though it was Slytherin House he was supposed to defend – Slytherin House which he and Harry had formed a pact to save – sometimes Draco couldn't help but think that it was just less wearisome when he was leading army practices. When he was working with students from the other three Houses that weren't Slytherin. Once you saw and named the problems, you couldn't stop seeing them, it just got more annoying every day.

"Mr. Malfoy?" said the voice of Gregory Goyle, from where he was lying on the floor beside Draco's desk, in the small but private bedroom; Gregory was doing his Transfiguration homework, on which he often needed help.

Any distraction was welcome at this point. "Yes?" said Draco.

"You weren't really plotting against Granger at all," said Gregory. "Were you?"

The sensation spreading through Draco's stomach felt just like Gregory's voice sounded, sickened and afraid.

"You actually were helping Granger, that day you picked her up off the

floor,” said Gregory. “And before, that time you kept her from falling off the roof. You helped a mudblood –”

“Yeah, right,” said Draco sarcastically, without the slightest hesitation or delay, looking back down at his Astronomy homework like he wasn’t the least bit nervous. It was all happening the way Draco had feared it would, but at least that meant he’d played this conversation in his head over and over, coming up with the right opening gambit. “Come on, Gregory, you’ve dueled General Granger, you know how strong her spells are. Like a real Muggle-spawn is going to be more powerful than you, more powerful than Theodore, more powerful than every single pureblood in our whole school year except me? Don’t you actually believe in anything Father says? She’s adopted. Her parents died in the war and someone stuck her with a couple of Muggles to hide her. No way is General Granger a real mudblood.”

A slow pulse of silence through Draco’s bedroom. Draco wanted to know, needed to know what look was on Gregory’s face. But he couldn’t look up from his desk, not yet, not until Gregory spoke first.

And then –

“Is that what Harry Potter said to you?” said Gregory.

The voice wavered, and broke. When Draco looked up from his homework, he saw that tears were leaking out of Gregory’s eyes.

Apparently that hadn’t worked.

“I don’t know what to do,” Gregory said in a whisper. “I don’t know what to do now, Mr. Malfoy. Your father isn’t – when he finds out – he’s not going to like it, Mr. Malfoy!”

It’s not your job to decide what Father will like, Goyle –

Draco could hear the words in his head; they sounded in Father’s voice, with the same sternness. It was the sort of thing Father had told him to say, if Vincent or Gregory ever questioned him; and if that didn’t work he was to hex them. They were not equal friends, Father had said, and he wasn’t ever to forget it. Draco was in charge, they were his servants, and if Draco couldn’t keep it that way then he wasn’t fit to inherit House Malfoy...

“It’s all right, Gregory,” Draco said, as gently as he could. “All you’ve got to do is worry about protecting me. Nobody’s going to blame you for following my orders, not my father, not yours.” Putting all the warmth he could into his voice, like trying to cast a Patronus Charm. “And anyway, the next war isn’t going to be the same as the last one. House Malfoy was around long before the Dark Lord, and not every Lord Malfoy does the same thing. Father

knows that.”

“Does he?” said Gregory in trembling voice. “Does he really?”

Draco nodded. “Professor Quirrell knows it too,” said Draco. “That’s what the armies are about. The Defense Professor’s right, when the next war comes, Father won’t be able to unite the whole country, they’ll remember the last war. But anyone who’s fought in Professor Quirrell’s armies will remember who the strongest generals were, they’ll know who’s worthy to lead them. They’ll proclaim Harry Potter their Lord, and I’ll be his right hand, and House Malfoy will come out on top, like always. People might even turn to me, if Potter isn’t there, so long as they think I’m trustworthy. That’s what I’m setting up now. Father will understand.”

Gregory reached up and wiped his eyes, looking down again at his Transfiguration homework. “Okay,” Gregory said in a shaky voice. “If you say so, Mr. Malfoy.”

Draco nodded again, ignoring the hollow feeling inside himself at the lies he’d just told his friend, and turned back to the stars.



Aftermath: Hermione Granger and –

Being invisible should’ve been more interesting than this, the corridors of Hogwarts should have been outlined in strange colors or something. But actually, Hermione thought, being under Harry’s invisibility cloak was exactly like not being under an invisibility cloak, except for the cloak part. When you pulled the veil of soft black cloth down from the hood and over your face, you couldn’t even see it stretching in front of you, and afterward it didn’t seem to impede your breathing. And the world looked just the same, except that when you walked past things of metal, you didn’t see any small reflections of yourself. Portraits never looked at you, only did whatever strange things they did when they were alone. Hermione hadn’t tried walking past a mirror yet, she wasn’t sure she wanted to. Most of all, there was no you anymore as you walked around, no hands, no feet, just a changing point of view. It was an unnerving feeling, not so much of being invisible as of not existing.

Harry hadn’t questioned her at all, she’d just got out the word ‘invisibility’ and then Harry was drawing his invisibility cloak from his pouch. She hadn’t even been given a chance to explain about her extremely secret meeting with Daphne and Millicent Bulstrode, or that she thought it would help protect the other girls, Harry had just handed over what was probably a Deathly

Hallow. If you were fair, and she did try to be fair, she had to admit that sometimes Harry could be a very true, true friend.

The secret meeting itself had been a great big failure.

Millicent had claimed to be a seer.

Hermione had carefully explained to Millicent and Daphne at considerable length that this could not possibly be true.

She and Harry had looked up Divination early on in their research; Harry had insisted that they read everything they could find about prophecies that wasn't in the Restricted Section. As Harry had observed, it would save a lot of effort if they could just get a seer to prophesy everything they would figure out thirty-five years later. (Or to put it in Harry's terms, any means of obtaining information transmitted from the distant future was potentially an instant global victory condition.)

But, as Hermione had explained to Millicent, prophesying wasn't controllable, there was no way to ask for a prophecy about anything in particular. Instead (the books had said) there was a sort of pressure that built up in Time, when some huge event was trying to happen, or stop itself from happening. And seers were like weak points that let out the pressure, when the right listener was nearby. So prophecies were only about big, important things, because only that generated enough pressure; and you almost never got more than one seer saying the same thing, because afterward the pressure was gone. And, as Hermione had further explained to Millicent, the seers themselves didn't remember their prophecies, because the message wasn't for them. And the messages would come out in riddles, and only someone who heard the prophecy in the seer's original voice would hear all the meaning that was in the riddle. There was no possible way that Millicent could just give out a prophecy any time she wanted, about school bullies, and then remember it, and if she had it would've come out as 'the skeleton is the key' and not 'Susan Bones has to be there'.

Millicent had been looking rather frightened at this point, so Hermione had relaxed her fists where they'd been jammed on her hips, calmed herself down, and stated carefully that she was glad Millicent had helped them, but they had sometimes walked into traps following what Millicent said, and so Hermione really did want to know where the messages had actually come from.

And Millicent had said in a small voice:

But, but she told me that she was a seer...

Hermione had told Daphne not to press it, after Millicent had refused to give up her source. It wasn't just that Hermione had felt awful about the scared look on Millicent's face. It was that Hermione had a strong feeling that if they did find the person who'd been telling Millicent things, why, they would turn out to just be finding envelopes under their pillow in the morning.

She was getting that same despairing feeling she'd gotten in the battle before Christmas, looking at Zabini's charts with all the colored lines and boxes and... and she had only just now realized what it meant that Zabini had been the one showing her that chart.

Even for a Ravenclaw, she felt, there was such a thing as having your life get overly complicated.

Hermione began ascending a short spiral of yellow marble steps protruding from a central spine, a poorly-kept "secret" staircase that was actually one of the fastest ways up from the Slytherin dungeons to the Ravenclaw tower, but which only witches could traverse. (Why girls in particular needed a quick way to move from Ravenclaw to Slytherin and back was something Hermione found a bit puzzling.) At the top of the staircase, now that she was away from Slytherin places and back into the main parts of Hogwarts, Hermione stopped and took off Harry's invisibility cloak.

After her pouch had swallowed the cloak, Hermione turned right and started to walk down a short passageway, now automatically keeping an eye out in all directions without really thinking about it, and her constantly-scanning eyes glanced into a shadowy alcove –

(fleeting disorientation)

– and then a rush of shock and fear hit her like a Stunning Hex over her whole body, she found that without any thought or any conscious decision her wand had leaped into her hand and was already pointed at...

...a black cloak so wide and billowing that it was impossible to determine whether the figure beneath was male or female, and atop the cloak a broad-brimmed black hat; and a black mist seemed to gather beneath it and obscure the face of whoever or whatever might lie beneath.

"Hello again, Hermione," whispered a sibilant voice from beneath the black hat, from behind the black mist.

Hermione's heart was already pounding hugely inside her chest, her witch's robes felt already sweat-dampened against her skin, there was a taste of fear already in her mouth; she didn't know why she was so suddenly filled up with adrenaline but her hand gripped harder on her wand. "Who are you?"

Hermione demanded.

The hat tilted slightly; the whispery voice, when it came forth from the black mist, sounded dry as dust. "The last ally," spoke the sibilant whisper. "The one who finally answers, when no other will answer you. I am perhaps the only true friend you have in all Hogwarts, Hermione. For you have now seen how the others stayed silent when you were in need –"

"What's your name?"

The black cloak rotated slightly, back and forth, it didn't look like shoulders shrugging, but it conveyed a shrug. "That is the riddle, young Ravenclaw. Until you solve it, you may call me whatever you wish."

She could feel her palm already sweaty and was thankful for the spiral grooves on her wand that helped her hand keep a steady grip on the wood. "Well, Mister Incredibly Suspicious Person," Hermione said, "what do you want with me?"

"That is the wrong question," came the whisper from black mist. "You should ask, rather, what I can offer you."

"No," the young girl said quite steadily, "I don't think I should be asking that, actually."

A high-pitched chuckle from behind the black mist. "Not power," whispered the voice, "not wealth, you care little for such things, do you, young Ravenclaw? Knowledge. That is what I possess. I know what is unfolding within this school, all the hidden plans and players, the answers of the riddle. I know the true reason for the coldness you see in Harry Potter's eyes. I know the true nature of Professor Quirrell's mysterious illness. I know who Dumbledore truly fears."

"Good for you," said Hermione Granger. "But do you know how many licks it takes to get to the Tootsie Roll center of a Tootsie Pop?"

The black mist seemed to darken slightly, the voice sounded lower when it spoke, disappointed. "So you are not even curious, young Ravenclaw, about the truths behind the lies?"

"One hundred and eighty-seven," she said. "I tried it once and that's how many it came out to." Her hand was almost slipping on her wand, there was a sense of fatigue in her fingers like she'd been holding the wand for hours instead of minutes –

The voice hissed, "Professor Snape is a hidden Death Eater."

Hermione almost dropped her wand.

"Ah," the voice whispered in satisfaction. "I thought that might interest you. So, Hermione. Is there anything else you would like to know about your enemies, or those you call friends?"

She stared up at the black mist that topped the towering black cloak, frantically trying to order her thoughts. Professor Snape was a Death Eater? Who would tell her something like that, why, what was going on? "That's –" Hermione said. Her voice was quavering. "That's extremely serious business, if it's really true. Why are you telling something like that to me, and not to Headmaster Dumbledore?"

"Dumbledore did nothing to stop Snape," the black mist whispered. "You saw it, Hermione. The rot at Hogwarts begins at the top. Everything that is wrong with this school, it all begins with the mad Headmaster. You alone dared to call him out for it – and therefore I speak to you."

"And have you also spoken to Harry Potter, then?" Hermoine said, keeping her voice as even as she could. If this was his helpful ghost –

The black mist darkened and lightened, like a shake of the head. "I am frightened of Harry Potter," it whispered. "Of the coldness in his eyes, of the darkness that grows behind them. Harry Potter is a killer, and anyone who is an obstacle to him will die. Even you, Hermione Granger, if you dare truly oppose him, the darkness behind his eyes will reach out and destroy you. This I know."

"Then you don't know half of what you pretend to know," Hermione said, her voice a little firmer. "I'm scared of Harry too. But not because of what he might ever do to me. I'm scared of what he might do to protect me –"

"Wrong." The whisper was flat, and hard, as if to brook no possibility of denial. "Harry Potter will turn against you in time, Hermione, when the darkness takes him fully. He will not shed a tear, he will not even notice, on the day his footsteps finally crush you underneath."

"Double wrong!" she said back in a rising voice, even though there were chills going down her spine. One of Harry's phrases came to her. "Just what do you think you know, and how do you think you know it, anyway?"

"Time –" The voice seemed to catch itself. "Time enough for that later. For now, for today, indeed Harry Potter is not your enemy. And yet you are in gravest danger."

"I can believe that," said Hermione Granger. She desperately wanted to shift her wand to her other hand, she felt like she needed to grab her right arm just to keep it up, her head ached like she'd been staring at the black mist

for days; she didn't know why she'd gotten tired so quickly.

"Lucius Malfoy has taken notice of you, Hermione." The whisper had risen, departed from its tonelessness, taken on a note of audible concern. "You have humiliated Slytherin House, you have defeated his son in battle. Even before then you were an embarrassment to all who stand with the Death Eaters; for you are a Muggleborn and yet you possess a power of wizardry greater than any pureblood. And now you are becoming known, the eyes of the world on you. Lucius Malfoy seeks to crush you, Hermione, to hurt you and perhaps even kill you, and he has the means to do it!" The whisper had grown urgent.

There was a pause.

"Is that all?" Hermione said. If she was ex-Colonel Zabini or Harry Potter, she'd probably be asking clever questions to gather more information; but her mind felt slow and fatigued. She really needed to get out of here and go lie down for a while.

"You don't believe me," the whisper said, softer and sadder now. "Why not, Hermione? I am trying to help you."

Hermione took a step backward, away from the shadowy alcove.

"Why not, Hermione?" demanded the voice, rising to a hiss. "You owe me that much! Tell me, and then –" The voice caught, and came back quieter. "And then you can go, I suppose. Only tell me – why –"

Maybe she shouldn't've answered; maybe she should've just turned and fled, or better yet, cast a Prismatic Wall first and then screamed at the top of her lungs as she ran; but it was the note of real pain in the voice that caught her, and so she answered.

"Because you look incredibly dark and scary and suspicious," Hermione said, keeping her voice polite, as her wand stayed level on the towering black cloak and the faceless black mist.

"That's all?" whispered the voice incredulously. Sadness seemed to infuse it. "I hoped for better from you, Hermione. Surely such a Ravenclaw as you, the most intelligent Ravenclaw to grace Hogwarts in a generation, knows that appearances can be misleading."

"Oh, I know it," said Hermione. She took another step back, her tired fingers tightening on the wand. "But the thing that people forget sometimes, is that even though appearances can be misleading, they're usually not."

There was a pause.

“You are the clever one,” said the voice, and the black mist evaporated away, no longer obscuring; she saw the face beneath, and recognition sent a jolt of terrified adrenaline bursting through her –

(fleeting disorientation)

– and then a rush of shock and fear hit her like a Stunning Hex over her whole body, she found that without any thought or any conscious decision her wand had leaped into her hand and was already pointed at...

...a shining lady, her long white dress billowing about her as though in invisible winds; neither her hands nor her feet were visible, her face hidden beneath a white veil; and she was glowing all over, not like a ghost, not transparent, just surrounded by soft white light.

Hermione stared open-mouthed at the gentle sight, wondering why her heart was already hammering, and why she felt so scared.

“Hello again, Hermione,” the kindly whisper emanated from the white glow behind the veil. “I’ve been sent to help you, so please don’t be afraid. I am your servant in all things; for you, my Lady, are the bearer of a most marvelous destiny –”

TABOO TRADEOFFS PRELUDE: CHEATING

IT was Saturday, on the 4th of April, in the year 1992.

Mr. and Mrs. Davis looked rather nervous, as they sat in a certain special section of the Hogwarts Quidditch stands – though today the cushioned benches did not look upon flying broomsticks, but rather viewed a gigantic square of something like parchment; a great white blankness soon to flicker with windows into grass and soldiers. For now it showed only the reflected dull gray color of the surrounding overcast skies. (Looking rather stormy, though the weather-wizards had promised that the rain wouldn't break before nightfall.)

Ordinarily it was the ancient tradition of Hogwarts that mere parents were to Stay Out – for much the same reason that impatient children are told to get out of the kitchen and not meddle in the cook's affairs. The only reason for a parent-teacher conference was if a teacher felt that a parent wasn't shaping up properly. It took an exceptional circumstance to make the Hogwarts administration feel that it had to justify itself to you. On any given occasion, generally speaking, the Hogwarts administration was backed up by eight hundred years of distinguished history and you were not.

Thus it had been with some trepidation that Mr. and Mrs. Davis had insisted on an audience with Deputy Headmistress McGonagall. It was hard to muster a proper sense of indignation when you were confronting the same dignified witch who, twelve years and four months earlier, had given both of you two weeks' detention after catching you in the act of conceiving Tracey.

On the other hand, Mr. and Mrs. Davis's courage had been helped by angrily waving about a copy of *The Quibbler* whose headline showed, in bright bold text for all the world to see:

PACTS WITH POTTER?
BONES, DAVIS, GRANGER
IN LOVE RECTANGLE OF FEAR

And so Mr. and Mrs. Davis had argued their way into the Faculty Box of the Hogwarts Quidditch stands, where they were now ensconced with

an excellent view of Professor Quirrell's enchanted screens, so that the two of them could see for themselves "Just what the Fiddly-Snocks has been going on in this school, if you'll pardon the expression, Deputy Headmistress McGonagall!"

Seated to the left of Mr. Davis was another concerned parent, a white-haired man in elegant black robes of unmatched quality, one Lucius Malfoy, political leader of the strongest faction of the Wizengamot.

To the left of Lord Malfoy, a sneeringly aristocratic man with a scarred face who had been introduced to them as Lord Jugson.

Then an elderly but sharp-eyed fellow named Charles Nott, rumored to be nearly as wealthy as Lord Malfoy, seated on Lord Jugson's left.

On the right of Mrs. Davis, one would find the comely Lady and yet handsomer Lord of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Greengrass. Young they were as wizards counted age, garbed in grey silken robes set with tiny dark emeralds embroidered into the shape of grass blades. The Lady Greengrass was considered a key swing vote on the Wizengamot, her own mother having retired from the body with surprising speed. Her charming husband, though his family was not noble or wealthy of itself, had taken a seat on the Hogwarts Board of Governors.

To their right, a square-jawed and incredibly tough-looking old witch, who had shaken hands with Mr. and Mrs. Davis without the slightest hint of condescension. This was Amelia Bones, Director of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

To Amelia's right was a seniorish woman who had set the fashion scene of magical Britain on its ear by integrating a live vulture into her hat, one Augusta Longbottom. Though she was not addressed as Lady, Madam Longbottom would exercise the full rights of the Longbottom family for so long as their last scion had yet to attain his majority, and she was considered a prominent figure in a minority faction of the Wizengamot.

At the side of Madam Longbottom was seated none other than Chief Warlock Supreme Mugwump Headmaster Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, legendary defeater of Grindelwald, protector of Britain, rediscoverer of the fabled twelve uses of dragon's blood, the most powerful wizard in the world &c.

And finally, on the far right, one would find the enigmatic Defense Professor of Hogwarts, Quirinus Quirrell, who was leaning back on the cushioned benches as though resting; seeming entirely and naturally at ease in the rar-

efied company of a voting quorum of the Hogwarts Board of Governors, which had dropped by on this fine Saturday to learn just what the Fiddly-Snocks had been going on at Hogwarts in general and with Draco Malfoy, Theodore Nott, Daphne Greengrass, Susan Bones, and Neville Longbottom in particular. The name of Harry Potter had also been much discussed.

Oh, and one mustn't forget Tracey Davis, of course. Director Bones's eyebrows had climbed in some interest upon hearing the young couple introduced as her parents. Lord Jugson had given them a brief, incredulous stare before dismissing them with a snort. Lucius Malfoy had greeted them politely, his smile containing a hint of grim amusement mixed with pity.

Mr. and Mrs. Davis, whose last vote on anything of significance had been touching their wands to the name of Minister Fudge, who had all of three hundred Galleons stored in their Gringotts vault, and who respectively worked at selling cauldrons in a Potions shop and enchanting Omnioculars, were pressed up tightly against each other, sitting rigidly erect upon their cushioned benches, and desperately wishing they'd worn nicer robes.

The sky above was a solid mass of cloud dispersed into darker and lighter grays, grim with the promise of future storms; though no lightning flickered as yet, nor distant rumbles of thunder echoed; and only a few threatening droplets had fallen.



To their designated starting place in a certain forest, the Sunshine Regiment marched, though it was really more like a slow walk; you wouldn't want to tire yourself out before the battle even started, and the breezes of April were annoyingly humid, though cool. Ahead of them, a yellow flame wandered slowly through the air, guiding them according to their pace.

Susan Bones kept throwing worried glances toward the Sunshine General as they marched through the grayly illuminated forest. Professor Snape's going after Hermione seemed to have really shaken her. Hermione had even missed her Sunshine Regiment Official Planning Meeting, which seemed understandable enough; but when Susan had offered her sympathy afterward, Hermione had stammered that she'd lost track of time, which wasn't at all a usual thing for her to say, and the girl had looked exhausted and frightened like she'd just spent three days locked in a bathroom stall with a Dementor. Even now, when all the Sunshine General's focus should've been on the coming battle, the Ravenclaw girl's gaze was constantly darting in all directions,

as though she expected Dark Wizards to jump out of the bushes and sacrifice her.

"The ban on Muggle artifacts cuts down our options a lot," Anthony Goldstein was saying in the dour tones the boy used to denote deliberate pessimism. "I had the idea of trying to Transfigure nets to throw on people, but –"

"No good," said Ernie Macmillan. The Hufflepuff boy shook his head, looking even more serious than Anthony. "I mean, it's just like throwing a hex, they'd dodge."

Anthony nodded. "That's what I figured, too. Do you have any ideas, Seamus?"

The former Chaotic Lieutenant still looked a bit nervous and out-of-place, marching along with his new comrades in the Sunshine Regiment. "Sorry," said the newly minted Captain Finnigan. "I'm more the strategic master type."

"I'm the strategic master type," said Ron Weasley, sounding put-off.

"There are three armies," the Sunshine General said acerbically, "which means we fight two armies at once, which means we need more than one strategist, which means shut up, Ron!"

Ron gave their General a surprised and worried look. "Hey," the Gryffindor boy said in a calming tone, "you shouldn't let Snape get to you so much –"

"What do you think we ought to do, General?" Susan said very loudly and quickly. "I mean, we don't really have a plan at this point." Their official planning session had failed amazingly with Hermione gone and both Ron and Anthony thinking they were in charge.

"Do we really need a plan?" the Sunshine General said, sounding a little distracted. "We've got you and me and Lavender and Parvati and Hannah and Daphne and Ron and Ernie and Anthony and Captain Finnigan."

"That –" began Anthony.

"Sounds like a pretty good strategy," Ron said with an approving nod. "We've got as many strong soldiers now as both other armies put together. Chaos's only got Potter and Longbottom and Nott left – well, and Zabini too, I suppose –"

"And Tracey," said Hermione.

Several people swallowed nervously.

"Oh, stop it," Susan said sharply. "She's just a battle-hardened member of S.P.H.E.W., that's all General Sunshine means."

“Still,” Ernie said, turning to look seriously at Susan, “I think you’d better go with whatever group fights Chaos, Captain Bones. I know you can’t use your double magical powers except when innocents are in danger, but I mean – just in case Miss Davis does, you know, go out of control and try to eat someone’s soul –”

“I can handle her,” Susan told him, keeping her voice reassuring. Admittedly, Susan hadn’t been replaced by a Metamorphmagus at the moment, but then Tracey probably wasn’t Polyjuiced Dumbledore or whoever.

Captain Finnigan intoned in a deep, sort-of-rumbling voice, “I find your lack of skepticism disturbing.” He raised his hand with his thumb and forefinger almost touching, pointed at Ernie.

For some reason Anthony Goldstein seemed to be having a sudden choking fit. “What’s that supposed to mean?” said Ernie.

“It’s just something General Potter says sometimes,” said Captain Finnigan. “Funny, when you first join the Chaos Legion it all seems crazy, and then after a couple of months you realize that actually everyone who isn’t in the Chaos Legion is crazy –”

“I said,” Ron said loudly, “it sounds like good strategy. We don’t Transfigure anything, we don’t tire ourselves out, we handle whatever they throw at us, and then we just overrun them.”

“Okay,” said Hermione. “Let’s do that.”

“But –” said Anthony, shooting a glare at Ron. “But General, Harry Potter’s got sixteen people left in his army. Dragon and us each have twenty-eight. Harry knows that, he knows he’s got to come up with something incredible –”

“Like what?” demanded Hermione, sounding stressed. “If we don’t know what he’s planning, we might as well save our magic for doing massed Finites. Like we should’ve done last time!”

Susan touched Hermione gently on the shoulder. “General Granger?” said Susan. “I think you should take a break for a bit before the battle.”

She’d been expecting Hermione to argue, but Hermione just nodded and then walked a little faster, pulling away from the Sunshine Regiment Official Officer Group, her eyes still watching the forest, and sometimes the sky.

Susan followed her. It wouldn’t do, having it look like the Sunshine General was being ejected from her own Official Officer Group.

“Hermione?” Susan said softly, after they’d walked a bit away. “You’ve got to focus. Professor Quirrell’s in charge here, not Snape, and he won’t let

anything bad happen to you or anyone.”

“You’re not helping,” Hermione said, sounding shaky. “You’re not helping at all, Captain Bones.”

The two of them walked faster, circling around some of the other soldiers, inspecting the marching perimeter and glancing at the surrounding trees.

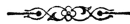
“Susan?” Hermione said in a small voice, when they’d gotten further away from all the others. “Do you think Daphne’s right about Draco Malfoy plotting something?”

“Yes,” Susan said at once, not even thinking about it. “You can tell, because his name’s got the letters M-A-L-F-O and Y in it.”

Hermione looked around, as if to make sure that nobody was watching, although of course that was a wonderful way to get other people to pay attention to you. “Could Malfoy have been behind what Snape did?”

“Snape could be behind Malfoy,” Susan said thoughtfully, remembering dinner-table conversations she’d heard at Auntie’s, “or Lucius Malfoy could be behind both of them.” A slight chill went down Susan’s spine as this last thought occurred to her. Suddenly, telling Hermione to just focus on the coming battle seemed a lot less reasonable. “Why, did you find some sort of clue about that?”

Hermione shook her head. “No,” the Ravenclaw girl said, in a voice that sounded almost like she was about to cry. “I was – just thinking about it myself – that’s all.”



In their designated place in a forest near Hogwarts, the Dragon General and the warriors of Dragon Army waited where their red flame had led them, beneath grey skies.

At Draco’s right side stood Padma Patil, his second-in-command, who had once led all of Dragon Army after Draco had been stunned. At Draco’s back was Vincent, the son of Crabbe, a family which had served the Malfoys into the distance of forgotten memory; the muscular boy was watchful as he was always watchful, whether battle had been declared or no. Further back, Gregory of the Goyles stood waiting beside one of the two broomsticks Dragon Army had been given; if the Goyles had not served the Malfoys so long as the Crabbes, yet they had served no less well.

And at Draco’s left side, now, stood one Dean Thomas of Gryffindor, a mudblood or possible half-blood who knew nothing of his father.

Sending Dean Thomas to Dragon Army had been a quite deliberate move on Harry's part, Draco was certain. Three other former Chaotics had also been transferred to Dragon Army, and all were watching Draco hawklike to see if he offered the former Lieutenant the slightest insult.

Some might have called it sabotage, but Draco knew better. Harry had also sent Lieutenant Finnigan to the Sunshine Regiment, even though Professor Quirrell's mandate had only required that Harry give up one Lieutenant. That too had been a deliberate move, making crystal clear to everyone that Harry wasn't dumping his least-favored soldiers.

In one sense, it might have been easier for Draco to win the true loyalties of his new soldiers if they'd thought Harry hadn't wanted them. In another sense... well, it wasn't easy to put into words. Harry had given him good soldiers with their pride intact, but it was more than that. Harry had showed kindness toward his soldiers, but it was more than that. It wasn't just Harry playing fair, it was something that... that you couldn't help but contrast with the way the game was played in Slytherin House.

So Draco hadn't offered the slightest insult to Mr. Thomas, but brought him straight to his side, subordinate to himself and Padma but no one else. It was a test, Draco had told Mr. Thomas and everyone, not a promotion. Mr. Thomas would have to show himself worthy of rank within Dragon Army – but he would be given a chance, and the chance would be fair. Mr. Thomas had looked surprised at the ceremony of it (the Chaos Legion, from what Draco had heard, didn't stand on formality) but the Gryffindor boy had stood a little straighter, and nodded.

And then, after Mr. Thomas had done well enough in one of Dragon Army's training sessions, he'd been brought into the strategy session in Dragon Army's huge military office. And a few minutes into the session, Padma had happened to ask – as though it was a perfectly normal question – whether Mr. Thomas had any ideas about how to defeat the Chaos Legion.

The Gryffindor boy had said cheerfully that Harry had predicted that General Malfoy would get one of his soldiers to ask him that, and that Harry had given him the message that General Malfoy should ask himself where his relative advantage lay – what Draco Malfoy could do, or what Dragon Army could do, that the Chaos Legion couldn't match – and then try to exploit it for all it was worth. Dean Thomas couldn't think of what that advantage might be, but if he did come up with any ideas for beating Chaos, he'd share them. Harry had ordered him to, after all.

Sigh, Draco had thought, since he couldn't actually sigh out loud. But it was good advice, and Draco had followed it, sitting at his bedroom desk with quill and parchment listing out everything that might be a relative advantage.

And, almost to Draco's own surprise, he'd had an idea, a real one. In fact he'd had two.

The hollow bell sounded through the forest, somehow sounding more ominous than ever before. On the instant, the two pilots cried "Up!" and leapt onto their broomsticks, heading into the gray sky.



Mr. and Mrs. Davis had now slumped slightly against each other, more from sheer muscle exhaustion than from any decrease of tension. Before them, the vast blank white parchment flickered with three great windows, as though holes had been cut through into the forest, showing three armies on the march. Lesser windows showed the six riders upon their broomsticks, and the corner of the parchment showed a view of the entire forest, with glowing dots to indicate armies and scouts.

The window into Sunshine showed General Granger and her Captains marching in the center of the Sunshine Regiment, protected by Contego screens along with a number of other young witches. The Sunshine Regiment, the Defense Professor had remarked, knew well that it had now acquired a strong advantage in experienced soldiers, and it meant to protect those soldiers from a surprise attack. Aside from that, the Sunshine Soldiers were moving forward at a steady march, conserving their strength.

The soldiers in General Malfoy's army, at least those with higher Transfiguration scores, were picking up leaves and Transfiguring them into... well, if you looked at Padma Patil, who was almost done with hers, it looked like her leaf was becoming a left-handed glove bearing a dangling strap. (The window had zoomed in to show this.)

Lord Jugson was watching the screen with a flat expression; his voice, when he spoke, seemed to ooze and drip with disdain. "What is your son doing, Lucius?"

The foreign-born witch who stood at Draco Malfoy's right side had finished Transfiguring her glove, and was now bringing it before the Dragon General like a sacrifice.

"I do not know," said Lucius Malfoy, his tone calm though no less aristocratic, "but I must trust that he has good reason for doing it."

All Dragon Army stopped for a moment as Padma slid the glove over her left hand, strapped it in place, and presented it before Draco Malfoy; who also stopped in place, took several deep breaths, raised his wand, executed a precise set of eight movements and bellowed “Colloportus!”

The Dragon Warrior raised her gloved hand, flexed it, and gave a small bow to Draco Malfoy, who returned it more shallowly, though the Dragon General was staggering slightly. Padma then returned to her place at Draco’s side, and the Dragons began marching once more.

“Well,” remarked Augusta Longbottom. “I don’t suppose someone would care to explain?” Amelia Bones was frowning slightly as she gazed at the screen.

“For some reason or other,” said the amused voice of Professor Quirrell, “it seems that the scion of Malfoy is able to cast surprisingly strong magic for a first-year student. Due to the purity of his blood, of course. Certainly the good Lord Malfoy would not have openly flouted the underage magic laws by arranging for his son to receive a wand before his acceptance into Hogwarts.”

“I suggest you be careful in your implications, Quirrell,” Lucius Malfoy said coldly.

“Oh, I am,” Professor Quirrell said. “A Colloportus cannot be dispelled by Finite Incantatem; it requires an Alohomora of equal strength. Until then, a glove so Charmed will resist lesser material forces, deflect the Sleep Hex and the Stunning Hex. And as neither Mr. Potter nor Miss Granger can cast a counterspell powerful enough, that Charm is invincible upon this battlefield. It is not the original intent of the Charm, nor the intent of whoever taught Mr. Malfoy an emergency spell for evading his enemies. But it would seem that Mr. Malfoy has been learning creativity.”

Lucius Malfoy had straightened as the Defense Professor spoke; he now sat erect upon his cushioned bench, his head held perceptibly higher than before, and when he spoke it was with quiet pride. “He will be the greatest Lord Malfoy that has yet lived.”

“Faint praise,” Augusta Longbottom said under her breath; Amelia Bones chuckled, as did Mr. Davis for a tiny, fatal fraction of a second before he stopped with a strangled gackle.

“I quite agree,” said Professor Quirrell, though it wasn’t clear to whom he spoke. “Unfortunately for Mr. Malfoy, he is still new to the art of creativity, and so he has committed a classic error of Ravenclaw.”

“And what might that be?” said Lucius Malfoy, his voice now turned chill once more.

Professor Quirrell had leaned back in his seat, the pale blue eyes briefly unfocusing as one of the windows shifted its viewpoint within the greater screen, zooming in to show the sweat now on Draco Malfoy’s forehead. “It is such a beautiful idea that Mr. Malfoy has quite overlooked its pragmatic difficulties.”

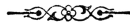
“Would someone care to explain that?” said Lady Greengrass. “Not all of us present are experts at such... affairs.”

Amelia Bones spoke, the old witch’s voice somewhat dry. “It will tempt them to try to catch hexes that they would be wiser to simply dodge. The more so, if they have had little practice catching them. And the casting of so many Charms will tire their strongest warrior.”

Professor Quirrell gave the DMLE Director a half-nod of acknowledgment. “As you say, Madam Bones. Mr. Malfoy is new to the business of having ideas, and so when he has one, he becomes proud of himself for having it. He has not yet had enough ideas to unflinchingly discard those that are beautiful in some aspects and impractical in others; he has not yet acquired confidence in his own ability to think of better ideas as he requires them. What we are seeing here is not Mr. Malfoy’s best idea, I fear, but rather his only idea.”

Lord Malfoy simply turned to watch the screens again, as though the Defense Professor had used up his right to exist.

“But –” said Lord Greengrass. “But what in Merlin’s name is Harry Potter –”



Sixteen remaining soldiers of the Chaos Legion – or fifteen plus Blaise Zabini, rather – marched confidently through the forest, their shoes thudding over the still-dry ground. Their camouflage uniforms blended into the forest even more than usual, all colors washed out by the tints of an overcast day.

Sixteen Chaos Legionnaires, against twenty-eight Dragon Warriors and twenty-eight Sunshine Soldiers.

The common consensus had been that, with odds that bad, it was practically impossible for them to lose. After all, General Chaos was bound to come up with something really spectacular, facing odds like that.

There was something almost nightmarish about how everyone seemed to now expect Harry to pull miracles out of his hat, on demand, any time

one was needed. It meant that if you couldn't do the impossible, you were disappointing your friends and failing to live up to your potential...

Harry hadn't bothered complaining to Professor Quirrell about 'too much pressure'. Harry's mental model of the Defense Professor had predicted him looking severely annoyed, saying things along the lines of You are perfectly capable of solving this problem, Mr. Potter; did you even try? and then deducting several hundred Quirrell points.

From above, from where two broomsticks watched their march, the high young voice of Tess Walsh cried "Friend!" and after another moment, "Gingersnap!"

A handful of seconds later, the soldier who'd code-named herself Gingersnap returned bearing a double handful of acorns, sweating slightly in the cool but humid air from the jog that had taken her to the oak tree Neville had spotted. Gingersnap approached to where Shannon was holding a uniform-shirt with the neck tied off, in lieu of anyone having to Transfigure a bag. When Gingersnap brought her hands forward to try and dump her acorns into the holding-shirt, Chaotic Shannon, giggling, jerked the shirt to the right, then to the left again as Gingersnap made another effort to dump the acorns, until a sharp "Miss Friedman!" from Lieutenant Nott caused Shannon to sigh and hold the shirt still. Gingersnap dumped her acorns into those accumulated, and then headed out for more.

Somewhere in the background, Ellie Knight was singing her very own version of the Chaos Legion's marching song, and around half the other soldiers were trying to step along with it despite not knowing the tune in advance. Nearby, Nita Berdine, who had a high Transfiguration score, finished creating yet another pair of green sunglasses, and handed them to Adam Beringer, who folded up the sunglasses before tucking them into his uniform pocket. Other soldiers were already wearing their own green sunglasses, despite the cloudy day.

You might guess that there was some sort of incredibly complicated and fascinating explanation behind this, and you would be right.

Two days earlier Harry had been sitting amid his bookcases in the comfy rocking-chair he'd obtained for his trunk's cavern level, pondering silently in the quiet span between classes and dinnertime, thinking about power.

For sixteen Chaotics to defeat twenty-eight Sunnies and twenty-eight Dragons they would need a force amplifier. There were limits to what you could do with maneuver. There had to be a secret weapon and it had to be

invincible, or at least moderately unstoppable.

Muggle artifacts were now illegal in Hogwarts's mock battles, banned by Ministry edict. And the trouble with finding some other clever and unusual spell was that an army twice your own size could brute-force Finite almost anything you tried. The Sunshine Regiment might have missed that tactic with the Transfigured chainmail, but nobody would miss it again now that Professor Quirrell had pointed it out. And Finite Incantatem was a brute-force counterspell which required at least as much magic as the spell being canceled... which, if you were severely outnumbered, made it a whole new order of military challenge. The enemy could Finite anything you tried, and still have enough magic left over for shields and volleys of Sleep Hexes.

Unless, somehow, you could invoke potencies beyond the ordinary strength of first-year Hogwarts students, something too powerful for the enemy to Finite.

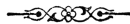
So Harry had asked Neville if he'd ever heard of any small, safe sacrificial rituals –

And then, after the screaming and the shouting had subsided, after Harry had stopped trying to argue about Unbreakable Vows and just given up the whole thing as impossible from a public relations standpoint, Harry had realized that he hadn't even needed to go there. They taught you how to invoke potencies far beyond your own strength in ordinary Hogwarts classes.

Sometimes, even though you were looking straight at something, you didn't realize what you were looking at until you happened to ask exactly the right question.

Defense. Charms. Transfiguration. Potions. History of Magic. Astronomy. Broomstick Flying. Herbology...

"Foel!" screamed the voice from above.



It was a good thing that Neville Longbottom hadn't the tiniest idea that his grandmother was watching; or he would've been more self-conscious about screaming scary battlecries at the top of his lungs while casting Luminos every three seconds as he rocketed through a dense forest of trees, hot on the tail of Gregory Goyle.

("But –" Augusta Longbottom said, her expression showing almost as much astonishment as worry. "But Neville is afraid of heights!")

“Not all fears last,” said Amelia Bones. The old witch was favoring the great screen before them with a measuring gaze. “Or perhaps he has found courage. It is much the same, in the end.”)

A glimmer of red –

Neville dodged, very nearly into a tree but he did dodge; and then Neville somehow also managed to dodge almost all of the branches before they smacked him in the face.

Now Mr. Goyle’s broomstick was pulling further and further away – even though the two of them were riding exactly the same broomstick and Mr. Goyle weighed more, somehow Neville was still falling behind. So Neville slowed down, pulled back, angled up out of the forest and began to accelerate back toward where the Chaos Legion still marched.

Twenty seconds later – it hadn’t been a long chase, just an exciting one – Neville was back among his fellow Chaotics, and dismounted his broom to walk on the ground for a little bit.

“Neville –” said General Potter. Harry’s voice was a little distant, as he walked carefully and steadily through the forest, his wand still applied to the almost-finished Form of the object he was slowly Transfiguring. Beside him, Blaise Zabini, working a smaller version of the same Transfiguration, looked like a shambling Inferi as he stumbled forward. “I told you – Neville – you don’t have to –”

“Yes, I do,” said Neville. He looked down at where his fingers grasped the broomstick, and saw that not just his hands, but his whole arms were shaking. But unless anyone else in Chaos had been practicing dueling for an hour a day with Mr. Diggory, and then practicing their aim in private for another hour afterward, Neville was probably the best shot from a broomstick even after taking into account that he wasn’t a very good flyer.

“Good show, Neville,” Theodore said from where he was walking ahead of them all, leading the Chaos Legion forward through the forest while wearing only his undershirt.

(Augusta Longbottom and Charles Nott exchanged brief astonished glances and then wrenched their gazes away from one another as though stung.)

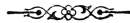
Neville took a few deep breaths, trying to steady his hands, trying to think; Harry might not be good for deep strategic thinking while he was in the middle of an extended Transfiguration. “Lieutenant Nott, do you have any idea why Dragon Army just did that? They lost a broom –” The Dragons

had started the combat with a feint to provide a distraction for Mr. Goyle's approach through the forest; Neville hadn't realized there were two brooms attacking until almost too late. But the Chaos Legion had gotten the other pilot. That was why broomsticks usually didn't attack before armies met, it meant a whole army would concentrate fire on the broomstick. "And the Dragons didn't even get anyone, did they?"

"Nope!" Tracey Davis said proudly. She too was now marching by General Potter's side, her wand gripped low and watchful as her eyes scanned the surrounding forest. "I threw up a Prismatic Sphere like a split second before Mr. Goyle's hex got Zabini, and the way Mr. Goyle had his other arm stretched out I think he planned to knock down the General, too." The Slytherin witch smiled with vicious confidence. "Mr. Goyle tried a Breaking Drill Hex, but learned to his dismay that his weak magic was no match for my newfound dark powers, hahahaha!"

Some Chaotics laughed with her, but a queasy sensation was starting in Neville's stomach as he realized how close the Chaos Legion had come to complete disaster. If Mr. Goyle had managed to disrupt both Transfigurations

—



"Report!" snapped the Dragon General, doing his best to conceal the fatigue he felt after casting seventeen Locking Charms, with more yet to come.

Beads of sweat now dotted Gregory's forehead. "The enemy got Dylan Vaughan," Gregory said formally. "Harry Potter and Blaise Zabini were each Transfiguring something dark-grey and roundish, I don't think it was finished but it looked like it would be big and hollow, sort of cauldron-shaped. Zabini's was smaller than Potter's. I couldn't get either of them or disrupt their Transfigurations, Tracey Davis blocked me. Neville Longbottom is on a broomstick and he's still a terrible flyer but his aim is really good."

Draco listened, frowning, and then he glanced at Padma and Dean Thomas, who both shook their own heads, indicating that they also couldn't think of what might be big and grey and shaped like a cauldron.

"Anything else?" said Draco. If that was it, they'd lost a broom for nothing

—

"The only other weird thing I saw," Gregory said, sounding puzzled, "was that some Chaotics were wearing... sort of like goggles?"

Draco thought about this, not noticing that he'd stopped marching or that all of Dragon Army had automatically stopped with him.

"Was there anything special about the goggles?" Draco said.

"Um..." Gregory said. "They were... greenish, maybe?"

"Okay," said Draco. Again without thinking, he began walking once more and his Dragons followed. "Here's our new strategy. We're only going to send eleven Dragons against the Chaos Legion, not fourteen. That should be enough to beat them, now that we can neutralize their special advantage." It was a gamble, but you had to take gambles sometimes, if you wanted to come in first in a three-way battle.

"You figured out Chaos's plan, General Malfoy?" said Mr. Thomas with considerable surprise.

"What are they doing?" said Padma.

"I haven't the faintest idea," said Draco, with a smirk of the most refined smugness. "We'll just do the obvious thing."



Harry, having now finished his cauldron, was carefully scooping acorns into the container while the scouts searched for a nearby source of water that could be used as a liquid base. They'd come across frequent sinkholes and miniature creeks in the forest before, so it ought not to take long. Another scout had brought a straight stick that would serve as a stirrer, so Harry didn't have to Transfigure one.

Sometimes, even though you were looking straight at something, you didn't realize what you were looking at until you happened to ask exactly the right question...

How can I invoke magical powers that ought to be beyond the reach of first-year students?

There was a cautionary tale the Potions Master had told them (with much sneers and laughter to make the stupidity seem low-status instead of daring and romantic) about a second-year witch in Beauxbatons who'd stolen some extremely restricted and expensive ingredients, and tried to brew Polyjuice so she could borrow the form of another girl for purposes better left unmentioned. Only she'd managed to contaminate the potion with cat hairs, and then instead of seeking a healer immediately, the witch had hidden herself in a bathroom, hoping the effects would just wear off; and when

she'd finally been found, it had been too late to reverse the transformation completely, condemning her to a life of despair as a sort of cat-girl hybrid.

Harry hadn't realized what that meant until the instant of thinking the right question – but what that implied was that a young wizard or witch could do things with Potions-Making that they couldn't even come close to doing with Charms. Polyjuice was one of the most potent potions known... but what made Polyjuice a N.E.W.T.-level potion, apparently, wasn't the required age before you had enough magical power; it was how difficult the potion was to brew precisely and what happened to you if you screwed up.

Nobody in any army had tried brewing any potions up until then. But Professor Quirrell would let you get away with nearly anything, if it was something you could also have done in a real war. Cheating is technique, the Defense Professor had once lectured them. Or rather, cheating is what the losers call technique, and will be worth extra Quirrell points when executed successfully. In principle, there was nothing unrealistic about Transfiguring a couple of cauldrons and brewing potions out of whatever came to hand, if you had enough time before the armies met.

So Harry had retrieved his copy of *Magical Drafts and Potions*, and begun looking for a safe but useful potion he could brew in the minutes before the battle started – a potion which would win the battle too fast for counterspells, or produce spell effects too strong for first-years to Finite.

Sometimes, even though you were looking straight at something, you didn't realize what you were looking at until you happened to ask exactly the right question...

What potion can I brew using only components gathered from an ordinary forest?

Every recipe in *Magical Drafts and Potions* used at least one ingredient from a magical plant or animal. Which was unfortunate, because all the magical plants and animals were in the Forbidden Forest, not the safer and lesser woods where battles were held.

Someone else might have given up at that point.

Harry had turned the pages from one recipe to another, skimming faster and faster in dawning realization, confirming what he had already read and was now seeing for the first time.

Every single Potions recipe seemed to demand at least one magical ingredient, but why should that be true?

Charms required no material components at all; you just said the words

and waved your wand. Harry had been thinking about Potions-Making as essentially analogous: Instead of your spoken syllables triggering a spell effect for no comprehensible reason, you collected a batch of disgusting ingredients and stirred four times clockwise, and that arbitrarily triggered a spell effect.

In which case, given that most potions used ordinary components like porcupine quills or stewed slugs, you'd expect to see some potions using only ordinary components.

But instead every single recipe in *Magical Drafts and Potions* demanded at least one component from a magical plant or animal – an ingredient like silk from an *Acromantula* or petals from a *Venus Fire Trap*.

Sometimes, even though you were looking straight at something, you didn't realize what you were looking at until you happened to ask exactly the right question...

If making a potion is like casting a Charm, why don't I fall over from exhaustion after brewing a draught as powerful as boil-curing?

The Friday before last, Harry's double Potions class had brewed potion of boil-curing... although even the most trivial healing Charms, if you tried to cast them with wand and incantation, were at least fourth-year spells. And afterward, they'd all felt the way they usually felt after Potions class, namely, not magically exhausted to any discernible degree.

Harry had shut his copy of *Magical Drafts and Potions* with a snap, and rushed down to the Ravenclaw common room. Harry had found a seventh-year Ravenclaw doing his N.E.W.T. potions homework and paid the older boy a Sickle to borrow *Moste Potente Potions* for five minutes; because Harry hadn't wanted to run all the way to the library to find confirmation.

After skimming through five recipes in the seventh-year book, Harry had read the sixth recipe, for a potion of fire breathing, which required Ashwinder eggs... and the book warned that the resulting fire could be no hotter than the magical fire which had spawned the Ashwinder which had laid the eggs.

Harry had shouted "Eureka!" right in the middle of the Ravenclaw common room, and been severely rebuked by a nearby prefect, who'd thought Mr. Potter was trying to cast a spell. Nobody in the wizarding world knew or cared about some ancient Muggle named Archimedes, nor the ur-physicist's realization that the water displaced from a bathtub would equal the volume of the object entering the bathtub...

Conservation laws. They'd been the critical insight in more Muggle discoveries than Harry could easily count. In Muggle technology you couldn't

raise a feather one meter off the ground without the power coming from somewhere. If you looked at molten lava spilling from a volcano and asked where the heat came from, a physicist would tell you about radioactive heavy metals in the center of the Earth's molten core. If you asked where the energy to power the radioactivity came from, the physicist would point to an era before the Earth had formed, and a primordial supernova in the early days of the galaxy which had baked atomic nuclei heavier than the natural limit, the supernova compressing protons and neutrons into a tight unstable package that yielded back some of the supernova's energy when it split. A light bulb was fueled by electricity, fueled by a nuclear power plant, fueled by a supernova... You could play the game all the way back to the Big Bang.

Magic did not appear to work like this, to put it mildly. Magic's attitude toward laws like Conservation of Energy was somewhere between a giant extended middle finger, and a shrug of total indifference. Aguamenti created water out of nothingness, so far as anyone knew; there was no known lake whose water level went down each time. That was a simple fifth-year spell, not considered impressive by wizards, because creating a mere glass of water didn't seem amazing to them. They didn't have the wacky notion that mass ought to be conserved, or that creating a gram of mass was somehow equivalent to creating 90,000,000,000,000 joules of energy. There was an upper-year spell Harry had run across whose literal incantation was 'Arresto Momentum!' and when Harry had asked if the momentum went anywhere else he'd just gotten a puzzled look. Harry had kept an increasingly desperate eye out for some kind of conservation principle in magic, anywhere whatsoever...

...and the whole time it had been right in front of him in every Potions class. Potions-Making didn't create magic, it preserved magic, that was why every potion needed at least one magical ingredient. And by following instructions like 'stir four times counterclockwise and once clockwise' – Harry had hypothesized – you were doing something like casting a small spell that reshaped the magic in the ingredients. (And unbound the physical form so that ingredients like porcupine quills dissolved smoothly into a drinkable liquid; Harry strongly suspected that a Muggle following exactly the same recipe would end up with nothing but a spiny mess.) That was what Potions-Making really was, the art of transforming existing magical essences. So you were a little tired after Potions class, but not much, because you weren't empowering the potions yourself, you were just reshaping magic

that was already there. And that was why a second-year witch could brew Polyjuice, or at least get close.

Harry had kept scanning through *Moste Potente Potions*, looking for something that might disprove his shiny new theory. After five minutes he'd flipped the older boy another Sickle, (over his protests), and kept going.

The potion of giant strength required a Re'em to trample the mashed Dugbogs you stirred into the potion. It was odd, Harry had realized after a moment, because crushed Dugbogs weren't strong themselves, they were just... very, very crushed after the Re'em got through with them.

Another recipe said to 'touch with forged bronze', i.e., grasp a Knut in pliers so you could skim the potion's surface; and if you dropped the Knut all the way in, the book warned, the potion would instantly superheat and boil over the cauldron.

Harry had stared at the recipes and their warnings, forming a second and stranger hypothesis. Of course it wouldn't be as simple as Potions-Making using magical potentials imbued in the ingredients, like Muggle cars fueled by the combustion potential of gasoline. Magic would never be as sensible as that...

And then Harry had gone to Professor Flitwick – since he didn't want to approach Professor Snape outside of class – and Harry had told Professor Flitwick that he wanted to invent a new potion, and he knew what the ingredients ought to be and what the potion should do, but he didn't know how to deduce the required stirring pattern –

After Professor Flitwick had stopped screaming in horror and running in little circles, and Professor McGonagall had been called into the ensuing fierce interrogation to promise Harry that in this case it was both acceptable and important for him to reveal his underlying theory, it had developed that Harry had not made an original magical discovery, but rediscovered a law so ancient that nobody knew who had first formulated it:

A potion spends that which is invested in the creation of its ingredients.

The heat of goblin forges that had cast the bronze Knut, the Re'em's strength that had crushed the Dugbogs, the magical fire that had spawned the Ashwinder: all these potencies could be recalled, unlocked, and restructured by the spell-like process of stirring the ingredients in exact patterns.

(From a Muggle standpoint it was just odd, a deranged version of thermodynamics invented by someone who thought life ought to be fair. From a Muggle standpoint, the heat expended in forging the Knut hadn't gone into

the bronze, the heat had left and dissipated into the environment, becoming permanently less available. Energy was conserved, could be neither created nor destroyed; entropy always increased. But wizards didn't think that way: from their perspective, if you'd put some amount of work into making a Knut, it stood to reason that you could get exactly the same work back out. Harry had tried to explain why this sounded a bit odd if you'd been raised by Muggles, and Professor McGonagall had asked bemusedly why the Muggle perspective was any better than the wizarding one.)

The fundamental principle of Potions-Making had no name and no standard phrasing, since then you might be tempted to write it down.

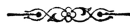
And someone who wasn't wise enough to figure out the principle themselves might read it.

And they would start having all sorts of bright ideas for inventing new Potions.

And then they would be turned into catgirls.

It had been made very clear to Harry that he wasn't going to be sharing this particular discovery with Neville, or Hermione either after the next armies' battle. Harry had tried to say something about Hermione seeming really off lately and this being just the sort of thing that might cheer her up. Professor McGonagall had said flatly that he wasn't even to think it, and Professor Flitwick had raised his little hands and made a gesture as of snapping a wand in half.

Although the two Professors had been kind enough to suggest that if Mr. Potter thought he knew what the potion's ingredients should be, he might be able to find an already-existing recipe that did the same thing; and Professor Flitwick had mentioned several volumes in the Hogwarts library that might be useful...



The vast parchment-like screen now showed only an aerial view of the forest, from which you could barely make out the camouflaged forms of three armies, split up into two groups each, converging to fight their three-way battle.

The benches of the Quidditch stadium were now rapidly filling up with the more easily bored sort of spectator who only wanted to be there for the final battle and skip out on all the boring points along the way. (If there was anything wrong with Professor Quirrell's battles, it was widely agreed, it was that his spectacles didn't last nearly as long as Quidditch matches, once they

actually started. To this Professor Quirrell had replied only, Such is realism, and that had been that.)

Within the huge window – it was all one window now, observing from a great height – the vague collections of tiny camouflaged forms grew closer.

Closer.

Almost touching –



The vast white parchment window showed the first touch of battle between Sunshine and Chaos, a screaming mass of running children with smiley-faces upon their breasts, charging forward with Contego shields held high and others shouting “Somnium!” –

Until one of their number shrieked “Prismatis!” in a terrified voice and the entire charge came to a sudden halt before the sparkling wall of force that had appeared in front of them.

Tracey Davis had walked out from behind the trees.

“That’s right,” said Tracey, her voice low and grim as she leveled her wand on the barrier. “You should fear me. For I am Tracey Davis, the Darke Lady! That’s Darke Lady spelled D-A-R-K-E, with an E!”

(Amelia Bones, Director of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, was sending an inquiring look at Mr. and Mrs. Davis, both of whom looked like they would have dearly preferred to die on the spot.)

Behind the Prismatic Barrier, there was some kind of hushed argument taking place among the Sunshine Soldiers, one of whom in particular seemed to be getting scolded by several of the others.

Then, a moment later, Tracey flinched.

Susan Bones had come to the front of the Sunshine contingent.

“Goodness,” said Augusta Longbottom. “What do you suppose your grand-niece has been learning at Hogwarts?”

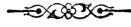
“I don’t know,” Amelia Bones said calmly, “but I shall owl her a Chocolate Frog and instructions to learn more of it.”

The Prismatic Barrier vanished.

The Sunshine Soldiers resumed their charge forward.

Tracey yelled, her voice high with strain, “Inflammaré!” and the Sunshine charge came to another sudden halt as a line of fire blazed up between them in the half-dry grass, extending to follow the path of Tracey’s wand as she pointed it; an instant later Susan Bones cried “Finite Incantatem!” and

the flames dimmed, brightened, dimmed in the contest of their wills, other soldiers raising their wands to aim at Tracey; and that was when Neville Longbottom plunged shrieking out of the sky.



One of the Dragon Warriors, Raymond Arnold, made a hand-sign, pointing forward and oblique left; and there was a sudden hushed hiss of whispers among the Dragon Army contingent as they all quietly reoriented themselves in the direction of the enemy. The Sunnies knew they were there, of course both armies knew; but somehow, in this moment, they had all become instinctively quiet.

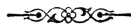
The Dragons crept forward further, and then further, the dull camouflaged forms of the Sunnies beginning to appear among the distant trees, and still nobody spoke, nobody bellowed the call to charge.

Draco was now at the forefront of his soldiers, Vincent behind him and Padma only a shade further back; if the three of them could take the shock of Sunshine's best, the rest of Dragon Army might stand a chance.

Then Draco saw one Sunnie staring at him from the distance, in the vanguard of her own army; staring at him with a look of fury –

Across the forest battleground, their eyes met.

Draco had only a fraction of a second to wonder, in the back of his mind, what Hermione Granger was so angry about, before the shout went up from both their armies; and they were all running forward to the charge.



The other Chaotics had appeared now from among the trees, some had dropped out of trees, and the battle was in full force now, everyone firing in every direction at anything that looked like an enemy. Plus a number of Sunnies crying "Luminos!" at Neville Longbottom as the Chaos Hufflepuff twisted and rocketed up through the air on courses that could only be described as, indeed, "chaotic" –

And it happened, the way it happened only one time out of twenty in mock aerial combat, that Neville Longbottom's broomstick glowed bright red beneath his clenched hands.

It should've meant that Longbottom was out of the game.

Then, in the Hogwarts stands, among the watching crowds of students, a scream went up –

Combat realism. It was Professor Quirrell's one master rule. You could get away with anything if it was realistic, and in real life, a soldier didn't just vanish when their broomstick got hit by a curse.

Neville was falling toward the ground and screaming "Chaotic landing!" and the Chaotics were wrenching their attention away from fights to cast the Hover Charm (and run at the same time so they wouldn't be sitting ducks), almost everyone else stopping to gape –

And Neville Longbottom slammed into the leaf-laden forest ground, landing on one knee, one foot, and both hands, as though he were kneeling down to be knighted.

Everything stopped. Even Tracey and Susan paused in their duel.

In the stadium, all crowd noises vanished.

There was a universal silence composed of astonishment, concern, and sheer dumbstruck gaping awe, as everyone waited to see what would happen next.

And then Neville Longbottom slowly rose to his feet, and leveled his wand at the Sunshine Soldiers.

Though nobody on the battlefield heard it, a large segment of the stadium audience had begun chanting, in steadily rising notes each time the word was uttered, "DOOM DOOM DOOM DOOM DOOM", because you just couldn't see that and not think it required musical accompaniment.

"The crowd is cheering your grandson," said Amelia Bones. The old witch was favoring the screen with a measuring look.

"So they are," said Augusta Longbottom. "Some, if I hear correctly, are cheering, Our blood for Neville! Our souls for Neville!"

"Quite," said Amelia, taking a sip from a teacup which had not been there moments earlier. "It shows the lad has leadership potential."

"These cheers," continued Augusta, her voice taking on an even more stunned quality, "seem to be coming from the Hufflepuff benches."

"It is the House of the loyal, my dear," said Amelia.

"Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore! What in Merlin's name has been happening in this school?"

Lucius Malfoy was watching the screens with an ironic smile, his fingers tapping at his armrest in no discernible pattern. "I do not know what is more frightening, the thought that he has some hidden plan behind all this, or the thought that he does not."

“Look!” cried the Lord of Greengrass. The dapper young man had risen half out of his chair, pointing his finger at the screen. “There she goes!”



“We’ll both take him at once,” Daphne whispered. She knew that a few fear-filled minutes of real combat experience, a handful of times each week, might not be enough to match Neville’s regular dueling practice with Harry and Cedric Diggory over the same period. “He’s too much for one of us, but both of us together – I’ll use my Charm, you just try to stun him –”

Hannah, beside her, nodded, and then they both screamed at the top of their lungs and charged forward, the Hover Charms of two supporting Sunshine Soldiers moving them faster and making them light on their feet, Daphne already crying “Tonare!” even as Hannah kept a huge Contego shield moving in front of them, and with a brief extra lift they leapt over the heads of the front screen of soldiers and landed in front of Neville with their hair billowing high around them –

(Photographs were strictly prohibited at all Hogwarts games, but somehow this moment still ended up on the front page of the next day’s Quibbler.)

– and in the same instant, because fighting older bullies had burned away the slightest traces of hesitation, Hannah fired her first Sleep Hex at Neville (she’d started the incantation while she was still in the air) even as Daphne, concentrating more on speed than on force, slashed down with her Ancient Blade at where she thought Neville’s thighs would be after he dodged –

But Neville leapt up, not sideways, leapt up higher than he should’ve been able to go, so that her glowing sword cut only the air beneath his feet. Somehow Daphne realized what it meant, that Neville still had other Chaotics Hovering him, in time for her to raise her Blade up over her head, but Neville fell too fast and when his Blade smashed into hers it was like being hit by a Bludger. It knocked Daphne off her feet and sent her sprawling backward onto the grass, hitting the ground hard on her back. It might have been all over for her, then, if Neville hadn’t landed too hard himself and gone to his knees with a pained gasp. And then before Neville could bring his glowing Blade down, Hannah shouted “Somnium!” and Neville lurched frantically backward – though of course no spell had actually come from Hannah’s wand, the Hufflepuff girl couldn’t really have fired again that fast – which gave Daphne a second to scramble to her feet and get both hands around her wand again –



“Dear Merlin,” said Lady Greengrass. Her voice seemed unsteady, the aristocratic poise well-punctured. “My daughter is fighting with the Charm of the Most Ancient Blade. In her first year. I never knew she possessed – such extraordinary talent –”

“Excellent blood,” Charles Nott said approvingly, causing Augusta to snort.

“My good Lady,” said Professor Quirrell, sounding grave. “Do not wrong your daughter so. That is not mere talent which you see.” His voice grew a little dryer. “Rather, it is what happens when children put their competitive efforts into a game which involves actual spellcasting.”



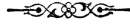
“Expelliarmus!” shouted Draco, trying not to let his voice crack as he simultaneously dodged the blazing red stunbolt that Hermione Granger had fired at him, his muscles twisting with the need to dodge in the wrong direction – she’d pointed to his left, and then with a mysterious twitch fired right –

Hermione dodged the fast-moving dueling hex, and cried with hardly another moment’s pause, “Steleus!”, a wide-angle Hex that Draco couldn’t avoid, but he managed to point his wand at his own face and cry “Quiescus!” before the sudden urge to inhale could devolve into a sneezing fit that would’ve ended the battle.

Draco Malfoy was already half-exhausted from all the Locking Charms and Transfigurations earlier, but his confusion was beginning to give way to a sense of his own blood boiling, he didn’t know why Granger was attacking him so angrily all of a sudden, but if she wanted a fight he’d give her one –

(The Dragons and Sunnies weren’t stopping to watch the duel of their Generals, the Dragons were too disciplined to stop and watch and that meant the Sunnies had to go on fighting too; but the gaping audience in the Hogwarts Quidditch stands were being distracted even from Neville and Daphne’s spectacle, shifting their eyes to the duel of two Generals as Malfoy and Granger fired hex after hex and jinx after jinx at each other, casting more rapidly than any other student in their year could have managed, the Dragon General’s trained dueling dance matched by the Sunshine General’s frantic energy, the combat between them beginning to resemble an adult duel as the two most magically powerful first-years resorted to spells more exotic than the usual Sleep Hex.)

– although, Draco was beginning to realize, when he and Harry and Professor Quirrell had dismissed Miss Granger as having as much intent to kill as a bowl of wet grapes, they’d never seen her angry.



Daphne lashed out with her Ancient Blade, again not trying to hit hard but just moving the Blade as fast as possible, at the same time Hannah cried “Somnium!” and Neville leapt back again, but it had been another bluff and Hannah was moving in to fire a real spell almost point-blank –

– and Neville Longbottom did exactly what – he would explain afterward – Cedric Diggory had trained him to do if he was fighting Bellatrix Black, which was to spin around and kick Hannah really hard in the pit of her stomach.

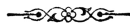
The Hufflepuff girl made a sad little sound, a gasping cry of pain, as she was knocked off her feet by the hard shoe sinking into her abdomen with the force of Neville’s whole body behind it.

For an instant the battlefield stood still, everything halted except Hannah’s falling form.

Then Neville’s face turned to absolute dismay and he lowered his wand, the Chaotic Lieutenant starting instinctively toward his House-mate as he reached for her with his other hand –

Even as Hannah turned her fall into a roll and came out with her wand raised and shot him.

A fractional second later, Daphne, who hadn’t hesitated either, sank her Most Ancient Blade squarely into Neville’s back, causing the Chaotic Lieutenant’s muscles to jerk convulsively with the stunning magic discharging into him even as Hannah’s Sleep Hex took effect, and then the last scion of Longbottom was sprawled still on the ground with a look of total surprise frozen to his face.



“Today Mr. Longbottom has learned a valuable lesson about his feelings of pity and remorse,” said Professor Quirrell.

“And chivalry,” said Amelia, sipping her tea again.



“Are you all right?” whispered Daphne, as she stood protectively over where Hannah lay on the ground clutching her stomach. The girl didn’t give anything back in reply except more retching sounds that sounded like Hannah was trying not to throw up while trying not to cry.

Somehow, even though it might not have been good tactics – it would’ve been better if Hannah had been hexed outright, than for other soldiers to be tied up protecting her – a number of Sunnies seemed to be standing in front of Hannah with their wands clutched tightly, staring angrily at the Chaotics. Someone had thrown up a Prismatic barrier between the two groups, Daphne couldn’t see who.

And for some reason the Chaotics didn’t seem to be pressing the attack. Even Tracey had completely dropped the grim look on her face and was shifting her weight nervously from one foot to another, as though she was having trouble remembering which side she was on –

“Hold!” shouted a voice. “Hold battle!”

There wasn’t much battle going on anyway, but it held.

General Potter, looking every inch the Boy-Who-Lived, strode out from the trees with something large and camouflage-cloth-covered held under one arm.

“Is Miss Abbott breathing all right?” General Potter yelled.

Daphne didn’t look back. She didn’t trust that this wasn’t a trap – it was absolutely certain that if the Chaotics took the opportunity to attack, Professor Quirrell would not only rule it legal but also award them extra points afterward. But Daphne could hear the answer well enough with her ears, it wasn’t like Hannah was trying to breathe quietly, and so she said, “Sort of.”

“She should get out of here and to someone who can use healing Charms,” Harry said. “Just in case that broke something.”

From behind Daphne, a small gasping voice said, “I– can– still– fight–”

“Miss Abbott, don’t –” Harry said, just as there was the sound from behind Daphne of someone collapsing back to the grass after trying and failing to get to her feet. Everyone winced, but Daphne didn’t turn her back on Harry.

“Why haven’t the teachers stopped the battle?” said Susan, her voice angry.

“I expect it’s because Miss Abbott is in no danger of permanent damage and Professor Quirrell thinks we’re learning valuable lessons,” Harry said in a hard voice. “Look, Miss Abbott, if you go, Tracey will also retire from the

battle. You already outnumber us, so that's a very good deal for your side. Please take it."

"Hannah, just go!" said Daphne. "I mean, just say you're out!"

When Daphne glanced back she saw that Hannah was shaking her head, still curled up in a ball on the grass.

"Oh, screw this," said Harry. "Chaotics! The faster we stun them, the faster she's out of here! We're going to do this very quickly, even if we take casualties! End truce! TUNAFISH!"

Daphne's political hindbrain had only an instant to admire how Harry's few words had just made the Chaotics the good guys, and then in almost perfect unison, the Chaotics were plunging their hands into the pockets of their uniforms and drawing out green sunglasses in an unfamiliar style. Not like anything you would wear to the beach, more like goggles for advanced Potions –

Then Daphne realized what was about to happen and snapped up her other hand to shield her eyes, just as Harry ripped the cloth off the cauldron.

The fluid that spilled forth as Harry Potter threw the cauldron's contents into the air was too bright to be seen, too brilliant to be imagined, incandescent like the Sun magnified a dozen times –

(which was exactly what it was)

(the sunlight which had been invested to create the acorns, the bright energy that had fueled a tree rising up from the bare dirt)

(blazing a searing purple, the color of the mixed blue and red wavelengths that chlorophyll absorbed)

(with almost none of the green wavelengths that chlorophyll reflected to create the green color of leaves)

(which was the color of the Chaos Legion's sunglasses, made to pass through green wavelengths, blocking red and blue, reducing even the most incandescent purple glare to something bearable)

– the violet light blazed on and on, Daphne tried dropping her arm from her eyes but found that she couldn't look directly at anything, even the secondhand purple glare was so bright she had to squint; and she had only time to cry one Finite Incantatem, which didn't work, before a Sleep Hex took her.

What was left of the battle didn't take very long after that.



“NOW!” bellowed Blaise Zabini, formerly of Sunshine, now commanding a detachment of Chaos Legionnaires. “I mean, TUNAFISH!” The Slytherin boy’s hand grasped the cloth shielding the cauldron from the triggering touch of daylight, already beginning to move it aside.

“NOW!” bellowed Dean Thomas, formerly of Chaos, commanding a consignment of Dragon Warriors. “DO WHATEVER THEY DO!”

The Chaotics of Zabini’s detachment plunged their hands into their uniform pockets, and came forth bearing green sunglasses –

– an action almost perfectly mirrored by Dean and the Dragon Warriors, who drew forth green-colored Potions goggles, and quickly drew the straps over their own heads, even as the Chaotics put on their sunglasses and the violet incandescence blasted forth.

(As General Malfoy had explained, if Mr. Goyle reported that the Chaos Legion was wearing green-colored Potions goggles, you didn’t have to know why to Transfigure some copies.)

“THAT’S CHEATING!” shrieked Blaise Zabini.

“THAT’S TECHNIQUE!” Dean yelled back. “DRAGONS, CHARGE!”

“Pardon me,” the Lady Greengrass said. “Could you stop laughing like that, Mr. Quirrell? It’s unnerving.”

“FINITE THEIR GOGGLES!” shouted Blaise Zabini, as the two armies ran headlong toward each other through omnipresent eye-searing purple glare. “WE CAN STILL WIN!”

“YOU HEARD HIM!” bellowed Dean. “GET THEIR GLASSES!”

Blaise Zabini’s reply to this wasn’t anything articulate.

That battle went on a lot longer.



“Stupefy!” shrieked the Sunshine General.

Draco didn’t dodge, he didn’t counter, he didn’t have enough energy left for either, all he could do was whip his left hand into position and hope –

The red stunbolt dissipated again on Draco’s Colloportused glove, which he’d Transfigured and spell-locked to his hand the same as the rest of Dragon Army. It was all that was saving him now, that shield.

It should have been a time to counterattack, but Draco could only catch his breath, as the two of them danced backward and forward beneath the trees in the never-ending movements of their duel. Across from him, General Granger was panting hard, the young girl’s face glistening with sweat like

dew, her chestnut hair wetted into brown plaits. Her camouflage uniform was stained with damp spots, her shoulders visibly trembling with exhaustion, but her wand was still steel-steady where it stayed level on Draco through all their motion. Her eyes glaring, her cheeks flushed with rage.

So, little girl, why're you pretending to fight like a grownup today?

The taunt came to mind, but he didn't really think he needed Granger any angrier; so instead Draco just said – though he could hear his own voice cracking – “Any reason you're feeling mad at me, Granger?”

The girl was gasping for breath herself, her own voice wobbling as she spoke. “I know what you're up to,” said Hermione Granger, her voice rising. “I know what you and Snape are up to, Malfoy, and I know who's behind it!”

“Huh?” Draco said without even thinking about it.

That only seemed to increase Granger's fury, and her fingers whitened on the wand she held leveled on him.

And then Draco got it, and it boiled his own blood in his veins. Even she thought he was secretly plotting against her –

“You too?” Draco yelled. “I helped you, you bucktoothed bint! You, you, you,” – stuttering past all the Dark curses that came to mind until he found something he could actually cast at her – “DENS AUGEO!”

But Granger flashed and whirled around the Tooth-Lengthening Hex, and then her own wand came around and leveled at almost point-blank range, even as Draco brought up his left hand like a shield, placing the magic-locked glove between himself and whatever she was about to fire, and the Sunshine General's own voice rose to a shriek audible across the whole battleground –

“ALOHOMORA!”

Time should have paused.

But it didn't.

Instead the padlock clicked and fell off the glove.

Just like that.

Just like that.

The screens showed it all very clearly, to the entire watching Hogwarts stadium.

And the bone-dead-silent hush that fell over every bench in every bleacher said that everyone understood quite clearly what it meant, that the scion of House Malfoy had just had his magic overcome by a Muggleborn.

Hermione Granger didn't pause in her fight, gave no sign that she even knew what she'd done; instead her foot snapped out in a Muggle-style kick

that knocked Draco's wand cleanly out of his hand, his shocked mind and body moving just a little too slowly. Draco dove after his wand, scrabbling frantically on the ground, but from behind him a girl's cracking voice said "Somnium!" and Draco Malfoy fell and didn't rise again.

There was another moment of frozen silence. The Sunshine General was wobbling on her feet, looking like she might faint.

Then the Dragon Warriors screamed at the top of their lungs and charged forward to avenge their fallen commander.



Mr. and Mrs. Davis were shaking as they stood up from the comfortable chairs of the faculty Quidditch box; they couldn't quite clutch each other while walking, but they held hands tightly, pretending hard to be invisible. If they'd been children young enough for accidental magic they probably would've spontaneously Disillusioned themselves.

The elderly Charles Nott said nothing as he stood from his chair. The scarred Lord Jugson said nothing, as he stood from his own chair.

Lucius Malfoy said nothing as he stood.

All three of them turned without pause and strode toward the stairwell of the elevated bleachers, moving in eerie unison like an Auror trio –

"Lord Malfoy," the Defense Professor said in mild tones. That man was still seated in his own chair, looking upon his parchment-like screens, arms limp at his side, as though for some reason he didn't feel like moving.

The white-haired man halted just before reaching the exit archway, and the elderly man and the scarred man halted as well, flanking him. Lord Malfoy's head turned, too slightly to be any form of acknowledgement, but in the Defense Professor's direction.

"Your son performed exceptionally well today," said Professor Quirrell. "I must confess that I underestimated him. And he has earned his army's loyalty, as you have witnessed." Still very mild, the Defense Professor's voice. "Speaking as your son's teacher, it is my opinion that he will not benefit if you interfere in his –"

Lord Malfoy and his compatriots vanished down the stairs.

"A fine try, Quirinus," Dumbledore said quietly. The old wizard's face showed small lines of worry; he hadn't risen from his own seat either, staring at the parchment screens as though they were still active. "Do you think he will listen?"

The Defense Professor's shoulders twitched in a slight shrug, the only movement they'd shown since the battle ended.

"Well," said the Lady Greengrass, as she rose up and cracked her knuckles, stretching, her husband silent beside her. "I must say, that was quite... interesting..."

Amelia Bones had risen from her own cushioned seat without any fuss. "Interesting indeed," said Director Bones. "I do confess, I find myself disturbed by the skill with which those children were fighting one another."

"The skill?" Lord Greengrass said. "Their spells didn't seem all that impressive to me. Except for Daphne's, of course."

The old witch did not move her eyes from where she was gazing at the Defense Professor's balding head. "The Stunning Hex is not a first-year spell, Lord Greengrass, but that is not the skill I had in mind. They supported each other with those simple spells, they reacted at speed to surprises..." The Director of the DMLE paused, as though searching for words that a mere civilian could understand. "In the midst of battle," she said finally, "with spells flying in every direction... those children seemed quite at home."

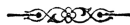
"Indeed, Director Bones," said the Defense Professor. "Some arts are best begun in youth."

The old witch's eyes narrowed. "You are readying them to become a military force, Professor. To what end?"

"Now hold on!" interjected Lord Greengrass. "There's plenty of schools where they teach dueling in first year!"

"Dueling?" said the Defense Professor. From behind it wasn't visible if the pale face was smiling. "That is nothing, Lord Greengrass, to what my students have learned. They have learned not to hesitate in the face of ambushes and greater foes. They have learned to adapt when combat conditions change and change again. They have learned to protect their allies, to protect more those who are more valuable, to abandon pieces which cannot be rescued. They have learned that to survive they must follow orders. Some have even learned a little creativity. Oh, no, Lord Greengrass, these wizards will not hide in their manors and wait to be protected, when the next threat comes. They will know that they know how to fight."

Augusta Longbottom loudly clapped her hands together three times.



We won.

It was the first thing Draco heard when he woke up on the battlefield, Padma telling him how his soldiers had rallied after he fell. How, thanks to the Dragon General's foresight, Mr. Thomas had led his detachment to victory over Chaos. How General Potter had defeated the portion of the Sunshine Regiment that clashed with him. How Mr. Thomas's Dragon Warriors had rejoined the main body of soldiers bearing both their own goggles and the sunglasses of the defeated Chaotics. How, only moments later, General Potter's remaining contingent had attacked both other armies with a potion that emitted searing purple light. But Dragon had held the numerical advantage over Sunshine and Chaos both, and enough sunglasses for their warriors; and so Padma had managed to lead her inherited army to victory.

From the light in Padma's eyes and her arrogant smile that would have done proud to a Malfoy, she was expecting congratulations. Draco managed to grit out some form of praise from between his clenched teeth, and couldn't have said afterward what it was. The foreign-born witch, it appeared, hadn't any idea what'd happened, or what it meant.

I lost.

The Dragons trudged back to Hogwarts beneath gray skies, cold droplets landing heavy on Draco's skin, one by one. While he'd been stunned, it had begun, the long-promised rain finally beginning to fall. There was only one option left to Draco now. A forced move, as Mr. MacNair, who'd taught Draco chess, would have termed it. Harry Potter probably wouldn't like it, if he really was in love with Granger the way everyone said. But the forced move, as Mr. MacNair had defined it, was one you needed to make if you wanted the game to continue at all.

It kept on playing in Draco's mind, over and over again, even as he walked like an automaton through the massive portals of Hogwarts, sent away Vincent and Gregory with two sharp words, and became alone within his private bedroom, sitting on his bed, staring at the wall above his desk. Filling his mind like a Dementor had locked him into the memory.

The padlock on his glove clicking and falling away –

Draco knew, he knew what he'd done wrong. He'd been so tired after casting twenty-seven Locking Charms for all the other Dragon Warriors. Less than a minute wasn't enough time to recover after each spell. And so he'd just cast Colloportus on his own padlocked glove, just cast the spell, not put in all his strength to bind it stronger than Harry Potter or Hermione Granger could undo.

But nobody was going to believe that, even if it was true. Even in Slytherin, nobody would believe that. It sounded like an excuse, and an excuse was all that anyone would hear.

Granger whirled and spun and screamed 'ALOHOMORA!' –

Draco's mind kept playing it over and over as the resentment built. He'd helped Granger – cooperated with her on banning traitors – held her hand as she'd dangled off the roof – stopped a riot from breaking out around her in the Great Hall – did she have any idea what he'd risked, what he'd probably already lost, what it meant for the heir of House Malfoy to do that for a mudblood –

And now there was only one move left, and the thing about a forced move was that you had to make it, even if it meant getting detention and losing House points. Professor Snape would know and understand but there were limits (Father had warned him) to what the Potions Master would overlook.

Challenge Granger to a wizard's duel, in open defiance of Hogwarts regulations. Attack her outright, if she tried to refuse. Defeat her one-on-one, in public, not with clever dueling technique, but by overpowering her magic. Beat her solidly, completely, crush her as utterly as the Dark Lord himself had crushed his enemies. Make it absolutely clear to everyone, so that nobody could possibly doubt, that Draco had just been exhausted from casting the spell so many times. Prove that the Malfoy blood was stronger than any mudblood's –

Only it's not, Harry Potter's voice whispered inside Draco's mind. It's easy to forget what's really true, Draco, once you start trying to win at politics. But in reality there's only one thing that makes you a wizard, remember?

Draco knew, then, he knew the reason for the disquiet in the back of his mind, as he stared at the blank wall above his desk contemplating his forced move. It should've been simple – when you only had one move, the thing to do was make it – but –

Granger whirling, spinning, sweat-dampened hair flying around her, bolts flying from her wand as fast as his own, jinx and counter-jinx, glowing bats flying at his face, and through all of it the look of fury in Granger's eyes

–

There'd been a part of him admiring that, before it had all gone wrong, admiring Granger's fury and power; a part of him that had exulted in the first real fight he'd ever been in, against...

...an equal opponent.

If he challenged Granger, and lost...

It ought not to be possible, Draco had gotten his wand two full years before anyone else in his Hogwarts class.

Only there was a reason why they usually didn't bother giving wands to nine-year-olds. Age counted too, it wasn't just how long you'd held a wand. Granger's birthday had been only a few days into the year, when Harry had bought her that pouch. That meant she was twelve now, that she'd been twelve almost since the start of Hogwarts. And the truth was, Draco hadn't been practicing much outside of class, probably not nearly as much as Hermione Granger of Ravenclaw. Draco hadn't thought he needed any more practice to stay ahead...

And Granger was exhausted too, whispered the Voice of Contrary Evidence inside him. Granger must have been exhausted from all those Stunning Hexes, and even in that state she'd been able to undo his Locking Charm.

And Draco could not afford to challenge Granger publicly, one-on-one with no excuses, and lose.

Draco knew what you were supposed to do in this sort of situation. You were supposed to cheat. But if anyone discovered Draco cheating, it would be disastrous, perfect blackmail material even if it never got out publicly, and any Slytherins watching would know that, they'd be looking...

And then, if you were watching, you would have seen Draco Malfoy get up from his bed, and go to his desk, and take out a sheet of the finest sheepskin parchment, and a pearl-carven inkwell, filled with greenish-silver ink that had been made with true silver and crushed emeralds. From the great trunk at his bed's foot, the Slytherin drew forth a book bound also in silver and emeralds, entitled *The Etiquette of the Houses of Britain*. And with a new, clean quill, Draco Malfoy began to write, frequently looking to the book where it lay open as a reference. There was a grim smile on the boy's face, making the young Malfoy look very much like his father, as he carefully drew each letter as though it were a separate artwork.

From Draco, son of Lucius son of Abraxis Lords of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Malfoy, son also of Narcissa daughter of Druella Lady of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black, scion and heir of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Malfoy:

To Hermione, the first Granger:

(That form might have been meant to sound polite, long ago when it had been invented; nowadays, after centuries of being used to address mudbloods, it carried a lovely tinge of refined venom.)

I, Draco, of Most Ancient House, demand redress, for

Draco paused, carefully moving the quill aside so that it wouldn't drip. He needed a pretext for this, at least if he wanted to impose the duel's conditions. The challenged had the choice of terms unless they had insulted a Noble House. He needed to make it look like Granger had insulted him...

What was he thinking? Granger had insulted him.

Draco flipped the book to the page of standard formulae, and found one that seemed appropriate.

I, Draco, of Most Ancient House, demand redress, for that I have thrice over helped you and offered you only my goodwill, and in return you falsely accused me of plotting against you,

Draco had to stop and take a breath, forcing down the seething anger; he was starting to genuinely feel the insult now, and he'd just written out the last phrase and underlined it without thinking, like it was an ordinary letter. After a moment's reflection, he decided to let it stand; it might not be the exact formal phrasing but it had a raw, angry tone that seemed appropriate.

which insult you committed before the eyes of Britain.

Thus I, Draco, compel you, Hermione, by custom, by law, by

"The seventeenth ruling of the thirty-first Wizengamot," Draco said aloud without looking, a line delivered in many plays; he sat straighter as he said it, feeling every pulse of the noble blood in his veins.

Thus I, Draco, compel you, Hermione, by custom, by law, by the 17th ruling of the 31st Wizengamot, to meet me in wizard's duel with terms: That we each come alone and in silence, speaking to none before or after,

If the duel went poorly, Draco could just say nothing and leave it at that. And if he did defeat Granger, he would have learned experimentally that he could beat her again in a public challenge. It wasn't cheating, but it was Science, which was almost as good.

contesting by magic solely, without death or lasting injury,
...where? Draco had been told about a room in Hogwarts that was good for duels, where everything valuable was already protected by wards, and there were no portraits to tattle on you... which one had it been again...

in the trophy room of the Castle of the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry,

And their second and public duel had better be soon, like tomorrow, it would take very little time for his reputation in Slytherin to go irretrievably to sludge. He needed to fight Granger for the first time tonight.

upon midnight's stroke that shall end this very day.

Draco, of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Malfoy.

Draco signed the formal parchment, and then drew forth his ordinary and lesser parchment, and his regular ink, for his post scriptum:

If you don't know how the rules work, Granger, here's how it is. You insulted a Most Ancient House, and I've got the lawful right to challenge. And if you affront the conditions of the duel, like by having Flitwick show up at the trophy room, or even just telling anyone else, my father will take you and your false honor straight to the Wizengamot.

Draco Malfo

On the last letter his quill pressed down on the parchment so viciously that the nib snapped off, creating a streak of ink and a small rip in the parchment, which Draco decided also looked appropriate.



That night at dinnertime, Susan Bones came to Harry Potter and told him that she thought Draco Malfoy was going to carry out his plot against Hermione very soon. She was warning all the members of S.P.H.E.W., and she'd warned Professor Sprout, and she'd warned Professor Flitwick, and she was going to send a letter to her Aunt tonight, and now she was warning Harry Potter, too. Only they couldn't quite talk about it with Padma – Susan said, looking very

serious – because Padma was feeling torn between her loyalty to Hermione and her loyalty to her General.

Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres, who was at this point feeling more frustrated with the entire situation than anything really productive, snapped at her that yes, he knew something had to be done.

After Susan Bones left, Harry looked over at the other end of the Ravenclaw table, where Hermione had sat down away from him or Padma or Anthony or any of her other friends.

But Hermione didn't look like she was in a mood where somebody going over and bothering her would be taken very well.

Later, looking backward, Harry would think of how, in his SF and fantasy novels, people always made their big, important choices for big, important reasons. Hari Seldon had created his Foundation to rebuild the ashes of the Galactic Empire, not because he would look more important if he could be in charge of his own research group. Raistlin Majere had severed ties with his brother because he wanted to become a god, not because he was incompetent at personal relationships and unwilling to ask for advice on how to do better. Frodo Baggins had taken the Ring because he was a hero who wanted to save Middle-Earth, not because it would've been too awkward not to. If anyone ever wrote a true history of the world – not that anyone ever could or would – probably 97% of all the key moments of Fate would turn out to be constructed of lies and tissue paper and trivial little thoughts that somebody could've just as easily thought differently.

Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres looked at Hermione Granger, where she'd sat down at the other end of the table, and felt a sense of reluctance to bother her when she looked like she was already in a bad mood.

So then Harry thought that it probably made more sense to talk to Draco Malfoy first, just so that he could absolutely positively definitely assure Hermione that Draco really wasn't plotting against her.

And later on after dinner, when Harry went down to the Slytherin basement and was told by Vincent that the boss ain't to be disturbed... then Harry thought that maybe he should see if Hermione would talk to him right away. That he should just get started on unraveling the whole mess before it raveled any further. Harry wondered if he might just be procrastinating, if his mind had just found a clever excuse to put off something unenjoyable-but-necessary.

He actually thought that.

And then Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres decided that he'd just talk to Draco Malfoy the next morning instead, after Sunday breakfast, and then talk to Hermione.

Human beings did that sort of thing all the time.



It was Sunday morning, on the 5th of April, 1992, and the simulated sky above the Great Hall of Hogwarts showed great torrents of rain pouring down in such density that the lightning flashes were diminished and scattered into small pulses of white light that sometimes transformed the House tables, paling their faces and making all the students appear briefly to be ghosts.

Harry sat at the Ravenclaw table, wearily eating a waffle, waiting for Draco to make an appearance so that he could get started on sorting this whole thing out. There was a Quibbler being passed around which had somehow ended up with Hannah and Daphne on the front page, but it hadn't gotten to his place yet.

A few minutes later Harry finished eating his waffle, and then looked around again to see if Draco had arrived yet for breakfast at the Slytherin table.

It was odd.

Draco Malfoy was almost never late.

Since Harry was looking in the direction of the Slytherin table, he didn't see Hermione Granger entering through the huge doors of the Great Hall. Thus he was rather startled when he turned back and discovered Hermione sitting down directly beside him at the Ravenclaw table, just as if she hadn't not-done that for more than a week.

"Hi, Harry," Hermione said, her voice sounding almost exactly normal. She started to put toast on her plate and a selection of healthy fruits and vegetables. "How are you?"

"Within one standard deviation of my own peculiar little average," Harry automatically replied. "How are you doing? Did you sleep okay?"

There were dark bags under Hermione Granger's eyes.

"Why, yes, I'm fine," said Hermione Granger.

"Um," Harry said. He took a slice of pie onto his plate (as his brain was occupied with other things, Harry's hand simply took the tastiest thing within range, without evaluating complex concepts like whether he was ready to

eat dessert). "Um, Hermione, I'm going to need to talk to you later today, is that okay?"

"Sure," said Hermione. "Why wouldn't it be?"

"Because –" Harry said. "I mean – you and I haven't – for the last few days –"

Shut up, suggested an internal part of Harry that seemed to have been recently allocated for governing Hermione-related issues.

Hermione Granger didn't look like she was paying much attention to him in any case. She just stared down at her plate, and then, after about ten seconds of awkward silence, began to eat her tomato slices, one after another, without pause.

Harry looked away from her and began to eat a slice of pie which, he discovered, had somehow materialized on his plate.

"So!" Hermione Granger suddenly said after she'd polished off most of her plate in silence. "Anything happening today?"

"Um..." Harry said. He looked around frantically, as though to find something-happening that he could use as conversational fodder.

And so Harry was one of the first to see it, and wordlessly point, although the sudden swell of whispers that swept through the Great Hall showed that a number of other people had seen it too.

The distinctive crimson tinge of the robes would have been recognizable anywhere, but it still took Harry's brain a few moments to place the faces. An Asianish-looking man, solemn, and today looking rather grim. A man with a piercing gaze that swept over the room, his long black hair waving behind him in a ponytail. A man thin and pale and unshaven, with a face so blank that it was like stone. It took Harry a few moment to place the faces, and remember the names, from that long-ago day in January when the Dementor had come to Hogwarts: Komodo, Butnaru, Goryanof.

"An Auror trio?" Hermione said in a strange bright voice. "Why, I wonder what they'd be doing here."

Dumbledore was in their company as well, looking as worried as Harry had ever seen him; and after a moment's pause while the old wizard's eyes scanned the Great Hall and the students whispering over their breakfasts, he pointed –

– straight at Harry.

"Oh, now what," Harry said under his breath. His inward thoughts were a lot more panicked than that, as he wondered frantically if anyone had

connected him to the Azkaban breakout somehow. He looked at the Head Table, trying to make the glance casual, and realized that Professor Quirrell was nowhere to be seen, this morning –

The Aurors swept toward him with swift strides, Auror Goryanof approaching from the other side of the Ravenclaw table as though to block any escape in that direction, Auror Komodo and Auror Butnaru approaching from Harry's side, the Headmaster following straight on Komodo's heels.

All conversation everywhere had ground to utter silence.

The Aurors reached Harry's place at the table, surrounding him from three angles.

"Yes?" Harry said, as normally as he could. "What is it?"

"Hermione Granger," Auror Komodo said in a toneless voice, "you are under arrest for the attempted murder of Draco Malfoy."

TABOO TRADEOFFS, PART I

“Hermione Granger,” Auror Komodo said in a toneless voice, “you are under arrest for the attempted murder of Draco Malfoy.”

The words dropped into Harry’s consciousness and shattered his thoughts into a hundred shards of incredulity, the shock of adrenaline running into so much confusion that –

“She –” Harry said. “She – she wouldn’t – WHAT?”

The Aurors weren’t paying any attention to him. Komodo spoke again, still in that colorless voice. “Mr. Malfoy has regained consciousness in St. Mungo’s and named you, Hermione Granger, as his assaulter. He has repeated these accusations under two drops of Veritaserum. The Blood-Cooling Charm you cast upon Mr. Malfoy would have killed him if he had not been found and treated, and it must be presumed known to you that this was a fatal curse. I therefore arrest you upon the serious charge of attempted murder and you will be taken into Ministry custody to be interrogated under three drops of Veritaserum –”

“Are you mad?” the words burst out of Harry’s mouth, as he shoved himself up from the Ravenclaw table, an instant before Auror Butnaru’s hand clamped down hard upon his shoulder. Harry ignored it. “That’s Hermione Granger you’re trying to arrest, the nicest girl in Ravenclaw, she helps Hufflepuffs with their homework, she’d die before she tried to kill anyone –”

Hermione Granger’s face had crumpled. “I did it,” she whispered in a tiny voice. “It was me.”

Another huge rock fell on Harry’s thoughts and crushed their fragile order, bursting fragments of comprehension into dust.

Dumbledore’s face seemed to have aged decades over the course of seconds. “Why, Miss Granger?” Dumbledore said, his own voice barely above a whisper. “Why would you do such a thing?”

“I’m,” Hermione said, “I’m, I’m – sorry – I don’t know why I –” She seemed to collapse in on herself, her voice was formed of nothing but sobs, and the only words that could be made out were, “I thought – killed him – sorry –”

And Harry should have said something, should have done something, should have jumped up out of his seat and stunned all three Aurors and then gone on to some incredibly clever next move, but the twice-shattered fragments of his thought processes could yield no output. Butnaru's hand pushed Harry gently but firmly back into his seat and Harry found himself stuck there like he'd been glued, he tried to grab his wand for a Finite and it wouldn't come out of his pocket, the three Aurors and Dumbledore escorted Hermione out of the Great Hall amid a rising storm of outcries and the doors began to swing shut behind them – nothing made sense, it was surreal beyond all reckoning, like he'd been transported into an alternate universe, and then Harry's mind flashed back to another day of confusion and in a moment of desperate inspiration he finally realized what the Weasley twins had done to Rita Skeeter, and his voice rose in a scream, "HERMIONE YOU DIDN'T DO IT YOU'VE BEEN FALSE-MEMORY-CHARMED!"

But the doors had already shut.



Minerva couldn't possibly have stood still, she paced back and forth through the Headmaster's office, the back of her mind half-expecting Severus or Harry to tell her to shut up and sit down, but neither the Potions Master or the Boy-Who-Lived seemed much concerned with her, both of their gazes focused on Albus Dumbledore where he had emerged from the Floo. There were sounds in the background that nobody heard. Severus seemed as passionless as ever, sitting in a small cushioned chair beside the Headmaster's desk. The old wizard stood terrible and upright by the still-burning fireplace, robed in black like a starless night, radiating power and dismay. All her own thoughts were of utter confusion and horror. Harry Potter sat on a wooden stool with his fingers gripping the seat, and his eyes were fury and freezing ice.

At 6:33am, Quirinus Quirrell had Flooed St. Mungo's from his office for immediate pickup of Draco Malfoy. Professor Quirrell had found Mr. Malfoy in the trophy room of Hogwarts, on the verge of death from the continuing effects of the Blood-Cooling Charm slowly lowering his body temperature. Professor Quirrell had immediately dispelled the Charm, cast stabilizing spells on Mr. Malfoy, and levitated him to his office to Floo him to St. Mungo's for further treatment. After this, Professor Quirrell had informed the Headmaster, stating the facts briefly before vanishing through

the Floo; the Aurors, notified by St. Mungo's, had demanded his presence for questioning.

The clear intent of the Blood-Cooling Charm had been to kill Draco Malfoy so slowly that the wards of Hogwarts, set to detect sudden injury, would not trigger. Under interrogation, Professor Quirrell had told the Aurors that he had cast several tracking Charms upon Mr. Malfoy's person in January, shortly after Mr. Malfoy's return to Hogwarts from Yuletime break. Professor Quirrell had cast tracking Charms because he had learned of a person with a motive to harm Mr. Malfoy. Professor Quirrell had refused to identify this person. The tracking Charms which Professor Quirrell had cast were triggered by Mr. Malfoy's health falling below an absolute level, rather than by sudden changes, and had therefore alerted Professor Quirrell before Mr. Malfoy had died.

Two drops of Veritaserum, sufficient to prevent Mr. Malfoy from withholding any meliorating or moderating information in his statements, had shown that Mr. Malfoy had – legally under the laws of Noble Houses, illegally under the regulations of Hogwarts – challenged Hermione Granger to a duel. Mr. Malfoy had won the duel but had then, as he left, been attacked from behind by Miss Granger with a Stunning Hex. After this Mr. Malfoy knew nothing.

Three drops of Veritaserum, requiring her to volunteer all relevant information, had caused Hermione Granger to confess that she had stunned Draco Malfoy from behind, and then, in a fit of anger, cast the Blood-Cooling Charm on him, with the deliberate intention of killing him slowly enough to evade identification from the Hogwarts wards, whose workings she had read about in *Hogwarts: A History*. She had been horrified at herself upon awakening the next morning, but had not told anyone of what she'd done, believing Draco Malfoy to be already dead – as he certainly would have been after seven hours, had his body's own magic not been resisting the effects of the Blood-Cooling Charm.

"Her trial," said Albus Dumbledore, "is set for tomorrow at noon."

"What?" the word burst out of Harry Potter. The Boy-Who-Lived didn't rise from his chair, but Minerva saw his fingers whiten where they gripped the wooden seat beneath him. "That's insane! You can't do a police investigation in one day –"

The Potions Master raised his voice. "This is not Muggle Britain, Mr. Potter!" Severus's face was as expressionless as ever, but the bite in his voice

was sharp. "The Aurors have an accusation under Veritaserum and a confession under Veritaserum. So far as they are concerned, the investigation is done."

"Not quite," said Dumbledore, just as Harry seemed ready to explode. "I have insisted to Amelia that this matter be given the utmost scrutiny. Unfortunately, as the ill-fated duel was at midnight –"

"Supposed duel," Harry said sharply.

"As the supposed duel was at midnight – yes, you're quite right, Harry – it is beyond the range of any Time-Turner –"

"Also supposedly," the Boy-Who-Lived said coldly. "And rather suspiciously, since the alleged murder suspect doesn't know about Time-Turners. I hope that an invisible Auror was immediately sent back in time as far as possible to observe –"

Dumbledore inclined his head. "I went myself, Harry, the moment I heard. But by the time I reached the trophy room, Mr. Malfoy was already unconscious and Miss Granger had gone –"

"No," said Harry Potter. "You reached the trophy room and saw Draco unconscious. That is all you observed, Headmaster. You did not observe Hermione there, or watch her leave. Let us distinguish observation from inference." The boy's head turned to look at her. "Imperius, Obliviation, False Memory Charm, Legilimency. Professor McGonagall, am I leaving out any mind-affecting spell that could have made Hermione do this or make her believe she'd done it?"

"The Confundus Charm," she said. And the Dark Arts had never been her study, but she knew – "And certain Dark rituals. But none of those could be performed in Hogwarts without alarm."

The boy nodded, his eyes still directly addressing her. "Which of those spells can be detected? Which would the Aurors try to detect?"

"The Confundus Charm would wear off in a few hours," she said, after a moment to gather her thoughts. "Miss Granger would remember the Imperius. Obliviation cannot be detected by any known means, but only a Professor could have cast that spell upon a student without alarm from the Hogwarts wards. Legilimency – can only be detected by another Legilimens, I think –"

"I requested that Miss Granger be examined by the court Legilimens," said Dumbledore. "The examination showed –"

"Do we trust him?" said Harry.

"Her," said Dumbledore. "Sophie McJorgenson, whom I remember as an honest student of Ravenclaw, and she is bound by the Unbreakable Vow to tell the truth of what she sees –"

"Could someone else be Polyjuiced as her?" Harry Potter interrupted again. "What did you observe, Headmaster?"

Albus said heavily, "A person who looked like Madam McJorgenson told us that a single Legilimens had lightly touched Miss Granger's mind some months ago. That is from January, Harry, when I communicated with Miss Granger about the matter of a certain Dementor. That was expected; but what I did not expect was the rest of what Sophie found." The old wizard turned to gaze into the Floo fire, letting the orange flames reflect on his face. "As you say, Harry, a False Memory Charm is one possibility; they are, when cast perfectly, indistinguishable from true memory –"

"That doesn't surprise me," Harry interrupted. "Studies show that human memories are more or less rewritten every time we remember them –"

"Harry," Minerva said softly, and the boy's mouth clamped shut.

The old wizard continued. "– but a False Memory Charm of such quality requires as much time to create as a true memory. Creating a detailed memory of ten minutes would be ten minutes' work. And according to the court Legilimens," Albus's face now seemed more tired and lined than before, "Miss Granger has been obsessing over Mr. Malfoy since the day that Severus... yelled at her. She has been thinking of how Mr. Malfoy might be in league with Professor Snape, how he might be planning to harm her and harm Harry – imagining it for hours every day – it would be impossible to create false memories for so much time."

"The appearance of insanity..." Severus murmured softly, as though he were speaking to himself. "Could it be natural? No, it is too disastrous to be pure accident; too convenient for someone, I have no doubt. A Muggle drug, perhaps? But that would not be enough – Miss Granger's madness would have to be guided –"

"Ah!" Harry said suddenly. "I get it now. The first False Memory Charm was cast on Hermione after Professor Snape yelled at her, and showed, say, Draco and Professor Snape plotting to kill her. Then last night that False Memory was removed by Obliviation, leaving behind the memories of her obsessing about Draco for no apparent reason, at the same time she and Draco were given false memories of the duel."

Minerva blinked in startlement. It would have been a thousand years

before she thought of that possibility.

The Potions Master was frowning thoughtfully, eyes intent. "The reaction to a False Memory Charm is hard to predict in advance, Mr. Potter, without Legilimency. The subjects do not always act as expected, when they first remember the false memories. It would have been a risky ploy. But I suppose that is one way Professor Quirrell could have done it."

"Professor Quirrell?" said Harry. "What motive does he have to –"

The Potions Master said dryly, "The Defense Professor is always a suspect, Mr. Potter. You will notice a trend, given time."

Albus raised up a hand, a silencing gesture, and their heads all turned to look at him. "But in this case there is another suspect," Albus said quietly. "Voldemort."

That deadliest of unspeakable words seemed to echo around the room, canceling all the heat from the orange flames of the fireplace.

"I do not know," the old wizard said slowly, "I know all too little, of the methods of Voldemort's immortality. He searched out those books before I did, I think. All I could find were ancient tales, scattered across too many volumes for him to remove. But to find truth among many stories is also a wizard's mastery, and this I have endeavored to do. There is a human sacrifice, a murder, of that I am certain; committed in coldest blood, the victim dying in horror. And old, old tales of wizards possessed, doing mad deeds, claiming the names of Dark Lords thought defeated; and there is usually a device, of that Dark Lord, which they wield..." Albus looked at Harry, the ancient eyes searching the younger. "I think, Harry – though you will call it only inference – that the act of murder splits the soul. That by ritual of blackest horror, the torn fragment of soul is chained to this world. To a material thing of this world. Which must be, or which then becomes, a device of power."

Horcrux. The terrible name echoed in Minerva's mind, though it seemed that – for what reason she did not know – Albus would not speak that word in front of Harry.

"And therefore," the old wizard finished quietly, "the remainder of the soul is bound to its chained part, lingering here when its body is destroyed. A sad and painful existence, I think it would be; less than spirit, less than the meanest ghost..." The old wizard's eyes were locked on Harry, who gazed back with his eyes narrowed. "It would take time for that mutilated soul to regain a mockery of life. That is why we have had our ten-year reprieve, I believe; why Voldemort did not return at once. But in time... that revenant

would become capable of rising again.” The old wizard spoke with grim precision. “It is clear, from the stories, that the Dark Lords who return by possessing another’s form, wield lesser magics than they once knew. I do not think Voldemort would be satisfied with that. He would take some other avenue to life. But Voldemort was more Slytherin than Salazar, grasping at every opportunity. He would use his pitiful state, use his power of possession, if he had reason. If he could benefit by another’s... inexplicable fury.” Albus’s voice had fallen to almost a whisper. “That is what I suspect happened to Miss Granger.”

Minerva’s throat was very dry. “He’s here,” she gasped. “Here, in Hogwarts –”

Then she stopped, because the reason Voldemort had come to Hogwarts –

The old wizard glanced at her only briefly, and said, still in that whisper, “I am sorry, Minerva, you were right.”

Harry’s voice was edged. “Right about what?”

“Voldemort’s strongest avenue to life,” Dumbledore said heavily. “The most desirable road for him, by which he would rise greater and more terrible than ever before. It is guarded here, within this castle –”

“Excuse me,” Harry said politely. “Are you stupid?”

“Harry,” she said, but there was no force in her voice.

“I mean, maybe you haven’t noticed this, Headmaster Dumbledore, but this castle is full of CHILDREN –”

“I had no choice!” bellowed Dumbledore. The blue eyes were blazing now, beneath the half-moon spectacles. “I do not own it, that thing which Voldemort desires. It belongs to another, and is held here by his consent! I asked if it could be kept in the Department of Mysteries. But he would not permit that – he said it must be within the wards of Hogwarts, in the place of the Founders’ protection –” Dumbledore passed his hand across his forehead. “No,” the old wizard said in a quieter voice. “I cannot pass this blame to him. He is right. There is too much power in that thing, too much that men desire. I agreed that the trap should be laid behind the wards of Hogwarts, in the place of my own power.” The old wizard bowed his head. “I knew Voldemort would worm his way here somehow, and planned to trap him. I did not think – I did not dream – that he would tarry in an enemy fortress one minute longer than he must.”

“But,” said Severus in some puzzlement, “what would the Dark Lord possibly gain by killing Lucius’s only heir?”

"Point of order," Harry Potter said, a hard edge in his voice. "The motives of whoever's behind this are not the primary issue. Our top priority at this point is that an innocent Hogwarts student is in trouble!"

The green eyes locked with the blue, as Albus Dumbledore gazed back at the Boy-Who-Lived –

"Quite right, Mr. Potter," Minerva said, she hadn't even thought about it, the words just seemed to pop out of her lips. "Albus, who is watching over Miss Granger now?"

"Professor Flitwick has gone to her," the Headmaster said.

"She needs a lawyer," Harry said. "Anyone who just blurts out 'I did it' to the police –"

"Unfortunately," Minerva said, her tone taking on some of Professor McGonagall's sternness without thinking, "I doubt an attorney will be any use to Miss Granger at this point, Mr. Potter. She is to face the judgment of the Wizengamot, and they would be exceedingly unlikely to free her on a technicality."

Harry was looking at her with an utterly incredulous expression, as though suggesting that Hermione Granger didn't need an attorney was akin to suggesting that she be set on fire.

"She is correct, Mr. Potter," Severus said quietly. "Few court processes in this country involve solicitors."

Harry lifted his glasses and rubbed his eyes, briefly. "Fine. How do we get Hermione off the hook, exactly? I suppose it's too much to hope that with all the lawyers gone, the judges understand the concept of 'common sense' and 'prior probability' well enough to realize that twelve-year-old girls basically never commit cold-blooded murders?"

"It is the Wizengamot that she faces," said Severus. "The oldest Noble Houses, and certain other wizards of influence." Severus's face twisted in something approaching his customary sarcasm. "As for them showing common sense – you might as well expect them to make you a bacon sandwich, Potter."

Harry nodded, his mouth set. "Exactly what sort of penalty is Hermione facing? Snapped wand and expulsion –"

"No," Severus said. "Nothing that light. Are you willfully misunderstanding, Potter? She is facing the Wizengamot. There is no set penalty. There is only the vote."

Harry Potter murmured, “The rule of law, in complex times, has proved itself deficient; we much prefer the rule of men, it’s vastly more efficient... There’s no constraining legal rules at all, then?”

Light glinted off the old wizard’s half-moon glasses; he spoke carefully, and not without anger. “Legally, Harry, we are dealing with a blood debt from Hermione Granger to the House of Malfoy. The Lord of Malfoy proposes a repayment of that debt, and then the Wizengamot votes on his proposal. That is all.”

“But...” Harry said slowly. “Lucius was Sorted into Slytherin, he’s got to realize that Hermione was just a pawn. Not the one he should actually be angry at. Right?”

“No, Harry Potter,” Albus Dumbledore said heavily. “That is how you wish Lucius Malfoy would think. Lucius Malfoy himself... will not share your desire that he think that way.”

Harry gazed at the Headmaster, his eyes growing colder, at the same time that Minerva herself had to clamp down harder on her own emotions, stop her pacing and try to breathe. She’d been trying not to think about it, trying to turn her thoughts away from it, but she knew. She’d known since the instant she’d heard. She could see it in Albus’s eyes –

“Is she facing capital punishment?” Harry said quietly, and chills went all the way down Minerva’s spine at the undertones of that voice.

“No!” Albus said. “No, not the Kiss, not Azkaban, not for a first-year in Hogwarts. Our country is not so lost, not yet.”

“But Lucius Malfoy,” Severus said tonelessly, “certainly will not be satisfied with only snapping her wand.”

“All right,” Harry said commandingly. “As I see it, we’ve got two essential lines of attack. Line one, find the real culprit. Line two, other leverage over Lucius. Professor Quirrell saved Draco’s life, does that create a blood debt from House Malfoy to him that he could redeem to cancel Hermione’s?”

Minerva blinked in startlement again.

“No,” Dumbledore said. The old wizard shook his head. “It was a clever thought – but no, Harry, I’m afraid not. There is an exception when the Wizengamot suspects that the circumstances of a life-debt may have been created deliberately. And the Defense Professor is hardly above suspicion. Thus Lucius would argue.”

Harry nodded once, face set. “Headmaster, I know I said I wouldn’t – but under the circumstances – that time Draco cast that torture hex on me, is

that debt enough –”

“No,” the old wizard said (even as she blurted “What?” and Severus lifted an eyebrow). “It would not have been enough, and now it is no debt at all. You are an Occlumens and cannot testify under Veritaserum. Draco Malfoy could be Obliviated of his own memory before he could testify –” Albus hesitated. “Harry... whatever you have done with Draco, you must assume that Lucius Malfoy will soon know of it.”

Harry’s head sank into his hands. “He’ll give Draco Veritaserum.”

“Yes,” Albus said quietly.

The Boy-Who-Lived didn’t say anything, as he sat with his head in his hands.

The Potions Master looked genuinely shocked. “Draco really was trying to help Miss Granger,” Severus said. “You – Potter, you actually –”

“Turned him?” Harry said from between his hands. “I was about three-quarters done. Taught him the Patronus Charm and everything. I don’t know what will happen now, though.”

“Voldemort has struck a grave blow against us, this day,” Albus said. The sound of old wizard’s voice was like the look of the boy with his head in his hands. “He has taken two of our pieces, with one... No. I should have seen it earlier. He has taken two of Harry’s pieces with one move. Voldemort has begun his game again, not against myself, but against Harry. Voldemort knows the prophecy, he knows who his last foe shall be. He is not waiting to face Hermione Granger and Draco Malfoy at Harry’s side when they are grown. He is striking at them now.”

“Maybe it’s You-Know-Who and maybe it isn’t,” Harry said, his voice sounding a little unsteady. “Let’s not narrow down the hypothesis space prematurely.” Harry took a breath and lowered his hands. “The other thing we can try is to nail the real culprit before the trial – or at least find solid evidence that someone else did it.”

“Mr. Potter,” said Minerva, “Professor Quirrell told the Aurors that he knew of someone with a motive to harm Mr. Malfoy. Do you know who he was talking about?”

“Yes,” Harry said, after a hesitation. “But I think I shall conduct that part of my investigation with the Defense Professor – just as I would not have Professor Quirrell in the room while we were discussing how to investigate him.”

“He suspects me?” Severus said, then gave a short laugh. “Why, of course he does.”

“My own plan,” said Harry, “is to go look at the trophy room where the supposed duel took place and see if I can discover anything anomalous. If you can tell the investigating Aurors to let me through –”

“What investigating Aurors?” Severus said tonelessly.

Harry Potter took a deep breath, slowly let it out, and then spoke again. “In mystery books it usually takes longer than one day to solve a crime, but twenty-four hours is – no, thirty hours is eighteen hundred minutes. And I can think of at least one other important place to look for clues – though it’ll have to be someone who can get into the Ravenclaw girls’ dorm. Back when Hermione was fighting bullies, she was finding notes under her pillow each morning, telling her where to go –”

“Albus...” ground out Minerva.

“I did not send them,” said the old wizard. His white eyebrows had lifted in surprise. “I knew nothing of this. You think she was being played, Harry?”

“It’s a possibility,” Harry said. “More so, because there’s a part of this puzzle that you don’t know about yet.” Harry’s voice lowered, grew more intense. “Headmaster, you already know that I got my father’s invisibility cloak from someone who left a note under my pillow, saying it was an early Christmas present. I think we have to assume that’s the same person who left notes for Hermione –”

“Harry,” the old wizard said, and hesitated momentarily. “Returning your father’s cloak to you, does not seem to me like the act of a villain –”

“Listen,” Harry Potter said urgently. “The part you don’t know is that after Bellatrix Black escaped from Azkaban, I found another note under my pillow, signed ‘Santa Claus’, saying that they’d heard you were shutting me up inside Hogwarts, and that they were giving me an escape route to the Salem Witches’ Institute in America. That note came with a deck of cards, in which the King of Hearts was supposedly a portkey –”

“Mr. Potter!” cried Professor McGonagall, she hadn’t even thought before she spoke. “That could well be a kidnapping attempt! You should have told –”

“Yes, Professor, I did the sensible thing,” the boy said levelly. “As adapted to the circumstances, I did the sensible thing. I told Professor Quirrell. And according to Professor Quirrell, that portkey goes to somewhere in London – it’s definitely not strong enough to be an international portkey. Now it’s

possible that the person who sent the note is honest, and that the point in London is just a way station.” The boy reached into his robes and took out a deck of cards, along with a folded paper note. “I will trust you not to go in guns blazing – I mean wands blazing – just in case the sender is an ally of mine, if not yours. But if this is a trap, I say we spring it now. And whoever it is, take them alive so we can exhibit them before the Wizengamot, I cannot overemphasize that part.”

Severus rose from his chair, his eyes now intent, and moved toward Harry. “I’ll need a hair of yours for Polyjuice, Mr. Potter –”

“Let us not be hasty!” said Albus. “We have not yet examined the notes sent to Miss Granger; there may be no resemblance after all. Severus, would you enter her dorm room and see if you can find those?”

Harry Potter’s eyebrows had raised, even as he stood to offer the Potions Master better access to his mess of hair. “You think two different people are running around Hogwarts leaving notes beneath pillows?”

Severus gave a brief sardonic laugh, as his hand moved forward and plucked a hair, which soon was being carefully wrapped in silk. “Quite possibly. If I have learned anything in my tenure as Head of Slytherin, I have learned what ridiculous messes arise when there is more than one plotter and more than one plan. But Headmaster – I think Mr. Potter is correct that I should follow this portkey and see where it leads.”

Albus hesitated, and then nodded reluctantly. “I will speak to you before you go, then.”



Even as Harry Potter left the room for his own investigations, Severus spun on his heel and strode swiftly toward the jar of Floo powder, his cloak rising behind him with his speed. “I’ll get some raw Polyjuice, add the hair, and go. Headmaster, will you stand by to –”

“Albus,” Minerva said, surprised at how steady her own voice was, “did you leave those notes under Mr. Potter’s pillow?”

Severus’s hand halted an instant before casting Floo powder into the fire.

Dumbledore nodded to her, though the accompanying smile seemed a bit hollow. “You know me far too well, my dear.”

“And I suppose the portkey goes to a friendly home where Mr. Potter would be kept safe and sound until you arrived to pick him up and return

him to Hogwarts?” Her voice tight – it was sensible, she could not deny it was sensible, but somehow it seemed a little cruel.

“It would depend on the circumstances,” the old wizard said quietly. “If Harry had gone so far – I might have let him make good his escape, for a time. Better to know where he was going, and ensure it was somewhere safe, with friends –”

“And to think,” said Professor McGonagall, “that I had thought to reprimand Mr. Potter for not telling us about this important matter! Upbraid him for not having the sense to trust us!” Her voice had risen in volume. “I shall skip that lecture, I suppose!”

Severus was gazing at the Headmaster with narrowed eyes. “And the notes to Miss Granger –”

“The Defense Professor, very likely,” the old wizard said. “Still – that is only a guess.”

“I shall go look for them,” Severus said. “And then, I suppose, start looking for You-Know-Who.” A frown crossed the Potions Master’s face. “A task at which I haven’t the faintest idea of where to start. Do you know of any magics to find a soul, Headmaster?”



The Divination classroom was lit by the dim red light of a hundred small fires where burned a hundred kinds of incense, so that if you were to ask in one word what the room looked like, the answer would be ‘smoke’. (Assuming you bothered to look at anything, when your nose was threatening to overload and die.) If your gaze could pierce those dank mists, you would see a tiny, cluttered room in which forty stuffed armchairs, most of them unused, were crammed around a small open space in the center of the room, where a circular trapdoor waited on your escape.

“The grim!” Professor Trelawney said in a quavering voice, as she peered into George Weasley’s teacup. “The grim! It is a sign of death! One whom you know, George – someone you know is to die! And soon – yes, it shall be quite soon, I think – unless of course it is later –”

It would have been a good deal scarier, thought Fred and George, if she hadn’t said the same thing to every single other student in their Divination class. They were hardly even thinking about it at this point; all their thoughts were on today’s disaster –

The trapdoor in the floor flew open with a bang that caused Professor Trelawney to shriek and spill George's tea all over his robes, and then an instant later Dumbledore was whooshing up out of the floor with a bird of fire upon his shoulder.

"Fred!" the old wizard said commandingly. His robes were the black of a moonless night, his eyes hard like blue diamonds. "George! With me, now!"

There was an collective gasp and by the time Fred and George were climbing down the ladder after the Headmaster, the entire class was already speculating what role they'd played in the attempted murder of Draco Malfoy.

The trapdoor had hardly slammed shut above them before all nearby sounds muted and the old wizard spun on them and held out a hand and commanded, "Give me the map!"

"M-map?" said Fred or George in total shock. They'd never even suspected that Dumbledore suspected. "Why, w-we don't know what you're –"

"Hermione Granger is in trouble," said the old wizard.

"The Map is in our dorm," George or Fred said immediately. "Just give us a few minutes to get it and we'll –"

The wizard's arms swept them up as if they were hugging-pillows, there was a piercing cry and a flash of fire and then the three of them were in the third-year Gryffindor's boys' dorm.

A few moments later, Fred and George were handing over the Map to the Headmaster, wincing only slightly at the sacrilege of giving their precious piece of the Hogwarts security system to the person who actually owned it, and the old wizard was frowning at the apparent blankness.

"You've got to say," they explained, "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good –"

"I decline to lie," said the old wizard. He held the Map high and bellowed, "Hear me, Hogwarts! Deligitor prodi!" An instant later the Headmaster was wearing the Sorting Hat, which looked scarily right upon his head, as though Dumbledore had always been waiting for a patchwork pointed hat to complete his existence.

(Fred and George immediately memorized this phrase, just in case it would work for somebody besides the Headmaster, and began trying to think of pranks that would involve the Sorting Hat.)

The old wizard wasted not a moment before sweeping the Sorting Hat off his head and turning it upside-down – it was hard to tell with the Hat upside-down, but it looked a bit cross at the treatment – and then plunged in

his hand and drew out a crystal rod. With this instrument he began tracing rune-like patterns on the Map, muttering strange incantations that sounded not quite like Latin and echoed in their ears in an unusually creepy fashion. In the midst of tracing one rune he looked up at both of them, fixing them with a sharp glare. "I will return this to you later, sons of Weasley. Go back to class."

"Yes, Headmaster," they said, and hesitated. "Ah – about Hermione Granger, is she really going to be bound to serve Draco Malfoy forever as his –"

"Go," said the old wizard.

They went.

When he was alone in the room, the old wizard looked down at the map, which had now written upon itself a fine line drawing of the Gryffindor dorms in which they stood, the small handwritten Albus P.W.B. Dumbledore the only name left therein.

The old wizard smoothed the map, bent over it, and whispered, "Find Tom Riddle."



The interrogation room at the Department of Magical Law Enforcement was usually lit by a small orange light, so that the Auror interrogating you would be leaning toward your uncomfortable metal chair with most of their face in shadow, preventing you from reading their expression, even as they read yours.

As soon as Mr. Quirrell had entered the room, the small orange light had dimmed and begun flickering like a candle about to be blown out by the wind. The room was now lit by a sourceless ice-colored glow which illuminated all of Mr. Quirrell's pale skin like alabaster, except, somehow, his eyes, which stayed in darkness.

The Auror on duty outside had surreptitiously tried to dispel this effect four times without the slightest success, despite the fact that Mr. Quirrell had politely surrendered his wand upon being detained for interrogation, and had shown no sign of speaking any incantations nor exerting any other power.

"Quirinus... Quirrell," drawled the man now sitting across from where the Defense Professor had waited courteously. The interrogator had tawny hair that swept back like a lion's mane, with yellowish eyes set into the sternly

lined face of a man late in his tenth decade. The man was, at this moment, leafing through a large folder of parchments that he had taken from a black and very solid-looking briefcase after he had limped into the room and sat down, seeming not to look at the face of the man he was interrogating. He had not introduced himself.

After some further leafing through parchments, carried out in silence, the Auror spoke again. "Born the 26th of September, 1955, to Quondia Quirrell, of an acknowledged tryst with Lirinus Lumblung..." intoned the Auror. "Sorted into Ravenclaw... O.W.L.S. quite good... N.E.W.T.S. in Charms, Transfiguration... an Outstanding in Muggle Studies, impressive... Ancient Runes, and ah yes, Defense. An Outstanding in that as well. Went on to become quite the tourist, visiting all sorts of places. Portkey visas for Transylvania, the Forbidden Empire, the City of Endless Night... my my, Texas." The man looked up from the portfolio, eyes narrowed. "What were you doing there, Mr. Quirrell?"

"Sightseeing, mostly in the Muggle areas," the Defense Professor said easily. "As you say, I am quite the tourist."

The man listened to this with a frown, then looked back down, then up again. "I also see that you visited Fuyuki City in 1983."

The Defense Professor lifted an eyebrow in mild puzzlement. "What of it?"

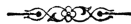
"What did you do in Fuyuki City?" The question snapped out razor-sharp.

The Defense Professor frowned slightly. "Nothing of any account. I visited some better-known sights, some less-known sights, and aside from that, kept to myself."

"Really?" the Auror said softly. "I find that reply rather interesting."

"How so?" said the Defense Professor.

"Because there was no visa listed for Fuyuki City." The man slammed the folder shut. "You're not Quirinus Quirrell. Who the hell are you?"

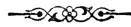


The Potions Master walked quietly into the Ravenclaw girls' dorm, the first-year dorm room, a festive place where bronze and blue competed to be the color of stuffed animals, scarves and dresses, small bits of inexpensive jewelry, and posters of famous people. Hermione Granger's bed was easy to identify; it was the one that had been attacked by a book monster.

Nobody else seemed to be around, at that time of day, and a number of spells verified this.

The Potions Master searched under Hermione Granger's pillow, and beneath her bed, and then began going through her trunk, sorting through mentionable and unmentionable items without change of expression, and finally succeeded in drawing forth a set of papers describing places and times where bullies would be found, all of the papers signed only with an elaborate 'S'.

A brief burst of fire later, the papers were gone, and the Potions Master left to report the failure of his mission.



The Defense Professor was sitting calmly with his hands still folded in his lap. "If you consult Headmaster Dumbledore," said the Defense Professor, "you will find that he is well aware of this matter, and that I agreed to teach his Defense class on the explicit condition that no inquiry be made into my –"

In a lightning motion, the interrogator whipped out his wand and spat "Polyfluis Reverso!" at the same time that the Defense Professor sneezed, which somehow caused the mirror-silvered ray to disrupt in a shower of white sparks.

"Pardon me," the Defense Professor said politely.

The smile that the Auror gave had absolutely no mirth in it. "So where's the real Quirinus Quirrell, eh? Under an Imperius in the bottom of a trunk somewhere, while you take a hair now and then for your illegal Polyjuice?"

"You are making highly questionable assumptions," the Defense Professor said with an edged voice. "What makes you think I did not steal his body outright using incredibly Dark magic?"

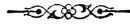
This was followed by a certain pause.

"I suggest," the Auror said, "that you take this seriously, Mr. Whoever-You-Are."

"I'm sorry," said the Defense Professor, leaning back in his chair, "but I see little reason to humble myself on this particular occasion. What are you going to do, kill me?"

"I don't appreciate your humor," the Auror said softly.

"How unfortunate for you, Rufus Scrimgeour," said the Defense Professor. "You have my deepest sympathy." He tilted his head, seeming to study the interrogator; and even within the shadow of the ice-light, the eyes glinted.



Padma stared down at her plate.

“Hermione wouldn’t just do that!” yelled Mandy Brocklehurst, who was practically in tears, in fact she was in tears, her voice would have been loud enough to silence the Great Hall if it hadn’t been for all the other students also screaming at each other. “I – I bet Malfoy tried to – to do things to her –”

“Our General would never do that!” Kevin Entwhistle yelled even louder than Mandy.

“Of course he would!” shouted Anthony Goldstein. “Malfoy’s the son of a Death Eater!”

Padma stared down at her plate.

Draco was the General of her army.

Hermione was the founder of S.P.H.E.W.

Draco had trusted her to be his second-in-command.

Hermione was her fellow Ravenclaw.

Both of them were her friends, maybe the two best friends she had.

Padma stared down at her plate. She was glad the Sorting Hat hadn’t offered her Hufflepuff. If she’d been Sorted into Hufflepuff it would probably have been much more painful, trying to decide where her divided loyalties lay...

She blinked and realized that her vision had gotten blurry again, and raised a trembling hand to wipe once more at her eyes.

Morag MacDougal snorted so loudly it was audible even amid the pandemonium of lunch, and said in a loud voice, “I bet Granger cheated in her battle yesterday, I bet that’s why Malfoy challenged her –”

“All of you SHUT UP!” roared Harry Potter, as he hit the table with his fists so hard that plates rattled all the way along it.

At any other time it would have gotten Professors reprimanding him, this time it just got a few nearby students to look.

“I’d wanted to eat lunch,” Harry Potter said, “and then get back to investigating, so I wasn’t going to talk. But you’re all being silly, and when the truth comes out you’re going to regret what you said about innocent people. Draco didn’t do anything, Hermione didn’t do anything, they were both False-Memory-Charmed!” Harry Potter’s voice had been rising on the last words. “How is that not BLOODY OBVIOUS?”

"You think we'll believe that?" Kevin Entwhistle yelled right back at him. "That's what everyone says! 'I didn't do it, it was all just a False Memory Charm!' You think we're stupid?"

And Morag nodded right along with him, with a condescending look.

The look that came over Harry Potter's face then made Padma flinch.

"I see," Harry Potter said, it wasn't a shout so Padma had to strain to hear it. "Professor Quirrell isn't here to explain to me how stupid people are, but I bet this time I can get it on my own. People do something dumb and get caught and are given Veritaserum. Not romantic master criminals, because they wouldn't get caught, they would have learned Occlumency. Sad, pathetic, incompetent criminals get caught, and confess under Veritaserum, and they're desperate to stay out of Azkaban so they say they were False-Memory-Charmed. Right? So your brain, by sheer Pavlovian association, links the idea of False Memory Charms to pathetic criminals with unbelievable excuses. You don't have to consider the specific details, your brain just pattern-matches the hypothesis into a bucket of things you don't believe, and you're done. Just like my father thought that magical hypotheses could never be believed, because he'd heard so many stupid people talking about magic. Believing a hypothesis that involves False Memory Charms is low-status."

"What are you blithering about?" said Morag, looking down her nose at the Boy-Who-Lived.

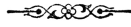
"You think we'd believe anything you say?" yelled a slightly older-looking Ravenclaw witch who Padma didn't recognize. "When you turned Granger Dark?"

"And I'm not going to complain," Harry Potter said in an eerily calm voice, "about wizards not having any logic and believing the craziest things. Because I said that to Professor Quirrell once, and he just gave me this look and said that if I wasn't blinded by my upbringing I could think of a hundred more ridiculous things that lots of Muggles believe. What you're all doing is very human and very normal and doesn't make you unusually bad people, so I'm not going to complain." The Boy-Who-Lived rose up from his bench. "I'll see you all later."

And Harry Potter walked away from them, walked away from all of them.

"You're not thinking he's right, are you?" said Su Li from beside her, in a tone which made it clear what she thought.

"I –" said Padma. Her words seemed to be caught in her throat, her thoughts seemed to be caught in her head. "I – I mean – I –"



If you think hard enough you can do the impossible.

(It had always been an article of faith with Harry. There'd been a time when he'd acknowledged the laws of physics as ultimate limitations, and now he suspected there were no true limits at all.)

If you think fast enough you can sometimes do the impossible quickly...
...sometimes.

Only sometimes.

Not always.

Not reliably.

The Boy-Who-Lived stared around the trophy room, surrounded by awards and cups and plates and shields and statues and medals kept behind thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, of crystal glass displays. For as many centuries as Hogwarts had existed, this room had been accumulating details. A week, a month, maybe even a year, wouldn't have sufficed to take the 'examine' option on every item in the room. With Professor Flitwick gone, Harry had asked Professor Vector if there was any way to detect damage to the wards around the crystal cases, verify the residue that a real duel should have left behind. Harry had raced through the Hogwarts library looking for spells to tell the difference between old fingerprints and new fingerprints, or to detect lingering exhalations in a room. And all those attempts at playing detective had failed.

There were no clues, none that he was smart enough to find.

Professor Snape had said that the portkey led to an empty house in London, with no sign of anyone or anything else.

Professor Snape hadn't found any notes in Hermione's dorm.

Headmaster Dumbledore had said that Voldemort's spirit was probably hiding out in the Chamber of Secrets where the Hogwarts security system couldn't find him. Harry had snuck into the Slytherin dungeons under the Cloak of Invisibility and spent the rest of the afternoon looking through all the obvious places, but he hadn't found anything snaky that answered back when spoken to. The entrance to the Chamber of Secrets, it seemed, hadn't been meant to be found in a day.

Harry had talked to all of Hermione's friends that would still talk to him, and none of them had remembered Hermione saying anything specific about why she'd believed that Draco was plotting against her.

Professor Quirrell hadn't come back from the Ministry as of dinnertime. The older students seemed to think that this year's Defense Professor would probably end up being blamed for the incident, and fired for teaching Hogwarts students to be too violent. They'd talked about the Defense Professor as though he were already gone.

Harry had used up all six hours from his Time-Turner, and there were still no clues, and he had to go to sleep now if he wanted to be functional at Hermione's trial the next day.

The Boy-Who-Destroyed-A-Dementor was standing in the middle of the Hogwarts trophy room, his wand dropped at his feet.

He was crying.

Sometimes you call your brain and it doesn't answer.

The trial of Hermione Granger started on schedule the next day.

TABOO TRADEOFFS, PART II, THE HORNS EFFECT

THE Most Ancient Hall of the Wizengamot is cool and dark, with concentric half-circles of stone rising up from the lowest center, and simple wooden benches set down upon those elevated half-circles. There is no source of light, but the chamber is well-lit, without any apparent cause or reason; it is simply a brute fact that the hall is well-lit. The walls like the floor are stone, dark stone, some elegant and mysterious conjugation of rock most fine to gaze upon, with a smooth texture that seems to flow and shift beneath its surface. This is the Most Ancient Hall, the oldest place of wizardry that has lasted into the modern day; every other place of power was destroyed in one war or another. This is the Hall of the Wizengamot, which is most ancient because the wars ended with the building of this place.

This is the Hall of the Wizengamot; there are older places, but they are hidden. Legend holds that the walls of dark stone were conjured, created, willed into existence by Merlin, when he gathered the most powerful wizards left in the world and awed them into accepting him as their chief. And when (the legend continues) the Seers continued to foretell that not enough had yet been done to prevent the end of the world and its magic, then (the story goes) Merlin sacrificed his life, and his wizardry, and his time, to lay in force the Interdict of Merlin. It was not an act without cost, for a place like this one could not be raised again by any power still known to wizardkind. Nor yet destroyed, for those walls of dark stone would pass unharmed, and perhaps unwarmed, through the heart of a nuclear explosion. It is a pity that nobody knows how to make them anymore.

In the highest of the rising half-circles of the Wizengamot, on the topmost level of dark stone, there is a podium. At that podium stands an old man, with care-lined face and a silver beard that stretches down below his waist; this is Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore. His right hand bears a wand of power, upon his shoulder perches a bird of fire. His left hand holds a short rod, thin and featureless and forged of the same dark stone as the walls, and

this is the Line of Merlin Unbroken, the device of the Chief Warlock. Karen Dutton bequeathed the Line to Albus Dumbledore on the last day of her life, scant hours after he returned half-dead from his defeat of Grindelwald with a phoenix flaming brightly at his side. She in turn received the Line from the perfectionist Nicodemus Capernaum, each wizard passing it to their chosen successor, back and back in unbroken chain to the day Merlin laid down his life. That (if you were wondering) is how the country of magical Britain managed to elect Cornelius Fudge for its Minister, and yet end up with Albus Dumbledore for its Chief Warlock. Not by law (for written law can be rewritten) but by most ancient tradition, the Wizengamot does not choose who shall preside over its follies. Since the day of Merlin's sacrifice, the most important duty of any Chief Warlock has been to exercise the highest caution in their choice of people who are both good and able to discern good successors. You would expect that chain of light to miss a step, sometime down through the centuries; that it would go astray at least once, and then never return. But it has not. The Line of Merlin continues, unbroken.

(Or so say those of Dumbledore's faction. Lord Malfoy would tell you otherwise. And in Asia they tell other tales entirely, which may not make Britain's version wrong.)

Upon the bottommost platform of the Ancient Hall there is a high-backed chair, legged and armed and without cushions, of dark metal rather than dark stone, which Merlin did not place there.

The Ministry building that grew up around this place is wood-paneled and gold-washed, bright and fire-lit, filled with bustling foolishness. This place is different. It is the stone heart of magical Britain, and it is neither gold-washed nor wood-paneled, neither fire-lit nor bright.

Filing solemnly into this room are witches and wizards in plum-colored robes each embroidered with a silver W. They carry themselves with an air of seriousness showing that they are well aware that they are terribly, terribly important. They are meeting in the Most Ancient Hall, after all. They are the Lords and Ladies of the Wizengamot, and they consider themselves the greatest folk of the world's greatest magical country. Lesser folk have fallen before them on bended knee in supplication; they are powerful, they are wealthy, they are noble; are they not great?

Albus Dumbledore knows everyone in this room by name. He has taught many of them, though too few have learned. Some are his allies, some his opponents, the rest he courts within the careful dance of their neutrality. All

of them, to him, are people.

The current Defense Professor of Hogwarts, if you asked him for his opinion of the Lords and Ladies, would say that while many of them are ambitious, few have any ambition. He would observe that the Wizengamot is exactly where someone like that would end up – that it is exactly the sort of opportunity you would grasp, if you had nothing better to do. Such folk are rarely interesting, but they are often useful; pieces to be manipulated, points to be scored, by the true players of the game.

Not among the rising half-circles, but off to one side among a raised arc for the spectators, next to a witch in pointed hat whose face is lined with apprehension, there sits a boy dressed in the most formal black robes that he owns. His eyes are green ice and abstraction, and he hardly glances at the Lords and Ladies as they bustle in. To him they are just a collection of murmuring plum-colored robes to decorate the wooden benches, visual background for the scene of the Most Ancient Hall. If there is an enemy here, or something to be manipulated, it is merely “the Wizengamot”. The wealthy elites of magical Britain have collective force, but not individual agency; their goals are too alien and trivial for them to have personal roles in the tale. As of now, this present time, the boy neither likes nor dislikes the plum-colored robes, because his brain does not assign them enough agenthood to be the subjects of moral judgment. He is a PC, and they are wallpaper.

This view is about to change.



Harry gazed unseeing around the hall of the Wizengamot; it looked quite old and historic and there was no doubt that Hermione could have lectured him about the place for hours on end. The plum-colored robes had stopped arriving, and Harry’s pocketwatch, advancing at the rate of three minutes every half-hour, said that the trial was almost due to start.

Professor McGonagall was sitting beside him, and her eyes never left him for more than twenty consecutive seconds.

Harry had read the Daily Prophet that morning. The headline had been “MAD MUGGLEBORN TRIES TO END ANCIENT LINE” and the rest of the paper had been the same. When Harry was nine years old the IRA had blown up a British barracks, and he’d watched on TV as all the politicians contested to see who could be the most loudly outraged. And the thought had occurred to Harry – even then, before he’d known much about psychology –

that it looked like everyone was competing to see who could be most angry, and nobody would've been allowed to suggest that anyone was being too angry, even if they'd just proposed the saturation nuclear bombing of Ireland. He'd been struck, even then, by an essential emptiness in the indignation of politicians – though he hadn't had the words to describe it, at that age – a sense that they were trying to score cheap points by hitting at the same safe target as everyone else.

Harry had always possessed that sense of hollowness about political indignation, but it was strange how very much more obvious it seemed, when you were reading a dozen articles in the Daily Prophet beating on Hermione Granger.

The leading article, written by some name that Harry didn't recognize, had called for the minimum age for Azkaban to be lowered, just so that the twisted mudblood who had defaced the honor of Scotland with her savage, unprovoked attack upon the last heir of a Most Ancient House within the sacred refuge of Hogwarts could be sent to the Dementors that were the only punishment commensurate with the severity of her unspeakable crime. Only this would be enough to discourage any other foreign, subhuman brutes who similarly believed in their twisted insanity that they could evade the majesty of the Wizengamot's inevitable and merciless scourging of all that threatened the honorable nobility of etcetera etcetera etcetera.

The next article had said the same thing in less eloquent words.

Earlier, Albus Dumbledore had told him,

"I will not try to keep you from this trial." The old wizard's voice quiet and unyielding. "I can well foresee how that would go. But I would have you treat me with equal courtesy in return. The politics of the Wizengamot are delicate, and of them you know nothing. Dare any folly and it shall be to Hermione Granger's cost; and you will remember that folly for the rest of your days, Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres."

"I understand," Harry said. "I know. Just – if you're planning to pull a rabbit out of your hat and save the day at the last minute when everything seems lost, please tell me now instead of letting me sit and worry –"

"I would not do that to you," the old wizard said, a terrible weariness seeming to suffuse him as he turned to go. "Still less to Hermione. But I have no rabbits in my hat, Harry. We can only see what Lucius Malfoy wants."

There was a small sharp rap, a single brief sound that somehow silenced the entire room and caused Harry's head to jerk around and upward. High

above, Dumbledore had just tapped his podium with the dark rod he held in his left hand.

"The ninetieth session of the two-hundred-and-eighth Wizengamot is convened at the request of Lord Lucius Malfoy," the old wizard said tonelessly.

At once, far to the side of the podium but also in the highest circle, rose a tall man with a mane of long white spilling down from his head over the shoulders of his plum-colored robes. "I present a witness for questioning under Veritaserum," Lucius Malfoy said, his cool tone clear throughout the room, smoothly controlled with only a slight undertone of righteous fury. "Let Hermione, the first Granger, be brought forth."

"I ask you all to remember that she is a first-year of Hogwarts," Dumbledore said. "I will brook no abuse of this witness –"

Someone in the benches quite audibly said "Pfah!" and there was a spread of disgusted snorts, even one or two jeers.

Harry stared at the plum-colored robes, his eyes narrowing.

And with the growing anger came something else, a rising sense of disquiet, of something horribly skewed, like reality itself was being disrupted. Harry knew that, somehow, but he couldn't figure out what was awry, or why his mind thought it was getting worse...

"Order!" Dumbledore bellowed. He rapped the stone rod twice against the podium, producing two more small clicks that overrode all noise. "I will have order here!"

The door through which the witness was brought forth was set directly beneath Harry's own seat, so it wasn't until the entire group had emerged fully into the stone hall that Harry saw –

- an Auror trio –
- Hermione's back was to Harry as she was brought out, he couldn't see her face –
- followed by a shining silver sparrow and a running moonlit squirrel –
- and the source of the horrible wrongness, half-hidden beneath a tattered cloak.

Harry shot to his feet before he could even think, it was only Professor McGonagall's sudden frantic grab on his wrist that stopped his hand going for his wand; and the Transfiguration Professor whispered desperately, "Harry it's all right there's a Patronus –"

It took a few seconds for Harry to remember himself. For the part of himself that understood that Hermione hadn't been directly exposed to a

Dementor, to argue his other parts into something like sanity –

But animal Patronuses aren't perfect, said another voice inside his mind. Or Dumbledore wouldn't see the form of a naked man painful to look upon. You felt it approaching, animal Patronus or no...

Slowly, Harry Potter sat back down again as Professor McGonagall pulled down with her grip on his wrist.

But by then he'd already declared war on the country of magical Britain, and the idea of other people calling him a Dark Lord no longer seemed important one way or another.

Hermione's face became visible to him, as she sat down in the chair. She wasn't upright and defiant like she'd been in front of Snape, she wasn't crying like she'd been when the Aurors arrested her. She just sat there with a look of vacant horror as dark metal chains snaked out from the chair and bound her arms and legs.

Harry couldn't take it. Without even thinking he was trying to flee inside himself, flee into his dark side, pull the cold rage over himself like a shield. It took too long, he hadn't tried to go fully into his dark side since Azkaban. And then when his blood was something like cold, he looked up again, and saw Hermione in the chair again, and discovered that his dark side knew nothing about how to deal with this type of pain, it pierced through the coldness like a knife and didn't hurt less in the slightest.

"Why, if it isn't Harry Potter!" came a high, light female voice, sickly sweet and indulgent.

Slowly, Harry turned his head away from the chair and saw a smiling woman wearing so much makeup that her skin looked almost pink, sitting next to a man that Harry recognized from photographs as Minister Cornelius Fudge.

"Did you have something to say, Mr. Potter?" inquired the woman, as cheerfully as if this wasn't a trial.

Other people were also looking at him now.

Harry couldn't speak, all the words in his mind would have been stupid to speak aloud. He couldn't find anything to say that Neville could also have said. Dumbledore had warned Harry that if anyone else wanted the Boy-Who-Lived to speak, he must pretend to be his age –

"The Headmaster said I shouldn't ought to talk," the boy said, not quite able to keep the edge out of his voice.

“Oh, but you have our permission to talk!” the woman said brightly. “I’m sure the Wizengamot is always happy to hear from the Boy-Who-Lived!” Beside her, Minister Cornelius Fudge was nodding.

The woman’s face was puffy and overweight, visibly pale beneath the makeup. Almost inevitably, a certain word came to mind, and that word was toad. Which, said Harry’s logical part, shouldn’t correlate to morality in any way. Only in Disney movies were ugly people more likely to be evil and vice versa; and those movies were probably scripted by writers who’d never been ugly. He’d give her a chance, everyone in this room deserved one chance...

“Because I got rid of the Dark Lord?” the boy said, and pointed at the Dementor where it was hovering behind Hermione’s chair. “There’s something in this room that’s Darker.”

The woman’s face narrowed, growing a little stern. “I realize a young boy like yourself may be scared by them, Mr. Potter, but the Dementors are quite obedient to the Ministry of Magic. And they would, of course, be necessary to guard –”

“A twelve-year-old girl?” the boy yelled. “Those are the Darkest creatures in the whole world, I could feel it coming here even through the Patronus – the wrongness coming nearer – it’s horribly evil and it – it’d eat everyone in this room, if it could! It shouldn’t be let near any child, ever! Not me, not her, not anyone! You ought to vote to send it away!”

“We’ll certainly have no such vote –” the toad-woman snapped.

“That’s enough, Madam Umbridge, Mr. Potter,” came Dumbledore’s stern voice from high above. And then after a short pause, the old wizard went on, “Although, of course, the boy is correct on every count.”

Some of the members of the Wizengamot were looking abashed at the Boy-Who-Lived’s admonition, and a few others were nodding violently to the old wizard’s words. But they were too few. Harry could see it. They were too few.

The Veritaserum was brought in then, and Hermione looked for a brief moment like she was about to sob, she was looking at Harry – no, at Professor McGonagall – and Professor McGonagall was mouthing words that Harry couldn’t make out from his angle. Then Hermione swallowed three drops of Veritaserum and her face grew slack.

“Gawain Robards,” said the smooth voice of Lucius Malfoy. “Your probity is known to all of us. If you would do the honors?”

One of the three Aurors stepped forward.

After the first few questions Harry looked away and stared off to one side with his fingers in his ears, as Hermione's brain played back the contents of the False Memory Charm. He couldn't handle the drug-dulled anguish in Hermione's voice as she recounted the false memories, and his dark side couldn't handle it either, and he'd already heard the contents summarized.

Harry's mind flashed back to another day of horror, and even though Harry had been on the verge of writing off Lord Voldemort's continued existence as the senility of an old wizard, it suddenly seemed horribly and uniquely plausible that the entity who'd Memory-Charmed Hermione was the very same mind that had – made use of – Bellatrix Black. The two events had a certain signature in common. To choose that this should happen, plan for this to happen – it would take more than evil, it would take emptiness.

Harry looked up for a moment, then, and saw that the plum-colored robes were watching, just watching.

Some time later, after all the stars in the night sky had gone cold and dark and the last light in the Universe had sputtered down to embers and gone black, the questioning of Hermione ended.

"If it pleases my Lords," said the voice of Lord Malfoy, "I should like to have the testimony of my son Draco, witnessed under two drops of Veritaserum, read aloud at this time."

Until she went after me in that battle, I wasn't plotting anything against Granger. But after that day I really was feeling insulted, I'd helped her all those times –

The sound that came from Hermione's throat was like she'd just been crushed under a falling stone, so huge that she couldn't cry or breathe, just a small sad gasp.

"Pardon me," said one witch from what seemed to be the Malfoy-aligned side of the room. "But Lord Malfoy, why would your son help this mudblood girl?"

"My son," Lucius Malfoy said in a heavy voice, "seems to have been listening to certain misguided ideas. He is young – and he has learned, now, we have all seen as a country, what such folly brings in repayment."

A few steps down along the visitor's benches, a man wearing a newsman's cap and a badge identifying him as belonging to the Daily Prophet was avidly scribbling with a long quill.

The few people who'd nodded along to Dumbledore earlier had rather sick looks on their faces. One witch in plum-colored robes quite deliberately

stood up from what had seemed like Dumbledore's side of the room, and made her way over toward the Malfoy side.

The Auror went on reading, his voice monotone.

I'd been so tired from casting all those locking wards, I was weak when I cast the last one. I thought I was stronger than Granger but I wasn't certain, so I tested it empirically by challenging her to a duel, that's why I d-d-did it and also because if I'd won I was planning to beat her again the next day where everyone could see. Stupid Veritaserum. But she didn't know about that when she tried to kill me! And I really was insulted by what she'd done, I really had helped her before and I hadn't been planning anything against her then, only she went after me in front of everyone!"

When all the witness testimony was done, the deliberations of the Wizengamot began.

If you could call them that.

It seemed that many members of the Wizengamot were of the strong opinion that murder was bad.

The plum-colored robes on Dumbledore's side of the room were silent, the supposed forces of good saving their political capital for more winnable battles. And Harry could hear, as though Professor Quirrell were standing next to him, a dry voice in his mind; explaining to him that it would hardly have been to the politicians' own advantage to speak, just then.

But there was one wizard in the room whose status was high enough that he had, it seemed, transcended his caution against losing face; one wizard alone whose status was high enough that he could speak a word of sanity and escape unscathed. He alone spoke to defend Hermione, the man with a phoenix flaming bright upon his shoulder.

Only Albus Dumbledore spoke.

The Chief Warlock didn't raise the possibility that Hermione Granger was entirely innocent. That, the Headmaster had explained to Harry, would not be believed, would only make it worse.

But Albus Dumbledore said, in one gentle reminder after another, that the perpetrator was a first-year girl in Hogwarts; that many had done foolish things during their youth; that a first-year in Hogwarts was simply too young to comprehend the consequences of her acts. He himself (the Chief Warlock said quietly) had attempted certain foolish things during his childhood, when he was well older than she.

Albus Dumbledore said that Hermione Granger had been beloved of all

the Hogwarts faculty, and helped four Hufflepuff girls with their Charms homework, and had scored one hundred and three points for Ravenclaw over the course of the school year.

Albus Dumbledore said that nobody who knew Hermione Granger would be anything but shocked by these events. That they had, all of them, heard the horror in her voice as she recounted her testimony. And if some unusual madness had temporarily possessed her, then – his voice rising in stern command – she deserved nothing from them except sympathy and a healer’s attentions.

And at the last, Albus Dumbledore reminded the Wizengamot, over cries of protest, that the charge was attempted murder and not murder. Albus Dumbledore said, over a rising storm of objections, that no lasting harm had come to anyone. And Albus Dumbledore begged them not to do worse themselves than anything that had yet been done –

“Enough!” bellowed Lucius Malfoy, and a show of hands ended the deliberations. The white-maned man stood tall and terrible, his silver cane held high in one hand like a gavel about to fall. “For what this mad woman has tried to do to my son – for the blood debt that she owes for trying to end the line of a Noble and Most Ancient House – I say that she will –”

“Azkaban!” roared a man with a scarred face, seated at Lord Malfoy’s right hand. “Send the mad mudblood to Azkaban!”

“Azkaban!” cried another plum-colored robe, and then another, and another –

A click from the rod in Dumbledore’s hand silenced the room. “You are out of order,” the old wizard said sternly. “And your proposal is barbaric, beneath the dignity of this assembly. There are things we do not do. Lord Malfoy?”

Lucius Malfoy had listened to this with an impassive face. “Well,” Lord Malfoy said after a few moments. A cold gleam lit his eyes. “I had not planned to ask it. But if that is the will of the Wizengamot – then let her pay as any in her place would pay. Let it be Azkaban.”

A great cheer of rage went up –

“Are you all lost?” cried Albus Dumbledore. “She is too young! Her mind would not withstand it! Not in three centuries has such a thing been done in Britain!”

“What will the other countries think of us?” said the sharp voice of a woman that Harry recognized as Neville’s grandmother.

“Will you guard Azkaban after she goes there, Lord Malfoy?” said a stern old witch that Harry didn’t know. “For my Aurors may decline to guard it, I fear, if small children are kept within.”

“The deliberations are ended,” Lucius Malfoy said coldly. “But if you are incapable of finding Aurors who can obey the vote of the Wizengamot, Madam Bones, you may relinquish the position; we can easily find another to serve in your place. The will of this Hall is clear. For the monstrosity of her crimes, the girl is to be tried as an adult and punished accordingly; ten years in Azkaban, the justice for attempted murder.”

When the old wizard spoke again, his voice was lower. “Is there no alternative to this, Lucius? We may retire to my chambers to discuss it, if need be.”

The tall man of the long white hair turned, then, to regard where the old wizard stood at the podium; and the two stared at each other for a long moment.

When Lucius Malfoy spoke again his voice seemed to tremble ever so slightly, as though the stern control on it was failing. “Blood calls for repayment, the blood of my family. Not for any price will I sell the blood debt owed my son. You would not understand that, who never had love or child of your own. Still, there is more than one debt owed to House Malfoy, and I think that my son, if he stood among us, would rather be repaid for his mother’s blood than for his own. Confess your own crime to the Wizengamot, as you confessed it to me, and I shall –”

“Don’t even think about it, Albus,” said the stern old witch who had spoken before.

The old wizard stood at the podium.

The old wizard stood at the podium, his face twisting, untwisting –

“Stop it,” said the old witch. “You know the answer you must give, Albus. It will not change for agonizing over it.”

The old wizard spoke.

“No,” said Albus Dumbledore.

“And you, Malfoy,” continued the stern old witch, “I suppose all you really wanted this whole time was to ruin –”

“Hardly,” said Lucius Malfoy, his lips now twisting into a bitter smile. “No, I have no purpose here but my son’s vengeance. I only wished to show the Wizengamot the truth behind this old man’s pretended heroism and his

praise of that girl – that he would hardly think of sacrificing himself to save her.”

“Cruelty worthy of a Death Eater indeed,” said Augusta Longbottom. “Not that I’m implying anything, of course.”

“Cruelty?” said Lucius Malfoy, the bitter smile still on his face. “I think not. I knew what his answer would be. I have ever warned you that he only plays his pretended part. If you believe in his hesitation, the more fool you. Remember that his answer was the same.” The man raised his voice. “Let us vote, my friends. I think a show of hands will suffice for it. I do not imagine there will be many who choose to align themselves with murderers.” The voice went cold, on the last note, the promise in it very clear.

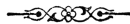
“Look at the girl,” said Albus Dumbledore. “See her, see the horror you are committing! She is –” The old wizard’s voice broke. “She is afraid –”

The Veritaserum must have been wearing off, because Hermione Granger’s face was twisting beneath the slackness, her limbs trembling visibly beneath the chains, as though she were trying to run, run from that chair, but was pressed down by weights larger than the enchanted metal links that bound her. Then there was a convulsive effort and Hermione’s neck moved, her head twisted, enough to bring her eyes into line –

She looked at Harry Potter and though she didn’t speak, it was absolutely clear what she was saying.

Harry
help me
please –

And in the Most Ancient Hall of the Wizengamot an icy voice rang out, speech the color of liquid nitrogen, pitched too high for that it came from too young a throat, and that voice said, “Lucius Malfoy.”



In the ancient and hallowed halls of the Wizengamot, people looked around and it took their eyes too long to find what they sought. It might have been high in pitch, it might have been under-loud for the words being spoken; and yet even so, you wouldn’t have expected to hear that voice from a child.

It wasn’t until Lord Malfoy spoke in return that people even realized where they should be looking.

“Harry Potter,” said Lucius Malfoy. He did not incline his head.

Heads spun, eyes moved, and people focused on the messy-haired young boy standing near the weeping older witch. The boy stood merely chest-high with his shoes on, dressed in short robes of formal black. Though unless your eyes were keen indeed, you couldn't have seen, from all the way across the Hall, that famous and deadly scar beneath his messy hair.

"This folly does not become you, Lucius," said the boy. "Twelve-year-old girls do not go around committing murders. You are a Slytherin and an intelligent one. You know this is a plot. Hermione Granger was placed on this gameboard by force, by whatever hand lies behind that plot. You were surely intended to act just as you are acting now – except that Draco Malfoy was meant to be dead, and you were meant to be beyond all reason. But he is alive and you are sane. Why are you cooperating with your intended role, in a plot meant to take the life of your son?"

A storm seemed to be raging inside Lucius, the face beneath the flowing white hair threatening to crack open and spill something unguessable. The Lord of Malfoy seemed to almost speak once and then twice again, swallowing three unheard sentences before his lips parted for true. "A plot, you say?" Lord Malfoy said at last. His face was twitching, hardly controlled. "And whose plot would that be, then?"

"If I knew," said the boy, "I would have said so a good deal earlier. But anyone who had ever been Hermione Granger's classmate could tell you that she is a most unlikely murderess. She does, in fact, help Hufflepuffs with their homework. This was not a natural event, Lord Malfoy."

"Plot – or no plot –" Lucius's voice was trembling. "This mudblood filth has touched my son and for that I will end her. You should know that full well, Harry Potter."

"It is questionable," the boy said, "to put it mildly, whether Hermione Granger actually cast that Blood-Cooling Charm. I do not know the exact circumstances or what spells were involved, but simple trickery would not have sufficed to make her do it. She did not act of her own will, and perhaps did not act at all. Your vengeance is being misdirected, Lord Malfoy, and deliberately so. It is not a twelve-year-old girl who deserves your ire."

"And what do you care for her fate?" Lucius Malfoy's voice was rising. "What is your stake in this?"

"She is my friend," the boy said, "as Draco is my friend. It is possible that this blow was aimed at me, and not at House Malfoy at all."

Again the muscles jumped in Lucius's face. "And now you are lying to

me – as you lied to my son!”

“Believe it or not,” the boy said quietly, “I never willed anything but that Draco should know the truth –”

“Enough!” cried the Lord Malfoy. “Enough of your lies! Enough of your games! You do not understand – you would never understand – what it means that he is my son! I will not be denied this vengeance! No more! Never again! For the blood this girl owes House Malfoy, she shall go to Azkaban. And if I ever find another hand at work – even if it is your own – that hand shall be cut off as well!” Lucius Malfoy raised his deadly silver cane as though in command, his teeth clenched and his lips drawn back in a snarl, like a wolf facing a dragon. “And if you have nothing better to say than that – be silent, Harry Potter!”



Harry’s blood was hammering even beneath the ice of his dark side, the fear for Hermione, the part of him that wanted to lash out at Lucius and destroy him where he stood for his insolence and his stupidity – but Harry didn’t have the power, he didn’t even have a single vote in the Wizengamot –

Draco had said that Lucius was scared of him, for some unknown reason. And Harry could see it in the rictus that Lord Malfoy’s face had become, drawn and tight, that it was taking all his courage for him to tell Harry to shut up.

So Harry said, his voice cool and deadly, hoping to hell that it meant something, “You will earn my enmity if you do this thing, Lucius...”

Someone in the lower rows of what was evidently the blood-purist side of the Wizengamot, who was looking down at the young boy rather than up at Lord Malfoy, laughed in outright incredulity. Other plum-colored robes began to laugh as well.

Lord Malfoy gazed at him with hard dignity, as that laughter spread. “If you want the enmity of the House of Malfoy, you shall have it, child.”

“Now really,” said the woman in too much pink makeup, “I think this has gone on quite long enough, wouldn’t you say, Lord Malfoy? The boy will miss his classes.”

“Indeed he will,” said Lucius Malfoy, and then raised his voice again. “I call the vote! By show of hands, let the Wizengamot acknowledge the blood debt owed to the Noble and Most Ancient House of Malfoy, for the attempted murder of its last scion and ending of its line, by Hermione, the first Granger!”

Hands shot up one after another, and the secretary who sat in the bottom circle began to make marks on parchment to tally them, but it was obvious which way the majority had gone.

And Harry screamed inside his mind, a frantic call for help to any part of himself that would offer a way out, a strategy, an idea. But there was nothing, there was nothing, he'd played his last cards and lost. And then with a last convulsive desperation Harry plunged himself into his dark side, pushed himself into his dark side, seizing at its deadly clarity, offering his dark side anything if it would only solve this problem for him; and at last the lethal calm came over him, the true ice finally answering his call. Beyond all panic and despair his mind began to search through every fact in its possession, recall everything it knew about Lucius Malfoy, about the Wizengamot, about the laws of magical Britain; his eyes looked at the rows of chairs, at every person and every thing within range of his vision, searching for any opportunity it could grasp –

TABOO TRADEOFFS, PART III

IN rising half-circles of dark stone, a great sea of upraised hands. The Lords and Ladies of the Wizengamot, in plum-colored robes marked with a silver 'W', stared down in stern rebuke at a young girl trembling in chains. If they had, in any particular ethical system, damned themselves, they clearly thought quite highly of themselves for having done so.

Harry's breath was trembling in his chest. His dark side had come up with a plan – and then rotated itself back out again because speaking too icily would not be to Hermione's advantage; a fact which the only-half-cold Harry had somehow not realized...

"The vote carries, in favor," intoned the secretary, when all the tallying was done, and the upraised hands fell back down. "The Wizengamot recognizes the blood debt owed by Hermione Granger to House Malfoy for the attempted murder of its scion and ending of its line."

Lucius Malfoy was smiling in grim satisfaction. "And now," said the white-maned wizard, "I say that her debt shall be paid –"

Harry clenched his fists beneath the bench and shouted, "By the debt owed from House Malfoy to House Potter!"

"Silence!" snapped the woman in too much pink makeup sitting next to Minister Fudge. "You've disrupted these proceedings quite enough already! Aurors, escort him out!"

"Wait," said Augusta Longbottom from the top tier of seats. "What debt is this?"

Lucius's hands whitened on his cane. "House Malfoy owes no debt to you!"

It wasn't the world's most solid hope, it was based on one newspaper article from a woman who'd been False-Memory-Charmed, but Rita Skeeter had seemed to find it plausible, that Mr. Weasley had allegedly owed James Potter a debt because...

"I'm surprised you've forgotten," Harry said evenly. "Surely it was a cruel and painful period of your life, laboring under the Imperius curse of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, until you were freed of it by the efforts of

House Potter. By my mother, Lily Potter, who died for it, and by my father, James Potter, who died for it, and by me, of course.”

There was a brief silence within the Most Ancient Hall.

“Why, what an excellent point, Mr. Potter,” said the old witch who’d been identified as Madam Bones. “I, too, am quite surprised that Lord Malfoy would forget such a significant event. It must have been such a happy day for him.”

“Yes,” said Augusta Longbottom. “He must have been so grateful.”

Madam Bones nodded. “House Malfoy could not possibly deny that debt – unless, perhaps, Lord Malfoy is to tell us that he has misremembered something? I should take quite a professional interest in that. We are always trying to improve our picture of those dark days.”

Lucius Malfoy’s hands gripped the silver snake-handle of his cane like he was about to strike with it, unleash whatever power it kept –

Then the Lord Malfoy seemed to relax, and a chill smile came over his face. “Of course,” he said easily. “I do confess I had not understood, but the child is quite correct. But I do not quite think the two debts cancel – House Potter was only trying to save itself, after all –”

“Not so,” Dumbledore said from above.

“– and therefore,” intoned Lucius Malfoy, “I demand monetary compensation as well, for the redemption of the blood debt owed my son. That, too, is the law.”

Harry felt a strange inward flinch. That had also been in the newspaper article, Mr. Weasley had demanded an additional ten thousand Galleons –

“How much?” said the Boy-Who-Lived.

Lucius was still wearing the cold smile. “One hundred thousand Galleons. If you have not that much in your vault, I suppose I must accept a promissory note for the remainder.”

A roar of protest went up from Dumbledore’s side of the room, even some of the plum-colored robes in the middle looked shocked.

“Shall we put it to vote of the Wizengamot?” said Lucius Malfoy. “I think few of us would like to see the little murderess go free. By a show of hands, that additional compensation of one hundred thousand Galleons would be required to cancel the debt!”

The clerk began tallying, but that vote was also clear.

Harry stood there, breathing deeply.

You'd better not even have to think about this, Harry's inner Gryffindor said threateningly.

It's a major purchase, observed Ravenclaw. We ought to spend a lot of time thinking about it.

It shouldn't have been hard. It shouldn't have. Two million pounds was only money, and money was only worth what it could buy...

It was strange how much psychological attachment you could have to 'only money', or how painful it could be to imagine losing a bank vault full of gold that you hadn't even imagined existed just one year earlier.

Kimball Kinnison wouldn't hesitate, said Gryffindor. Seriously. Like, snap decision. What sort of hero are you? I already hate you just for having to think about it for longer than 50 milliseconds.

This is real life, said Ravenclaw. Losing all your money is a lot more painful for real people in real life than in heroic books.

What? demanded Gryffindor. Whose side are you on?

I wasn't advocating for a particular answer, said Ravenclaw, I was just saying it because it was true.

Could a hundred thousand Galleons be used to save more than one life if spent some other way? said Slytherin. We have research to do, battles to fight, the difference between being 40,000 Galleons rich and being 60,000 Galleons in debt is not trivial –

So we'll just use one of our ways to make money fast and earn it all back, said Hufflepuff.

It's not certain those will work, said Slytherin, and a lot of them require starting cash –

Personally, said Gryffindor, I vote that we save Hermione and then gang up and kill our inner Slytherin.

The clerk's voice said that the tally had been recorded and the vote had passed...

Harry's lips opened.

"I accept your offer," said Harry's lips, without any hesitation, without any decision having been made; just as if the internal debate had been pretense and illusion, the true controller of the voice having been no part of it.

It was clear that Lucius Malfoy had not been expecting that reply.

The Lord Malfoy's mask of calm shattered, his eyes widened, he stared at Harry in sheer blank astonishment. His mouth had opened slightly, though

he wasn't speaking, and if he was making any peculiar noises it couldn't be heard over the roar of simultaneous gasps from the Wizengamot –

A tap of stone silenced the crowd.

"No," said the voice of Dumbledore.

Harry's head jerked around to stare at the ancient wizard.

Dumbledore's lined face was pale, the silver beard was visibly trembling, he looked like he was in the final throes of a terminal illness. "I'm – sorry, Harry – but this choice is not yours – for I am still the guardian of your vault."

"What?" said Harry, too shocked to compose his reply.

"I cannot let you go into debt to Lucius Malfoy, Harry! I cannot! You do not know – you do not realize –"

DIE.

Harry didn't even know which part of himself had spoken, it might have been a unanimous vote, the pure rage and fury pouring through him. For an instant he thought that the sheer force of the anger might take magical wing and fly out to strike the Headmaster, send him tumbling back dead from the podium –

But when that mental voice had spoken, the old wizard was still standing there, gazing at Harry, long dark wand in his right hand, short black rod in his left.

And Harry's eyes also went to the red-golden bird with its claws resting on the shoulder of Dumbledore's black robes, silent when no phoenix should have been silent. "Fawkes," Harry said, his voice sounding strange in his own ears, "can you scream at him for me?"

The fiery bird on the old wizard's shoulder didn't scream. Maybe the Wizengamot had demanded that a spell of silence be put on the creature, otherwise it probably would have been screaming the whole time. But Fawkes hit his master, one golden wing buffeting the old wizard's head.

"I cannot, Harry!" the old wizard said, the agony clear in his voice. "I am doing as I must do!"

And Harry knew, then, as he looked at the red-golden bird, what he had to do as well. It should have been obvious from the beginning, that solution.

"Then I too will do what I must," Harry said up to Dumbledore, as though the two of them stood alone in the room. "You do realize that, don't you?"

The old wizard shook his trembling head. "You will change your mind when you are older –"

"I'm not talking about that," Harry said, his voice still strange in his own ears. "I mean that I will not allow Hermione Granger to be eaten by Dementors under any circumstances. Period. Regardless of what any law says, and no matter what I have to do to stop it. Do I still need to spell it out?"

A strange male voice spoke from somewhere far away, "Be sure that the girl is taken directly to Azkaban, and put under extra guard."

Harry waited, staring at the old wizard, and then spoke again. "I will go to Azkaban," Harry said to the old wizard, as though they stood alone in the world, "before Hermione can be taken there, and start snapping my fingers. It may cost me my life, but by the time she gets there, there won't be an Azkaban anymore."

Some members of the Wizengamot gasped in surprise.

Then a greater number started laughing.

"How would you even get there, little boy?" someone said, from among those who were laughing.

"I have my ways of going places," said the boy's distant voice. Harry kept his eyes on Dumbledore, on the old wizard staring at him in shock. Harry didn't look directly at Fawkes, didn't give his plan away; but in his mind he prepared to summon the phoenix to transport him, prepared to fill his mind with light and fury, to call for the fire-bird with all his might, he might have to do it upon the instant if Dumbledore pointed his wand –

"Would you truly?" the old wizard said to Harry, also as if the two of them stood alone in the room.

The room went silent again as everyone stared in shock at the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, who seemed to be taking the mad threat completely seriously.

The old wizard's eyes were locked only on Harry. "Would you risk everything – everything – only for her?"

"Yes," Harry said back in reply.

That's the wrong answer, you know, said Slytherin. Seriously.

But it's the true answer.

"You will not see reason?" said the old wizard.

"Apparently not," Harry said back.

The gazes stayed locked.

"This is terrible folly," said the old wizard.

"I am aware of this," answered the hero. "Now get out of my way."

Strange light glinted in the ancient blue eyes. "As you will, Harry Potter, but know that this is not over."

The rest of the world faded back into existence.

"I withdraw my objection," said the old wizard, "Harry Potter may do as he wishes," and the Wizengamot exploded in a roar of shock, only to be silenced by a final tap of the stone rod.

Harry turned his head back to look at Lord Malfoy, who looked like he'd seen a cat turn into a person and start eating other cats. To call the look confused did not begin to describe it.

"You would truly..." Lucius Malfoy said slowly. "You would truly pay a hundred thousand Galleons, to save one mudblood girl."

"I think there's about forty thousand in my Gringotts vault," Harry said. It was strange how that was still causing more internal pain than the thought of taking an over-fifty-percent risk to his life to destroy Azkaban. "As for the other sixty thousand – what are the rules, exactly?"

"It comes due when you graduate Hogwarts," the old wizard said from high above. "But Lord Malfoy has certain rights over you before then, I fear."

Lucius Malfoy stood motionless, frowning down at Harry. "Who is she to you, then? What is she to you, that you would pay so much to keep her from harm?"

"My friend," the boy said quietly.

Lucius Malfoy's eyes narrowed. "By the report I received, you cannot cast the Patronus Charm, and Dumbledore knows this. The power of a single Dementor nearly killed you. You would not dare venture near Azkaban in your own person –"

"That was in January," said Harry. "This is April."

Lucius Malfoy's eyes remained cool and calculating. "You pretend you can destroy Azkaban, and Dumbledore pretends to believe it."

Harry did not reply.

The white-haired man turned slightly, toward the center of the half-circle, as though to address the greater Wizengamot. "I withdraw my offer!" shouted the Lord of Malfoy. "I will not accept the debt to House Potter in payment, not even for a hundred thousand Galleons! The girl's blood debt to House Malfoy stands!"

Again the roar of many voices. "Dishonorable!" someone cried. "You acknowledge the debt to House Potter, and yet you would –" and then that voice cut off.

"I acknowledge the debt, but the law does not strictly oblige me to accept it in cancellation," said Lord Malfoy with a grim smile. "The girl is no part of House Potter; the debt I owe House Potter is no debt to her. As for the dishonor –" Lucius Malfoy paused. "As for the grave shame I feel at my ingratitude toward the Potters, who have done so much for me –" Lucius Malfoy bowed his head. "May my ancestors forgive me."

"Well, boy?" called the scarred man sitting at Lord Malfoy's right hand. "Go and destroy Azkaban, then!"

"I'd like to see that," said another voice. "Will you be selling tickets?"

It went without saying that Harry didn't pick this particular moment to give up.

The girl is no part of House Potter –

He had, in fact, seen the obvious way out of the dilemma almost instantly.

It might have taken him longer if he hadn't recently overheard a number of conversations between older Ravenclaw girls, and read a certain number of Quibbler stories.

He was, nonetheless, having trouble accepting it.

This is ridiculous, said a part of Harry which had just dubbed itself the Internal Consistency Checker. Our actions here are completely incoherent. First you feel less emotional reluctance to risk your bloody LIFE and probably DIE for Hermione, than to part with a stupid heap of gold. And now you're balking just at getting married?

SYSTEM ERROR.

You know what? said Internal Consistency Checker. You're stupid.

I didn't say no, thought Harry. I was just saying SYSTEM ERROR.

I vote for destroying Azkaban, said Gryffindor. It needs to be done anyway.

Really, really stupid, said Internal Consistency Checker. Oh, screw this, I'm assuming control of our body.

The boy took a deep breath, and opened his mouth –

By this point Harry Potter had entirely forgotten the existence of Professor McGonagall, who had been sitting there this whole time undergoing a number of interesting changes of facial expression which Harry had not been looking at because he was distracted. It would have been overly harsh to say that Harry had forgotten her because he did not consider her a PC. It could be more kindly said that Professor McGonagall was not visibly a solution to any of his current problems, and therefore she was not part of the universe.

So Harry, who at this point had a fair amount of adrenaline in his bloodstream, startled and jumped quite visibly when Professor McGonagall, her eyes now blazing with impossible hope and the tears on her cheek half-dried, leapt to her feet and cried, "With me, Mr. Potter!" and, without waiting for a reply, tore down the stairs that led to the bottom platform where waited a chair of dark metal.

It took a moment, but Harry ran after; though it took him longer to reach the bottom, after Professor McGonagall vaulted half the stairs with a strange catlike motion and landed with the astonished-looking Auror trio already pointing their wands at her.

"Miss Granger!" cried Professor McGonagall. "Can you speak yet?"

Much as with Professor McGonagall, there was a certain sense in which it could be said that Harry had forgotten about the existence of Hermione Granger, because Harry had been tilting his neck back to look upward rather than downward, and because he hadn't considered her a solution to any of his current problems. Though it was hardly certain, in fact it wasn't at all probable, that Harry remembering to look at Hermione or think about what she must be feeling, would have helped anything in the slightest.

Harry reached the bottom of the stairs and saw Hermione Granger full on –

Without thinking, without being able to help himself, Harry shut his eyes, but he'd seen.

Her school robes around her neck, soaked all the way through with tears.

The way she'd been looking away from him.

And the eye of memory and sympathy, which could not be shut, which could not look away, knew that Hermione had recounted the worst shame of her life in front of the nobility of magical Britain and Professor McGonagall and Dumbledore and Harry; and then been sentenced to Azkaban where she would be exposed to darkness and cold and all her worst memories until she went mad and died; and then she'd heard that Harry was going to give away all his money and go into debt to save her, and maybe even sacrifice his life

and with the Dementor standing only a few paces behind her

she hadn't said anything...

"Y-yes," whispered the voice of Hermione Granger. "I c-can talk."

Harry opened his eyes again and saw her face, now looking at him. It didn't say anything like what he thought Hermione was feeling, faces couldn't

say anything that complicated, all facial muscles could do was contort themselves into knots.

"H-H-Harry, I-I'm so, I'm so –"

"Shut up," Harry suggested.

"s-s-sorry –"

"If you'd never met me on the train you wouldn't be in any trouble right now. So shut up," said Harry Potter.

"Both of you stop being silly," Professor McGonagall said in her firm Scottish accent (it was strange how much that helped). "Mr. Potter, hold out your wand so that Miss Granger's fingers can touch it. Miss Granger, repeat after me. Upon my life and magic –"

Harry did as he was bid, thrusting his wand forward to touch Hermione's fingers; and then Hermione's faltering voice said, "Upon my life and magic –"

"I swear service to the House of Potter –" said Professor McGonagall.

And Hermione, without waiting for any further instructions, said, the words spilling out of her in a rush, "I swear service to the House of Potter, to obey its Master or Mistress, and stand at their right hand, and fight at their command, and follow where they go, until the day I die."

All those words had been blurted out in a desperate gasp before Harry could have thought or said anything, if he'd been mad enough to interrupt.

"Mr. Potter, repeat these words," said Professor McGonagall. "I, Harry, heir and last scion of the Potters, accept your service, until the end of the world and its magic."

Harry took a breath and said, "I, Harry, heir and last scion of the Potters, accept your service, until the end of the world and its magic."

"That's it," said Professor McGonagall. "Well done."

Harry looked up, and saw that the entire Wizengamot, whose existence he'd forgotten, was staring at them.

And then Minerva McGonagall, who was Head of House Gryffindor even if she didn't always act like it, looked up high above at where Lucius Malfoy stood; and she said to him before the entire Wizengamot, "I regret every point I ever gave you in Transfiguration, you vile little worm."

Whatever Lucius was about to say in reply was silenced by a tap of the short rod in Dumbledore's hand. "Ahem!" said the old wizard from his podium of dark stone. "This session has carried on quite considerably, and if it is not dismissed soon, some of us may miss their entire luncheon. The law

of this matter is clear. You have already voted on the terms of the bargain, and Lord Malfoy cannot legally decline it. As we have far exceeded our allotted time, I now, in accordance with the last decision of the survivors of the eighty-eighth Wizengamot, adjourn this session."

The old wizard tapped the rod of dark stone three times.

"You fools!" shouted Lucius Malfoy. The white hair was shaking as though in a wind, the face beneath was pale with fury. "Do you think you'll get away with what you've done today? Do you think that girl can try to murder my son and escape unscathed?"

The toad-like pink-makeup woman, whose name Harry could no longer remember, was standing up from her seat. "Why, of course not," she said with a sickening smile. "After all, the girl is still a murderess, and I think the Ministry shall be watching her affairs quite closely – it hardly seems wise that she should be allowed to wander the streets, after all –"

Harry was fed up at this point.

Without waiting to listen, Harry turned on his heel and strode forward in long steps toward –

The horror only he could truly see, the absence of color and space, the wound in the world, above which floated a tattered cloak; most imperfectly guarded by a running moonlit squirrel and fluttering silver sparrow.

His dark side had also noticed, when it was looking through the entire room for anything that could possibly be used as a weapon, that the enemy had been foolish enough to bring a Dementor into Harry's presence. That was a powerful weapon indeed, and one that Harry might wield better than its supposed masters. There had been a time in Azkaban when Harry had told twelve Dementors to turn and go, and they had gone.

The Dementors are Death, and the Patronus Charm works by thinking about happy thoughts instead of Death.

If Harry's theory was correct, that one sentence would be all it took to pop the Aurors' Patronus Charms like a soap bubble, and ensure that nobody within reach of his voice could cast another one.

I am going to cancel the Patronus Charms and prevent any more Patronuses from being cast. And then my Dementor, flying faster than any broomstick, is going to Kiss everyone here who voted to send a twelve-year-old girl to Azkaban.

Say that, to set up the if-then expectation, and wait for people to understand and laugh. Then speak the fatal truth; and when the Aurors' Patronuses

winked out to prove the point, either people's anticipations of the mindless void, or Harry's threat of its destruction, would make the Dementor obey. Those who had sought to compromise with the darkness would be consumed by it.

It was the other solution his dark side had devised.

Ignoring the gasps rising from behind him, Harry crossed the radius of the Patronuses, strode to a single pace from Death. Its unhindered fear burst around him like a whirlpool, like stepping next to the sucking drain of some huge bathtub emptying out its water; but with the false Patronuses no longer obscuring the level on which they interacted, Harry could reach the Dementor even as it could reach him. Harry looked straight into the pulling vacuum and –

the Earth among the stars

all his triumph at saving Hermione

someday the reality of which you are a shadow will cease to exist

Harry took all the silver emotion that fueled his Patronus Charm and shoved it at the Dementor; and expected Death's shadow to flee from him –

– and as Harry did that, he flung his hands up and shouted "BOO!"

The void retreated sharply away from Harry until it came up against the dark stone behind.

In the hall there was a deathly silence.

Harry turned his back on the empty void, and looked up at where the toad-woman stood. She was pale beneath the pink makeup, her mouth opening and closing like a fish.

"I make you this one offer," said the Boy-Who-Lived. "I never learn that you've been interfering with me or any of mine. And you never find out why the unkillable soul-eating monster is scared of me. Now sit down and shut up."

The toad-woman fell back down to her bench without a word.

Harry looked further up.

"A riddle, Lord Malfoy!" the Boy-Who-Lived shouted across the Most Ancient Hall. "I know you weren't in Ravenclaw, but try to answer this one anyway! What destroys Dark Lords, frightens Dementors, and owes you sixty thousand Galleons?"

For an instant Lord Malfoy stood there with eyes slightly widened; then his face fell back into calm scorn, and his voice spoke coolly in reply. "Are you openly threatening me, Mr. Potter?"

"I'm not threatening you," said the Boy-Who-Lived. "I'm scaring you. There's a difference."

"Enough, Mr. Potter," said Professor McGonagall. "We shall be late for afternoon Transfiguration as it is. And do come back here, you're still terrifying that poor Dementor." She turned to the Aurors. "Mr. Kleiner, if you would!"

Harry strode back to them, as the Auror addressed moved forward and pressed a short rod of dark metal to the dark metal chair, muttering an inaudible word of dismissal.

The chains slithered back as smoothly as they had come forth; and Hermione pushed herself out of the chair as fast as she could, and half-ran and half-staggered forward a few steps.

Harry held out his arms –

– and Hermione half-jumped half-fell into Professor McGonagall's arms, beginning to sob hysterically.

Hmpfh, said a voice inside Harry. I kind of thought we'd earned that one ourselves.

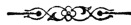
Oh, shut up.

Professor McGonagall was holding Hermione so firmly that you might have thought it was a mother holding her daughter, or maybe granddaughter. After a few moments Hermione's sobs slowed, and then stopped. Professor McGonagall suddenly shifted her stance and grabbed onto her more tightly; the girl's hands were dangling limply, now, and her eyes were closed –

"She'll be fine, Mr. Potter," Professor McGonagall said softly in Harry's direction, without looking at him. "She just needs a few hours in one of Madam Pomfrey's beds."

"All right, then," Harry said. "Let's get her to Madam Pomfrey's."

"Yes," said Dumbledore, as he descended to the bottom of the dark stone stairs. "Let us all go home, indeed." His blue eyes were locked on Harry, as hard as sapphires.



The Lords and Ladies of the Wizengamot are departing their wooden benches, leaving as they came, looking rather nervous.

The vast majority are thinking "The Dementor was frightened of the Boy-Who-Lived!"

Some of the shrewder ones are already wondering how this will affect the delicate power balance of the Wizengamot – if a new piece has appeared upon the gameboard.

Almost none are thinking anything along the lines of ‘I wonder how he did that.’

This is the truth of the Wizengamot: Many are nobles, many are wealthy magnates of business, a few came by their status in other ways. Some of them are stupid. Most are shrewd in the realms of business and politics, but their shrewdness is circumscribed. Almost none have walked the path of a powerful wizard. They have not read through ancient books, scrutinized old scrolls, searching for truths too powerful to walk openly and disguised in conundrums, hunting for true magic among a hundred fantastic fairy tales. When they are not looking at a contract of debt, they abandon what shrewdness they possess and relax with some comfortable nonsense. They believe in the Deathly Hallows, but they also believe that Merlin fought the dread Totoro and imprisoned the Ree. They know (because that too is part of the standard legend) that a powerful wizard must learn to distinguish the truth among a hundred plausible lies. But it has not occurred to them that they might do the same.

(Why not? Why, indeed, would wizards with enough status and wealth to turn their hands to almost any endeavor, choose to spend their lives fighting over lucrative monopolies on ink importation? The Headmaster of Hogwarts would hardly see the question; of course most people should not be powerful wizards, just as most people should not be heroes. The Defense Professor could explain at great and cynical length why their ambitions are so trivial; to him, too, there is no puzzle. Only Harry Potter, for all the books he has read, is unable to understand; to the Boy-Who-Lived the life choices of the Lords and Ladies seem incomprehensible – not what a good person would do, nor yet an evil person either. Now which of the three is most wise?)

For whatever reason, then, most of the Wizengamot has never walked the path that leads to powerful wizardry; they do not seek out what is hidden. For them, there is no why. There is no explanation. There is no causality. The Boy-Who-Lived, who was already halfway into the magisterium of legend, has now been promoted all the way there; and it is a brute fact, simple and unexplained, that the Boy-Who-Lived frightens Dementors. Ten years earlier they were told that a one-year-old boy defeated the most terrible Dark Lord of their generation, perhaps the most evil Dark Lord ever to live; and they

just accepted that too.

You are not meant to question that sort of thing (they know in some unspoken way). If the most terrible Dark Lord in history, confronts an innocent baby – why, how could he not be vanquished? The rhythm of the play demands it. You are supposed to applaud, not stand up from your seat in the audience and say ‘Why?’ It is just the story’s conceit, that in the end the Dark Lord is brought down by a little child; and if you are going to question that, you might as well not attend the play in the first place.

It does not occur to them to second-guess the application of such reasoning to the events they have seen with their own eyes in the Most Ancient Hall. Indeed, they are not consciously aware that they are using story-reasoning on real life. As for scrutinizing the Boy-Who-Lived with the same careful logic they would use on a political alliance or a business arrangement – what brain would associate to that, when a part of the legendary magisterium is at hand?

But there are a very few, seated on those wooden benches, who do not think like this.

There are a certain few of the Wizengamot who have read through half-disintegrated scrolls and listened to tales of things that happened to someone’s brother’s cousin, not for entertainment, but as part of a quest for power and truth. They have already marked the Night of Godric’s Hollow, as reported by Albus Dumbledore, as an anomalous and potentially important event. They have wondered why it happened, if it did happen; or if not, why Dumbledore is lying.

And when an eleven-year-old boy rises up and says “Lucius Malfoy” in that cold adult voice, and goes on to speak words one simply would not expect to hear from a first-year in Hogwarts, they do not allow the fact to slip into the lawless blurs of legends and the premises of plays.

They mark it as a clue.

They add it to the list.

This list is beginning to look somewhat alarming.

It doesn’t particularly help when the boy yells “BOO!” at a Dementor and the decaying corpse presses itself flat against the opposite wall and its horrible ear-hurting voice rasps, “Make him go away.”

TABOO TRADEOFFS, FINAL

PHOENIX travel was a sensation entirely unlike Apparition or portkeys. You caught on fire – you definitely felt yourself catching on fire, even though there was no pain – and instead of burning to ashes, the fire burned all the way through you and you became fire, and then you went out in one place and blazed up in another. It didn't sicken the stomach like portkeys or Apparition, but it was a rather unnerving experience nonetheless. If the underlying truth of phoenix travel really was becoming a specific instantiation of a more general Fire, then that seemed to hint you could potentially burn anywhere – even in the distant past, or in another universe, or in two places at once. You might go out in one place and blaze up in a hundred others, and the you who arrived at Hogwarts would never know the difference. Though Harry had read what he could about phoenixes, trying to figure out how to get one of his own, and there'd been no hint of anything remotely like that capability.

Harry caught fire and went out and blazed up somewhere else; and just like that he, and the Headmaster, and the unconscious form of Hermione Granger held in the Headmaster's arms, were occupying another place; with Fawkes above them all. A calm, warm room of bright stone columns, skylit on all four sides, populated by white beds in long rows, four of which had silencing veils drawn around them, and the rest empty.

In one corner of Harry's vision, a surprised-looking Madam Pomfrey was turning toward them. Dumbledore seemed to pay the senior healer no heed, as he carefully laid down Hermione on an unoccupied white bed.

From a distant corner there was a flash of green, and from out of a fireplace strode Professor McGonagall, brushing herself off slightly from the Floo ashes.

The old wizard turned from the bed and reached one of his arms around Harry again; and then the Boy-Who-Lived and his wizard vanished in another burst of fire.



When Harry had fully lit up again he was standing in the Headmaster's office, amid the noises of a dozen dozen inexplicable gadgets.

The young boy took a step away from the old wizard and then turned on him, emerald and sapphire eyes meeting.

The two of them did not speak for a time, looking at each other; as though all they had to speak could be said only by stares, and not said in any other way.

In time the boy enunciated words slowly and precisely.

"I cannot believe that a phoenix is still upon your shoulder."

"The phoenix chooses but once," said the old wizard. "They might perhaps leave a master who chooses evil over good; they will not leave a master forced to choose between one good and another. Phoenixes are not arrogant. They know the limits of their own wisdom." Stern indeed, that ancient gaze. "Unlike you, Harry."

"Choose between one good and another," Harry echoed flatly. "Like Hermione Granger's life, versus a hundred thousand Galleons." The rage and indignation Harry wanted to put into his voice wasn't quite there, for some reason, maybe because –

"You are hardly in a position to speak to me of that, Harry Potter." The Headmaster's voice was deceptively soft. "Or what was that look of reluctance that I saw upon your face, there in the Most Ancient Hall?"

The sense of inward hollowness grew worse. "I was looking for other alternatives," Harry bit out. "Some way to save her that didn't lose the money."

Wow, said Ravenclaw. You just told an outright lie. Not only that, I think you actually believed it for the seconds it took to say it. That's kinda scary.

"Is that what you were thinking, Harry?" The blue eyes were keen, and there was a terrifying moment when Harry wondered if the world's most powerful wizard could see right past his Occlumency barriers.

"Yes," Harry said, "I flinched away from the pain of losing all the money in my vault. But I did it! That's what counts! And you –" The indignation that had faltered out of Harry's voice returned. "You actually put a price on Hermione Granger's life, and you put it below a hundred thousand Galleons!"

"Oh?" the old wizard said softly. "And what price do you put on her life, then? A million Galleons?"

"Are you familiar with the economic concept of 'replacement value'?" The words were spilling from Harry's lips almost faster than he could consider

them. "Hermione's replacement value is infinite! There's nowhere I can go to buy another one!"

Now you're just talking mathematical nonsense, said Slytherin. Ravenclaw, back me up here?

"Is Minerva's life also of infinite worth?" the old wizard said harshly. "Would you sacrifice Minerva to save Hermione?"

"Yes and yes," Harry snapped. "That's part of Professor McGonagall's job and she knows it."

"Then Minerva's value is not infinite," said the old wizard, "for all that she is loved. There can only be one king upon a chessboard, Harry Potter, only one piece that you will sacrifice any other piece to save. And Hermione Granger is not that piece. Make no mistake, Harry Potter, this day you may well have lost your war."

And if the old wizard's words hadn't hit quite so hard, and quite so close to home, Harry might not have said what he said then.

"Lucius was right," Harry ground out. "You never had a wife, you never had a daughter, you've never had anything but war –"

The old wizard's left hand closed hard upon Harry's wrist, bony fingers digging into the still-developing muscle of Harry's arm, and for a moment Harry was paralyzed with the shock of it, he had forgotten what it meant that adults were stronger.

Albus Dumbledore did not seem to notice. He only turned, dragging Harry with him, and moved forward in hard steps toward the wall of the room.

"Phoenix's price."

Harry was pulled up along the black stairs.

"Phoenix's fate."

The room of black pedestals, silver light falling on shattered wands.

"You think," yelled Harry, after his lips unlocked, "that you can win any argument, just by standing here?"

The old wizard ignored him, dragging Harry across the room. His right hand, no longer holding his wand, grabbed up a vial of silver fluid –

Harry blinked in shock; the vial of silver fluid had been standing next to a picture of Dumbledore, or so it had appeared to Harry in the brief moment before he was dragged past.

Past the end of all the pedestals, at the farthest part of the room, rose a great stone basin with runes carved into it that Harry didn't recognize. The

center was a shallow depression filled with transparent liquid, and into this the old wizard dumped the canister of silver fluid, which at once began to spread out, to swirl, to set the entire basin glowing eerie white.

The old wizard's hand let go of Harry's arm and gestured to the glowing basin, commanding harshly, "Look!"

As requested, Harry stared at the glowing water.

"Put your head into the Pensieve, Harry Potter." The old wizard's voice was stern.

Harry had heard that word before, but he couldn't remember where. "What – does this do –"

"Memories," the old wizard said. "You will see my memory. My oath that it is safe. Now look into the Pensieve, Ravenclaw, if you still care anything at all for your precious truth!"

That was a request that Harry could not deny, and he stepped forward and thrust his head into the glowing water.



Harry was sitting behind the desk in the Headmaster's office of Hogwarts, and his wrinkled hands that clutched at his head were spotted with age and white hairs.

"He is all that I have!" wept a voice, very strange was Dumbledore's voice as Dumbledore himself remembered it, from the inside it seemed far less stern and wise. "The last of my family! All that I have left!"

No emotion had been allowed to pass through the Pensieve, only the physical sensation of seeming to speak the words. Harry heard the utter desolation in Dumbledore's words, the sounds that seemed to come from Harry's own throat, but Harry did not feel it beyond the hearing.

"You've got no choice," said a harsh voice.

The eyes moved, the field of vision jumped to a man that Harry didn't recognize, in clothing tinged with Auror crimson but made of solid leather with many pockets.

His right eye was overlarge, with an electric-blue pupil that constantly darted and moved.

"You cannot ask this of me, Alastor!" Dumbledore's voice was wild. "Not this! Anything but this!"

"I'm not asking," growled the man. "Voldie's the one who's asking, and you're going to tell him no."

"For money, Alastor?" Dumbledore's voice was begging. "Only for money?"

"You ransom Aberforth, you lose the war," the man said sharply. "That simple. One hundred thousand Galleons is nearly all we've got in the war-chest, and if you use it like this, it won't be refilled. What'll you do, try to convince the Potters to empty their vault like the Longbottoms already did? Voldie's just going to kidnap someone else and make another demand. Alice, Minerva, anyone you care about, they'll all be targets if you pay off the Death Eaters. That's not the lesson you should be trying to teach them."

"If I do this I will have no one. No one." Dumbledore's voice broke, the world tilted as the outlooking head fell down into the ancient hands, and awful sounds came from not-Harry's throat as he began to sob like a child.

"Shall I tell Voldie's messenger no?" said Alastor's voice, now strangely gentle. "You don't have to do it yourself, old friend."

"No – I will say it myself – I must –"



The memory ended with a shock and Harry ripped his head out of the glowing water, gasping as though he'd been deprived of air.

The transition between scenes, between decade-old reality and present moment, was another jolt to Harry's mind; in some fashion his immersion in the past had unanchored him. The broken old man sobbing in his office had been another person in another era, Harry had understood that much; someone softer –

Before it had all vanished like dissipating smoke, returning the now, the present day.

Terrible and stern stood the ancient wizard, like he was carved from stone; beard woven of thread like iron, half-moon glasses like mirrors, and the pupils behind as sharp and unyielding as black diamond.

"Do you also wish to see my brother as he died under the Cruciatus?" said Albus Dumbledore. "Voldemort sent me that memory as well!"

"And that –" Harry was having trouble producing a voice, for the growing sickness in his chest. "That was when –" The words seemed to burn in his throat, as the awful knowledge dawned on him, the horrible understanding. "That was when you burned Narcissa Malfoy alive in her own bedroom."

Albus Dumbledore's gaze was cold as he answered. "To that question only a fool would say yea or nay. What matters is that the Death Eaters

believe I killed her, and that belief kept safe the families of all who served the Order of the Phoenix – until this day. Now do you understand what you have done? What you have done to your friends, Harry Potter, and to any that stand with you?” The old wizard seemed to grow still taller and more terrible, as his voice rose louder. “You have made them all targets, and targets they will remain! Until you prove, the only way it can be proven, that you are no longer willing to pay such prices!”

“And is it true?” Harry said. There was a buzzing sensation filling him, his body growing more distant. “What Draco said, that Narcissa Malfoy never got her hands dirty, that she was only Lucius’s wife? She was an enabler, I get that, but I can’t back that deserving being burned alive.”

“Nothing less would have convinced them that I was done with hesitation.” The old wizard’s voice brooked no question and no refusal. “Always I was too reluctant to do as I must, always it was others who paid the cost of my mercy. So Alastor told me from the beginning, but I did not listen to him. You, I expect, shall prove better at such decisions than I.”

“I’m surprised,” Harry said, amazed that his voice was almost steady. “I would have expected the Death Eaters to go after another Light family and start a cycle of escalating retaliation, if you didn’t get them all with your first strike.”

“If my opponent had been Lucius, perhaps.” Dumbledore’s eyes were like stones. “I am told that Voldemort laughed at the news, and proclaimed to his Death Eaters that I had finally grown, and was at last a worthy opponent. Perhaps he was right. After the day I condemned my brother to his death, I began to weigh those who followed me, balancing them one against another, asking who I would risk, and who I would sacrifice, to what end. It was strange how many fewer pieces I lost, once I knew what they were worth.”

Harry’s jaw seemed locked, like it took a massive effort to make his lips move. “But then it’s not like Lucius was deliberately taking Hermione for ransom,” Harry’s voice said thinly. “From Lucius’s perspective, someone else broke the truce first. So with that in mind, how many Galleons was Hermione worth, exactly? Leaving aside the Danegeld thing, if it was just some ordinary threat to her life, how much should I have paid to save her? Ten thousand Galleons? Five thousand?”

The old wizard did not answer.

“It’s a funny thing,” Harry said, his voice wavering like something seen through water. “Do you know, the day I went in front of the Dementor, what

my worst memory was? It was my parents dying. I heard their voices and everything.”

The old wizard’s eyes widened behind the half-moon glasses.

“And here’s the thing,” Harry said, “here’s the thing I’ve been thinking about over and over. The Dark Lord gave Lily Potter the chance to walk away. He said that she could flee. He told her that dying in front of the crib wouldn’t save her baby. ‘Step aside, foolish woman, if you have any sense in you at all –’” An awful chill came over Harry as he spoke those words from his own lips, but he shook it off and continued. “And afterward I kept thinking, I couldn’t seem to stop myself from thinking, wasn’t the Dark Lord right? If only Mother had stepped away. She tried to curse the Dark Lord but it was suicide, she had to have known that it was suicide. Her choice wasn’t between her life and mine, her choice was for herself to live or for both of us to die! If she’d only done the logical thing and walked away, I mean, I love Mum too, but Lily Potter would be alive right now and she would be my mother!” Tears were blurring Harry’s eyes. “Only now I understand, I know what Mother must have felt. She couldn’t step aside from the crib. She couldn’t! Love doesn’t walk away!”

It was like the old wizard had been struck, struck by a chisel that shattered him straight down the middle.

“What have I said?” the old wizard whispered. “What have I said to you?”

“I don’t know!” shouted Harry. “I wasn’t listening either!”

“I – I’m sorry, Harry – I –” The old wizard pressed his hands to his face, and Harry saw that Albus Dumbledore was weeping. “I should not have said, such things to you – I should not, have resented, your innocence –”

Harry stared at the wizard for another second, and then Harry turned and marched out of the black room, down the stairs, through the office –

“I really don’t know why you’re still on his shoulder,” Harry said to Fawkes.

– out the oaken door and into the endlessly turning spiral.



Harry had arrived in the Transfiguration classroom before anyone else, before even Professor McGonagall. There was Charms class earlier, for his year, but that he hadn’t even bothered trying to attend. Whether Professor McGonagall would make today’s class he didn’t know. There was something ominous

about all the empty desks beside him, the absence at the board. As if he stood alone in Hogwarts, with all his friends departed.

According to the class schedule, today's lesson was on sustained Transfigurations, all the rules of which Harry had learned by heart back when he was Transfiguring a huge rock into the small diamond that shone on his pinky finger. It would be a theoretical subject, rather than practical, for the rest of the class; which was a pity, because he could have used a dose of Transfiguration's trance.

Harry noted distantly that his hand was trembling, to the point where he had trouble undoing the pouch's drawstring as he drew forth the Transfiguration textbook.

You were monstrously unfair to Dumbledore, said the voice Harry had been calling Slytherin, only now it also seemed to be the Voice of Economic Sensibility and maybe also Conscience.

Harry's eyes dropped down to his textbook, but the section was so familiar it might as well have been a blank parchment.

Dumbledore fought a war against a Dark Lord who deliberately set out to break him in the cruelest possible way. He had to choose between losing his war and his brother. Albus Dumbledore knows, he learned in the worst possible way, that there are limits to the value of one life; and it almost broke his sanity to admit it. But you, Harry Potter – you already knew better.

"Shut up," the boy whispered to the empty Transfiguration classroom, though there was nobody there to hear it.

You'd already read about Philip Tetlock's experiments on people asked to trade off a sacred value against a secular one, like a hospital administrator who has to choose between spending a million dollars on a liver to save a five-year-old, and spending the million dollars to buy other hospital equipment or pay physician salaries. And the subjects in the experiment became indignant and wanted to punish the hospital administrator for even thinking about the choice. Do you remember reading about that, Harry Potter? Do you remember thinking how very stupid that was, since if hospital equipment and doctor salaries didn't also save lives, there would be no point in having hospitals or doctors? Should the hospital administrator have paid a billion pounds for that liver, even if it meant the hospital going bankrupt the next day?

"Shut up!" the boy whispered.

Every time you spend money in order to save a life with some probability,

you establish a lower bound on the monetary value of a life. Every time you refuse to spend money to save a life with some probability, you establish an upper bound on the monetary value of life. If your upper bounds and lower bounds are inconsistent, it means you could move money from one place to another, and save more lives at the same cost. So if you want to use a bounded amount of money to save as many lives as possible, your choices must be consistent with some monetary value assigned to a human life; if not then you could reshuffle the same money and do better. How very sad, how very hollow the indignation, of those who refuse to say that money and life can ever be compared, when all they're doing is forbidding the strategy that saves the most people, for the sake of pretentious moral grandstanding...

You knew that, and you still said what you did to Dumbledore.

You deliberately tried to hurt Dumbledore's feelings.

He's never tried to hurt you, Harry Potter, not once.

Harry's head dropped into his hands.

Why had Harry said what he'd said, to a sad old ancient wizard who'd fought hard and endured more than anyone should ever have to endure? Even if the old wizard was wrong, did he deserve to be hurt for it, after all that had happened to him? Why was there a part of him that seemed to get angry at the old wizard beyond reason, lashing out at him harder than Harry had ever hit anyone, without thought of moderation once the rage had been raised, only to quiet as soon as Harry left his presence?

Is it because you know Dumbledore won't fight back? That no matter what you say to him, however unfair, he'll never use his own power against you, he'll never treat you the way you treat him? Is this the way you treat people when you know they won't hit back? James Potter's bullying genes, manifesting at last?

Harry closed his eyes.

Like the Sorting Hat speaking inside his head –

What is the real reason for your anger?

What do you fear?

A whirlwind of images seemed to flash through Harry's mind, then, the past Dumbledore weeping into his hands; the present form of the old wizard, standing tall and terrible; a vision of Hermione screaming in her chains, in the metal chair, as Harry abandoned her to the Dementors; and an imagination of a woman with long white hair (had she looked like her husband?) falling

amid the flames of her bedroom, as a wand was held upon her and orange light reflected from half-moon glasses.

Albus Dumbledore had seemed to think that Harry would be better at that sort of thing than him.

And Harry knew that he probably would be. He knew the math, after all.

But it was understood, somehow it was understood, that utilitarian ethicists didn't actually rob banks so they could give the money to the poor. The end result of throwing away all ethical constraint wouldn't actually be sunshine and roses and happiness for all. The prescription of consequentialism was to take the action that led to the best net consequences, not actions that had one positive consequence and wrecked everything else along the way. Expected utility maximizers were allowed to take common sense into account, when they were calculating their expectations.

Somehow Harry had understood that, even before anyone else had warned him he'd understood. Before he'd read about Vladimir Lenin or the history of the French Revolution, he'd known. It might have been his earliest science fiction books warning him about people with good intentions, or maybe Harry had just seen the logic for himself. Somehow he'd known from the very beginning, that if he stepped outside his ethics whenever there was a reason, the end result wouldn't be good.

A final image came to him, then: Lily Potter standing in front of her baby's crib and measuring the intervals between outcomes: the final outcome if she stayed and tried to curse her enemy (dead Lily, dead Harry), the final outcome if she walked away (live Lily, dead Harry), weighing the expected utilities, and making the only sensible choice.

She would've been Harry's mother if she had.

"But human beings can't live like that," the boy's lips whispered to the empty classroom. "Human beings can't live like that."

TABOO TRADEOFFS, AFTERMATH I

WHEN Padma entered the Transfiguration classroom, she saw that half the class had beaten her there, a strange, deathly silence pervading the room. Harry Potter sat alone in one corner, staring off into some unknown distance, his eyes half-lidded, nearly closed.

Rumor said that the Aurors had discovered that the Defense Professor had Polyjuiced as Granger to fool Malfoy.

Rumor said that Hermione had been bound by the Unbreakable Vow to be Draco Malfoy's slave.

Rumor said that Hermione had gotten the Dementor's Kiss.

But if that were true, Harry Potter wouldn't be sitting there, he would be

—

Padma didn't know what General Potter would do. Her mind went blank, trying to think about it.

Even when Professor McGonagall got there, the silence hadn't broken. The Transfiguration Professor walked up to the board without a pause, erased it with a sweep of her hand, and then began to write.

"Today, children," began the calm professional voice of the Transfiguration Professor, just as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened that week, "we shall learn how much effort it takes to sustain a Transfiguration, and why, at your age, you should not even try. The original Form is not gone, only suppressed; and to maintain that suppression —"

"Excuse me," said Padma Patil. She knew her voice was shaking, she knew that she was trembling visibly, but she had to ask. "Excuse me, Professor, what happened with Miss Granger?"

The Transfiguration Professor paused at the board, and turned to look at Padma. The Professor should have looked stern, having been interrupted without a hand being raised, but instead her face was kindly. "You don't already know, Miss Patil? I expected that rumor would have spread."

"There's too many rumors," said Padma. "I don't know what's true."

Morag MacDougal raised her hand, then said without waiting to be called, "I told you, Padma, what's true is that the Wizengamot found Granger guilty

and ordered her to get the Dementor's Kiss and they brought in the Dementor and Harry Potter glued it to the ceiling and wouldn't let it down until –"

"Oh, dear Merlin," said Professor McGonagall, her expression growing sharp, but then she visibly calmed herself. "The affair was utterly ridiculous and I shan't go into detail. Let it stand that Miss Granger is resting with Madam Pomfrey for now, and coming back to classes tomorrow. And if I catch anyone bothering her, I shall turn them into glass vases and drop them."

The entire class gasped at this; it wasn't so much that the threat was fatal, as that it broke the safety rules for Transfiguration.

Professor McGonagall turned back to her board –

From a corner of the classroom, another voice rose up. "What about Professor Quirrell?" said Terry Boot. "Has he been arrested?"

"The Aurors are only detaining him," said the Transfiguration Professor without turning around. "If they have not given back our Defense Professor by tomorrow, I shall ask the Headmaster to go fetch him. Though I may as well tell you now that the Board of Governors has scheduled a vote on whether Professor Quirrell's battles shall be allowed to continue."

Kevin Entwhistle spoke. "And General Malfoy? When's he getting back from St. Mungo's?"

The Transfiguration Professor paused in her drawing.

She turned around again, more slowly, this time.

"I am sorry, Mr. Entwhistle," said Professor McGonagall. Her face looked a little more lined than when she had entered the room. "Mr. Malfoy's health is in no danger, I am given to understand. Unfortunately, I have received an owl from Mr. Malfoy's father withdrawing him from Hogwarts. I am afraid he is not coming back."

TABOO TRADEOFFS, AFTERMATH II

WHEN Hermione Granger woke, she found herself lying in a soft, comfortable bed of the Hogwarts infirmary, with a square of setting sunlight falling on her midriff, warm through the thin blanket. Memory said that there would be a screen-sheet above her, either drawn around her bed or open, and that the rest of Madam Pomfrey's domain would lie beyond: the other beds, occupied or unoccupied, and bright windows set in the curvily-carven stone of Hogwarts.

When Hermione opened her eyes, the first thing she saw was the face of Professor McGonagall, sitting on the left side of her bed. Professor Flitwick wasn't there, but that was understandable, he'd stayed by her side all morning in the detention cell, his silver raven standing extra guard against the Dementor and his stern little face always turned outward toward the Aurors. The Head of Ravenclaw had surely spent way too much time on her, and probably had to get back to teaching his classes, instead of keeping watch on a convicted attempted-murderess.

She felt horribly, horribly sick and she didn't think it was because of any potions. Hermione would've started crying again, only her throat hurt, her eyes still burned, and her mind just felt tired. She couldn't have borne to weep again, couldn't find the strength for tears.

"Where are my parents?" Hermione whispered to the Head of House Gryffindor. Somehow it seemed like the worst thing in the world to face them, even worse than everything else; and yet she still wanted to see them.

The gentle look on Professor McGonagall's face Transfigured into something sadder. "I'm sorry, Miss Granger. Though it was not always so, we have found in recent years that it is wiser not to tell the parents of Muggleborns about any danger their child has faced. I should advise you also to remain silent, if you wish to stay at Hogwarts without trouble from them."

"I'm not being expelled?" the girl whispered. "For what I did?"

"No," said Professor McGonagall. "Miss Granger... surely you heard... I hope you heard Mr. Potter, when he said that you were innocent?"

"He was just saying that," she said dully. "To get me free, I mean."

The older witch shook her head firmly. "No, Miss Granger. Mr. Potter believes you were Memory-Charmed, that the whole duel never happened. The Headmaster suspects even Darker magics may have been involved – that your own hand might have cast the spell, but not your own will. Even Professor Snape finds the affair completely unbelievable, though he may not be able to say so publicly. He was wondering if Muggle drugs might have been used on you."

Hermione's eyes went on staring distantly at the Transfiguration Professor; she knew that she'd just been told something significant, but she couldn't find the energy to propagate any changes through her mind.

"Surely you don't believe it?" said Professor McGonagall. "Miss Granger, you cannot believe of yourself that you would turn to murder!"

"But I –" Her excellent memory helpfully replayed it for the thousandth time, Draco Malfoy telling her with a sneer that she'd never beat him when he wasn't tired, and then proceeding to prove just that, dancing like a duelist between the warded trophies while she frantically scrambled, and dealing the ending blow with a hex that sent her crashing against the wall and drew blood from her cheek – and then – then she'd –

"But you remember doing it," said the older witch, who was watching over her with kindly understanding. "Miss Granger, there is no need for a twelve-year-old girl to bear such dreadful memories. Say the word and I shall be happy to lock them away for you."

It was like a glass of warm water thrown into her face. "What?"

Professor McGonagall took out her wand, a gesture so practiced and quick that it seemed like pointing a finger. "I can't offer to rid you of the memories entirely, Miss Granger," the Transfiguration Professor said with her customary precision. "There may be important facts buried there. But there is a form of the Memory Charm which is reversible, and I shall be happy to cast that on you."

Hermione stared at the wand, feeling the stirrings of hope for the first time in almost two days.

Make it didn't happen... she'd wished that over and over again, for the hands of time to turn back and erase the horrible choice that could never, ever be undone. And if erasing the memory wasn't that, it was still a kind of release...

She looked back at Professor McGonagall's kindly face.

"You really don't think I did it?" Hermione said, her voice trembling.

"I am quite certain you would never do such a thing of your own will."

Beneath her blankets, Hermione's hands clutched at the sheets. "Harry doesn't think I did it?"

"Mr. Potter is of the opinion that your memories are entire fabrications. I can rather see his point."

Then Hermione's clutching fingers let go of the sheet, and she slumped back into the bed, from which she'd partially risen.

No.

She hadn't said anything.

She'd woken up and remembered what had happened last night, and it had been like – like – she couldn't find words even in her own thoughts for what it had been like. But she'd known that Draco Malfoy was already dead, and she hadn't said anything, hadn't gone to Professor Flitwick and confessed. She'd just dressed herself and gone down to breakfast and tried to act normal so that nobody would ever know, and she'd known it was wrong and Wrong and horribly horribly WRONG but she'd been so, so scared –

Even if Harry Potter was right, even if the duel with Draco Malfoy was a lie, she'd made that choice all by herself. She didn't deserve to forget that, or be forgiven for it.

And if she had done the right thing, gone straight to Professor Flitwick, maybe that would've – helped, somehow, maybe everyone would've seen then that she regretted it, and Harry wouldn't have had to give away all his money to save her –

Hermione shut her eyes, squeezed them shut really tight, she couldn't bear to start crying again. "I'm a horrible person," she said in a wavering voice. "I'm awful, I'm not heroic at all –"

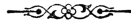
Professor McGonagall's voice was very sharp, like Hermione had just made some dreadful mistake on her Transfiguration homework. "Stop being foolish, Miss Granger! Horrible is whoever did this to you. And as for being heroic – well, Miss Granger, you have already heard my opinion about young girls trying to involve themselves in such things before they are even fourteen, so I shall not lecture you on it again. I shall say only that you have just had an absolutely dreadful experience, which you survived as well as any witch in your year possibly could. Today you are allowed to cry as much as you like. Tomorrow you are going back to class."

That was when Hermione knew that Professor McGonagall couldn't help her. She needed someone to scold her, she couldn't be absolved if she

couldn't be blamed, and Professor McGonagall would never do that for her, would never ask so much of a little Ravenclaw girl.

It was something Harry Potter wouldn't help her with either.

Hermione turned over in the infirmary bed, huddling into herself, away from Professor McGonagall. "Please," she whispered. "I want to talk – to the Headmaster –"



"Hermione."

When Hermione Granger opened her eyes a second time, she saw the care-lined face of Albus Dumbledore leaning over her bedside, looking almost as though he'd been crying, though that was impossible; and Hermione felt another stabbing pang of guilt for having bothered him so.

"Minerva said you wished to speak with me," the old wizard said.

"I –" Suddenly Hermione didn't know at all what to say. Her throat locked up, and all she could do was stammer, "I – I'm –"

Somehow her tone must have communicated the other word, the one she couldn't even say anymore.

"Sorry?" said Dumbledore. "Why, for what should you be sorry?"

She had to force the words out of her throat. "You were telling Harry – that he shouldn't pay – so I shouldn't – have done what Professor McGonagall said, I shouldn't have touched his wand –"

"My dear," said Dumbledore, "had you not pledged yourself to the House of Potter, Harry would have attacked Azkaban singlehandedly, and quite possibly won. That boy may choose his words carefully, but I have never yet known him to lie; and in the Boy-Who-Lived there is power that the Dark Lord never knew. He would indeed have tried to break Azkaban, even at cost of his life." The old wizard's voice grew gentler, and kinder. "No, Hermione, you have nothing at all for which to blame yourself."

"I could have made him not do it."

In Dumbledore's eyes a small twinkle appeared before it was lost to weariness. "Really, Miss Granger? Perhaps you should be Headmistress in my place, for I myself have no such power over stubborn children."

"Harry promised –" Her voice stopped. The awful truth was very hard to speak. "Harry Potter promised me – that he would never help me – if I told him not to."

There was a pause. The distant noises of the infirmary that had accompanied Professor McGonagall had ceased, Hermione realized, when Dumbledore had awoken her. From where she lay in bed she could see only the ceiling, and the top of one wall's windows, but nothing in her range of vision moved, and if there were sounds, she could not hear them.

"Ah," said Dumbledore. The old wizard sighed heavily. "I suppose it is possible that the boy would have kept his promise."

"I should – I should've –"

"Gone to Azkaban of your own will?" Dumbledore said. "Miss Granger, that is more than I would ever ask anyone to take upon themselves."

"But –" Hermione swallowed. She couldn't help but notice the loophole, anyone who wanted to get through the portrait-door to the Ravenclaw dorm quickly learned to pay attention to exact wordings. "But it's not more than you'd take on yourself."

"Hermione –" the old wizard began.

"Why?" said Hermione's voice, it seemed to be running on without her mind, now. "Why couldn't I be braver? I was going to run in front of the Dementor – for Harry – before, I mean, in January – so why – why – why couldn't I –" Why had the thought of being sent to Azkaban just completely unglued her, why had she forgotten everything about being Good –

"My dear girl," Dumbledore said. The blue eyes behind the half-moon glasses showed a complete understanding of her guilt. "I would have done no better myself, in my first year in Hogwarts. As you would be kind to others, be kinder to yourself as well."

"So I did do the wrong thing." Somehow she needed to say that, to be told that, even though she already knew.

There was a pause.

"Listen, young Ravenclaw," the old wizard said, "hear me well, for I shall speak to you a truth. Most ill-doers do not think of themselves as evil; indeed, most conceive themselves the heroes of the stories they tell. I once thought that the greatest evil in this world was done in the name of the greater good. I was wrong. Terribly wrong. There is evil in this world which knows itself for evil, and hates the good with all its strength. All fair things does it desire to destroy."

Hermione shivered in her bed, somehow it seemed very real, when Dumbledore said it.

The old wizard continued speaking. "You are one of the fair things of this world, Hermione Granger, and so that evil hates you as well. If you had stayed firm through even this trial, it would have struck you harder and yet harder, until you shattered. Do not think that heroes cannot be broken! We are only more difficult to break, Hermione." The old wizard's eyes had grown sterner than she had ever seen. "When you have been exhausted for many hours, when pain and death is not a passing fear but a certainty, then it is harder to be a hero. If I must speak the truth – then today, yes, I would not waver in the face of Azkaban. But when I was a first-year in Hogwarts – I would have fled from the Dementor that you confronted, for my father had died in Azkaban, and I feared them. Know this! The evil that struck at you could have broken anyone, even myself. Only Harry Potter has it within him to face that horror, when he has come fully into his power."

Hermione's neck couldn't stare at the old wizard any longer; she let her head fall back, back to the pillow, where she stared up at the ceiling, absorbing what she could.

"Why?" Her voice trembled again. "Why would anyone be that evil? I don't understand."

"I, too, have wondered," said Dumbledore's voice, a deep sadness in it. "For thrice ten years I wondered, and I still do not understand. You and I will never understand, Hermione Granger. But at least I know now what true evil would say for itself, if we could speak to it and ask why it was evil. It would say, Why not?"

A brief flare of indignation inside her. "There's got to be a million reasons why not!"

"Indeed," said Dumbledore's voice. "A million reasons and more. We will always know those reasons, you and I. If you insist on putting it that way – then yes, Hermione, this day's trial broke you. But what happens after you break – that, too, is part of being a hero. Which you are, Hermione Granger, and will always be."

She raised her head again, staring at him.

The old wizard got up from beside her bed. His silver beard dipped down, as Dumbledore bowed to her gravely, and left.

She went on looking at where the old wizard had gone.

It should have meant something to her, should have touched her. Should have made her felt better inside, that Dumbledore, who had seemed so reluctant before, had now acknowledged her as a hero.

She felt nothing.

Hermione let her head fall back to the bed, as Madam Pomfrey came and made her drink something that seared her lips like the afterburn of spicy food, and smelled even hotter, and didn't taste like anything at all. It meant nothing to her. She went on staring up at the distant stone tiles of the ceiling.



Minerva was waiting, doing her best not to hover, beside the double doors to the Hogwarts infirmary, she'd always thought of those doors as "the ominous gates" as a child in Hogwarts, and couldn't help but remember that now. Too much bad news had been spoken here –

Albus stepped out. The old wizard did not pause on the way out of the infirmary, only kept walking toward Professor Flitwick's office; and Minerva followed him.

Professor McGonagall cleared her throat. "Is it done, Albus?"

The old wizard nodded in affirmation. "If any hostile magic is cast on her, or any spirit touches her, I shall know, and come."

"I spoke to Mr. Potter after Transfiguration class," said Professor McGonagall. "He was of the opinion that Miss Granger should go to Beauxbatons, rather than Hogwarts, from now on."

The old wizard shook his head. "No. If Voldemort truly desires to strike at Miss Granger – he is tenacious beyond measure. His servants are returning to him, he could not have retrieved Bellatrix alone. Azkaban itself is not safe from his malice, and as for Beauxbatons – no, Minerva. I do not think Voldemort can essay such possessions often, or against stronger targets, or this year would have gone quite differently. And Harry Potter is here, whom Voldemort must fear whether he admits it or no. Now that I have warded her, Miss Granger will be safer within Hogwarts than without."

"Mr. Potter seemed to doubt that," Minerva said. She couldn't quite keep the edge from her voice; there was a part of her that agreed rather strongly. "He seemed to feel that common sense said Miss Granger should continue her education anywhere but Hogwarts."

The old wizard sighed. "I fear the boy has spent too much time among the Muggles. Always they reach for safety; always they imagine that safety can be reached. If Miss Granger is not safe within the center of our fortress, she shall be no safer for leaving it."

“Not everyone seems to think so,” said Professor McGonagall. It had been almost the first letter she’d seen when she’d taken a quick look at her desk; an envelope of the finest sheepskin, sealed in greenish-silver wax, pressed into the image of a snake that rose and hissed at her. “I have received Lord Malfoy’s owl withdrawing his son from Hogwarts.”

The old wizard nodded, but did not break stride. “Does Harry know?”

“Yes.” Her voice faltered, for a moment, remembering Harry’s expression. “After class, Mr. Potter complimented Lord Malfoy’s excellent good sense, and said that he would be writing Madam Longbottom advising her to do the same with her grandson, in case he was the next target. In the event that Mr. Longbottom’s guardian was so negligent as to keep him in Hogwarts, Mr. Potter wanted him to have a Time-Turner, an invisibility cloak, a broomstick, and a pouch in which to carry them; also a toe-ring with an emergency portkey to a safe location, in case someone kidnaps Mr. Longbottom and takes him outside Hogwarts’s wards. I told Mr. Potter that I did not think the Ministry would consent to such use of our Time-Turners, and he said that we should not ask. I expect he will want Miss Granger to receive the same, if she stays. And for himself Mr. Potter wants a three-person broomstick to carry in his pouch.” She wasn’t awed by the list of precautions. Impressed with the cleverness, but not awed; she was a Transfiguration Mistress, after all. But it still sent shivers of disquiet through her, that Harry Potter now thought Hogwarts as dangerous as spell research.

“The Department of Mysteries is not lightly defied,” said Albus. “But for the rest –” The old wizard seemed to slump in on himself slightly. “We may as well give the boy what he wishes. And I will ward Neville also, and write Augusta to say that he should stay here over holiday.”

“And finally,” she said, “Mr. Potter says – this is a direct quote, Albus – whatever kind of Dark Wizard attractant the Headmaster is keeping here, he needs to get it out of this school, now.” She couldn’t stop the edge in her own voice, that time.

“I asked as much of Flamel,” Albus said, the pain clear in his voice. “But Master Flamel has said – that even he can no longer keep safe the Stone – that he believes Voldemort has means of finding it wherever it is hidden – and that he does not consent for it to be guarded anywhere but Hogwarts. Minerva, I am sorry, but it must be done – must!”

“Very well,” said Professor McGonagall. “But for myself, I think that Mr. Potter is right on every single count.”

The old wizard glanced at her, and his voice caught as he said, "Minerva, you have known me long, and as well as any soul still living – tell me, have I lost myself to darkness already?"

"What?" said Professor McGonagall in genuine surprise. Then, "Oh, Albus, no!"

The old wizard's lips pressed together tightly before he spoke. "For the greater good. I have sacrificed so many, for the greater good. Today I almost condemned Hermione Granger to Azkaban for the greater good. And I find myself – today, I found myself – beginning to resent the innocence that is no longer mine –" The old wizard's voice halted. "Evil done in the name of good. Evil done in the name of evil. Which is worse?"

"You are being silly, Albus."

The old wizard glanced at her again, before turning his eyes back to their way. "Tell me, Minerva – did you pause to weigh the consequences, before you told Miss Granger how to bind herself to the Potter family?"

She took an involuntary breath as she understood what she had done –

"So you did not." Albus's eyes were saddened. "No, Minerva, you must not apologize. It is well. For what you have seen of me this day – if your first loyalty is now to Harry Potter, and not to me, then that is right and proper." She opened her lips to protest, but Albus went on before she could say a word. "Indeed – indeed – that will be necessary and more than necessary, if the Dark Lord that Harry must defeat to come into his power is not Voldemort after all –"

"Not this again!" Minerva said. "Albus, it was You-Know-Who, not you, who marked Harry as his equal. There is no possible way that the prophecy could be talking about you!"

The old wizard nodded, but his eyes still seemed distant, fixed only on the road ahead.



The holding cell, well to the center of Magical Law Enforcement, was luxuriously appointed; more a remark on what adult wizards took for granted, than any special feeling toward prisoners. There was a self-reclining, self-rocking chair with plush, richly textured, self-warming cushions. There was a bookcase containing random books rescued from a bargain bin, and a full shelf of ancient magazines, including one from 1883. As for toiletries, well, it wasn't exactly luxurious, but there was a spell on the room which put all

that business on hold; you weren't to go anywhere that the watching Auror couldn't see you. But aside from that, it was quite a pleasant little cell. The Defense Professor of Hogwarts was being detained, not arrested, not even intimidated. There was no evidence to indict him... except that a terrible and unusual crime had been committed at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and going by previous occasions the odds were five to one that the current Defense Professor was tangled up in it somehow. To this must be added the fact that nobody in the D.M.L.E. even knew who the Defense Professor was, and that the man had literally sneezed at all attempts to uncover his true identity. Why, no, they hadn't released 'Quirinus Quirrell' back to Hogwarts just yet.

Let us repeat this for emphasis:

The Defense Professor.

Was being detained.

In a cell.

The Defense Professor was staring at the watching Auror and humming.

The Defense Professor has not spoken a single word since he arrived in this particular cell. He has only been humming.

The humming started as a simple children's lullaby, the one that in Muggle Britain begins, Lullaby, and goodnight...

This tune was hummed, without variation, over and over, for seven minutes, to establish the underlying pattern.

Then began the elaborations upon the theme. Phrases hummed too slow, with long pauses in between, so that the listener's mind helplessly waits and waits for the next note, the next phrase. And then, when that next phrase comes, it is so out of key, so unbelievably awfully out of key, not just out of key for the previous phrases but sung at a pitch which does not correspond to any key, that you would have to believe this person had spent hours deliberately practicing their humming just to acquire such perfect anti-pitch.

It bears the same semblance to music as the awful dead voice of a Dementor bears to human speech.

And this horrible, horrible humming is impossible to ignore. It is similar to a known lullaby, but it departs from that pattern unpredictably. It sets up expectations and then violates them, never in any constant pattern that would permit the humming to fade into the background. The listener's brain cannot prevent itself from expecting the anti-musical phrases to complete, nor prevent itself from noticing the surprises.

The only possible explanation for how this mode of humming came to exist is that it was deliberately designed by some unspeakably cruel genius who woke up one day, feeling bored with ordinary torture, who decided to handicap himself and find out whether he could break someone's sanity just by humming at them.

The Auror has been listening to this unimaginably dreadful humming for four hours, while being stared at by a huge, cold, lethal presence that feels equally horrible whether he looks at it directly or lets it hover at the corner of his vision –

The humming stopped.

There was a long wait. Time enough for false hope to rise, and be squashed down by the memory of previous disappointments. And then, as the interval lengthened, and lengthened, that hope rose again unstoppably –

The humming began once more.

The Auror cracked.

From his belt, the Auror took a mirror, tapped it once, and then said, "This is Junior Auror Arjun Altunay, I'm calling in code RJ-L20 on cell three."

"Code RJ-L20?" the mirror said in surprised tones. There was a sound of pages being flipped, then, "You want to be relieved because a prisoner is attempting psychological warfare and succeeding?"

(Amelia Bones really is quite intelligent.)

"What'd the prisoner say to you?" said the mirror.

(This question is not part of procedure RJ-L20, but unfortunately Amelia Bones has failed to include an explicit instruction that the commanding officer should not ask.)

"He's –" said the Auror, and glanced back at the cell. The Defense Professor was now leaning in back in his chair, looking quite relaxed. "He was staring at me! And humming!"

There was a pause.

The mirror spoke again. "And you're calling in an RJ-L20 over that? You're sure you're not just trying to get out of watching him?"

(Amelia Bones is surrounded by idiots.)

"You don't understand!" yelled Auror Altunay. "It's really awful humming!"

The mirror transmitted a sound of muffled laughter in the background, sounding like it was coming from more than one person. Then speech again.

“Mr. Altunay, if you don’t want to be busted to Junior Auror Second Class, I suggest you buckle down and get back to work –”

“Strike that,” a crisp voice said, sounding slightly remote due to its distance from the mirror.

(Which is why Amelia Bones often sits in on a coordination center of the D.M.L.E. while doing her Ministry-required paperwork.)

“Auror Altunay,” said the crisp voice, seeming to approach closer to the mirror, “you will be relieved shortly. Auror Ben Gutierrez, the procedure for RJ-L20 does not say that you ask why. It says that you relieve the Auror who calls it in. If I find that Aurors seem to be abusing it, I will modify the procedure to prevent its abuse –” The mirror cut off abruptly.

The Auror turned back to look triumphantly at where the current Defense Professor of Hogwarts was leaning back in his cushioned chair.

That man then spoke the first words that had left his lips since he entered the cell.

“Goodbye, Mr. Altunay,” said the Defense Professor.

A few minutes later, the door to the detention cell opened, and in walked a grey-haired woman, dressed in the crimson-tinged robes of an Auror without any sign of rank or other ornamentation, carrying a black leather folder under her left arm. “You’re relieved,” the old woman said abruptly.

There was a brief delay while Auror Altunay tried to explain what had been happening. This was cut short by a nod and a stark, simple finger pointing out the door.

“Good evening, Madam Director,” said the Defense Professor.

Amelia Bones did not acknowledge this statement, but sat down abruptly in the vacated chair. The old witch opened the black folder and her gaze moved down to the parchments therein. “Possible hints to the identity of the current Hogwarts Defense Professor, as compiled by Auror Robards.” The title parchment was turned, flipped aside. “The Defense Professor said that he was Sorted into Slytherin. Claimed that his family was killed by Voldemort. Said he had studied at a martial arts center in Muggle Asia which was destroyed by Voldemort. A request filed with the Department of International Magical Cooperation identifies this incident as the Oni Affair of 1969.” Another parchment was flipped aside. “It also seems this Defense Professor gave a most stirring speech to his students, just before last Yule, castigating the previous generation for their disunity against the Death Eaters.” The old witch looked up from the leather folder. “Madam

Longbottom was rather taken with it, and insisted that I read the entire thing. The argument struck me as familiar, though I could not place it at the time. But then, of course, I had thought you dead.”

The chief law enforcement officer of Magical Britain was now gazing sharply at the current Defense Professor of Hogwarts, across the pane of spell-reinforced glass separating them. The man in the cell returned the gaze equably, without apparent alarm.

“I shall not name any names,” said the old witch. “But I shall tell a story, and see if it sounds familiar.” Amelia Bones looked back down, turning to the next parchment. “Born 1927, entered Hogwarts in 1938, sorted into Slytherin, graduated 1945. Went on a graduation tour abroad and disappeared while visiting Albania. Presumed dead until 1970, when he returned to magical Britain just as suddenly, without any explanation for the missing twenty-five years. He remained estranged from his family and friends, living in isolation. In 1971, while visiting Diagon Alley, he fended off an attempt by Bellatrix Black to kidnap the daughter of the Minister of Magic, and used the Killing Curse to slay two of the three Death Eaters accompanying her. Beyond this all Britain knows the story; need I continue it?” The old witch looked up from her folder again. “Very well. There was a trial in the Wizengamot, during which this young man was exonerated for his use of the Killing Curse, not least due to the efforts of his grandmother, the Lady of his House. He was reconciled with his family, and they held a House gathering to welcome his return. The guest of honor arrived at that gathering to find his entire family slain by Death Eaters, even to the house elves; and that he himself, of cadet line, was now the last remaining scion of a Most Ancient House.”

The Defense Professor had not reacted at all to any of this, except that his eyes had half-closed, as though in weariness.

“The young man took up his family’s seat in the Wizengamot, becoming among the most steadfast voices against You-Know-Who. Several times he led forces against the Death Eaters, fighting with skillful tactics and extraordinary power. People began to speak of him as the next Dumbledore, it was thought that he might become Minister of Magic after the Dark Lord fell. On the third of July, 1973, he failed to appear at a key Wizengamot vote, and was never heard from again. We assumed You-Know-Who had killed him. It was a grave blow to all of us, and matters went much the worse from that day on.” The old witch’s gaze was questioning. “I mourned you myself. What happened?”

The Defense Professor's shoulders moved lightly, a small shrug. "You make many assumptions," the Defense Professor said softly. "For myself, I would believe that man died years ago. But if that man is nonetheless alive – then it is clear he does not wish the fact announced, and has reasons enough for silence. That man was once of some help to you, it seems." The Defense Professor's lips curved in a cynical smile. "But I am no longer surprised when gratitude is fleeting. Is there yet more that you would demand from him?"

The old witch leaned back in her Auror's monitoring-chair, looking rather startled, maybe even hurt. "No –" she said after a moment. Her fingers tapped the leather folder; nervously, you might have thought, if you had believed that Amelia Bones could ever be nervous. "But your House – there are not many Ancient Houses remaining –"

"It shall matter little to this country whether eight Ancient Houses remain, or seven."

The old witch sighed. "What does Dumbledore think of this?"

The man in the detention cell shook his head. "He does not know who I am, and promised not to inquire."

The old witch's eyebrows rose. "How did he identify you to the Hogwarts wards, then?"

A slight smile. "The Headmaster drew a circle, and told Hogwarts that he who stood within was the Defense Professor. Speaking of which –" The tone went lower, flatter. "I am missing my classes, Director Bones."

"You seem to – rest, sometimes, in a peculiar manner. This has also been reported. And you seem to be resting more and more frequently, as time goes on." The old witch's fingers tapped the leather folder again. "I cannot recall reading of such a symptom, but when one hears of such a thing, one imagines... Dark Wizards fought, and terrible curses received..."

The Defense Professor remained expressionless.

"Do you require a healer's help?" said Amelia Bones. Her own mask had slipped, clearly showing the pain in her eyes. "Is there anything at all that can be done for you?"

"I agreed to teach Defense at Hogwarts," the man in the cell said flatly. "Draw your own conclusions, Madam. And I am missing my classes, of which there are not many left. I would return to Hogwarts, now."



When Hermione woke the third time (though it felt like she'd only closed her eyes for a moment) the Sun was even lower in the sky, almost fully set. She felt a little more alive and, strangely, even more exhausted. This time it was Professor Flitwick who was standing next to her bed and shaking her shoulder, a tray of steaming food floating next to him. For some reason she'd thought Harry Potter ought to be leaning over her bedside, but he wasn't there. Had she dreamed that? She couldn't remember dreaming.

It developed (according to Professor Flitwick) that Hermione had missed dinner in the Great Hall, and was being woken to eat. And then she could go back to the Ravenclaw dorm, and her own bed, to sleep the rest of the night.

She ate in silence. There was a part of her that wanted to ask Professor Flitwick whether he thought she'd been Memory-Charmed or she'd tried to kill Draco Malfoy of her own will –

– like she remembered doing –

– but most of her was afraid to find out. Afraid to find out was a warning sign, according to Harry Potter and his books; but her mind felt tired, bruised, and she couldn't muster the strength to override it.

When she and Professor Flitwick left the infirmary they found Harry Potter sitting cross-legged outside the door, quietly reading a psychology textbook.

"I'll take her from here," said the Boy-Who-Lived. "Professor McGonagall said it would be all right."

Professor Flitwick seemed to accept this, and departed after a stern look at both of them. She couldn't imagine what the stern look was supposed to say, unless it was don't try to kill any more students.

The footsteps of Professor Flitwick faded, and the two of them stood alone outside the doors of the infirmary.

She looked at the green eyes of the Boy-Who-Lived, the mess of hair that didn't quite obscure the scar on his forehead; she looked upon the face of the boy who'd given all his money to save her without a second thought. There were feelings inside her – guilt, shame, embarrassment, other things as well – but no words. There was nothing she knew how to say.

"So," Harry said abruptly, "I did a quick skim through my psychology books to see what they said about post-traumatic stress disorder. The old books said you should talk about the experience immediately afterward with a counselor. The newer research says that when they actually ran experiments, it turned out that talking about it immediately afterward made it worse.

Apparently what you really ought to do is run with your mind's natural impulse to repress the memories and just not think about it for a while."

It was so normal for the way she and Harry usually talked that she felt a sudden burning in her throat.

We don't have to talk about it. That was what Harry had just said, more or less. It felt like cheating, maybe even like a lie. Nothing was normal. Everything wrong was still horribly wrong, everything left unsaid still needed to be said...

"Okay," said Hermione, because there wasn't anything else to say, anything else at all.

"I'm sorry I wasn't waiting when you woke up," Harry said, as they started to walk. "Madam Pomfrey wouldn't let me in, so I just stayed out here." He gave a small, sad-looking shrug. "I suppose I should be out there trying to run damage control on public relations, but... honestly I've never been good at that, I just end up speaking sharply at people."

"How bad is it?" She thought her voice should have come out in a whisper, a croak, but it didn't.

"Well –" Harry said with obvious hesitation. "The thing you've got to understand, Hermione, is that you had a lot of defenders at breakfast-time today, but everyone on your side was... making stuff up. Draco tried to kill you first, things like that. It was Granger versus Malfoy, that's how people saw it, like a seesaw where pushing his side down meant pushing your side up. I told them you were probably both innocent, that you'd both been Memory-Charmed. They didn't listen, both sides treated me like a traitor trying to play the middle. And then people heard that Draco had testified under Veritaserum that he'd been trying to help you before the battle – stop making that expression, Hermione, you didn't actually do anything to him. Anyway, all people understood was that the pro-Malfoy faction had been right and the pro-Granger faction had been wrong." Harry gave a small sigh. "I told them that when the truth came out later they'd be embarrassed..."

"How bad is it?" she said again. This time her voice did come out weaker.

"Remember Asch's conformity experiment?" Harry said, turning his head to give her a serious look.

Her mind was slow to remember for a few seconds, which frightened her, but then the reference came back. In 1951, Solomon Asch had taken some experimental subjects, and each one had been put among a row of other people who looked like them, seeming like other experimental subjects, but

actually confederates of the experimenter. They'd shown a reference line on a screen, labeled X, next to three other lines, labeled A, B, and C. The experimenter had asked which line X was the same length as. The correct answer had obviously been C. The other 'subjects', the confederates, had one after another said that X was the same length as B. The real subject had been put second-to-last in the order, so as not to arouse suspicion by being last. The test had been to see whether the real subject would 'conform' to the standard wrong answer of B, or voice the obviously correct answer of C.

75% of the subjects had 'conformed' at least once. A third of the subjects had conformed more than half the time. Some had reported afterward actually believing that X was the same length as B. And that had been in a case where the subjects hadn't known any of the confederates. If you put people around others who belonged to the same group as them, like someone in a wheelchair next to other people in a wheelchair, the conformity effect got even stronger...

Hermione had a sickening feeling where this was going. "I remember," she whispered.

"I gave the Chaos Legion anti-conformity training, you know. I had each Legionnaire stand in the middle and say 'Twice two is four!' or 'Grass is green!' while everyone else in the Chaos Legion called them idiots or sneered at them – Allen Flint did really good sneers – or even just gave them blank looks and then walked away. The thing you've got to remember is, only the Chaos Legion has ever practiced anything like that. Nobody else in Hogwarts even knows what conformity is."

"Harry!" Her voice was wobbling. "How bad is it?"

Harry gave another sad-looking shrug. "Everyone in the second year and above, since they don't know you. Everyone in Dragon Army. All of Slytherin, of course. And, well, most of the rest of magical Britain too, I think. Remember, Lucius Malfoy controls the Daily Prophet."

"Everyone?" she whispered. Her limbs had started to feel cold, like she'd just gotten out of an unheated swimming pool.

"What people really believe doesn't feel like a belief, it feels like the way the world is. You and I are standing in a private little bubble of the universe where Hermione Granger got Memory-Charmed. Everyone else is living in the world where Hermione Granger tried to murder Draco Malfoy. If Ernie Macmillian –"

Her breath caught in her throat. Captain Macmillian –

“ – thinks he’s ethically prohibited from being your friend now, well, he’s trying to do the right thing as he understands it, in the world he thinks he lives in.” Harry’s eyes were very serious. “Hermione, you’ve told me a lot of times that I look down too much on other people. But if I expected too much of them – if I expected people to get things right – I really would hate them, then. Idealism aside, Hogwarts students don’t actually know enough cognitive science to take responsibility for how their own minds work. It’s not their fault they’re crazy.” Harry’s voice was strangely gentle, almost like an adult’s. “I know it’s going to be harder on you than it would be on me. But remember, eventually the real culprit gets nailed. The truth comes out, everyone who was confidently wrong gets embarrassed.”

“And if the real culprit doesn’t get caught?” she said in a trembling voice. ...or if it turns out to be me after all?

“Then you can leave Hogwarts and go to the Salem Witches’ Institute in America.”

“Leave Hogwarts?” She’d never even thought of that possibility except as an ultimate punishment.

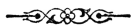
“I... Hermione, I think you might want to do that anyway. Hogwarts isn’t a castle, it’s insanity with walls. You have got other options.”

“I’ll...” she stammered. “I’ll have... to think about it...”

Harry nodded. “At least nobody’s going to try hexing you, not after what the Headmaster said at dinner tonight. Oh, and Ron Weasley came up to me, looking very serious, and told me that if I saw you first, I should tell you that he’s sorry for having thought badly of you, and he’ll never speak ill of you again.”

“Ron believes I’m innocent?” said Hermione.

“Well... he doesn’t think you’re innocent, per se...”



The whole Ravenclaw dorm went silent as the two of them walked in.

Staring at them.

Staring at her.

(She’d had nightmares like this.)

And then, one by one, people looked away from her.

Penelope Clearwater, the 5th-year prefect in charge of first-years, looked away slowly and deliberately, turning her head to face in another direction.

Su Li and Lisa Turpin and Michael Corner, all sitting at a table together, all of whom she'd helped with their homework at one time or another, all looked away, their faces suddenly nervous, the moment she tried to catch their eyes.

A third-year witch named Latisha Randle, whom S.P.H.E.W. had twice saved from Slytherin bullies, quickly bent back over her desk and started doing homework again.

Mandy Brocklehurst looked away from her.

If Hermione didn't burst into tears, then, it was only because she'd expected it, had played it out in her mind over and over again. At least people weren't screaming at her or shoving her or hexing her. They were just looking away –

Hermione walked very straight up to the staircaise that led toward the first-year girl's dorms. (She didn't see Padma Patil or Anthony Goldstein looking at her, those two lone heads turning to track her as she left.) From behind her, she heard Harry Potter saying in a very calm tone, "Now eventually the truth's going to come out, you all. So if you're all that confident she's guilty, can I ask you all to sign this paper right here, saying that if she later turns out to be innocent, she gets to say 'I told you so' and then hold it over you for the rest of your lives? Step on up, one and all, don't be cowards, if you really believe you shouldn't be afraid to bet –"

She was halfway up the stairs when she realized that there would be other girls inside her dorm room, too.



The stars hadn't quite come out yet, only one or two of the brightest ones visible through the reddish-purple haze of the horizon, though the sun had fully sunk.

Hermione's hands dug into the harsh stone of the parapet guarding the small balcony, where she'd ducked out of the stairwell after realizing that –

– she couldn't just go back to bed –

– the words echoed in her mind like 'You can't go home again' ought to sound.

She stared out at the empty grounds, the fading sunset, the sprouting grass so far below.

Tired, she was tired, she couldn't think now, she needed to sleep. Professor Flitwick had told her that she needed to sleep, and there'd been yet

another potion with her dinner. Maybe that was how wizarding society treated horrible traumas to innocent young girls, just made them sleep a lot afterward.

She should go to her room and sleep, but she was afraid to go someplace where other people were. Afraid of how they might look at her, or look away.

Fragments of thought chased themselves around a mind too exhausted to finish or connect them, as the night fully set in.

Why –

Why did all this happen –

Everything was fine a week ago –

Why –

From behind her came the creaky sound of an opening door.

She turned her head and looked.

Professor Quirrell was leaning against the doorway she'd walked through, silhouetted like a cardboard cutout by the light of the Hogwarts torches lit behind him, in the open door. She couldn't see his expression, though the doorway behind him was bright; his eyes, his face, everything she could see from here lay within night's shadow.

The Defense Professor of Hogwarts, number one on the list of people who might've done this. She hadn't even realized she had a suspect list until that moment.

The man stood within that doorway, saying nothing; and she couldn't see his eyes. What was he even doing there in the first place –

"Are you here to kill me?" said Hermione Granger.

Professor Quirrell's head tilted at that.

Then the Defense Professor started toward her, the dark silhouette raising one hand slowly and deliberately, as though to push her off the Ravenclaw tower –

"Stupefy!"

The burst of adrenaline overrode everything, she drew her wand without thinking, her lips formed the word of their own accord, the stunbolt leapt out of her wand and –

– slowed to a stop in front of Professor Quirrell's raised hand, rippling in midair like it was still trying to fly and making a slight hissing sound.

The red glow illuminated Professor Quirrell's face for the first time, showing a strange fond smile.

“Better,” said Professor Quirrell. “Miss Granger, you are still a student in my Defense class. As such, if you consider me a threat, I do not expect you to just look at me sadly and ask if I am there to kill you. Minus two Quirrell points.”

She was entirely unable to form words.

The Defense Professor flicked his forefinger casually at the suspended stunbolt, sending the hex shooting back over her head, far into the night, so that they stood again in darkness. Then Professor Quirrell walked out of the doorway, which swung shut behind him; and a soft white light sprung up around the two of them, so that she could see his face once more, still with that strange fond smile.

“What are you – what are you doing here?”

A few more steps took Professor Quirrell to a higher part of the balcony’s ramparts, where he put his elbows down on the stone, and leaned over heavily, looking up into the night.

“I came here straight upon being released by the Aurors, the moment I finished reporting to the Headmaster,” said Professor Quirrell in a quiet voice, “because I am your teacher, and you are my student, and I am responsible for you.”

Hermione understood, then; remembering what Professor Quirrell had said to Harry in the second Defense lesson of the year, about controlling his anger. She felt the flush of shame all the way down her chest. It took a moment after that for knowledge to override mortification, for her to force out the words –

“I –” said Hermione. “Harry thinks – that I didn’t – lose my temper, I mean –”

“So I heard,” said Professor Quirrell in rather dry tones. He shook his head, as though at the stars themselves. “The boy is fortunate that I have crossed the line from annoyance with his self-destructiveness, into sheer curiosity as to what he shall do next. But I agree with Mr. Potter’s assessment of the facts. This murder was well-planned to evade detection both by the wards of Hogwarts and the Headmaster’s timely eye. Naturally, in such a thoughtful murder, some innocent would be placed to take the blame.” A brief, wry smile crossed the Defense Professor’s lips, though he wasn’t looking at her. “As for the notion that you did it yourself – I consider myself a talented teacher, but even I could not teach such murderous intent to a student as obstinate and untalented as Hermione Granger.”

The part of her brain that said What? in indignation wasn't anywhere near loud enough to reach her lips.

"No..." said Professor Quirrell. "That is not why I am here. You have made no effort to hide your dislike for me, Miss Granger. I thank you for that lack of pretense, for I much prefer true hate to false love. But you are still my student, and I have a word to say to you, if you will hear it."

Hermione looked at him, still fighting down the aftereffects of the adrenaline from before. The Defense Professor seemed to be just staring up at the dark sky, in which the stars were becoming visible.

"I was going to be a hero, once," said Professor Quirrell, still looking upward. "Can you believe that, Miss Granger?"

"No."

"Thank you again, Miss Granger. It is true nonetheless. Long ago, long before your time or Harry Potter's, there was a man who was hailed as a savior. The destined scion, such a one as anyone would recognize from tales, wielding justice and vengeance like twin wands against his dreadful nemesis." Professor Quirrell gave a soft, bitter laugh, looking up at the night sky. "Do you know, Miss Granger, at that time I thought myself already cynical, and yet... well."

The silence stretched, in the cold and the night.

"In all honesty," said Professor Quirrell, looking up at the stars, "I still don't understand it. They should have known that their lives depended on that man's success. And yet it was as if they tried to do everything they could to make his life unpleasant. To throw every possible obstacle into his way. I was not naive, Miss Granger, I did not expect the power-holders to align themselves with me so quickly – not without something in it for themselves. But their power, too, was threatened; and so I was shocked how they seemed content to step back, and leave to that man all burdens of responsibility. They sneered at his performance, remarking among themselves how they would do better in his place, though they did not condescend to step forward." Professor Quirrell shook his head as though in bemusement. "And it was the strangest thing – the Dark Wizard, that man's dread nemesis – why, those who served him leapt eagerly to their tasks. The Dark Wizard grew crueler toward his followers, and they followed him all the more. Men fought for the chance to serve him, even as those whose lives depended on that other man made free to render his life difficult... I could not understand it, Miss Granger." Professor Quirrell's face was in shadow, as he looked upward. "Perhaps, by

taking on himself the curse of action, that man removed it from all others? Was that why they felt free to hinder his battle against the Dark Wizard who would have enslaved them all? Believing men would act in their own interest was not cynicism, it turned out, but sheerest optimism; in reality men do not meet so high a standard. And so in time that one realized he might do better fighting the Dark Wizard alone, than with such followers at his back.”

“So –” Hermione’s voice sounded strange in the night. “You left your friends behind where they’d be safe, and tried to attack the Dark Wizard all by yourself?”

“Why, no,” said Professor Quirrell. “I stopped trying to be a hero, and went off to do something else I found more pleasant.”

“What?” said Hermione without thinking at all. “That’s horrible!”

The Defense Professor turned his head down from the sky to regard her; and she saw, in the light of the doorway, that he was smiling – or at least half his face was smiling. “Are you going to tell me, Miss Granger, that I am an awful person? Well, perhaps I am. But then are people who never even try to be heroes still worse? If I had never done anything at all, like them, would you have thought better of me?”

Hermione opened her mouth and then found that, once again, she didn’t have anything to say. It wasn’t right to walk away from being a hero, you couldn’t just do that, but she didn’t want to say that everyone who wasn’t a hero was nothing, that was Quirrell-thinking...

The smile, or half-smile, had disappeared. “You were foolish,” the Defense Professor said quietly, “to expect any lasting gratitude from those you tried to protect, once you named yourself a heroine. Just as you expected that man to go on being a hero, and called him horrible for stopping, when a thousand others never lifted a finger. It was only expected that you should fight bullies. It was a tax you owed, and they accepted it like princes, with a sneer for the lateness of your payment. And you have already witnessed, I wager, that their fondness vanished like dust in the wind once it was no longer in their interest to associate with you...”

The Defense Professor slowly straightened off the balcony, standing almost straight, turning to regard her fully.

“But you don’t have to be a hero, Miss Granger,” said Professor Quirrell. “You can stop anytime you please.”

That idea...

...had occurred to her before, several times over the last two days.

People become who they are meant to be, by doing what is right, Headmaster Dumbledore had told her. The trouble was that there seemed to be two different right things to do. There was the part of her which said that right was to go on being a heroine, and stay at Hogwarts, she didn't know what was going on but a heroine wouldn't just run away.

And there was also the voice of common sense saying that young children shouldn't ever stay around danger, that was what adults were for; the voice of every school poster that said not to take candy from strangers. That was also right.

Hermione Granger stood there on that balcony, looking at Professor Quirrell silhouetted by the emerging stars, and she didn't understand; she didn't understand how the Defense Professor could be gazing at her with his face showing concern; she didn't understand the notes of pain in the Defense Professor's voice that caught at her; she didn't understand why she was being told all this.

"You don't even like me, Professor," said Hermione.

A small smile flickered on Professor Quirrell's face. "I suppose I could go on about how I am angered that this affair has taken up my valuable time and disrupted my Defense classes. But mostly, Miss Granger, you are my student, and whatever other professions I may have once held, I think I have been a good teacher at Hogwarts, have I not?" Suddenly Professor Quirrell's eyes seemed very tired. "As your teacher, then, I am advising you that you have other career options. I should not like to see anyone else going down my path."

Hermione swallowed. It was a side of Professor Quirrell she'd never seen or imagined, and it was eating away at her preconceptions.

Professor Quirrell watched her for a moment, and then looked away from her again, back up at the stars. When he spoke this time his voice was quieter. "Someone here is targeting you, Miss Granger, and I cannot ward you as I warded Mr. Malfoy. The Headmaster has prevented it, for what he claims to be good reasons. It is easy to become fond of Hogwarts, I know, for I am fond of it as well. But in France they take a different view of the Ancient Houses than in Britain; and Beauxbatons would not mistreat you, I think. Whatever else you imagine of me, I swear that if you asked me to see you safely in Beauxbatons, I would do all in my power to convey you there."

"I can't just –" Hermione said.

"But you can, Miss Granger." Now the pale blue eyes watched her intently.

“Whatever you wish to make of your life, you cannot attain it at Hogwarts, not anymore. This place is ruined for you now, even leaving aside all other threats. Simply ask Harry Potter to command you to go to Beauxbatons and live out your life in peace. If you stay here, he is your master in the eyes of Britain and its laws!”

She hadn’t even been thinking about that, it paled so much in comparison to being eaten by Dementors; it had been important to her before, but now it all seemed childish, unimportant, pointless, so why were her eyes burning?

“And if that fails to move you, Miss Granger, consider also that Mr. Potter has, just today at lunchtime, threatened Lucius Malfoy, Albus Dumbledore, and the entire Wizengamot because he cannot think sensibly when something threatens to take you from him. Are you not frightened of what he will do next?”

It made sense. Terrible sense. Dreadful awful sense.

It made too much sense –

She couldn’t have described it in words, what triggered the realization, unless it was the sheer pressure that the Defense Professor was exerting on her.

That if the Defense Professor was behind this whole thing – then Professor Quirrell had done it all just to get her out of the way of his plans for Harry.

Without any conscious decision, she shifted her weight to the other foot, her body moving away from the Defense Professor –

“So you think I am the one responsible?” said Professor Quirrell. His voice sounded a little sad as he said it, and her own heart almost stopped from hearing it. “I suppose I cannot blame you. I am the Defense Professor of Hogwarts, after all. But Miss Granger, even assuming that I am your enemy, common sense should still tell you to get away from me very quickly. You cannot use the Killing Curse, so the correct tactic is to Apparate away. I do not mind being the villain of your imagination if it makes matters clearer. Leave Hogwarts, and leave me to those who can handle me. I will arrange for the transportation to be through some family of good repute, and Mr. Potter will know to blame me if you do not arrive safely.”

“I –” She was feeling cold, the night air chilling her skin, or maybe being chilled by it. “I’ve got to think about it –”

Professor Quirrell shook his head. “No, Miss Granger. Your departure will take time for me to arrange, and I have less time left than you may think.

This decision may be painful for you, but it should not be ambiguous; much weighs in the balance of these scales, but not evenly. I must know tonight whether you intend to go.”

And if not –

Was the Defense Professor warning her deliberately? That if she didn’t run, he would strike again?

Why would it matter so much, what did Professor Quirrell want to do with Harry?

Hermione Granger, I shall be less subtle than is usual for a mysterious old wizard, and tell you outright that you cannot imagine how badly things could go if the events surrounding Harry Potter turn to ill.

The most powerful wizard in the world had told her that, when he was talking about how important it was that she not stop being Harry’s friend.

Hermione swallowed, she swayed a little where she stood, on the stone balcony of a magical castle. Suddenly the whole deadly absurdity of the situation seemed to rise up and grab her by the throat, that twelve-year-old girls shouldn’t be in danger, shouldn’t be thinking about such things, that Mum would want her to RUN AWAY and her father would have a heart attack if he even knew she was being faced with the question.

And she knew, then, as Harry and Dumbledore had both tried to warn her, that everything she’d ever thought about being a heroine had been mistaken. That there wasn’t really any such thing as heroes, outside of stories. There was just horrible danger, and being arrested by Aurors and put in cells next to Dementors, pain and fear and –

“Miss Granger?” said the Defense Professor.

She said nothing. All the words were blocked in her throat.

“I need a decision, Miss Granger.”

She kept her jaw locked, didn’t let any words come out.

Finally the Defense Professor sighed. Slowly the white light failed, and slowly the door behind him swung open, so that he was once again a black silhouette against the opening. “Good night, Miss Granger,” he said, and turned his back to her, and walked away into Hogwarts.

It took a while for her breathing to slow down again. Whatever had happened here tonight, it didn’t feel anything like victory. She’d fought so hard just to stop herself from saying Yes in the face of the Defense Professor’s pressure, and now she didn’t even know if she’d done the right thing.

When she walked back into the light herself (after exhaustion had overtaken everything and sleep was once more a possibility), she thought she heard it as she was within the doorway, from behind her and above her, a distant cawing cry.

But it wasn't meant for her, she knew, so she started climbing up the stairs toward her dorm room.

The other girls were probably asleep by now, and wouldn't look at her, or look away –

She felt the tears start, and this time she didn't stop them.

TABOO TRADEOFFS, AFTERMATH III, DISTANCE

SLOW and hard, the long stairway that led to the peak of Ravenclaw. From the inside, the stairway seemed like a straight upward slope, though from the outside you could see that it logically had to be a spiral. You could only get to the top of the Ravenclaw tower by making that long climb without shortcuts, stone step by stone step; passing beneath Harry's shoes, pushed down by his wearying legs.

Harry had seen Hermione safely off to bed.

He had lingered in the Ravenclaw common room long enough to collect a few signatures that might be useful to Hermione later. Not many students had signed; wizards hadn't been trained to think in the put-up-or-shut-up, stick-your-neck-out-and-make-a-prediction-or-stop-pretending-to-believe-in-your-theory rules of Muggle science. Most of them hadn't seen anything incongruent about being too nervous to sign an agreement saying that Hermione got to hold it over them for the rest of their lives if they were wrong, while acting outwardly confident that she was guilty. But just having demanded the signatures would make the point after the truth came out, if anyone ever again suspected Hermione of anything Dark. She wouldn't have to go through this twice, at least.

After that Harry had left the common room quickly, because all the kindly forgiving sentiments he'd reasoned out were getting harder and harder to remember. Sometimes Harry thought the deepest split in his personality wasn't anything to do with his dark side; rather it was the divide between the altruistic and forgiving Abstract Reasoning Harry, versus the frustrated and angry Harry In The Moment.

The circular platform at the top of the Ravenclaw tower wasn't the tallest place in Hogwarts, but the Ravenclaw tower jutted out from the main body of the castle, so you couldn't see down into the top platform from the Astronomy tower. A quiet place to think, if you had an awful lot to think about. A place where few other students ever came – there were easier niches of privacy, if

privacy was all you wanted.

The night-lit torches of Hogwarts were far below. The platform itself offered few obstructions; the stairs emerged from an uncovered gap in the floor, rather than an upright door. From this place, then, the stars were as visible as they ever were on Earth.

The boy lay down in the center of the platform, heedless of his robes that might be dirtied, dropping his head to rest upon the rock-tiled floor; so that, except for a few half-seen crenellations of stone at vision's edge, and a sliver of crescent moon, reality became starlight.

The pinpoints of light in dark velvet twinkled, wavering and returning, a different kind of beauty from their steady brilliance in the Silent Night.

Harry gazed out abstractly, his mind on other things.

This day your war against Voldemort has begun...

Dumbledore had said that, after the Incident with Rescuing Bellatrix from Azkaban. That had been a false alarm, but the phrase expressed the sentiment well.

Two nights ago his war had begun, and Harry didn't know with who.

Dumbledore thought it was Lord Voldemort, returned from the dead, making his first move against the boy who had defeated him last time.

Professor Quirrell had put detection wards on Draco, fearing that Hogwarts's mad Headmaster would try to frame Harry for the death of Lucius's son.

Or Professor Quirrell had set up the entire thing, and that was how he'd known where to find Draco. Severus Snape thought the Hogwarts Defense Professor was an obvious suspect, even the obvious suspect.

And Severus Snape himself might or might not be even remotely trustworthy.

Someone had declared war against Harry, their first strike had been meant to take out Draco and Hermione both, and it was only by the barest of margins that Harry had saved Hermione.

You couldn't call it victory. Draco had been removed from Hogwarts, and if that wasn't death, it wasn't clear how it could be undone, or what shape Draco might be in when he got back. The country of magical Britain now thought Hermione an attempted-murderer, which might or might not make her decide to do the sane thing and leave. Harry had sacrificed his entire fortune to undo his loss, and that card could only be played once.

Some unknown power had struck at him, and if that blow had been partially deflected, it had still hit really hard.

At least his dark side hadn't asked anything of him in exchange for saving Hermione. Maybe because his dark side wasn't an imaginary voice like Hufflepuff; Harry might imagine his Hufflepuff part as wanting different things from himself, but his dark side wasn't like that. His "dark side", so far as Harry could tell, was a different way that Harry sometimes was. Right now, Harry wasn't angry; and trying to ask what "dark Harry" wanted was a phone ringing unanswered. The thought even seemed a little strange; could you owe something to a different way you sometimes were?

Harry stared up at the random stars, the scattered twinkling lights that human brains couldn't help but pattern-match into imaginary constellations.

And then there was that promise Harry had sworn.

Draco to help Harry reform Slytherin House. And Harry to take as an enemy whomever Harry believed, in his best judgment as a rationalist, to have killed Narcissa Malfoy. If Narcissa had never gotten her own hands dirty, if indeed she'd been burned alive, if the killer hadn't been tricked – those were all the conditions Harry could remember making. He probably should've written it down, or better yet, never made a promise requiring that many caveats in the first place.

There were plausible outs, for the sort of person who'd let themselves rationalize an out. Dumbledore hadn't actually confessed. He hadn't come right out and said he'd done it. There were plausible reasons for an actually-guilty Dumbledore to behave that way. But it was also what you'd expect to see, if someone else had burned Narcissa, and Dumbledore had taken credit.

Harry shook his head, flattening one side of his hair and then another against the stone-tiled floor. There was still a final out, Draco could still release him from the oath at any time. He could, at least, describe the situation to Draco, and talk about options with him, when they met again. It didn't seem like a very likely prospect for release – but the idea of talking something over honestly was enough to satisfy the part of himself that demanded adherence to oaths. Even if it only meant delaying, it was better than taking a good man as an enemy.

But is Dumbledore a good man? asked the voice of Hufflepuff. If Dumbledore burned someone alive – wasn't the whole point that good people may kill, but never kill with suffering?

Maybe he killed her instantly, said Slytherin, and then lied to Lucius

about the burning-alive part. But... if there was any possibility of the Death Eaters magically verifying how Narcissa died... and if being caught in a lie would've endangered Light-side families...

Be careful what we cleverly rationalize, warned Gryffindor.

You have to expect reputational effects on how other people treat you, said Hufflepuff. If you decide there's sufficient reason to burn a woman alive, one of the predictable side effects is that good people decide you've crossed the line and have to be stopped. Dumbledore should've expected that. He's got no right to complain.

Or maybe he expects us to be smarter, said Slytherin. Now that we know this much of the truth – no matter the exact details of the full story – can we really believe that Dumbledore is a terrible, terrible person who ought to be our enemy? In the middle of a horrible bloody war, Dumbledore set one enemy civilian on fire? That's only bad by the standards of comic books, not by any sort of realistic historical standard.

Harry stared up at the night sky, remembering history.

In real life, in real wars...

During World War II, there had been a project to sabotage the Nazi nuclear weapons program. Years earlier, Leo Szilard, the first person to realize the possibility of a fission chain reaction, had convinced Fermi not to publish the discovery that purified graphite was a cheap and effective neutron moderator. Fermi had wanted to publish, for the sake of the great international project of science, which was above nationalism. But Szilard had persuaded Rabi, and Fermi had abided by the majority vote of their tiny three-person conspiracy. And so, years later, the only neutron moderator the Nazis had known about was deuterium.

The only deuterium source under Nazi control had been a captured facility in occupied Norway, which had been knocked out by bombs and sabotage, causing a total of twenty-four civilian deaths.

The Nazis had tried to ship the deuterium already refined to Germany, aboard a civilian Norwegian ferry, the SS Hydro.

Knut Haukelid and his assistants had been discovered by the night watchman of the civilian ferry while they were sneaking on board to sabotage it. Haukelid had told the watchman that they were escaping the Gestapo, and the watchman had let them go. Haukelid had considered warning the night watchman, but that would have endangered the mission, so Haukelid had only shaken his hand. And the civilian ship had sunk in the deepest

part of the lake, with eight dead Germans, seven dead crew, and three dead civilian bystanders. Some of the Norwegian rescuers of the ship had thought the German soldiers present should be left to drown, but this view had not prevailed, and the German survivors had been rescued. And that had been the end of the Nazi nuclear weapons program.

Which was to say that Knut Haukelid had killed innocent people. One of whom, the night watchman of the ship, had been a good person. Someone who'd gone out of his way to help Haukelid, at risk to himself; from the kindness of his heart, for the highest moral reasons; and been sent to drown in turn. Afterward, in the cold light of history, it had looked like the Nazis had never been close to getting nuclear weapons after all.

And Harry had never read anything suggesting that Haukelid had acted wrongly.

That was war in real life. In terms of total damage and who'd gotten hit, what Haukelid had done was considerably worse than what Dumbledore might have done to Narcissa Malfoy, or what Dumbledore had possibly done to leak the prophecy to Lord Voldemort to get him to attack Harry's parents.

If Haukelid had been a comic-book superhero, he'd have somehow gotten all the civilians off the ferry, he would've attacked the German soldiers directly...

...rather than let a single innocent person die...

...but Knut Haukelid hadn't been a superhero.

And neither had been Albus Dumbledore.

Harry closed his eyes, swallowing hard a few times against the sudden choking sensation. It was abruptly very clear that while Harry was going around trying to live the ideals of the Enlightenment, Dumbledore was the one who'd actually fought in a war. Nonviolent ideals were cheap to hold if you were a scientist, living inside the Protego bubble cast by the police officers and soldiers whose actions you had the luxury to question. Albus Dumbledore seemed to have started out with ideals at least as strong as Harry's own, if not stronger; and Dumbledore hadn't gotten through his war without killing enemies and sacrificing friends.

Are you so much better than Haukelid and Dumbledore, Harry Potter, that you'll be able to fight without a single casualty? Even in the world of comic books, the only reason a superhero like Batman even looks successful is that the comic-book readers only notice when Important Named Characters die, not when the Joker shoots some random nameless bystander to show off

his villainy. Batman is a murderer no less than the Joker, for all the lives the Joker took that Batman could've saved by killing him. That's what the man named Alastor was trying to tell Dumbledore, and afterward Dumbledore regretted having taken so long to change his mind. Are you really going to try to follow the path of the superhero, and never sacrifice a single piece or kill a single enemy?

Fatigued, Harry turned his attention away from the dilemma for a moment, opened his eyes again to regard the hemisphere of night, which required no decisions from him.

Near the edge of his vision, the pale white crescent of the Moon, the light from which had left one-and-a-quarter seconds ago, around 375,000 kilometers of distance in Earth's space of simultaneity.

Above and to the side, Polaris, the North Star; the first star Harry had learned to identify in the sky, by following the edge of the Big Dipper. That was actually a five-star system with a brilliant central supergiant, 434 light-years from Earth. It was the first 'star' whose name Harry had ever learned from his father, so long ago that he couldn't have guessed how old he'd been.

The dim fog that was the Milky Way, so many billions of distant stars that they became an indistinct river, the plane of a galaxy that stretched 100,000 light-years across. If Harry had experienced any sense of wonder when he'd first been told that, he'd been too young for him to remember now that first time, across a few years' distance.

In the center of the constellation Andromeda, the star Andromeda, which was really the Andromeda Galaxy. The nearest galaxy to the Milky Way, 2.4 million light-years away, containing an estimated trillion stars.

Numbers like those made 'infinity' pale by comparison, because 'infinity' was just featureless and blank. Thinking that the stars were 'infinitely' distant was a lot less scary than trying to work out what 2.4 million light-years amounted to in meters. 2.4 million light-years, times 31 million seconds in a year, times a photon moving at 300,000,000 meters per second...

It was strange to think that such distances might not be unreachably far away. Magic was loose in the universe, things like Time-Turners and broomsticks. Had any wizard ever tried to measure the speed of a portkey, or a phoenix?

And the human understanding of magic couldn't possibly be anywhere near the underlying laws. What would you be able to do with magic if you really understood it?

A year ago, Dad had gone to the Australian National University in Canberra for a conference where he'd been an invited speaker, and he'd taken Mum and Harry along. And they'd all visited the National Museum of Australia, because, it had turned out, there was basically nothing else to do in Canberra. The glass display cases had shown rock-throwers crafted by the Australian aborigines – like giant wooden shoehorns, they'd looked, but smoothed and carved and ornamented with painstaking care. In the 40,000 years since anatomically modern humans had migrated to Australia from Asia, nobody had invented the bow-and-arrow. It really made you appreciate how non-obvious was the idea of Progress. Why would you even think of Invention as something important, if all your history's heroic tales were of great warriors and defenders instead of Thomas Edison? How could anyone have suspected, while carving a rock-thrower with painstaking care, that someday human beings would invent rocket ships and nuclear energy?

Could you have looked up into the sky, at the brilliant light of the Sun, and deduced that the universe contained greater sources of power than mere fire? Would you have realized that if the fundamental physical laws permitted it, someday humans would tap the same energies as the Sun? Even if nothing you could imagine doing with rock-throwers or woven pouches – no pattern of running across the savannah and nothing you could obtain by hunting animals – would accomplish that even in imagination?

It wasn't like modern-day Muggles had gotten anywhere near the limits of what Muggle physics said was possible. And yet like hunter-gatherers conceptually bound to their rock-throwers, most Muggles lived in a world defined by the limits of what you could do with cars and telephones. Even though Muggle physics explicitly permitted possibilities like molecular nanotechnology or the Penrose process for extracting energy from black holes, most people filed that away in the same section of their brain that stored fairy tales and history books, well away from their personal realities: Long ago and far away, ever so long ago. No surprise, then, that the wizarding world lived in a conceptual universe bounded – not by fundamental laws of magic that nobody even knew – but just by the surface rules of known Charms and enchantments. You couldn't observe the way magic was practiced nowadays and not be reminded of the National Museum of Australia, once you realized what you were seeing. Even if Harry's first guess had been mistaken, one way or another it was still inconceivable that the fundamental laws of the universe contained a special case for human lips shaping the phrase 'Wingardium

Leviosa'. And yet even that fumbling grasp of magic was enough to do things that Muggle physics said should be forever impossible: the Time-Turner, water conjured out of nothingness by Aguamenti. What were the ultimate possibilities of invention, if the underlying laws of the universe permitted an eleven-year-old with a stick to violate almost every constraint in the Muggle version of physics?

Like a hunter-gatherer trying to look up at the Sun, and guess that the universe had to be shaped in a way that allowed for nuclear energy...

It made you wonder if maybe twenty thousand million million million meters wasn't so much distance, after all.

There was a step beyond Abstract Reasoning Harry which he could take, given time enough to compose himself and the right surroundings; something beyond Abstract Reasoning Harry, as that was beyond Harry In The Moment. Looking up at the stars, you could try to imagine what the distant descendants of humanity would think of your dilemma – in a hundred million years, when the stars would have spun through great galactic movements into entirely new positions, every constellation scattered. It was an elementary theorem of probability that if you knew what your answer would be after updating on future evidence, you ought to adopt that answer right now. If you knew your destination, you were already there. And by analogy, if not quite by theorem, if you could guess what the descendants of humanity would think of something, you ought to go ahead and take that as your own best guess.

From that vantage point the idea of killing off two-thirds of the Wizengamot seemed a lot less appealing than it had a few hours earlier. Even if you had to do it, even if you knew for a solid fact that it would be the best thing for magical Britain and that the complete Story of Time would look worse if you didn't do it... even as a necessity, the deaths of sentient beings would still be a tragedy. One more element of the sorrows of Earth; the Most Ancient Earth from which everything had begun, long ago and far away, ever so long ago.

He is not like Grindelwald. There is nothing human left in him. Him you must destroy. Save your fury for that, and that alone –

Harry shook his head slightly, tilting the stars a little in his vision, as he lay on the stone floor looking upward and outward and forward in time. Even if Dumbledore was right, and the true enemy was utterly mad and evil... in a hundred million years the organic lifeform known as Lord Voldemort probably wouldn't seem much different from all the other bewildered

children of Ancient Earth. Whatever Lord Voldemort had done to himself, whatever Dark rituals seemed so horribly irrevocable on a merely human scale, it wouldn't be beyond curing with the technology of a hundred million years. Killing him, even if you had to do it to save the lives of others, would be just one more death for future sentient beings to be sad about. How could you look up at the stars, and believe anything else?

Harry stared up at the twinkling lights of Eternity and wondered what the children's children's children would think of what Dumbledore had maybe-done to Narcissa.

But even if you tried framing the question that way, asking what humanity's descendants would think, it still drew only on your own knowledge, not theirs. The answer still came from inside yourself, and it could still be mistaken. If you didn't know the hundredth decimal digit of pi yourself, then you didn't know how the children's children's children would calculate it, for all that the fact was trivial.



Slowly – he'd been lying there, looking at the stars, for longer than he'd planned – Harry sat up from the ground. Pushing himself to his feet, the muscles protesting, he walked over to the edge of the stone platform at the height of the Ravenclaw tower. The stone crenellations surrounding the edge of the tower weren't high, not high enough to be safe. They were markers, clearly, rather than railings. Harry didn't approach too close to the edge; there was no point in taking chances. Looking down at the Hogwarts grounds below, he was predictably feeling a sense of dizziness, the wobbly affliction called vertigo. His brain was alarmed, it seemed, because the ground below was so distant. It might have been fully 50 meters away.

The lesson, it seemed, was that things had to be incredibly close by before your brain could comprehend them well enough to feel fear.

It was a rare brain that could feel strongly about anything, if it wasn't close in space, close in time, near at hand, within easy reach...

Before, Harry had imagined that going to Azkaban would require planning and cooperation from a grownup confederate. Portkeys, broomsticks, invisibility spells. Some way of getting to the bottom levels without the Aurors noticing, so he could carve his way into the central pit where the shadows of Death waited.

And that had been enough to put the prospect away, into the future, safely apart from the now.

He hadn't realized until today that it might be as simple as finding Fawkes and telling the phoenix that it was time.

Memories were rising up again, memories that Harry could never manage to forget for long. Though the stones beneath his feet were not smooth like metal, though the moonlit sky stretched all around him, somehow it was very easy to imagine himself trapped in a long metal corridor lit by dim orange light.

The night was quiet, quiet enough for memories to be clearly audible.

No, I didn't mean it, please don't die!

No, I didn't mean it, please don't die!

Don't take it away, don't don't don't –

The world blurred, and Harry wiped his eyes with his sleeve.

If Hermione had been the one behind that door –

If Hermione had been put in Azkaban, Harry would have called the phoenix and gone there and burned away every last Dementor and it wouldn't have made a single difference how crazy it was or what else he'd wanted to do with his life. That was just – that was – that was just how it was.

And the woman who was behind that door – wasn't there someone, somewhere, to whom she too was precious? Wasn't it only Harry's distance from her life that was preventing his brain from being driven to Azkaban to save her no matter what? What would it have taken to compel him? Would he have needed to know her face? Her name? Her favorite color? Would he have been driven to Azkaban to save Tracey Davis? Would he have been compelled there to save Professor McGonagall? Mum and Dad – there wasn't even any question. And that woman had said she was someone's mother. How many people had wished for the power to break Azkaban? How many prisoners of Azkaban dreamed nightly of such a miraculous rescue?

None. It's a happy thought.

Maybe he should harrow Azkaban. All he had to do was find Fawkes and tell him it was time. Visualize the center of the Dementor's pit as he'd seen it from the broomstick, and let the phoenix take him there. Cast the True Patronus Charm at point-blank range and to hell with what came after.

All he had to do was go find Fawkes.

It might be as simple as thinking of the flame, calling for the fire-bird in his heart –

A star flashed in the night.

By the time Harry's eyes had jumped with a reflex action trained on meteor showers, another part of him was surprised that the astronomical phenomenon was still there; a faint star whose brightness was slowly visibly waxing. There was a startled moment when Harry wondered whether he was seeing, not a meteor, but a nova or supernova – could you see them getting brighter like that? Was the first stage of a nova supposed to be that yellow-orange color?

Then the new star moved again, and seemed to grow as well as brightening. It looked closer suddenly, no longer so far away that distance became moot. Like what you thought was a star, turning out to be an airplane, a lighted form whose shape you could actually see...

...no, not a plane...

The realization seemed to spread out from Harry's chest in a wave of prickling, sweat preparing to break out.

...a bird.

A piercing cry split the night, echoing from the rooftops of Hogwarts.

The approaching creature trailed fire as it flew, shedding golden flames like sparks from its feathers as the mighty wings beat and beat again. Even as it swooped up in a great curve to hover a few paces away from Harry, even as the flames surrounding its passage diminished, the creature seemed no dimmer, no less bright; as though some unseen Sun shone upon it and illuminated it.

Great shining wings red like a sunset, and eyes like incandescent pearls, blazing with golden fire and determination.

The phoenix's beak opened, and let out a great caw that Harry understood as though it had been a spoken word:

COME!

Not even realizing, the boy stumbled back from the edge of the rooftop, eyes still locked on the phoenix, his whole body trembling and tensed, his fists clenching and releasing at his side; stepping back, stepping away.

The phoenix cawed again, a desperate, pleading, sound. It didn't come through in words, this time, but it came through in feelings, an echo of everything that Harry had ever felt about Azkaban and every temptation to action, to just do something about it, the desperate need to do something now and not delay any longer, all spoken in the cry of a bird.

Let's go. It's time. The voice that spoke came from inside Harry, not from the phoenix; from so deep inside it couldn't be given a separate name like 'Gryffindor'.

All he had to do was step forward and touch the phoenix's talons, and it would take him where he needed to be, where he kept thinking he ought to be, down into the central pit of Azkaban. Harry could see the image in his mind, shining with unbearable clarity, the image of himself suddenly smiling with joyous release as he threw all his fears away and chose –

"But I –" Harry whispered, not even aware of what he was saying. Harry lifted his shaking hands to wipe at his eyes from which tears had sprung, as the phoenix hovered before him with great wing-sweeps. "But I – there's other people I also have to save, other things I have to do –"

The fire-bird let out a piercing scream, and the boy flinched back as though from a blow. It wasn't a command, it wasn't an objection, it was the knowledge –

The corridors lit by dim orange light.

It felt like a tightening compulsion in Harry's chest, the desire to just do it and get it over with. He might die, but if he didn't die he could feel clean again. Have principles that were more than excuses for inaction. It was his life. His to spend, if he chose. He could do it any time he wanted...

...if he wasn't a good person.



The boy stood there on the rooftop, his own eyes locked with two points of fire. The stars might have had time to shift in their constellations while he stood there, agonizing over the decision...

...that wouldn't...

...change.

The boy's eyes flickered once to the stars above; and then he looked at the phoenix.

"Not yet," the boy said in a voice hardly audible. "Not yet. There's too much else I have to do. Please come back later, when I've found others who can cast the True Patronus – in six months, maybe –"

Without word, without sound, a sphere of fire surrounded the bird's form, crackling and blazing with white and crimson veins as though it meant to consume that which lay within; and when the fire dispersed into grey smoke, no phoenix remained.

There was silence on the top of the Ravenclaw tower. The boy gradually lowered his hands from his ears, pausing only to wipe at his wet cheeks.

Slowly, the boy turned –

Then cried out and leapt back and almost fell off the Ravenclaw tower; though the misstep would hardly have mattered, with that other wizard standing there.

“And so it was done,” Albus Dumbledore said, almost in a whisper. “So it was done.” Fawkes was on his shoulder, staring at where the other phoenix had been with an indecipherable avian gaze.

“What are you doing here?”

“Ah?” said the ancient man standing on the roof-platform’s opposite corner. “I felt the presence of a creature Hogwarts did not know, and came to see, of course.” Slowly the old wizard’s shaking hand came up to remove the half-moon glasses, his other hand wiped at his eyes and forehead with his robe’s sleeve. “I dared – I dared not speak – I knew, I knew this choice above all choices must be your own –”

A strange apprehension was beginning to fill Harry, welling up in him like a sick feeling in his stomach.

“That everything depended on this,” Albus Dumbledore said, still in that almost-whisper, “that much I knew. But which choice led into darkness, that I could not guess. At least the choice was your own.”

“I don’t –” Harry said, and then his voice stopped.

A terrible hypothesis, rising in credibility...

“The phoenix comes,” said the old wizard. “To those who would fight, to those who would act even at cost of their lives, the phoenix comes. Phoenixes are not wise, Harry, they know no means to judge us, save witnessing the choice. I thought it was to my death I went, when the phoenix took me to fight Grindelwald. I did not know that Fawkes would sustain me, and heal me, and stay by my side –” The old wizard’s voice quavered, for a moment. “It is not spoken of – you should realize, Harry, why it is never spoken of – if the one knew, the phoenix could not judge. But to you, Harry, I may say it now, for the phoenix comes only once.”

The old wizard walked across the top of the Ravenclaw tower to where a boy stood rooted in dawning horror, in dawning and utter horror.

In my duel with Grindelwald I could not win, only fight him for long hours until he collapsed in exhaustion; and I would have died of it afterward, if not for Fawkes –

Harry didn't even know he was speaking, until the whisper had escaped him –

“Then I could have –”

“Could you have?” said the ancient wizard, his voice sounding far older than his normal tones. “Three times, now, a phoenix has come for my student. One did send hers away, and the grief of it broke her, I think. And the last was cousin to your young friend Lavender Brown, and he –” The old wizard's voice cracked. “He did not return, did poor John, and he saved none of those he meant to save. It is said, among the few scholars of phoenix-lore, that not one in four returns from their ordeal. And even if you did survive – for the life you must lead, Harry James Potter-Evans-Verres – the choices you must make and the path you must walk – to always hear the phoenix's cries – who is to say it would not have driven you mad?” The old wizard raised his sleeve again, drawing it once more across his face. “I had more joy of Fawkes's companionship, in the days before I fought Voldemort.”

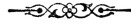
The boy did not seem to be listening, all his eyes were on the red-gold bird on the ancient wizard's shoulder. “Fawkes?” the boy said in shaking voice. “Why won't you look at me, Fawkes?”

Fawkes craned his head to peer at the boy curiously, then turned back and resumed gazing at his master.

“See?” said the old wizard. “He does not reject you. Fawkes may not be interested in you in quite that way, now; and he knows –” the wizard smiled wryly, “– that you are not exactly loyal to his master. But one to whom the phoenix comes at all – cannot be one whom a phoenix would dislike.” The wizard's voice fell to a whisper again. “There never was a bird seen on Godric Gryffindor's shoulder. Though it is not written even in his secrets, I think he must have sent his phoenix away, before he chose the red and gold for his colors. Perhaps the guilt of it urged him to greater lengths than he ever would have dared otherwise. Or it might have taught him humility, and respect for human frailty, and failure...” The wizard bowed his head. “I truly do not know if your choice was wise. I truly do not know if it was the right thing, or the wrong thing. If I knew, Harry, I would have spoken. But I –” Dumbledore's voice broke, then. “I am nothing but a foolish young boy who has become a foolish old man, and I have no wisdom.”

Harry couldn't breathe, the nausea seeming to fill and overflow his whole body, stomach locked solid. He was suddenly and terribly certain that he had failed, in some final sense failed, failed this very night –

The boy whirled and ran out to the curb of the Ravenclaw rooftop. "Come back!" His voice cracked, rising to a shriek. "Come back!"



Final Aftermath:

She came awake with a gasp of horror, she woke with an unvoiced scream on her lips and no words came forth, she could not understand what she had seen, she could not understand what she had seen –

"What time is it?" she whispered.

Her golden jeweled alarm clock whispered back, "Around eleven at night. Go back to sleep."

Her sheets were soaked in sweat, her nightclothes soaked in sweat, she took her wand from beside the pillow and cleaned herself up before she tried to go back to sleep and eventually succeeded.

Sybill Trelawney went back to sleep.

In the Forbidden Forest, a centaur woken by a nameless apprehension ceased scanning the night sky, having found only questions there and no answers; and with a folding of his many legs, Firenze went back to sleep.

In the distant lands of magical Asia, an ancient witch named Fan Tong, sleeping the tired days away, told her anxious great-great-grandson that she was fine, it had only been a nightmare, and went back to sleep.

In a land where Muggleborns received no letters of any kind, a girl-child too young to have a name of her own was rocked in the arms of her annoyed but loving mother until she stopped crying and went back to sleep.

None of them slept well.

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◇
 Here
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 ◇

Cartho philosophus



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